

The Poetry of Painting

By Robert Isley

I recently reread a book that I first came across years ago, titled “The Japanese Haiku” by Kenneth Yasuda. In describing the essence of the haiku experience, Yasuda’s work came closer to anything I had read before to giving voice to my feelings about what being an artist means. In particular, the second chapter, called “Basic Principles,” is filled with insights that I have found to be both inspiring and challenging. I would like to share a few of those insights that apply equally well to plein air painting.

The first principle deals with the mindset of the artist, something Yasuda refers to as the “Haiku attitude,” which means being in a state of readiness. It’s not limited to those moments we set out to paint but encompasses the entirety of our lives. It transforms painting from an activity to a vocation. The haiku attitude is the necessary precedent to the haiku moment, which Yasuda defines as “that moment of absolute intensity when the poet’s grasp of his intuition is complete, so that the image lives its own life.”

In both haiku and plein air painting the subject is depicted as simply and directly as possible. One of the things that attracted me most to the plein air movement, as I understand it, is this direct encounter with reality. There are no imposed meanings or hidden agendas. It’s about letting things speak for themselves, and it’s a difficult process.



The paintings we do on site are not just the end result of an experience we’ve had, but in a sense they are that experience manifested in a visible, tangible form that can be shared by others. The depth of that experience can be sentimental and superficial or it can be heartfelt and profound. When it’s the latter, Yasuda likens the artist to a tuning fork vibrating at the same frequency as the subject being depicted. There are no trivial subjects, but any subject, no matter how beautiful, can be made into a trivial painting.

Yusada points out that the selection process in determining the subject to represent is not entirely the free choice of the artist. Not all objects will speak to an artist as it depends upon one’s individual memories and life experiences. Artistic sincerity lies in the artist’s willingness to be open to what resonates with his or her true self and then having a single-minded devotion to its realization.

Even with the best of intentions there are many days when I never rise beyond the technical difficulties of painting, like incoherent brushwork,

Plein Air Painters of the Southeast

faulty perspective and color turned to mud. I try to remember, however, what a privilege it is to be a plein air artist; that on any given day a painting excursion may yield new insights into nature and my self, and will evoke feelings of awe and gratitude and a sense of time well spent.