

SIMPLIFY Your Sketches!

by Shannon Smith

As an artist, my love for painting allows me to fulfill my love for travel. All I really need is my oil paints, brushes and portable paint box. With these on hand, my need for adventure and new inspirations are fully satisfied.

I painted *Park Vendor* (oil, 9 x 12 inch) in the heart of Buenos Aires, Argentina while on a trip with a dozen fellow artists. On a beautiful Saturday morning, I was drawn to the colorful energy of families taking advantage of this relaxing park within this cosmopolitan city. It was quite a busy scene before my eyes! This is the type of scene where my most valuable teaching advice comes into play.

For instance, when painting *en plein air* with all the details of the world surrounding you, I tell my students you have to train your eyes to *simplify!* The best hint I can give someone to help them simplify is to constantly squint your eyes when looking at the scene. It will reveal how to better organize your composition, see the major shapes and, most importantly, eliminate the details.

Cameras are made to capture detail. The human eye, on the other hand, can only focus on one thing at a time, leaving everything in our peripheral vision somewhat blurred. A successful painting is pleasing to the viewer when it emulates how the eye naturally sees the world. Our eyes are drawn to the focal point, which in a painting is the area that has the highest visual interest—the most brilliant color, the sharpest edges and the strongest value contrast.

While painting this park scene, I was not too concerned with all the busy areas surrounding the vendor. These are merely



supportive parts or your “peripheral vision” to the focal point.

Along with squinting, it also helps to paint what you see, and not what you know. Think of your scene as puzzle pieces or a patchwork of color and light. I painted what I physically saw, whether I understood it or not. I tried to forget what I know about people, trees, and buildings and just kept squinting and painting the shapes I saw.

Trust me, if you paint those shapes the right color, value, and with proper edges, it will read as a believable sunlit park scene full of people, trees and architecture.

It helps to block in the biggest obvious shapes first with thinned paint and finish off with the smaller ones laid in with thicker paint. At the same time, you want to paint dark to light. I started by massing in the shapes of the trees, building, ground and sky. The windows on the buildings and the crowd of people are just dabs of color, or small shapes on top of the big ones. It gives us enough definition without getting fussy with detail.

When studying a scene to paint, it is important to understand what excites you about the scene. It may be the way the light interacts with objects or simply strong color notes or value contrasts. In this painting, I was drawn to the strong sunlight on the intense blue umbrella and the shadows it created on the hot concrete. The vendor—

Plein Air Painters of the Southeast

continued ...

my point of interest—tells us a story about what is going on. The concrete pattern on the brick walkway is a nice design element to help lead the viewer's eye to the focal point.

So choose your subject wisely by going with what you are initially drawn to or what excites you emotionally. If you are truly excited about what you're painting, it will show in your work. These can become your strongest pieces. Embrace your excitement and establish your focal point early on when designing your composition so you can visualize a clear mental image of how you want your painting to look.

My goal here is to tell the viewer all I need to by painting only what is important to define the scene. In other words, I don't need to paint every little thing to tell you about the upbeat mood of this Saturday in the park. I'd rather the viewer not get caught up in all the details but to enjoy the vibrant colors, warmth and activity of that special place.

Just remember to establish your focal point, squint and simplify by painting shapes of color and light with spontaneity and control. Your final patchwork will produce a fresh, painterly oil sketch that captures the essence of the scene.