

Interpreting Landscape Photographs

By Lee H. McVey

Lee H. McVey, of Whitesboro, New York, has studied with such renowned instructors as Wolf Kahn and Albert Handell. Displayed in galleries in Arizona, New Mexico, Connecticut, and New York, her work has won prizes in numerous regional and national shows. She is a signature member of the Pastel Painters Society of Cape Cod and an associate member of the American Academy of Women Artists. McVey teaches art at an elementary school and pastel classes at Kirkland Art Center in Clinton, New York. Visit her Web site: www.leemcvey.com.

Displayed in galleries in Arizona, New Mexico, Connecticut, and New York, her work has won prizes in numerous regional and national shows. She is a signature member of the Pastel Painters Society of Cape Cod and an associate member of the American Academy of Women Artists. McVey teaches art at an elementary school and pastel classes at Kirkland Art Center in Clinton, New York. Visit her Web site: www.leemcvey.com.



I feel a deep connection to landscapes and am continually inspired by scenes near my home in the Northeast, as well as in the Southwest and in gardens. All of these subjects make my heart sing, and each offers unique challenges, both conceptually and technically. Gardens, for instance, are more intimate compared to a pastoral field of New England, and both use colors vastly different from the canyon and desert landscape of the Southwest. Shifting from one painting to another requires some adjusting, but after a while, I find a comfortable rhythm that seems like second nature.

Expressing the beauty of a landscape, as well as my feelings for the scene, is at the heart of all my pastels. Although plein air painting is the ideal approach, I have little time for it because of my full-time teaching career. As a result, I rely on photographs, and in my experience, working from them can produce paintings that are just as effective—as long as the artist spends enough time observing the landscape and understanding it. The sensation of the scene will remain in the artist's mind and can be drawn upon to compensate for the photograph's black

shadows. In my approach, I work intuitively to alter the composition and colors of the photograph, creating pastel landscapes that invite viewers to share my vision and sense of place.

Because I am not dependent on the accuracy of my photographs, I use a 35-mm automatic-focus camera with a 130 zoom lens, which is lightweight and much less bulky than my manual camera, although its pictures are sometimes not as high quality. With Kodak Gold or Fuji 200- or 400-speed film loaded in the camera, I scan the scene and take photos of the areas that interest me. I try to compose with the viewfinder and spend a lot of time looking at the scene, often finding vertical and horizontal elements that will make a pleasing arrangement. After zooming in close for detail shots, I take photos to the right and left of the scene, as well as above and below.

When choosing a photograph for a painting, I am attracted to a strong abstract quality of the composition as well as a light-and-dark contrast that will move the viewer's eye through the work. On occasion, the photo's composition is suitable for the painting. Other times, I crop the picture or rearrange





Prescott Park, No. 2, Cloudy Day, 2002, pastel, 14 x 14, Private collection.

the elements of the landscape by taping together additional shots of the same scene.

Interpreting the information in the photograph is essential to creating a compelling painting. In *Cloudscape Over New Mexico*, for example, I cropped and moved part of a cloud to make a more pleasing arrangement. I also changed the sky from a deep sapphire blue, which seemed unnatural, to a softer hue. The ground was washed out, so I heightened it with more yellow and ochre.

Similarly, in *Prescott Park, No. 2, Cloudy Day*, I cropped the reference photo to create a vertical format, and I lightened the tree limbs, which read as a black area in the photo, to show the bark. To help me decipher the details in a photo's shadow areas, I sometimes hold the print up to a light and use a magnifying glass. And typically, for greater interest and drama, I make the colors in my painting brighter than they appear in my photograph.

I begin a new work directly on

the final surface by making a loose, cursory sketch with pastel pencil (Conté or Stabillo), showing the basic placement of the major shapes. Next, I block in the local color with the side of the pastels. If I am working on a Northeastern landscape, I often use purples and lavenders as the underpainting for the green foliage, favoring Sennelier violets 361 and 365. Stroking on the pastel, I use a cellulose packing peanut to scrub the pigment into an even, light covering of the paper. I prefer this



September on the Moose River, 2001, pastel, 18 x 20. Collection the artist.

method to a Turpenoid wash because I have little patience to wait for the Turpenoid to dry. My method allows me to go immediately to the next step, which is laying in the dark areas. From there, I build layers of pastel, weaving in the darks and lights. Occasionally, I blend lightly with my fingers.

The majority of my pastels are Rembrandt, Sennelier, Schmincke, Winsor & Newton, and Diane Townsend. I sometimes use pastel pencils for tree limbs or architectural

details. For a painting surface, I favor Wallis sanded paper because it receives layer after layer without losing its tooth. In addition, it is durable enough to hold up to vigorous scrubbing with a pink pearl eraser when I make changes during the early stages. It will also withstand later alterations in composition, such as when I decide to crop a painting to create less foreground or sky area. In that case, I use a brush to remove the pastel and a pearl eraser to remove the staining

colors as much as possible.

The final stages of my process involve a lot of time looking and thinking about what I've done. At this point, I often start another painting and work on both alternately, which allows me to return to the first with a fresh perspective.

Some paintings practically paint themselves, and I see them as meditations. Others need more concentrated thought. When I am challenged by a painting's progress, I recall my previous successes and





consciously slow down and make deliberate choices for each color or pastel stroke. If the frustration is allowed to grow, it inhibits my ability to create a successful painting. Self-affirmations—"I can do this"—help prevent the frustration from taking over.

I never use fixative, because I find it unnecessary. The strong tooth of

Above: *Longwood Gardens, No. 4*, 2001, pastel, 11 x 14. Private collection.

Opposite page, above: *After the Rain/ Canyon de Chelly*, 2000, pastel, 21 x 28. Collection the artist.

Opposite page, below: *Cloudscape Over New Mexico*, 2001, pastel, 10 x 14. Collection the artist.

the Wallis paper holds the pastel, and tapping a finished painting on the back removes any loose pastel dust. As a final precaution, I ensure that my framer places a spacer behind the double mat to catch any dust.

I place a lot of emphasis on the quality of my materials and believe professional-grade products contribute significantly to a painting's success. When I first started working with pastels, I used student materials, but when I switched to high-quality pastels and Wallis paper, many of the problems I had been experiencing disappeared. My colors became purer and richer, and I was better able to achieve the effects I wanted.

As I've grown as an artist, I've also realized the importance of recognizing and developing my unique way of working and making marks on my paper. When I was a beginning pastelist, I admired simplicity and abstraction in landscape painting and took a workshop with Wolf Kahn, with the intent of abstracting my landscapes. I came home with a wealth of information, although curiously, my pastels became more and more representational. Apparently, this approach is my signature, and I hope it will continue to help me create landscapes that renew my spirit as well as that of the viewer. ■