INSIDE
LEN CHMIEL PREVIEWS HIS CONVENTION PRESENTATION

SPECIAL SECTION:
PAINTING BUILDINGS & CITYSCAPES

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When artists refer to their painting process as being either direct or indirect, they are indicating whether they directly apply a few thick brushstrokes of local colors or they build up layers of transparent color that in the aggregate will match the local color. That is, one approach is bold and deliberate, while the other is slow and carefully planned. In fact, some indirect painters call their style of work “slow painting” as a way of distinguishing it from styles established by quick strokes of paint.

Because indirect painting with oils usually involves a long process of first establishing an underpainting and then floating transparent glazes and scumbles, each of which must dry thoroughly before the next can be applied, it is almost impossible for plein air painters to use indirect procedures outdoors. The limitations imposed by schedules and changing light force artists to use a direct method of building up layers of relatively thick, opaque oil color.

Bob Upton has found a way to exercise greater control over the drying properties of oil colors so he can work indirectly on location and complete small, well-composed, carefully articulated landscapes in three to four hours. In the end, he achieves all the depth, brilliance, and clarity that are the hallmarks of indirect painting. “The goal of early indirect painters was to achieve a gem-like quality in which one can’t tell how the painting was created,” he explains. “The uncertainty usually indicates that glazes and scumbles were used.”

The key to Upton’s technique is that he first paints the major shapes of the composition usingumber oil colors thinned with fast-drying Gamblin Alkyd Gel medium and no turpentine. He doesn’t do preliminary compositional sketches or value studies because he has spent years painting and working as a graphic designer and is therefore able to quickly analyze a subject in terms
of the value shapes. He says, “I spent years drawing plaster casts, Bargue plates, and models when I studied at the Atelier Lack and the Atelier, so I have no trouble making accurate preliminary judgments with the brush.”

Upton explains that the idea for an initial underpainting of warm colors occurred to him while looking carefully at paintings by members of the 19th-century Hudson River School, most especially Asher B. Durand and Sanford Gifford. “First, it is important to paint on a smooth, lightly toned ground so the light bouncing up from that bright surface will cause the transparent colors to glow,” he says. “And the reason to use the warm earth colors, like burnt umber, for the underpainting is that the iron oxide pigments containing manganese dry faster on their own, and, by adding the alkyd medium, the initial layers of color can dry within an hour or become tacky enough to accept transparent colors and scumbled textures. The warm tone influences the subsequent layers of transparent color and gives the finished painting more vibration and depth than if I worked over a cool-colored base.”

Upton points out that an advantage of using the alkyd gel medium rather than a fluid alkyd medium is that he can squeeze it out on his palette and it won’t run. He also notes that he makes an exception to starting with warm tones when he paints distant mountain ranges or buildings that recede into the depths of space. In those cases, he observes the principles of atmospheric perspective and the prismatic palette and underpaints those sections of the panel with cooler colors. Conservators have found that some historic landscape painters toned the lower portion of their canvases with a warm color and the top with a cool color for just the reasons Upton points out.

When Upton is ready to layer transparent colors over the initial warm tone on the panel, he first thinly paints the dark shadow shapes. As he does so, it is important that he delay using white to tint the colors. “If I start using white to lighten colors too early in the development of a painting, it will become more difficult to darken values and maintain transparency in the later stages of the process,” he says. “The paintings may look way too dark when I’m not adding white to the colors, but it’s important to wait until I am ready to add the lighter values with thicker paint.”

The next step in the process is to paint the sky, this time using white to establish a light blue background and the suggestion of clouds. Upton
Demonstration: *Willow River Falls*

**STEP 1:**
Upton paints the initial layers with transparent pigments (not mixed with white) and thins them with fast-drying Galkyd medium.

**STEP 2:**
Now the artist begins introducing opaque mid-tones in the rocks on the left foreground.

**THE COMPLETED PAINTING**

Willow River Falls
2014, oil, 11 x 14 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air
Cascade Falls, Osceola
2014, oil, 11 x 14 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air

Harbor Haze, Catalina
2008, oil, 9 x 12 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air
says, “I follow the procedure of painting from the background to the foreground, in part because the light sky establishes the full range of values from dark to light, and in part because I need to paint middle-ground and foreground shapes over those distant forms, so the sooner I block them in, the sooner they will dry enough to accept additional brushwork. Sanford Gifford said, ‘You need to attend to the color of the air at the horizon of the sky; that is the keynote of the picture.’ He called it ‘air painting.’ Moreover, the atmosphere of a landscape is most evident in the distant spaces, so painting those in early helps me convey the look and feel of the moment in time.”

Upton was trained by fellow Minnesotan Joseph Paquet, who excels at painting the atmospheric distance using a prismatic palette. “It’s a gradual removal of yellow tones until eventually you are just seeing layers of atmosphere,” says Upton. “It really takes years of training to master the techniques, and I am fortunate to live close enough to Joseph that he can continue to mentor me.”

Upton says that while the steps he describes happen relatively slowly as he develops a fairly detailed representation of a scene, the final step of establishing the light effect happens quickly, during the last half hour of painting. “I normally spend about three hours on a plein air piece,” he says, “with the final 30 minutes reserved for adding the dark and light accents. However, I have a tendency to keep working and could probably stand at my easel for another hour or two if I didn’t tell myself to stop.”

Upton’s favorite size for plein air painting is 11 x 14 inch inches, although he also works on New Traditions C12 panels measuring 9 x 12 inches. When he participated in Plein Air Easton, however, he challenged himself to paint outdoors on an 18 x 24-inch canvas. “It has become a sport in Easton to work as large as possible, and it is hard to get attention unless one creates at least two big works that can hang during the opening night festivities,” he says. “It isn’t easy to stand out in a show like that unless your paintings have strong value patterns that catch viewers’ attention. I learned the hard way that details are lost when there are so many strong paintings hanging within a collector’s field of vision. Richard Lack used to say paintings need to have the ‘big look,’ meaning an impact when seen from a distance. He taught us to make all our judgments from nine feet away from the canvas.”

In pursuing his interest in indirect painting, Upton has been studying with artist James Robinson at the Art Academy, Robinson’s art atelier in the Minnesota Twin Cities. As part of those studies, Upton has invested more than 200 hours in making copies of indirect portraits by Ingres. He has also studied at the Atelier Lack, the Atelier, and at the Joseph Paquet Studio. “I have a full-time job as an art director, but in the evenings, on weekends, and during vacations I paint with buddies and take classes at local art ateliers,” he says. “I participated in a workshop with Marc Dalessio on Long Island, and during my summer travels I have been to...
great painting locations in California and, on the East Coast, from Maine to Maryland.”

Recently, Upton and several of his artist friends made a trip to Italy during which he produced 17 plein air paintings that were subsequently exhibited and sold. “Minnesota is normally not a great place to sell paintings, but I received a really strong response from collectors to my show of Italian plein air works,” he says. He that he customized the frames for those paintings with aging techniques, using Japan paint and rottenstone to knock down the glossiness of the gold leaf frames he had made for the panels.

BOB UPTON has been an award-winning graphic designer for more than 25 years and has pursued his interest in classical realism. After receiving a B.F.A. from the College of Visual Arts in St. Paul, Minnesota, he studied at the Atelier Lack, the Atelier, the Joseph Paquet Studio, and the Art Academy, all in the Twin Cities. He has participated in a number of plein air events, including five times at Plein Air Easton, the Plein Air Grand Marais (Minnesota), and Carmel Art Festival (California).

M. STEPHEN DOHERTY is editor-in-chief of Plein-Air magazine.

See more of John Lasater’s paintings in the expanded digital edition of PleinAir.
Glare on the Grand Canal
2013, oil, 17 x 34 in.
Private collection
Price: $22,000

Antiqued Frame, Black

Tower Over the Arno
2013, oil, 17 x 34 in.
Private collection
Price: $22,000