

Romancing the Light

BY JOHN PHILLIP OSBORNE

Lighting effects that add drama and romance to your landscape paintings can be achieved through initial planning and careful organization.

The impact of light on the perception of color is the most important physical phenomenon for an artist to come to terms with in order to paint the landscape effectively. A clear understanding of light and color is essential if an artist wants to record accurately what he or she sees or wants to invent a believable painting. In the end, the ability to romance the light enables the artist to win over the viewer.

A landscape painter also learns that value (the lightness or darkness of a color) is more important than the color itself. When the relative values of colors work together, the painting will be true to nature. But determining values poses a major challenge. How dark do you make sunlight? How light do you make shadows?

I set up my palette according to the way I perceive color values at different distances when I'm painting a landscape: white, yellow, orange, red, violet, manganese blue, cobalt blue, ultramarine blue, and black (see illustration of my palette). In a landscape painting, objects in the foreground generally contain more yellow than distant objects, with orange, red, and violet increasing progressively from the middle ground to the background. I don't use earth colors from tubes; I prefer

to mix my own so that I can control them.

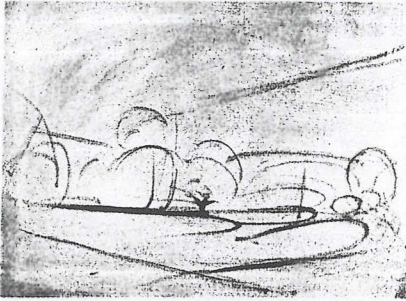
Contrary to what you might think, it's always best to start by painting the middle values. Even if you wish to paint a subject with intense lights and deep shadows, don't begin with your lightest light or darkest dark. My value scale sets cadmium orange as the middle value. I tell my students that anything lighter than the value of orange equals sunlight and anything darker equals shadow. I find a full spectrum of greens useful for summer landscapes; I mix them with cadmium yellow light and ultramarine blue, adding a little alizarin in the shadow tones to make the greens lean slightly to the violet side of the spectrum.

An assortment of gray tones is handy for every season. To create a receding effect, I often use a mixture of cobalt blue, black, and white. Blues, pinks, violets and anything else that helps get the action down quickly are invaluable. Because some of nature's most inspirational moments will be over before you get the paint mixed, you should have your colors prepared before you go out on site.

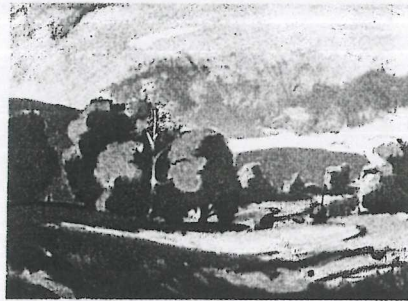
To facilitate painting on location, I use lead-white-primed linen canvas, which has been set aside to cure for about a month. I try to keep on hand a variety of canvases toned with vari-

Canyon Pools,
1990, oil, 36 x 30.
Collection the artist.

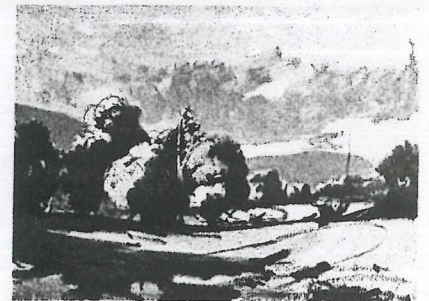
WEAVING PATTERNS OF LIGHT AND SHADOW: A DEMONSTRATION



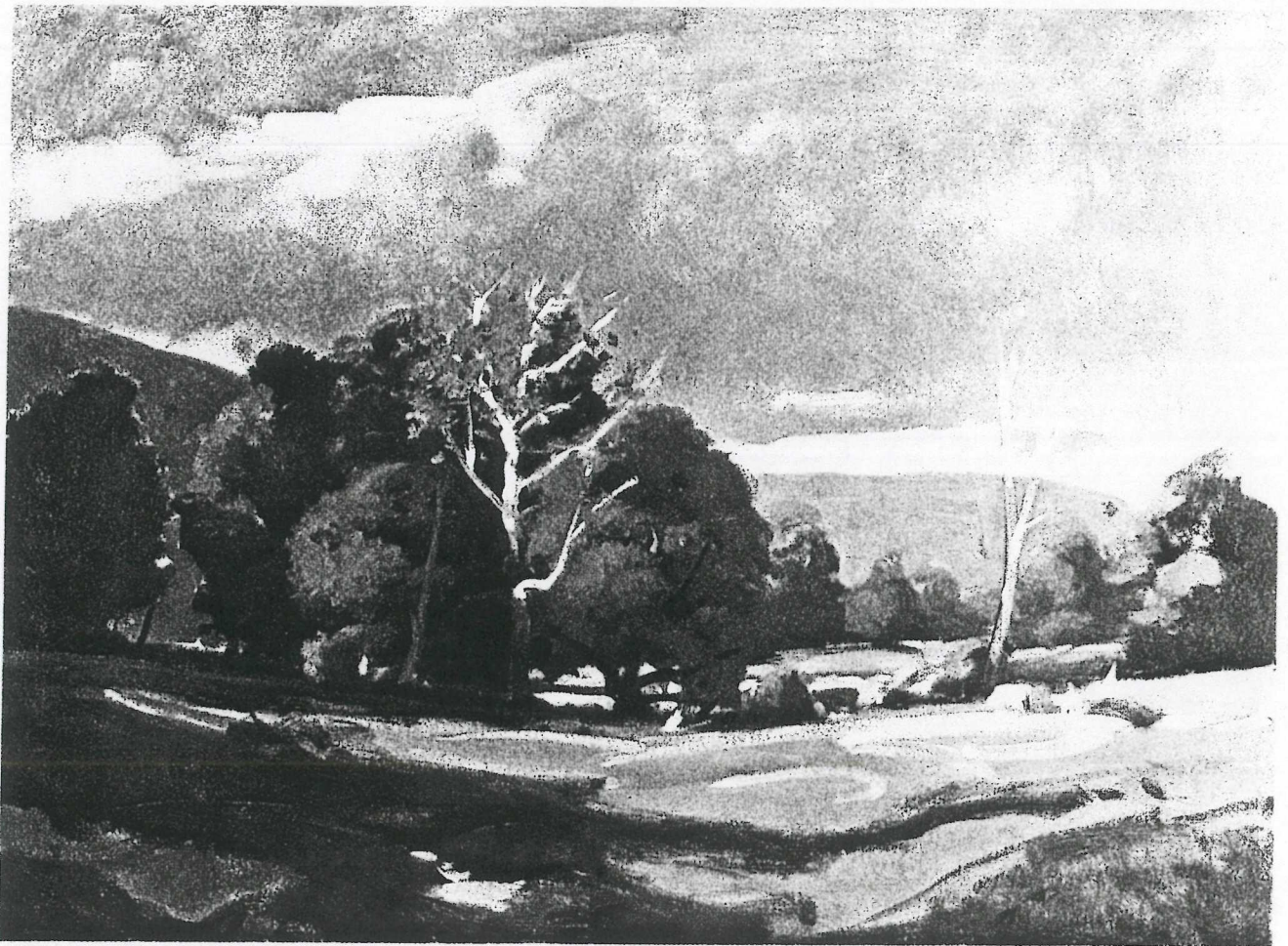
Step 1: I always start with several quick sketches, usually done in a neutral gray, to get the main composition down. Since I don't own a camera and often complete my paintings from my imagination, my initial sketches are critical for delineating the light and shadow masses.



Step 2: In this painting, since I wanted to focus on the effects of sunlight, I keyed my palette to a light, warm tone. The tone had to be just at the right pitch, which could only be determined once I was well into the painting. Using rich color, shadow masses were blocked in in the foreground and grew progressively lighter and more blue-gray as the picture's depth increased. It's always tricky to get the values to recede and still maintain the color. Remember, hard edges come forward and soft ones recede.



Step 3: Next, the sunlit values were determined in order to create the action seen in the sky. Keep in mind that in shadow sunlight is indirect but still contains color. The more muted your shadow effects are, the more critical it is to instill them with life and transparency by adding subtle color undercurrents to them.



Step 4: I then moved into my middle tones, softening edges in order to create a sense of volume and form. Other painters like to keep a two-value jump between light and shadow, but I prefer to create more of a blend by using a greater number of tones. The completed painting: *In the Pasture*, 1990, oil, 18 x 24. Collection the artist.



Light Triumphant, 1990, oil, 36 x 48. Collection the artist.



My palette is organized in receding order as color travels back from the landscape foreground: white, yellow, orange, red, violet, manganese blue, cobalt blue, ultramarine blue, and black.

ous warm and cool neutral values. If I'm painting a sunrise or early morning light, I prefer a darker-toned canvas so that I can focus on the sunlight right away. Since it matches the color of the darkened land, this toned canvas allows me to lay strokes of warm color on it and portray the first rays of sun streaming over the waking landscape as dramatically as it actually appears.

A lighter, middle-key, warm-gray-toned canvas is helpful when I'm painting at midday. I do the shadows first, leaving the base tone of the canvas showing through in what will be the sunlit areas; later, when I have time, I paint in the sun's actual effects. Never leave your shadows for last—they determine the scale of your contrasts. When juggling the effects of light and shadow, keep in mind the principle of contrasting color temperature: If the light is warm, the shadows are cool, and if the light is cool, the shadows are warm.

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Disparate features of the landscape react differently to the same lighting conditions. For example, shadows become paler and bluer as they recede into the distance. Generally, the farther away mountains are, the more they take on a blue-gray coloration. Although sun highlights grow darker in the distance, shadows grow lighter. The rate of change in color values over distance is variable. On a humid day, it will be greater, and on a cold, clear day smaller.

Outdoors, the shifting light and shadow patterns can play havoc with your composition, especially at sunrise or sunset. But, to my mind, the only thing that stands absolutely still is a bad picture! You want to create a sense of action in your landscape. However, it can be quite a challenge to hold onto an effect and not radically alter the painting when faced with changing weather conditions such as sunlight moving down a mountain. Occasionally, I like to pre-tone four or five pieces of canvas and staple them onto a stretcher one on top of the other. In this way, I can peel off one study and quickly begin another in order to keep up with the ever-changing light.

I begin painting on site with what I feel is the single most important step: the massing of forms. First, I squint at the landscape in order to divide it into its major masses. Then I work on shadows on the vertical planes (usually on such shapes as trees, barns, mountains, and figures) and those on the horizontal planes (on roads, fields of grass, etc.). The shadows on the vertical planes are usually darker than those on the horizontal planes. If the canvas I'm using has a warm neutral tone, then the dark shadow masses pretty much set the design of the painting. Beginners tend to think that shadows are done with black paint, but this is inaccurate. Shadows are full of reflected light tones and can actually be richer in color than sunlit areas.

It's more challenging to create an energized landscape when there are no shadow patterns to activate the composition. One of the most difficult times of day for a painter to work on a landscape is noon. The sun is directly overhead and color is washed out. It is much easier to

paint on an overcast day than on a brightly sunlit one. You can more easily distinguish values without distracting contrasts and the constantly evolving shadows created by the moving sun.

When the sky is to be the central focus of the picture, as in a dramatic sunset, I begin by massing forms in the upper part of the canvas. Diffused light throughout a painting is often desirable, but centralized light can be more dramatic. In *Light Triumphant*, I attempted to capture a shaft of sunlight breaking through the clouds, which I spotted one day while painting in the Adirondack Mountains in New York State. As I was painting the picture, I had to be careful not to allow the sunlight to look as if it had been pasted to the canvas. The trick was getting my values to blend while still maintaining an overall color.

When land is the most interesting part of the landscape, I'll quickly move past the sky and focus on the sunlight as it plays on the ground (see demonstration). In this case, I concentrate on vertical sunlit planes and the horizontal sunlit planes; again, the vertical planes are slightly darker in tone than the horizontal planes, as was the case with the shadow masses.

After the masses have been completely laid in on the canvas, I begin work on the middle tones. As I begin softening the edges between adjacent vertical planes of shadow and sunlight, the separate hard edges give way to solid forms. Trees, bushes, and mountains begin to take on volume. The work of harmonizing all the diverse tones in the painting now begins. I usually try for a full range of five values in both sunlight and shadow. Normally, you won't need more than this for a strong, convincing work.

I personally feel it's important not to put everything you see into a painting. I've found that after studying the rotation of seasons year after year I'm able to look past the obvious parts of a subject and discern its essentials. The paintings by other artists that I go back to study time and again are the ones that stir my imagination; the meaningful passages in them are suggested rather than built up with excessive detail. Although it may sound paradoxical,

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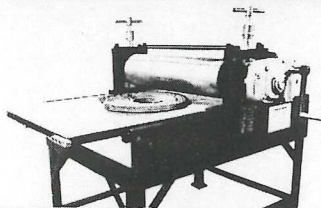
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I feel you can't really master the complexities of outdoor light without understanding indoor light. Only by exploring the lower end of the value scale of light, which is what most studios are lit with, can you fully understand the higher end—outdoor light. Inside a studio, where you are typically dealing with north light, shadows are warm while the light is cool. Outdoors, the opposite is true: Sunlight is warm while shadows are cool. In the twenty years I've been painting and teaching, the contemplation of nature and the infinite moods it seems to express has always given me great pleasure. Ironically, it's been said that most of the great landscape paintings were the product of studio work. Although this may be true, the importance of working outdoors in nature remains crucial. As Eugene Boudin, the nineteenth-century Impressionist said, "Three brush strokes painted from nature are worth more than two day's work in the studio." Ever since I started painting, I've known that there was a lifetime of work waiting to be done outdoors and a countless number of awe-inspiring lighting effects in nature to be captured on canvas. I can truthfully say that as an artist, nothing moves my soul as much as the splendor of that light. ■

John Phillip Osborne currently teaches oil painting at the Ridgewood Art Institute in Ridgewood, New Jersey, in addition to instructing outdoor classes locally and conducting painting trips throughout New England. A graduate of Pratt Institute in New York City, he is the recipient of many awards, among them the 1986 Gold Medal of Honor at the Hudson Valley Art Association. He has also won awards for the best rendition of light and atmosphere in a painting from the American Artists Professional League and the Ridgewood Art Institute. He has had several solo shows and will be exhibiting his newest work at the Heritage Art Gallery of Alexandria in Alexandria, Virginia, this October. Other galleries that show his work include the Gallery at 4 India Street in Nantucket, Massachusetts, the Cooley Gallery in Old Lyme, Connecticut, and the Wyckoff Gallery in Wyckoff, New Jersey.

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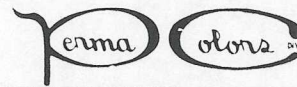
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