

SHERYL KNIGHT

Devoting Oneself to Plein Air Later in Life

Developing a passionate interest in plein air painting can happen at any point in an artist's career; the necessary skills can be learned and a personal approach developed. Californian Sheryl Knight found that to be true when she dedicated herself to studying and practicing outdoor painting.

By M. Stephen Doherty

The students who make the greatest progress in a workshop or art class are those who are determined to make improvements and remain open to instruction, criticism, and sharing with other participants. Sheryl Knight is a perfect example of what artists can achieve, even after a late start, when they make that commitment and remain open to change. Earlier in her life, she wasn't able to paint on a regular basis, take workshops, join festivals and paint-outs, or devote herself to outdoor painting. That didn't happen until she was in her 50s. Nevertheless, she made up for lost time.

"About 18 years ago, when my children were grown and on their own, I started painting again, working in watercolor for several years," Knight explains. "Then around 2000, while I was exhibiting watercolor paintings in galleries, I decided to switch to oils, a medium I used when I was in my teens and 20s. I took a number of workshops from artists I admired and constantly strove to improve by challenging myself to learn new ways of approaching my paintings and growing as an artist.

"I have always been fascinated with trees, and seasons, color, and light, so plein air was a logical choice for me. And I had dreamed of being a full-time artist ever since I was a child, so dedicating myself to painting on a professional level was a natural choice for me to make. And indeed my growth as an artist has given me a way of combining my two passions — art and nature — while being part of the exciting and fulfilling community of plein air artists."

When asked to list the learning experiences that were most beneficial to her art education,



Sheryl Knight

Knight quickly mentions a number of contemporary and historical painters whose work inspired and informed her, as well as the workshops that proved to be profoundly beneficial. "I've been fortunate to study with a number of great painters and teachers, but if I had to identify the instructors who had the strongest influence, I would have to say Ted Goerschner, Quang Ho, Mark Boedges, Richard McKinley, and Kevin Courter," says Knight.

"Critiques of my work by Kevin Macpherson and John Pototschnik have been invaluable. In the future, I hope to take workshops with Scott L. Christensen and Marc Hanson, both of whose work I have studied and admired for years."

One story Knight recalls from a workshop with Quang Ho: While critiquing her earlier paintings, he advised her to crop one large horizontal painting into a square. The advice was right on, and the square painting was juried into three national shows, won two awards, and then was the first painting sold in the third show. Thank you, Quang!

Knight also notes that some classes and workshops over the years have been more beneficial than others. She says, "Not only do the artists need to have outstanding work that you admire, but also the ability to teach and convey their knowledge of painting so as to help you grow as an artist. The advice I would give to another painter is to obtain recommendations from other artists before making the investment of time and money in a workshop."

About her own approach, she says, "After gathering information during workshops, museum visits, online courses, books, instructional DVDs, magazines, and conversations with other



ARTIST DATA

NAME: Sheryl Knight
BIRTHDATE: 1949
LOCATION: Santa Maria, CA
INFLUENCES: "Scott L. Christensen, Mark Boedges, Richard Schmid, Marc Hanson, Kathryn Stats, Ted Goerschner, J. Sorolla, Edgar Payne, and John Carlson."
WEBSITE: www.sherylknight.com



**Compositional sketch for
Autumn in
Maine**

Autumn in Maine
 2016, oil, 24 x 30 in.
 Courtesy Gallery Los Olivos,
 Los Olivos, CA
 Studio

ARTIST PROFILE



Central Coast Vineyard

2015, oil, 30 x 40 in.

Courtesy Judith Hale Gallery, Solvang, CA
Studio

artists, I arrived at an approach to plein air painting that allows me to express, in very personal terms, what I see and feel in nature. Generally speaking, the oils offer my interpretation of the information in front of me. Although I love cityscapes and architecture, I am more attracted to subjects that are not man-made but are, instead, created by the ultimate designer and artist. I have a strong faith in God and I am in awe of His creations, and I want my artwork to reflect the beauty of that creation.”

Plein Air Supplies & Procedures

“In my opinion, painting from life is essential for learning to paint what one sees and

feels,” Knight says as she reveals more about her approach to outdoor painting. “I consider the composition and the light when I am looking at a scene to paint, and I decide if I want to edit anything out or move something into view in order to make the design better. I strive to be selective about what elements of a landscape I include or omit, and to simplify those essential elements to convey what is important to me.

“I usually do one or two quick *notan* value sketches before I pick up a brush, and I often take the preliminary step of toning my canvas. I then draw the outlines of the main shapes and block them in with thin paint, sometimes wiping off areas to keep the paint thin and to

avoid getting too detailed in this early stage. I want this preliminary stage of the painting to be accurate in terms of the shapes, colors, and values so I can see if the overall composition is working. If it isn’t, it’s easy to wipe paint off and restate the colors and values.

“The palette of colors I use outdoors includes nine main colors plus white and several occasional colors. Those main colors are viridian, ultramarine blue, alizarin permanent, cadmium red light, cadmium orange, cadmium yellow pale [Winsor & Newton], cadmium yellow light [Gamblin], transparent red oxide [Rembrandt], and yellow ochre. The occasional colors that I like to have but can do without are



September Vines
2016, oil, 14 x 16 in.
Courtesy Hillside Fine Art,
Claremont, CA
Studio

Vineyard Sunrise
2014, oil, 12 x 24 in.
Private collection
Studio





Autumn Reflections
2016, oil, 12 x 16 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air

cobalt blue, cadmium red, terra rosa, phthalo blue, and transparent orange. I use Gamsol solvent to thin the oil colors and clean my brushes, and I like to paint on oil-primed linen panels, but occasionally I will use Arches oil paper on panels. I use Rosemary brushes and several palette knives, both to mix with and paint with.”

Knight explains, “When I am working *en plein air*, I don’t expect to achieve a finished painting. I just want to gather information and experience the joy of being outdoors and painting. Occasionally I will finish on site, but I prefer to take the plein air piece back to the studio to look at it with fresh eyes. I may finish it, or I may just use it as a study for a larger painting. I tend to be my worst critic when it comes to evaluating my plein air paintings, and in some ways that is one of the ways to strive

for improvement. My husband also has become very good at critiquing my work and seeing things I didn’t see. He is always supportive and encouraging — for which I am very grateful.

“I think I have learned more about painting from workshops than college classes. Now I am teaching and helping students the way others have helped me. Most of all, I want them to have fun!” 🎨

M. STEPHEN DOHERTY is editor-in-chief of PleinAir.



See more plein air and studio paintings by Sheryl Knight in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.