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Studying Form, Color, and Pictorial Composition in the New England Landscape

Daniel Faiella

University of New Hampshire, Durham

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Commentary

Studying Form, Color, and Pictorial Composition in the New England Landscape

—Daniel Faiella

It's early in the morning and the light is just getting good. I pull on my tick-resistant pants and don a pair of rubber boots and a wide-brim hat. As I scramble down the rocks into the ravine, my paint supplies rattle in the pack on my back. I must look ridiculous, but today there's no one here except me and a friend who is showing me around the woods of his small town. He is leading me to an almost inaccessible spot in a remote mill town in northern New Hampshire. As we clamber down a ravine, the hot summer air grows cooler and wetter, though we still can't see the falls that we hear roaring below us. Then we round a corner and there it is: a cascading series of waterfalls winding around rocks smoothed by centuries of rushing water. The morning light bursts through the trees and illuminates the mist in front of us. I have reached my destination, but my real work hasn't yet begun.

When I applied for a grant through the Research and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) during the spring of 2016, I had opportunities just like this in mind. My intention was to gain more experience in the art of painting outdoors. By looking through the student work of my favorite painters I realized that most of them had spent some concentrated period of time studying landscape painting and producing dozens or even hundreds of small sketches of different scenes and times of day outdoors. Dennis



The author painting in the field.

Miller Bunker, who went on to introduce impressionist color principles to American painting, and Rockwell Kent, one of the great American painters and illustrators of the first half of the twentieth century, among many others, painted copious studies of the American landscape. Grant Wood, the painter of *American Gothic*, John Singer Sargent, the well-known American expatriate portrait artist, and countless other painters spent their summers out in the European countryside painting. I knew

that if I was going to advance toward my own artistic goals, I needed to apply myself to those studies as well.

First, I wanted to study different effects of light outdoors and learn more about color relations through the constant practice of observation and color mixing. The color in the landscape is often varied but always maintains a unified feeling that gives us the “mood” of the scene. Balancing this unity and variety takes years of practice.

Second, I wanted to learn more about how to express complex forms in a broad and simplified way, an underlying principle of the way nearly all great painters see the world. The forms of objects like trees and houses are sometimes complex, which makes grasping their underlying unity all the more important to the production of a good picture.

Third, I wanted to learn more about composing pictures by persistently producing small studies (usually between 8 x 10 inches and 12 x 16 inches) and thinking about the principles of good composition for each one. The variety of scenes available to a painter outdoors offers infinite possibilities for the study of composition. The complexity of landscape as a subject made it a great source of practice for all three of my goals.

Composition: Laying the Foundation of the Picture

These considerations run through my mind as I start the picture-making process on this particular morning at the waterfall. Compositional questions arise first. I spend the next half hour traversing every navigable inch of the ravine, trying to see the falls from every angle. I occasionally hold up my hands as a makeshift viewfinder to see how a particular view would lend itself to an interesting composition. Some moments are a little scary: my rubber boots and complete lack of any skill in rock climbing make it difficult to scale slippery cliffs carrying a heavy backpack. It is a blessing that my mother doesn't know where I am. There is one spot where the waterfall emerges over a cliff to create a beautiful, impressive cascade. I decide against that location because of the isolation of the cascade: The view is limiting and lacks variety. I eventually decide on a spot where the falls split into three forks, spilling through and around a series of jutting rocks. I decide that the scene has enough pictorial balance to create a good composition, but I set aside any deeper considerations due to the pressing need to start before the light changes.

I begin by setting the palette. I squeeze out a group of seven intense colors: alizarin crimson, cadmium scarlet, cadmium lemon, permanent green light, sevrès blue, viridian, and ultramarine blue. These colors, along with white, line the edge of the palette on which I will be able to mix almost any color necessary to convey the scene in front of me. Later on my mentor, Craig Hood, advises me to limit my palette to two or three colors in order to force myself to see color less locally and more relationally. The freedom allowed by the palette listed above can lead to trying to match a color exactly instead of seeing it in relation to other colors in the scene.

Early on in the summer I purchased a pochade box, an idiosyncratic version of the classic paintbox that rose to its present popularity among landscape painters in the early twentieth century. In it I

store my paints, brushes, palette knife, painting medium, rags, trash bags, and extra panels to paint on. A camera tripod screws into the bottom of the box, allowing it to serve as both a storage box and an easel. I sit down for a couple of minutes to collect myself. A quick glance at the position of the sun, which has risen considerably since we first set out, tells me that if I want to paint this light effect I have no time to lose. I clamp a blank 9 x 12 inch canvas into place, pick up a handful of brushes, and shade my eyes as I look toward the waterfall.

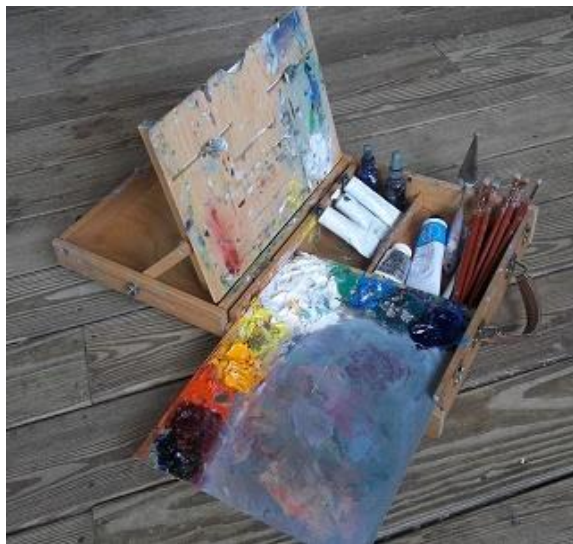
This is where the struggle really begins.

Color: The Observation of Relationships

I start with large areas of color: bright white tinted with yellow for the light on the falls, a dark, cool blue for the rocks near me, a bright yellowish green for the area of mossy rocks being hit by the sun. My aim is to capture the big impression of the scene. The word *impression*, when used by painters, refers to the visual impact of the whole scene on your eye, as opposed to the actual objects themselves. Put another way, it is the relationships of the areas of light in a scene, whether or not those areas define the edges of actual objects. In the scene before me, the warm sunlight is hitting the waterfall and creating an area of warm color in the middle ground of my picture, which contrasts with a very cool light and shadow on the rock in the foreground. I make note of that relationship in my painting.

A further challenge is to understand how to create the impression of light hitting the foam on the waterfall. This is the lightest area of my picture, and in order to convey that sense of light I have to keep everything else in the picture darker. This sounds simple, but it means keeping a constant awareness of the whole scheme of lights and darks in the picture all through the process of painting. If any other part of the picture gets too light, the impression of light on the foam will be destroyed.

Josef Albers, the modernist abstract painter and teacher, said that “color is the most relative medium in art” (Albers 1963, 11), and that applies here. The difficulty is compounded as I try to push this area of my painting to be as light as possible. If I make it straight white, it will not have the warmth of the light that I see in nature, but if I add too much yellow and red, I will darken it to the point where the range from dark to light will be too narrow for me to navigate. I solve the problem by putting a significant amount of white paint down and then layering a tiny bit of yellow on top, allowing it to influence the color without darkening it.



The author's open pochade box, showing palette, paint tubes, brushes, mediums, and palette knife.

Form: Articulating Transitions of Values to Convey a Sense of Space

As I bring the areas of color together, they begin to make edges, which introduces the third focus of my project. Whenever two differing value masses (a relatively light mass and dark mass) come together, they create an edge with a contrast. A painter can tend toward making clean, sharp edges, as for a silhouette, which creates a flattened, poster-like look. Or a painter can make edges mostly soft, like the fuzzy edge of a wispy cloud, to create a more atmospheric look. The important thing



The author's oil sketch of a waterfall in morning light.

when painting outdoors is to observe the relationships between edges: their relative contrasts of light and dark, hardness and softness, and color. In this picture I try to avoid getting hung up on details, and articulate only bigger forms, or shapes. I pay particular attention to edges with high contrast, trying to efficiently express their qualities in relation to all the other edges. I occasionally stand back to see if I am achieving the sense of volume and bulk that I want in this picture. If not, I adjust the edges until they begin to suggest the shapes of the objects and imply a third dimension.

By noon the sun is directly overhead and the morning light is gone. After showing the painting to Professor Hood for a critique later that day, I put it on the shelf with the dozens of other landscape studies I have completed that summer. They're not great art, just little exercises to help me understand the visual world better. I have a landscape painter friend, much older and more experienced than I, who has a bookshelf in his studio with hundreds of these little studies stacked back to front. I asked him about it once and he replied, a little sheepishly, "Yeah, landscape painting takes a while to figure out." An understatement, because I know that bookshelf represents only a fraction of the studies he has done in his time. But that experience shows in every painting he does now.

I want that kind of experience—the kind that gives you an authority with each mark that you make.

During my summer project I only skimmed the surface of what is possible in expressing the light and mood of a scene through paint. In the future it will be important for me to work on larger canvases and go back for several days in a row to work on a single image. I also want to explore including the human figure in landscape compositions, as I had little opportunity to do so last summer. The best thing I gained from the summer's work was actually something I lost. I lost the crippling timidity that often kept me from painting outside. I can deal with the fear of failure that stares back at you when

you look at a blank canvas. I can deal with people laughing at my silly painting outfit or coming up and asking questions, with the wind blowing a wet canvas off my easel and into my clothing, with standing in the sun for hours on a hot day wearing long pants and a long-sleeved shirt to shield my Irish skin. All that is part of the fun of landscape painting, and none of it distracts me much anymore. That's good, because a landscape painter has too much else to think about.

I would like to thank Dana Hamel, Elizabeth Lunt Knowles, and the Rogers Family Foundation for their generous contributions to the funding of this project through the Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program. It is because of the generosity of people like them that my college education has been possible. Many thanks also to all the staff at the Hamel Center who have helped me throughout my time at UNH so far. I am also very grateful to Professor Craig Hood for serving as my faculty mentor. His generosity with his time and with his extensive knowledge of the art of painting were essential to the success of the project.

Works Cited

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Author and Mentor Bios

Studio art major and University Honors Program member **Daniel Faiella**, from Northwood, New Hampshire believes that “in the modern world, many of us feel dislocated from the landscape around us.” He certainly overcame that dislocation the summer after his first year at the University of New Hampshire: He tramped through, across, up, and down forests, streams, mountains, and ravines in search of interesting landscapes to study through painting, just as many of the painters he admires did during their education. Dan’s faculty mentor, Professor Craig Hood, and a Hamel Center Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) grant supported his work tackling such complex concepts as color relations and what makes a compelling composition. He decided to write for *Inquiry* in order to convey some of these concepts to nonpainters and to clarify for himself what he knows about painting. After graduating from the University of New Hampshire in May 2019 with a studio art major and guitar performance minor, Dan plans to work professionally both as a painter and as a teacher of painting.

Craig Hood has been teaching painting and drawing at the University of New Hampshire for thirty-six years. He is a professor of studio art and chair of the Department of Art and Art History. Dan Faiella asked Professor Hood to mentor him for his Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) project, and working with Dan reinforced many of the things Professor Hood has learned about working on landscape painting over the years. Of Dan's decision to write for *Inquiry*, he notes that “in the visual arts, any experience with writing is valuable and makes a student more prepared professionally.”