

OPEN DISCUSSION

What Makes a Painting ‘Plein Air’?

Colorado artist Gary Michael raises a question often asked by festival organizers, artists, and collectors: Is there a definition that establishes what is and is not a true plein air painting?

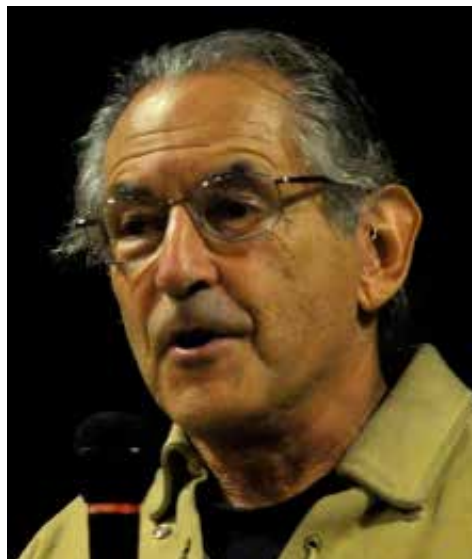
By Gary Michael

You might think it’s an easy question. But ask 10 artists what a “plein air painting” is, and odds are you’ll get a different answer from each one — with one point of agreement: The work has to connect to the outdoors. With so many conflicting opinions being argued with equal passion, is there a possibility of reaching a consensus? And is the effort really necessary? Judging from the abundance of plein air painting associations, competitions, exhibitions, festivals, online communities, and workshops, it seems we should at least make an effort to define *plein air*. Should the term cover all the various ways artists are working outdoors — or indoors looking out?

Consider that common element: *painted outside*. Does the subject also have to be outside? If you go outside and paint something that’s inside while looking in a window, is it plein air? Or if you set up by a window, whether in your studio or vehicle, and paint an outside motif, does that count? Does it matter if the window is open or shut? Monet’s series of the Rouen Cathedral, painted from a room across the street, might not qualify.

Which brings us to umbrellas. Many painters make use of these shields from direct sun on their palette and panel or canvas. They bring conditions a bit closer to those of the studio and make gauging values, maybe the most difficult thing about painting in the sun, a little less of a guessing game. Now suppose you have a 10-foot black umbrella and struts to keep it from toppling. Your task just got simpler. What if there’s a cupola conveniently located beside the lily pond of a botanic garden. If you avail yourself of its shade, are you still truly in plein air? It seems even the definition of “outside” is up in the air.

Suppose you sketch an outdoor scene in pencil, noting the colors and values, and then paint from the sketch outside, but miles from where you sketched it. Does that count? You



Gary Michael

did observe the subject outdoors, and painted it outdoors.

Surely it’s permissible to return to the same spot on different days to complete an outdoor scene. Dan Sprick showed me a highly detailed painting he did of downtown Denver over several days from the balcony of his 16th-floor studio, clearly *en plein air*. But when I said, “If you entered that in a plein air competition, no one would believe it was a plein air piece,” Dan laughed and agreed.

If you begin and complete a painting entirely on the spot but take radical liberties with color and composition and end up with a fauvist work that looks like a Matisse, can we still call it plein air? Or need it bear a recognizable resemblance to the motif?

Those who propose to determine whether a painting is plein air work based on what percentage is done outdoors also have questions to answer. Suppose you say 80 percent of the

painting needs to be done at the site. Eighty percent of what? The time you spend? (Does the thumbnail count, the squeezing out of paint, or the mixing of color?) The strokes you deploy? The surface you cover? Who times themselves, counts strokes, or measures square inches of color? There is simply no standard way to measure how much of a painting is “done” at a given moment, and we don’t know we’re finished until we stop. So this manner of determination leads to hopeless confusion, even if you paint with a brush in one hand and a stopwatch in the other.

A fellow member of Plein Air Artists of Colorado told me firmly that if you do any more than “tweak” a painting in the studio, it fails to qualify. But what’s a tweak? One stroke? Three? Five? Can you soften an edge, correct some drawing, add or remove a shape the bothers you? One person’s tweak may be another’s overhaul.

I saw Charles Movalli do an outdoor demo in which he laid out the darks, no more than a shadow pattern, very quickly. He said, “There’s my painting.” Clearly he meant that having established the composition and determined where the big shapes would be, he’d done what he considered the most important part. The addition of color and any detail was secondary.

Moral of story: Different parts of a painting have different weight, more or less importance. If you put down the big shapes outside, you’ve done the preponderance of the piece, in this view. The basic drawing, scale, perspective, and all-important design are accomplished. How much more time or paint you may spend refining, outside or in, is arbitrary.

So between those ultra-orthodox purists who declare that the entire painting should be completed outdoors in the presence of its subject and those who believe if any part of



Johanna's House
 Gary Michael
 1998, 20 x 24 in.
 Collection the artist
 Plein air

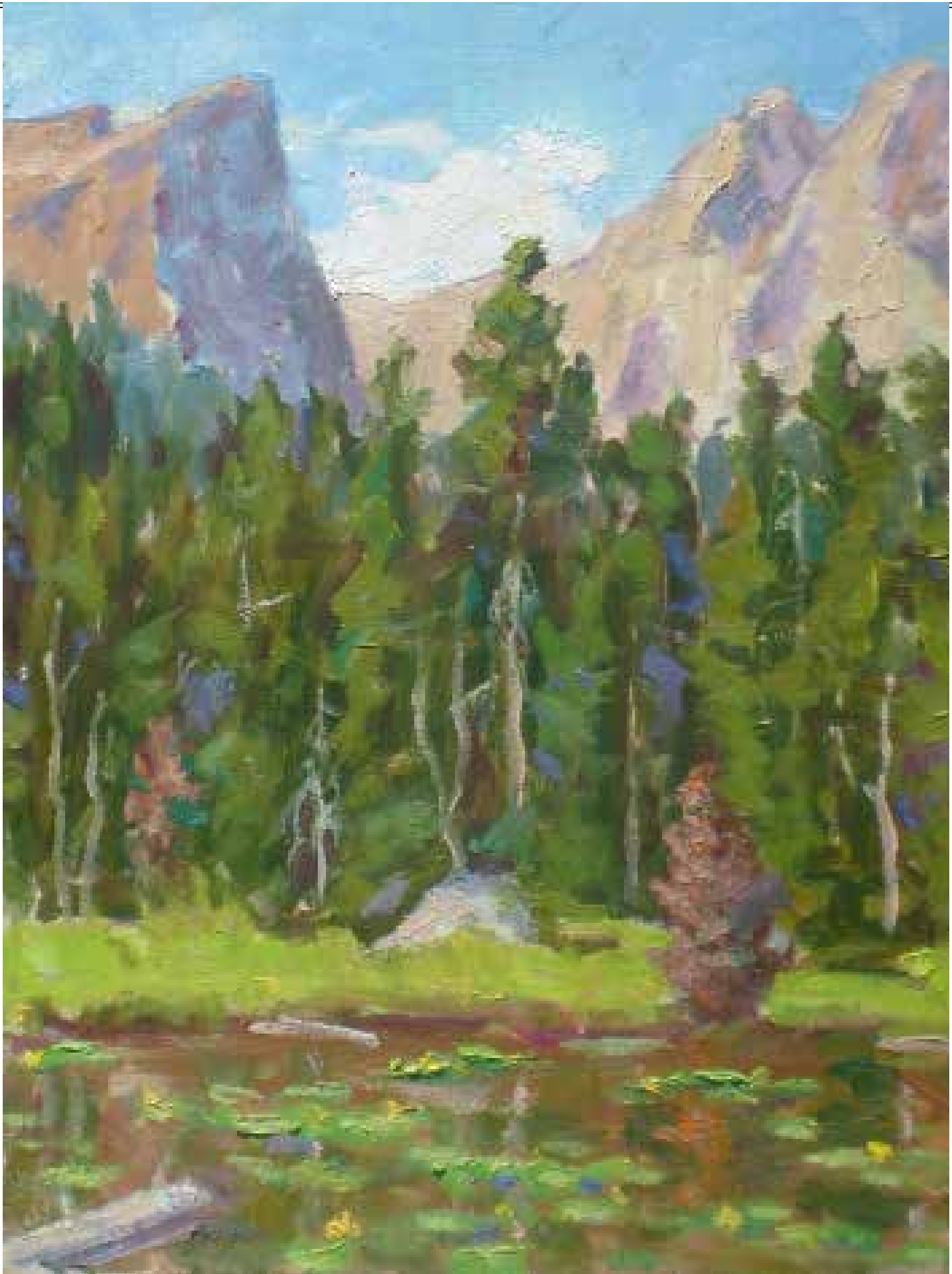
a painting is executed in plein air you can call it by that name lies a vast expanse of interpretation. And I think that's a good thing, because it doesn't really matter how a painting comes to be. Ours is not a *performing* art (unless you're doing a demo!).

Plein air is not a genre or a medium. It's a place. Painting in that place is fun and instructive, but there's no added *machismo*, much less greater authenticity, if it's completed in the absence of freezing temperatures, high winds, or voracious mosquitoes. Neither buyers nor artists

have different standards for judging a painting according to where the artist worked. Ultimately, all that matters about a painting is its quality.

As a juror in a criminal trial, I, along with my fellow jurors, struggled with "reasonable doubt." The judge couldn't define it for us. Whose "reasonable" are we talking about? In the end, I got it: Reasonable doubt is whatever a jury decides it is. You see the analogy — some things resist strict definition. And therein, I think, lies much of their beauty 📖

Born and raised in Denver, Colorado, **GARY MICHAEL** started drawing as a child, attended college on a tennis scholarship, and went on to earn multiple postgraduate degrees and become a university professor before retiring from academia to pursue his passion for painting. He will be discussing the issues covered in this article during the Plein Air Basics program at the Plein Air Convention & Expo in Monterey, California, from April 4-11, 2014. For more information, visit <http://gary-theartist.com> or www.pleinairconvention.com.



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Nymph Lake
Gary Michael
2012, 16 x 12 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air

Tunnel Rock
Gary Michael
2013, oil, 12 x 16 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air