

PASTEL. PLEIN AIR

The book is dedicated to pastel techniques in relation to plein-air landscape sketches and contains pastel illustrations by the author

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The author of the book has more than 25 years of experience working with pastel.

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Contents

Foreword	3
Choosing a place for plein-air sketches and understanding your creativity	4
On pastel	14
Choosing paper colour.....	16
Why this style of plein-air drawing?.....	17
Example of pastel work at the studio	35
The most renowned pastel brands	47
Fixatives	50
Mount	51
Paper	53
Tools and materials for plein air	54
On landscape	56
Contribution of impressionists to landscape painting.....	57
My life in pastel	59
Conclusion	60
About the author.....	64
List of featured works	66

FOREWORD

My name is Sergei Oussik.

I am a plein-air master of pastel.

My story is not an art review or lesson in the theory of art. All I want is to share my experience in pastel, especially working on plein-air landscape sketches. I am not saying that I am a good artist, that would be silly, only time can tell. However, I can safely declare that my pastel technique is at a very good level, it is recognised in many countries. I am not boasting, it is a fact.

I have been working for more than 25 years exclusively with pastel and I know all about it – brands of pastel manufacturers, paper, specific techniques, fixatives, all the insider nuances. I am going to share all that I have learned without keeping anything back.

Due to the fact that creative process in art is a mystery – otherwise any graduate from conservatory or literature institute could be Mozart and Dostoyevsky – my attempts to impart my experience in this area are very subjective.

The illustrative materials, if the readers will forgive me, are represented by my own pastels made over the last ten years. Works and names of other artists will only be mentioned in the text.

God's world is very beautiful. Thousands of people are born with the ability to see and feel its beauty sharper than others, and they try to recreate what they see. There are many new artists among them to whom I address my advice on plein-air pastel drawing.

Translucent background, that is the colour of paper, works for us in this case.

Sometimes it happens when you pick the wrong paper colour, or it is impossible to define the right one – for example, with dense greens and, among these trees, a number of red and orange buildings. In the conditions of plein air, when every minute is valuable, I suggest using a PU sponge (you can do it with a finger, as the last resort) to create a spot of colour you need and then work on it. This way we save a lot of time, without wasting effort on drawing pastel layers to achieve common colour, provide the background that will appear through the subsequent strokes, and keep the surface of the paper.

Thus, during work on plein air, I advise you, first of all, to choose the right tone and colour of paper, and then, evenly covering the whole surface of the sheet, to layer the colour until you reach the necessary colour scheme. At the beginning of such work these layers need to be transparent and light, so that you fully use the colour and tone of paper.

WHY THIS STYLE OF PLEIN-AIR DRAWING?

1. Limitations of the palette

As you can imagine, in 25 years of working with pastel my workshop has seen a great number of various pastels by the best manufacturers from around the world. There is an abundance of colours and tones. However, even when working at my workshop, I can almost never find the tone I need, so I have to create layers of various tones to get the result I need. On plein air, where your travelling set of pastels is obviously smaller and time is rigidly limited, there is no use even trying to find at once the colour you need. There will hardly be such chalk of pastel and the colour scheme is more important, than fully matching colour.

2. Priority of the colour scheme

Limitations of the technique, on the one hand, and the inevitable conventionality of reproduction of some light effects of the nature, on the other, often make it impossible to transfer exactly the “natural” colours (such light effects as shine or gloss on water or leaves). With pastel it isn’t always possible to recreate the needed colour, which is why one needs to concentrate on the achieved colour and to correct other colours according to the priorities of the colour scheme.

A Fa-La-Si-La melody doesn’t change whether it is played in higher octave or in lower, just its sound is only slightly toned. That is, the combination of sounds is more important than the absolute sound of the “correct” note. The same principle works in drawing, the feeling of the atmosphere of the drawn is defined by harmony of the colour scheme and the right proportion of colours, but not their exact representation.

3. Feeling of the air

The suggested way of plein-air work creates the illusion of air and life due to the fact that the surface of paper is not completely covered over, and the layers of pastel “breathe” and can be seen through. This effect works especially well with remote objects (see Bologna. Overcast day). If you look attentively at this sketch, you can see that the complex facade of the building isn’t drawn over. Its tone and colour are achieved by the already described light touches. The effect of air is aggravated if the foreground is drawn with bright, juicy, covering strokes. I advise you to do this only after all schemes in your drawing are defined and the covering stroke won’t break the harmony on paper.



Early Spring (country house); pastel, paper; 2012.

Sketch from nature. I was sitting in the spring sun, warmly dressed. I consider it as one of my best studies, because the minimalistic means bring the desired effect.

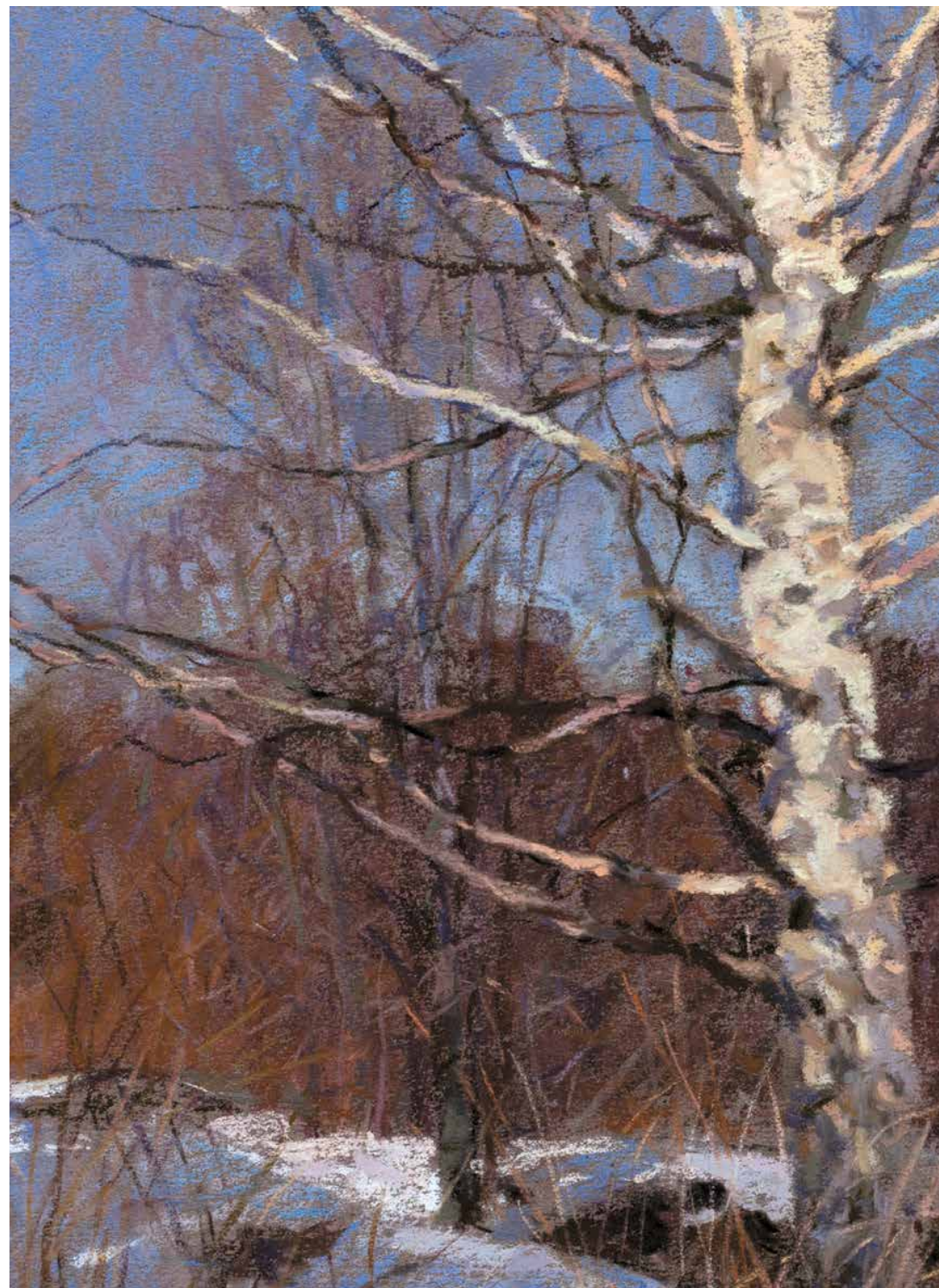
4. Possibility of further work

Dense, juicy pastel strokes fill the relief of paper and make it impossible to work further in the areas where they are laid. (In such case, for further work on the drawing, I weaken these areas with a PU sponge).

The suggested way of layering allows the surface of the paper to hold new layers of pastel, thus, enabling us to continue the work.

On the other hand, we still have our right to make mistakes.

Let me explain. It isn't always comfortable to work in the conditions of a plein-air: it's either blinding sun, or cold, or in an uncomfortable position with the sketch board. Mistakes in drawing or tone can happen (drawing in the bright sun any stroke seems darker and, as a result, the work has a "washed-out" effect, requiring contrast added at the studio). It is much easier to eliminate errors if the surface of paper isn't drawn over and still "breathing".



The described and reasoned way of making a plein-air sketch is, of course, schematic and only advised, your personality is more important. Undoubtedly, the problem of recreation of the charm of nature by all means has higher priority over following the suggested method. Nevertheless, it is hard to challenge the paradigm – “you need to know the law to break it,” as well as “the invention of the wheel is the fate of the stubborn and Philistines.” In order to defend my method I would like to add that the more complex and varied the object of the drawing is, the more effective is the suggested technical method.

That is, if the chosen place is water, sky, or cliff, that is, two-three colour combinations, and the drawing is only the line of the horizon, please, work as you like! However, if your landscape has complex facades, a group of buildings, etc., then it is almost impossible to achieve the desired effect without making mistakes if you ignore the proposed way of work.

I WOULD LIKE TO REPEAT AND EMPHASISE ONCE AGAIN THE MOST IMPORTANT POINTS FOR THE WORK ON A LANDSCAPE ON PLEIN AIR.



Bologna. Rain; Italy; pastel, paper; 2012.

This sketch from nature is made in confined conditions of a street cafe. The atmosphere of an Italian city centre is reproduced rather well. The study is made with technical ease and elegance. Drawback – possibly, a little boring in terms of colour.

