
What is Plein-Air Painting?

plein-air (plān-âr', Fr. plen-er') [key][Fr.,=open-air], term used for paintings or drawings made directly from nature and infused with a feeling of the open air. Painting outdoors is a relatively recent practice; the impressionists and painters of the Barbizon school made plein-air painting an important dimension of their landscape work.

Painting *en plein air* (French for “in the open air”) began in the 1800’s in Europe, and was an important practice of impressionist artists at the time. Impressionists were eschewing the traditional studio style of painting, and instead, headed outside to explore the possibilities of painting outside, and of capturing real life.

The goal of plein-air painting is to capture the light and colors peculiar to the place where artists paint. Some artists create a very colorful and abstract interpretation of their subjects, while others work toward a more realistic treatment.

Landscape painting continues to be a primary focus of plein-air artists, but it is not the exclusive focus. Today, plein-air paintings capture a range of subject matter, including portraits, figurative works, street scenes, and still-lives.

Painting en plein air is a pursuit unlike any other painting technique. It challenges artists to concentrate every sensory nerve on the information in front of them. Artists must absorb it all, from sight to sound, from temperature to atmosphere, and then channel those feelings from head to hand, recreating the vision in paints, on paper or canvas.

Plein-air painting is currently undergoing a resurgence in popularity throughout the country. Some have even called it the “people’s art,” because due to the generally small size of the paintings, it is relatively affordable and easy to collect.

