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## Open Air Painting in Italy

By Maddine Insalaco, Etruscan Places



Creating landscape paintings outdoors offers an opportunity to experience nature in a way that is very distinct from more traditional activities, such as hiking, biking, boating, etc., that involve movement. The fact that picture making requires the artist to remain stationary for at least two or three hours means that he or she will obtain an intimate familiarity with the subject landscape. This familiarity extends beyond the visual and includes the other senses as well. The artist as quiet spectator experiences a real assault on the senses of sound, smell, touch and even taste, if the season is right.

### A Long History

Open air painting has a long history and has its origins in Italy, not in France as is commonly believed. Evidence exists that artists painted in oil outdoors in the early 17th century, so the tradition is at least 350 years old. While the exact beginning of outdoor painting is hard to pinpoint chronologically, what is clearly established is that in the mid-18th century a movement began in the countryside surrounding Rome, the so-called Campagna Romana, which became an international phenomenon. Artists from all over Europe and America flocked to the Campagna to paint specific sites on defined itineraries. It was the artistic counterpart of the "Grand Tour."



Why was Italy destined to be the center of an activity that ultimately undermined tradition and led to modern painting? Since the Renaissance, Italy had reigned supreme as the artistic capital of the western world. The Renaissance itself was spurred by the new interest in Italy's classical antiquity. The tradition of artistic excellence was therefore an ancient one. Any artist possessing talent and ambition who was fortunate enough to have the financial backing, whether through awards or private sources, made his way to Rome as a necessary step on the path to success.

During the 17th century two French artists, Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin, working independently in Rome, developed what became known as the Classical Landscape style. Paintings in this style contained figure compositions based on ancient



literary themes, surrounded by classical architecture, all placed in an idealized landscape. These idealized spaces were all based on studies made in the Roman Campagna.

What led to the mass exodus to the countryside in the 18th century however, was the new spirit of empiricism that characterized the world of the Enlightenment. The emphasis on scientific observation dictated that the artist study the external world in an effort to reproduce it as accurately as possible in paint. The explosion of “Grand Tourism” during this period also created a demand for painted vedute, or views, of places of interest on the tour of Italy. The veduta functioned much like a photograph today in that it represented a record of one’s travels. Some travelers even brought their own artists with them.

The spread of the vedute, coupled with the ideal imagery of classical landscape, conferred a unique status on the Roman Campagna. By 1800, specific itineraries emerged that artists traveled to paint routinely. Many great figures in the history of painting contributed to this tradition: Corot, Turner, Sargent, Inness and Cole are but a few.

In addition to professional incentives there were strong personal motivations for painting outdoors. First of all, open air painting was always considered a social activity; that is, it was done in groups. The group provided the obvious security in a potentially hostile environment, but more importantly it was fun and stimulating to paint with others.

Also, the world of the 18th century was regulated by strict social and artistic conventions, and painting outdoors represented a time in which an artist could be free of them. Socially, the physical challenges in working outdoors certainly led to a relaxation of dress codes and formal behavior. Contact with nature stirs sentiments of a more elemental variety, a kind of abandonment to the senses that is itself freeing. Artistically, the nature of open air painting requires that the artist work quickly in an effort to capture the fleeting quality of light on the landscape. Hence no painting should involve more than a few hours to produce. In order to work in this manner the artist virtually had to ignore the rigors of conventional technique and register his impressions in a spontaneous fashion.

This new method of painting was enthusiastically embraced for its liberating quality. Today it is the works that were produced outdoors only for the purposes of study not for display that most appeal to our modern aesthetic in their freshness and liveliness of brushwork.

It was the French artists working in Italy that were to take this new freedom of process and transform painting, first in the works of the Barbizon painters and ultimately with the breakthroughs of the Impressionists in the 19th century. What is critical to remember is the role of the Roman Campagna in contributing to this revolution in art.

Modern painters investigate a tradition



My husband Joe Vinson and I are both painters. Our lives are divided between New York City and Italy where we organize landscape painting workshops in Tuscany and the Roman Campagna from May through October. We have the great fortune to have similar interests, complementary characters and adventurous spirits. When we started working together on these programs in Italy I had one very serious concern that I feared would jeopardize our relationship: I had lived in Rome for 10 years pursuing a former career and Joe had only visited the country once for a holiday. How could we be on equal terms

here when our backgrounds and experiences were so different? Would this not be a source of conflict? It was our love of outdoor painting and specifically our knowledge of its historical origins in Italy that suggested a solution.

One of the curious ironies of history is that many destinations that were household words among the artist community in the 18th and 19th centuries, for example Civita Castellana, Papigno, Olevano, Baia, Posillipo, are all but forgotten today. During my 10 years in Rome I had visited virtually none of these locations, even though many of them were just a few dozen kilometers from the city. In the early weeks of our first season working together, an idea for a project was born that would involve following these historical painting itineraries ourselves. We realized that to do this properly would take several months, if not years. These places were new to both of us so we could discover them together.

Five years have passed since this project was initiated and we have traveled hundreds of kilometers in the environs of Rome and Naples scouting out these sites and painting them. What began as an effort to make a marriage happy has yielded many side products, including public lectures on the subject of Italian open air painting in the US, and new programs that give our clients the opportunity to paint some of these historical itineraries. Our programs are also the direct beneficiaries of our ever increasing knowledge of handling the challenges of outdoor painting.

### The open air challenge

When we tell people that we make our living teaching landscape painting in Italy, there is an immediate positive reaction concerning the romantic and idyllic nature of what we do. While this perception is deserved, there are many difficulties inherent in this kind of work. In fact, a few years ago we concluded that open air painting can seem more like an extreme sport than fine art.

The unpredictability and variability of the weather is the most obvious challenge. Wind, rain, excessive heat or cold can present physical stress. Animal and insect life may create irritating situations. A goat once started eating the paint off one of our student's unattended palettes. Recently I found myself in the path of a shepherd with a flock of 300 sheep and within minutes found myself surrounded! Bugs just love wet paint and are difficult to remove from a picture. Art historians have used insect and plant matter to prove that works were created outside. Moving equipment and wet oil paintings can be a logistical nightmare. Even site selection itself can be problematic if some pre-painting reconnaissance has not taken place.

The benefits of open air painting far outweigh the inconveniences, however. There is the aesthetic pleasure derived from careful observation of changing light patterns on the landscape. In this busy world it is so rare to look at anything for more than a few seconds. The quiet and sustained encounter with nature is incredibly relaxing, if not therapeutic. Painting is so involving that it is virtually impossible to think about anything else simultaneously.

There is also the empowering sense of being free: free to look, explore, appropriate, interpret, or just exist and enjoy. Above all, the sense of being “in” one's painting resonates on a deeper level as we feel the naturalness of our connection with the external world. Upon discovering my interest in landscape painting, one of my instructors in art school said to me years ago that landscape painters were the happiest people he knew. At the time I did not fully understand this but now I know why it could be true.

## Doing as We Do

I consider myself very lucky to be able to make a living doing what I love with my artist husband. So much of our time in Italy when we are not running workshops involves painting outdoors and developing ideas for new and existing programs. Often this requires travel to new places, which in Italy of course means new foods and wines to sample!

We currently have three distinct workshops but they all reflect a fundamental priority to offer our clients nothing less than what we would want for ourselves. In addition however, our aim is to minimize the challenges of working outdoors by offering protection from both sun and rain; materials, equipment and logistical transport; food and water; isolated painting sites on private properties; and last but not least, professional instruction. In this way, participants can focus on the painting process alone. Because it is in the painting, the looking, and the sensing in general that the benefits of working in the open air derive.

