

Plein Air Painting In Russia Today

"Paint two small plein air sketches every day. Nothing else will train your sense of color better."

By M. Stephen Doherty

"Paint two small plein air sketches every day. Nothing else will train your sense of color better." That's the advice given to Ulrich Gleiter, an artist currently studying at the Repin Academy in St. Petersburg, Russia.

"Plein air painting is not actually part of the educational program at the Repin Academy in St. Petersburg, but it is considered an important exercise that should be performed every day," says Gleiter who won top awards in 2010 in the Plein Air Rockies in Estes Park, Colorado; the Wyoming Plein Air festival in Cheyenne, Wyoming; and the Alameda Plein Air Paintout in Alameda, California.

"Most of the instruction at the academy is centered around long-term figure poses for drawing and painting the human figure," Gleiter says. "I see myself as much a studio and portrait painter as a landscape painter. However, I make a point of creating plein air studies on the way home from the academy and on weekends because I believe it will help me refresh the colors in my paintings, train me to finish a canvas quickly, and bolster my ability to create better landscape paintings. To me, plein air painting is part of a whole educational program that includes drawing and painting portraits in the studio."

Gleiter explains, "The loose and painterly feel in the drawings and paintings created at the Repin Academy is intentional and related to an Impressionistic approach, in which a likeness is achieved through an understanding of how volume and light build up in a painting. In contrast to what one might find at an atelier in the United States that emphasizes approaches similar to those of the 19th-century academies, the instruction in St. Petersburg is based on an assump-



Painting in Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado in 2010.



'77 For Sale

2010, oil, 17 x 21 in. Private collection



Morning Aspens

2010, oil, 23 x 16 in. This painting received First Prize in the Rocky Mountains Plein Air Festival in Estes Park, Colorado. Private collection

tion that a likeness is achieved by studying how objects are revealed in light. Instead of emphasizing linear edges and precisely rendered shapes, we think more about the way relative value is established by the play of light and shadow.

“Representation of shade can be achieved through dark tones, softened edges, and minimal detail. Moreover, when we look at an object that is in the shadow, especially when it is positioned in front of a bright background, we perceive it as a unified mass and a sharp silhouette against the stretches where it meets the bright background. The same object under intensive light can be shown conveying all the inner details.”

Varied Approaches

“The basic idea is aiming to capture what characterizes shadow and light rather than striving to accurately represent every detail,” Gleiter continues. “This allows one to work quite independently from nature. It also facilitates getting along with a limited palette. When I was situated alongside American plein air painters, I noticed that many of them used a different approach. They preferred to squeeze out many more hues on their palettes than I did. Another difference is that I don’t clean my palette after I’ve finished a painting because I prefer to immediately start a new picture with the colors left on the palette from the previous effort. I see no problem going ahead with colors that might at first seem to be completely out of place, even if that forces me to do more mixing. For example, a sky that I first paint with a mixture of black, brown, and white can be made more lively with additional strokes of clean cerulean blue. In some ways the result will be even more vibrant than a sky painted with clean colors.”

Further explaining his choice of approach, Gleiter continues, “One of the principal reasons I pursue this approach is that one of the best ways to judge a representational painting is to imagine what it would look like in black and white. That can make it more obvious how space can be created by hard and soft edges, tonalities, and compositional centers.”

‘Individual And Personally Expressive’

“So far I have only discussed influences on my painting from my time in Russia,” Gleiter points out. “I want to quickly repeat the advice I received from one of my professors at the



Gleiter's easel set up in the snow as he paints Winter Road



Winter Road Near St. Petersburg, Russia
2010, oil, 20 x 28 in. Collection the artist



Nevski Prospekt, St. Petersburg, Russia
2009, oil, 20 x 24 in. Collection the artist



Night in the South, Greece
2009, oil, 16 x 18 in. Collection the artist

Dresden Academy in Germany, where I studied before moving to Saint Petersburg. ‘Paint in such a way that nobody else after you will have to paint this once more,’ he said. His point was that drawing and painting should be individual and personally expressive, and not totally objective and clinical. The aim is to instill a work of art with such strong emotional content that it could only be created by one person who brought his or her training, understanding, and feeling to the creative process. “

Captivating Content

“The most important consideration in deciding what to paint and how to represent that subject on canvas is my excitement about it,” Gleiter says emphatically. “I won’t begin painting unless there is something that captivates my attention. Searching for these instances is often as much work as producing the painting itself. That was particularly true during my recent visit to the United States, when I participated in plein air events. Everything I saw was an entirely new visual impression, and I found myself attracted to the urban landscape — parking lots, car dealerships, retail stores — subjects many artists would consider to be unpaintable. I was also overwhelmed by the vast landscapes of Colorado and Wyoming, and while it was hard to distill what was most worthy to be painted, I eventually found a way of transcribing my excitement.”

Gleiter concludes, “I’m still based here in Saint Petersburg at the moment. A next step will be to move back to Europe within a few months. However, I’m considering spending more time in the U.S. because my style was much appreciated. As for my art, I hope to always remain open to new information and influences. I know what matters to me, but I’m not sure I will ever know all that can be understood and appreciated about creating works of art.” □

ULRICH GLEITER was born in Saarbruecken, Germany, and studied at the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts in Germany before moving to Russia to study first at the Suricov Institute of Arts in Moscow and then at the Repin Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg. In 2010 he received the Best of Show award and First Place in the Quick Draw Portrait Competition in the Plein Air Rockies 2010 in Estes Park, Colorado; the Award of Excellence in the Wyoming Plein Air in Cheyenne, Wyoming; and the Frank Bette First Prize in the 2010 Alameda Plein Air Paintout in Alameda, California. He will be mounting a solo exhibition of his work at Gallerie Ines Schulz in Dresden, Germany, in the fall of 2011, and will participate in the Door County Plein Air Invitational in July 2011 and the Plein Air Rockies in Estes Park, Colorado, in August 2011. For more information, visit his website at www.ulrichgleiter.com.



Alpine Thoughts

2010, oil, 17 x 12 in. Private collection. This painting won the First Place Award in the Quick Draw contest during Plein Air Rockies, Estes Park, Colorado

View of the USS Hornet, Alameda, California
2010, oil, 16 x 20 in. Collection the artist. This painting won the Best of Show award in the Alameda Plein Air Festival.

