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PRESENTS

ARTIST DAILY STEP BY STEP:

# Oil Painting Techniques:

24 Tips to Learn  
How to Paint a  
Plein Air Landscape

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ARTIST DAILY STEP BY STEP:

# Oil Painting Techniques:

24 Tips to Learn How to Paint a Plein Air Landscape. | by M. Stephen Doherty

**W**hile formulating plans for another travel workshop sponsored by *American Artist*, I thought of Donald W. Demers as potentially the best instructor to lead the excursion through Spain. He has that combination of technical skill, teaching experience, and friendly personality that makes

for a good workshop leader. I knew he could offer valuable instruction as the group made its way from cities and villages to the Mediterranean coast, and also quickly establish a bond of friendship between the participants.

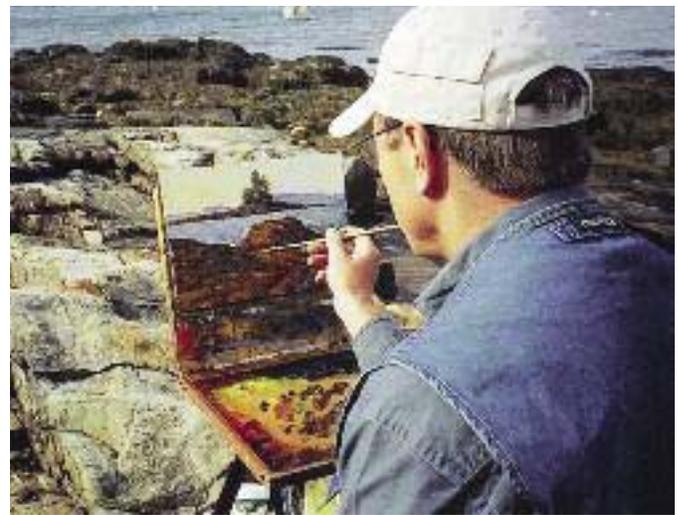
I observed Demers painting and interviewed him for an article in the

June 1999 issue of the magazine, but in that presentation I concentrated on his professional experience and relegated the instructional information to a short piece in the “Nuts & Bolts” section of the issue. With the prospect of him conducting a weeklong workshop, I wanted to know more about his approach to teaching and his attitude toward helping students of varying abilities who would be working with different media

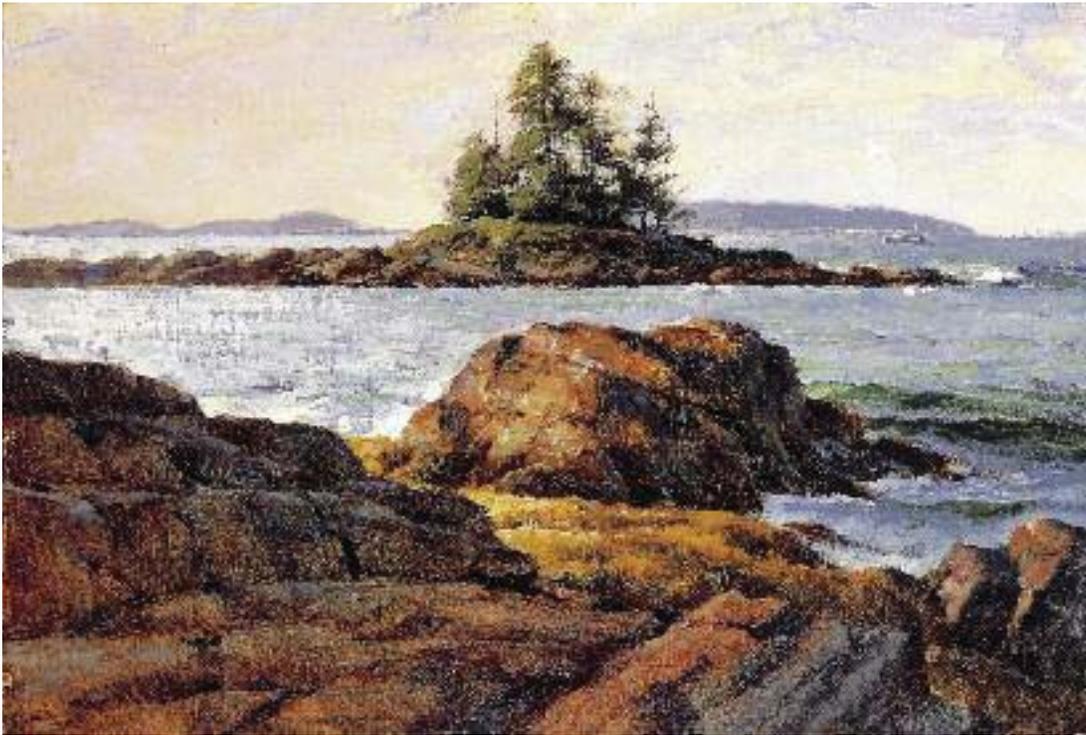
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A photograph of the painting location in Grimes Cove, Ocean Point, Maine.



Demers painting the sunlit areas of the foreground rocks. He's using an Open Box M pochade box.



**Trees on Island**  
2002, oil, 8 x 12.  
Collection the artist.

and styles. I learned during the second interview that Demers has more specific information on the best approaches to landscape painting, and he is sensitive to his students' need for supportive, relevant advice tailored to their specific needs.

"All of us are intimidated by the tools and the process, so **I start out by suggesting to the artists that they free themselves from that initial fear by thinking of the workshop as a total experience,**" Demers says in describing his teaching approach. "**We're not expecting to create one great masterpiece but, rather, a total body of work that either reinforces our current interests or moves us ahead to a new level of ability and understanding.** Some of our paintings will be successful and some will be disappointing no matter how much training and experience we have. The point is to learn from what we do and look forward to the next experience."

Recognizing that students want more than encouragement, Demers

offers several demonstrations during his workshops. "Everyone has three options when I do a demonstration," he explains. "They can watch and ask questions; they can paint along with me; or they can paint on their own. If they hang around to observe me, then I'll talk with them through the entire process about everything from the mixtures of paint to my philosophy about art. If they instead want to focus on a scene they can't wait to paint, then I'll catch up with them after the demo to discuss what they've been doing."

During a workshop in Maine, Demers showed how he approaches three different painting situations and allowed a video crew to record the first demonstration for a television program. "The first painting captured a classic landscape scene at Reid State Park near Georgetown, Maine," he explains. "The point of the exercise was to show how I work with a localized imprimatura. **I began without any white on my palette and painted the midtones and shadows**

**with transparent washes of color. Next, I drew the details of the scene with the dark color using a small round brush. Finally, I introduced white to the palette and established the highlights and reflected lights.**

"In this exercise, **strong drawing and accurate proportions were critical to the success of the picture,**" he continues. "Once the lines were established, I scrubbed in a local transparent color on the white panel, taking advantage of the subtle texture of the canvas. **By not using thick, opaque mixtures of paint at the beginning, I was able to record a lot of information about the scene in a short period of time.** I could move the brush faster and capture the sense of light because I wasn't contending with globs of oil paint. This was the technique used by a lot of the great 19th-century painters, such as Thomas Hill, Frederic E. Church, and Dennis Bunker."

During the second demonstration, Demers moved to a different location to paint the kind of scene for which he is

**FAR LEFT**

The location for the second painting demonstration.

**LEFT**

Demers working on the painting mounted on his French easel.

**BELOW**

**Crashing Waves, Boothbay Harbor, Maine**  
2002, oil, 10 x 12. Collection the artist.





**ABOVE, LEFT**  
The sunset view Demers painted.

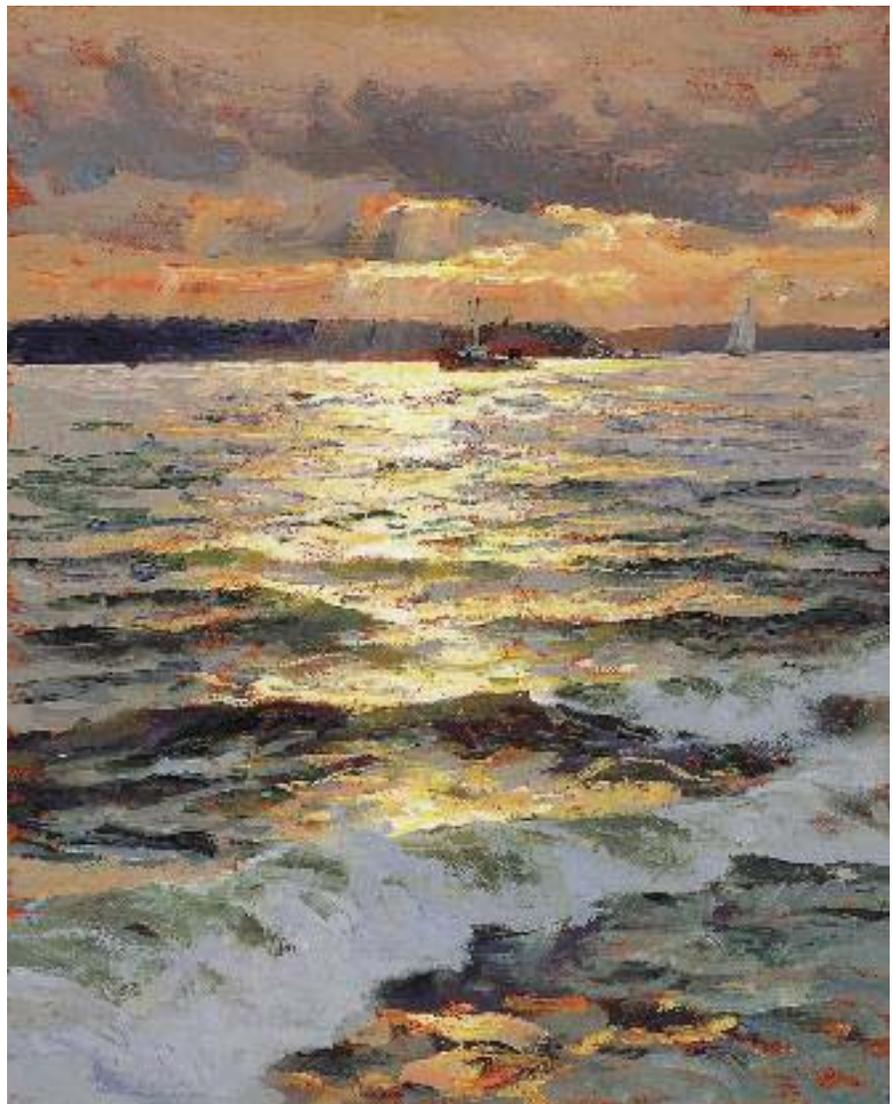


**ABOVE, RIGHT**  
Demers working quickly to capture the rapidly changing scene.

**RIGHT**  
**Sunset, Western Sky, Boothbay, Maine**  
2002, oil, 10 x 8. Collection the artist.

best known: waves crashing against the shoreline rocks. “There are many approaches to plein air painting and two of the most common are concerned with either observation or interpretation,” he explains by way of introducing the demonstration. “In the first exercise I was concerned with the shapes, values, and edges of the objects I observed in nature. In this one, I want to capture the essence of what the waves look like when they hit the shoreline rather than a wave in motion at one split second. That’s the best way to approach a subject that is constantly moving.”

**For those not familiar with painting objects in motion, Demers recommends spending two hours just watching the changing shapes, patterns, colors, and values.** “This is the kind of approach Andrew Wyeth takes to his subjects,” he says. “He makes dozens of drawings of a person or a place so he can understand it well enough to paint it from memory. To paint the sea, I recommend that same kind of process. Fix



**A Passing Shadow**

2002, oil, 12 x 18.  
Collection the artist. The creation of this painting was recorded in a video now available from the artist.

your eyes on one spot and let the sea move past your line of vision. Make mental notes about the way the light hits the water, how the colors change depending on the depth and motion of the water, and the shapes that repeat when the waves crash. With those images logged in your memory, you can paint an impression of the sea.”

In contrast to the first presentation, Demers used thick, opaque mixtures of paint to capture the motion of the water. “In this situation an imprimatura of thin paint isn’t as effective,” he comments. **“Thick paint pushed and twirled around by a bristle brush is much better at capturing the look of frothy foam and arching waves. I use a lot more bravura in the brushwork and a more aggressive impasto to convey the nature of the subject. The point is to express the total experience—the sights, sounds, and smells of the sea.”**

The final demonstration at the end of the day was preceded by a wine and cheese break and light conversation as Demers set up to paint a small, quick

study of the sunset. “I wanted to show another approach to plein air painting in which the artist tries to capture the fleeting light in about 45 minutes,” he says. “I used a small panel that had previously been toned with a light wash of burnt sienna. That warm undertone set up a color vibration with the cool tones I painted over it, and it helped quickly establish the golden light on the horizon. **The only down side to a toned panel is that mixing colors becomes a little more complicated because the palette and the painting surface are different colors. A mixture that seems correct on the palette may turn out to be the wrong color when applied over the burnt sienna.**”

During a typical workshop, Demers spends time with each student and addresses their concerns. “I first review their paintings and find out how they feel about their own work,” he says. “My comments will only be useful if I understand how they approach painting and what problems they see in their pictures. I can then address those with

specific suggestions for improvement.”

Demers says there are common problems that surface in discussions with students, and they usually involve drawing, color, value, and edges. **“The issue of drawing comes up when there are buildings, boats, or figures in a scene and the student cannot put those elements into accurate perspective,”** he comments. **“Color can become a struggle when people paint what they know rather than what they see.** That is, they know grass is green when in fact it appears as a gray or a purple shape under the prevailing lighting and atmospheric conditions. **Value is a question of relationships, and the solution to most students’ problems is to gauge each brushstroke against those already on the canvas. Finally, the decision to make an edge hard or soft usually depends on the way an artist wants the viewer’s eye to move around a picture.”**

Another common problem students face, according to Demers, is an unorganized palette of colors. **“Most instructors recommend their favorite**

palette and suggest squeezing the paint out in the same sequence each time so the artist always knows where to reach for a warm blue, cool yellow, or whatever,” he says. “I don’t belong to the art police so I won’t fine people for using colors that aren’t on my palette. I happen to use two blues, two reds, and two yellows—a warm and cool of each. Specifically, I work with cobalt blue and ultramarine blue, cadmium yellow light (or lemon) and cadmium yellow medium, cadmium red light and permanent alizarin (Gamblin). My white is manufactured by Utrecht and has a combination of titanium and alkyd white that dries faster than standard oil white. On occasion I expand the palette by adding viridian, burnt sienna, and/or transparent oxide red.”

Brushes can also be the source a problem if student’s select ones that don’t allow them to make a range of marks with the oil paints. **“I recommend practicing with the brushes to find out how to make broad strokes, lay down hard lines, and add small details,”** Demers explains. “Most people sell their brushes short and don’t realize what a range of possibilities is available. Sometimes they buy the wrong brush for the surface they are using and wind up with a soft brush that can’t work on a rough canvas, or a hard brush that can’t perform on a smooth canvas.”

Although Demers works primarily in oil on location, he uses watercolors when time or space is limited. “Sometimes the best subjects come along when I’m sitting on a boat or a park bench and there’s no place for an easel, so I just pull out a small watercolor set and paper and record what I see,” he recalls. In his studio, Demers

uses oil, casein, and watercolor to create both his marine paintings and his landscapes.

Demers grew up in Lunenburg, Massachusetts, spending summers with his family in Boothbay Harbor, Maine. He studied at the school of the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts and the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston.

Demers began his professional art career as an illustrator for such magazines as *Reader’s Digest* and *Yankee*. He is a member of the Guild of Boston Artists and is an elected fellow of the American Society of Marine Artists. He

was an invited artist at painting events sponsored by the Plein Air Painters of America and the Laguna Plein Air Painters Association. Demers is represented by the J. Russell Jinishian Gallery in Fairfield, Connecticut; Tree’s Place in Orleans, Massachusetts; John Pence Gallery in San Francisco; and Robert Wilson Galleries in Nantucket, Massachusetts. For more information about the artist, visit his website at [www.donalddemers.com](http://www.donalddemers.com). ■

*M. Stephen Doherty is the editor-in-chief of American Artist.*

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ARTIST DAILY STEP BY STEP:

# Problem Solving for Plein Air Painters: Gardens

Converting the lovely chaos of flowers and gardens into a potent composition requires skilful editing, simplification, and focus, according to members of the Plein-Air Painters of America. | by Susan Hallsten McGarry

Many a painter with a passion for color has made the pilgrimage to Giverny, where Monet spent his later years luxuriating among roses, hollyhocks, nasturtiums, and exotic trees growing along reflecting ponds, winding paths, bridges, benches, and more. Monet designed his garden as much for painting as for enjoyment. He ensured that the garden's range of hues and variety of vegetation and man-made objects would lend themselves to contrasts and focal points for art.

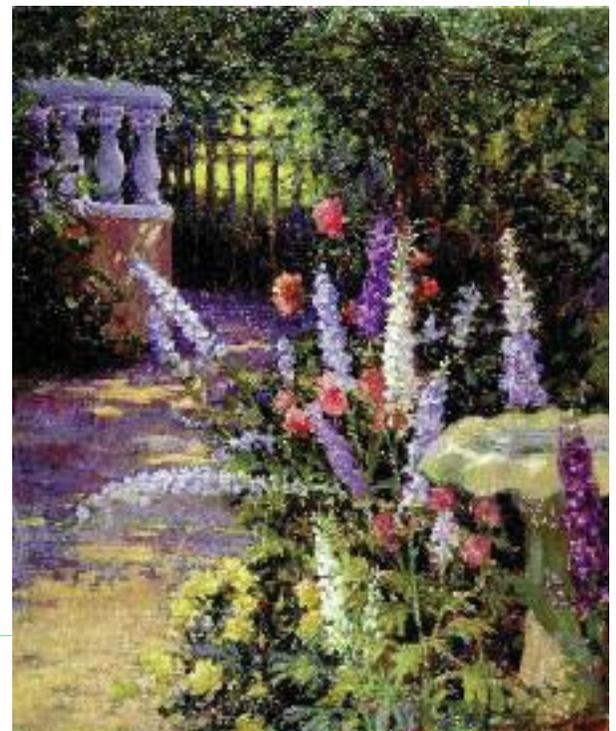
Gay Faulkenberry visited Giverny in the mid-1990s, first as a tourist and then by appointment on a Monday when the garden was closed to the public. "The place is overwhelming," she recalls, "so I concentrated on more intimate corners, as in *Green Shutters and Roses*. I simplified the detail in the explosion of vines and flower boxes and used the darkness of the open window as a focal point. Painting in a garden is different from a landscape vista

because you are so close to the subject. The colors are more intense and the range of values is stronger when there is a lack of atmospheric perspective."

According to Faulkenberry, Louise DeMore, Lynn Gertenbach, and Mary DeLoyht-Arendt (all signature members of the Plein-Air Painters of America [PAPA]), the biggest problem with painting a garden is that **no matter how formal or random, the scene needs editing, simplification, attention to design and color harmony and, most important, a focus.** "A garden painting is all about abstract design," says DeMore. "It's the artist's job to make a readable composition out of the chaos."

**"Get out the viewfinder and look for something that**

**excites you,"** Faulkenberry advises. "Focus on a group of flowers, a wall, shadows, or tall, vertical shapes such as trees. Think like a bee or hummingbird



Right: *Secret Garden*, by Lynn Gertenbach, 1987, oil, 30 x 24. Private collection.



and ask yourself what catches your eye first. **Look for the unusual, then make a composition out of it.**

To settle on a composition in the field, Gertenbach walks the site and frequently paints studies. “I need to get the obvious views out of my system so I can look for a special scene that has a mood,” she remarks. All of the PAPA painters say that early-morning or late-afternoon light enriches their colors, but “overcast days or mottled light and shadow is also good,” says Gertenbach. **“In diffused light, the shadows aren’t as**

**dark and the blossoms retain their full color.”** Another advantage of low sunlight is that it might spotlight certain parts of the scene, helping pinpoint a composition that maximizes positive and negative space. “A garden painting without negative space is just like wallpaper,” comments Gertenbach.

DeLoyht-Arendt concurs. “In watercolor, you are working light to dark—in essence, you paint around the lights or cut away the lights with the darks.” On location, she begins with a two-minute compositional thumbnail, then goes



Top: *Cottage by the Sea*, by Lynn Gertenbach, 1992, oil, 30 x 40. Private collection.

Above: Gertenbach's easel is set up in her and her husband Carl Belfor's garden in Calabasas, California.



Left: *La Quinta*,  
by Mary DeLoyht-  
Arendt, 2000,  
watercolor, 30 x 22.  
Private collection.

directly to a full sheet, trying to visualize the whole effect. “**Shadows are critical to a scene,**” she continues, “and I use artistic license with them because they are tools to guide the viewer’s eye. In *La Quinta*, however, I didn’t have to use artistic license, since the foreground shadow was a perfect lead-in to the light-filled courtyard. Even the bougainvilleas cooperated; they softened the hard architectural lines of the structures.”

Gertenbach, on the other hand, organized *Secret Garden* using light. “I was attracted to the way the light guided the eye from foreground to midground and background,” she explains. Gertenbach, who boasts a green thumb and a garden that rivals Monet’s, says **there are two types of garden paintings: those where you can identify species and the structural shapes of individual flowers, and those where the color is most important, creating shapes that direct the eye.**

Faulkenberry’s *Hill Country Color* falls into the latter category. “The field of bluebonnets needed to be simplified,” she says. “I suggested only a few of the foreground blooms and massed together the rest to give a feeling of distance and atmosphere. Because the sun was shining, I warmed up the blues in the foreground, then lightened and grayed the color as the field receded into space,” she explains.

**Adding structures to a garden creates interest and often provides a focal point for a painting.** Gertenbach loves to discover ancient stone walls or old gates that offer a contrast between their enduring antiquity and fresh, short-lived blooms nearby. DeLoyht-Arendt often paints in nurseries, where the pots, posts, and shelves in such settings add circular, triangular, horizontal, and



Top: *A Touch of Class*, by Mary DeLoyht-Arendt, 1999, watercolor, 22 x 30. Private collection.

Above: *Lots to Choose From*, by Mary DeLoyht-Arendt, 2002, watercolor, 18 x 24. Private collection.

Below: *Spring Garden*,  
by Gay Faulkenberry, 2004, oil,  
16 x 20. Collection the artist.



vertical shapes that help draw the eye through the painting. Or, she'll pick out commercial areas, such as the antique shop in Solano Beach, California—the subject of *Lots to Choose From*. “The combination of colorful flowers, the chair, and the dark interior draws you in and takes you into the distance on the right,” she says.

“**Man-made versus organic is always a good contrast,**” states DeMore. “In *Wild Garden*, the flowers are the sup-

porting actors, interspersed among diagonals that lead to the fence and secluded cabin. Essentially, the painting is a contrast of moving, irregular, organic shapes and shadows that suggest more rigid, geometric shapes. The repetition of yellow accents in the foreground, midground, and distance adds unity—and draws the eye to the focal point. Conversely, the hollyhocks are the stars in *Hollyhocks at Nob Hill*, supported by the descending diagonal of the moun-

tain, which leads the eye to the waterfall, then back to the flowers. The rocks provide different shapes and textures while adding the stability of a horizontal line.”

Gertenbach and Faulkenberry frequently place figures in their garden paintings. In *Spring Garden*, the vegetable patch is merely a backdrop for Faulkenberry's neighbor. “The painting is about her,” says Faulkenberry. “Gardening was her passion, and she worked her vegetable garden until



Left: *Monet's Lily Pond*, by Louise DeMore, 1999, oil, 24 x 36. Private collection.



Right: *Hollyhocks at Nob Hill*, by Louise DeMore, 2002, oil, 12 x 16. Private collection.

she was 90. She'd be up at six in the morning and always wore a hat, a long-sleeved shirt, and a dress. I did studies and took photographs of her. The nice thing about doing a studio painting is that you can step back and think about all the design elements. **Of course, when you paint outdoors, you should be thinking about simplification, placement, movement, and leading the eye, but when you're in a hurry, your intellect often takes a backseat to the engaging task of capturing the color and light.**

Since earliest times, gardens have been a source of peace and inner healing. Long before there were sanctuaries and cathedrals, there were sacred places identified by groves of trees or physical landmarks such as stones or bodies of water. "I've done a whole series of water-garden paintings because they convey a sense of peacefulness," says Gertenbach, who painted Koi Pond on location at Mission San Juan Capistrano, California. "Lily pads can be very tricky," she says. "Their elliptical shape has to be just right so that they lay on the water and don't stand up. You also must be sensitive to the variety of shapes and colors, and the way their edges curl."

Faulkenberry's lily pads in *Bridge at Château du Veaux* skim across the water as short, staccato strokes of various greens, yet they are thoroughly convincing. "Simplify, simplify, simplify," she says. Conversely, DeLoyht-Arendt zeroed in on a few pads and a single blossom in *Touch of Class*, where the reeds and lily pads are contrasting shapes and movement that are repeated in the ripples of water across the pond. DeMore did several field sketches when she visited Giverny. From her sketches she painted the studio work

Top: *Green Shutters and Roses*, by Gay Faulkenberry, 1996, oil, 11 x 14. Private collection.

Center: *Bridge at Château du Veaux*, by Gay Faulkenberry, 1999, oil, 18 x 16. Private collection.

Bottom: *Hill Country Color*, by Gay Faulkenberry, 1998, oil, 16 x 20. Private collection.

Monet's *Lily Pond*. "I stressed the peacefulness of this scene by emphasizing the strong horizontal in both the water and the shoreline," she says. "I was also careful to design the shapes of the water lilies so that they offer an interesting variety as they lead the eye to the flowered trellis."

Unfortunately, not every season of the year allows for on-site garden painting. If you are itching to paint in the dead of winter, DeLoyht-Arendt offers a solution. "I use

real-estate catalogs for different house shapes, and I thumb through flower and seed catalogs for inspiration," she says. "I **cut out images and make small compositional sketches and color studies in my sketchbook, then move to the larger painting.**

Starting with a plan is most important, but I want to be able to make choices as I go along. I change my mind as the painting progresses, or I'll have an accident that leads me in a new direction. That is the magic of watercolor: It has a mind of its own, and my better paintings are characterized by a combination of leading and allowing the paint to lead me." ■

*Susan Hallsten McGarry is the media-relations director for the Plein-Air Painters of America. She was the editor-in-chief of Southwest Art from 1979 to 1997. She lives in Santa Fe, where she is also a freelance writer and curator.*



## Demonstration: Distinguished Delphiniums



**Step 1** Although Mary DeLoyht-Arendt always carries her sketchbook—indoors and out—for house shapes, she relies on her photographs or real-estate ads that she’s taken from publications. The inspiration for *Distinguished Delphiniums* was an image in a flower catalog from which she did a thumbnail sketch and a study of a delphinium bloom.



### Step 2

The composition was much like the photo from the catalog, so her preliminary drawing was minimal. She drew in the flowers with her brush as she went along. “The flowers created themselves as the watercolor puddled and ran,” the artist explained. “My primary concerns here were color, value, texture, and placement.”



### Step 3

Next, DeLoyht-Arendt added to the background to establish stability. She laid in some washes behind the house.



### Step 4

By adding greens, she cut into the lavender with negative shapes to start forming the edge of a flower. The variations of green also brought out the white birdhouse and the pole. Because she works vertically, the paint sometimes runs, ideally stopping when it hits dry paper, in this case to form crisp edges in the flower blossoms and in the trees.

## Demonstration: Distinguished Delphiniums



### Step 5

Here, she cut away more white and added more buildings for interest, using the greens to define them and adding red to the rooftops and birdhouse for warmth. She skipped around the painting so that she wouldn't finish one area ahead of the rest.



### Step 6

Next, she began adding verticals—stems and leaves—to tie the composition to the bottom of the page. The amorphous areas of lavender began to take shape as she created negative, darker values in the lighter areas. Only a few spots needed to be defined to suggest the detail of many petals.



### Step 7

As DeLoyht-Arendt neared the finish of her painting, she wove a ribbon of darks in and out of the midground. "It's like filling in the missing pieces of a jigsaw puzzle," she says.



### Step 8

The artist added the trees and additional dark areas at the top left corner for balance and toned the bottom corners. Finally, she painted a few more trees in the distance for depth. The completed painting: *Distinguished Delphiniums*, by Mary DeLoyht-Arendt, 2004, watercolor, 15 x 22. Collection the artist.

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Robin Lee Makowski

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