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# ARTIST

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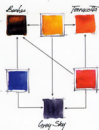
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## Landscape Legacy

John Wilson's Testament to Plein Air Painting



What is a focal  
point and why  
do you need it?

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As this issue went to press, John Wilson, one of Australia's most loved, respected and award-winning landscape artists, was battling the swift onset of a serious illness. Despite this, John is intent on passing on to other artists one of the secrets of a happy life — how, whether you make money at it or not, painting on location can make you rich beyond belief.

## John Wilson's testament to plein air painting

**W**ell it's a clear sunny morning here in the mountains. My French box easel is in the back of my old four-wheel-drive and I'm heading for the office, which today will be the beautiful Megalong Valley, located just west of Katoomba in the Blue Mountains of NSW, Australia.

Like most professional landscape artist I work on location whenever

the weather and light are good. For me Katoomba is an ideal home base. Dominant are the magnificent cliffs, valleys and gorges that the area is renowned for. Probably less known are the surrounding rural and wilderness areas. Megalong Valley is one such place. Megalong is the eastern side of one of the biggest valleys in the world. It is divided from the western Kanimbla

valley by the Cocks River. To the south the Cocks flows through the Wild Dog Mountains, and this area has some of the wildest pristine mountain country you could ever find. The area contains a myriad of diverse subjects.

### the best classroom in the world

Just like the early Australian Plein Air painters, today there is an ever-increasing number of artists who are discovering our landscape and the rewards gained from working on location. There are few professionals who would not insist that working on location is the best classroom in the world. It's all there and by exposing yourself to nature's moods and seasons you can become part of it — feel it, touch it, learn to be at one with it, and slowly grow to understand. You can see and feel all of nature's moods, its subtleties of colour and atmosphere. It is nature's vast storehouse, that can be drawn upon at will.

### lessons learned the hard way

All of this is wonderful of course, but painting on location can have its pitfalls. When I first started painting,

### (Previous page)

#### **High Country Gums, oil, 90 x 120cm**

This is a major work. It was developed using several small on site studies painted near Oberon in the high country last autumn. The morning ground fog, early morning light and majestic gum trees make great subjects.

#### **Tarana Gums, oil, 45 x 60cm**

This picture was painted on location. It was late summer and the landscape was dry. After painting during the morning I stopped for lunch and this subject was directly behind me. All I had to do was turn my easel 180 degrees.







**Morning Atmosphere, oil, 90 x 120cm**

This painting is a major work painted using an on location study as the main reference material.

I was very fortunate to have the guidance of friend and mentor Les Graham. Even so, those early painting trips bring embarrassing memories of my disorganisation and confusion. I was always overloaded with lots of important equipment. Easels, painting boards, chairs and tables, in fact, almost everything except the kitchen sink. At the end of a painting trip the car would be full of wet paintings precariously propped up everywhere. I almost needed a small truck to cart it all around.

Today I travel light, carrying only a fold-up stool and a French box easel which contains all I need. On longer trips I also carry drying boxes. Each of these is designed to carry several sizes of painting board so that the appropriate shape and size can be selected to suit most subjects. Drying boxes also provide safe, dust free storage for wet paintings.

#### **how to make painting outdoors a pleasant experience**

- Always wear neutral coloured clothing to avoid foreign colours being reflected onto your canvas.
- A good hat is also important especially when working into the light.
- A French box easel (or similar) is ideal. It will carry all you need including paints, brushes, turps as well as your wet palette and two wet paintings. Box easels can be adjusted to any angle or height and will fit most sizes of boards, from very small to quite large. (They are expensive but you will have it forever).
- Eliminate as many distractions as possible. You should be comfortable and relaxed, not too hot or too cold. Whether you sit or stand should

be your personal choice.

- Don't forget the sunscreen and insect repellent.

#### **essential differences in colour and tone**

Cover your board with paint quickly to eliminate the glare of white canvas. Doing this allows you to access the tonal structure of abstract design early on in your picture.

Painting outdoors can create other problems associated with the much stronger and changing light. Sometimes this can have an effect on your judgement of tone and colour. Frequently, tones that appear correct on location can be too high in key when viewed indoors. Colours that looked strong outside can be low in chroma, appearing bleached, and they →



*Winter morning, Bathurst, NSW, 90 x 40cm*



*Translucent Dunes, near Huskisson, NSW, 60 x 40cm*

**“Follow the principles of traditional oil painting. That is, work from dark to light, thin to thick, so when blocking in put the darkest dark on first, followed by the next darkest, and so on.”**

→ may need strengthening. If you have this tendency, then paint your tones a little darker than you see them and give extra strength to colours. You can make further adjustment back in the studio if necessary. Most paintings are going to be viewed indoors under artificial light so I believe they should look their best in this environment.

#### **set up in the shade**

If possible set up in a shady area and don't forget to allow for the shadow to move. If there is no shade available, face your easel towards the sun so that your canvas and palette are in the shadow. This may mean that the sun will be in your face while you look at the subject but it will provide more stable lighting.

And finally if at first you don't succeed keep trying; perseverance will win in the long run. Nothing compares with the freshness and spontaneity of a successful picture painted on location. □





***Hazy Afternoon, Narrow Neck, 60 x 45cm***



***Pink Rocks, the Coks River in Flood***

This was painted on my property.



***Valley Homesteads, 20 x 12cm***

## know your trees

Out in the landscape, you will encounter trees in nearly everything you paint. To paint authentic pictures you must know your trees, their nature, growth and their movement. Every gum possesses a tremendous multitude of expressions. It will take time and study to paint a good gum tree, or anything else, for that matter.

- Study what different trees do, as well as how one species of gum differs from another. Find the main differences between, say, a red river gum, a box gum or an apple gum.
- Study the way light falls on a tree, its trunk, branches and foliage.
- Study the effects of reflected light on the trunk and shadow sides of branches. Add to this the effect of reflected light from the sky, usually on the tops of branches.
- Study the effects of diffraction — the bending of light around the trunk, branches, foliage and through the sky holes in the foliage.

### ***Granite Boulders and Afternoon Light*, oil on gesso on board, 140 x 140cm**

This is a major painting, developed from an original on-site study. This collection of granite boulders caught my eye one winter afternoon. The light, shadows and atmosphere were just right. The composition was almost perfect so I only had to make very small changes to get a nice design for this picture.







**Macquarie River Reflections, oil on gesso on board, 60 x 90cm**

In Australia we have vast areas of wilderness country. This was painted on the Macquarie River below the old gold mining town of Hill End. This is wild rugged country but fabulous for painting. Every bend in the river offers the artist many subjects.



**about the artist**

John Wilson has been painting for thirty years and is one of Australia's leading oil painters. He is a multi award-winning artist with 25 solo exhibitions and numerous group shows to his credit. John has exhibited in London, USA, Japan and Canada. He is a consultant tutor at Charles Sturt University, the University of Southern Queensland and a valuable and regular contributor to *Australian Artist* and *International Artist* magazines.

John's work can be viewed at the John Wilson Gallery, 46 Narrow Neck Road, Katoomba NSW 2780.  
Ph (02) 4782 3703  
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**artist's statement**

Writing this article reminds me of many painting trips with other great artist friends: Warwick Fuller, Les Graham, John Downton, Alan Fizell and the late Greg Turner.

When working plein air we would all paint from sunrise until sunset and then spend the evenings under the stars by the campfire. We would talk about our day's work, the quality of that day's light/atmosphere, as well as recount the odd tall tale. Invariably, someone would say, "I wonder what the poor people are doing?". For me this epitomises the life of a professional artist. Few of us have ever made much money, and it is often a hand to mouth existence, but we are all rich beyond belief. We have lived our dreams, been part of nature and the universe. We spend our lives attempting to bring the beauty of our world to others through our paintings. Yes, we are rich indeed!

— JOHN WILSON