A Walk in the Landscape

Sometimes the best composition for your plein air painting is hidden just around the bend.

Thirty minutes of walking and sketching made all the difference for *January Glow* (12x15½). While sketching, I glimpsed some nice light on the opposite shore, but I had to keep walking to really find the idea that I wanted. It came in the third sketch (on page 10).

For years I’ve encouraged students to take a little time for exploration before setting up their easels when painting outdoors. Success favors the intrepid, I’d tell them: Seek out the best possible composition, even if that means sacrificing the comfort of shade.

The problem, I came to realize, was that I’d send them off like hikers without a map and no clear destination. What exactly were they supposed

Something hidden. Go and find it.
Go and look behind the Ranges—
Something lost behind the Ranges.
Lost and waiting for you. Go!

—“THE EXPLORER” BY RUDYARD KIPLING
to be looking for? And how would they know when they found it? I realized that it would be far more effective to head out as a group on what I now like to call “composition walks.” These rambles have become a regular part of my workshops, during which we seek out and analyze possible compositions. By walking, we learn that with each step, the landscape becomes a treasure trove of possibilities; each new discovery begets another. The most obvious possibilities don’t necessarily make the most compelling compositions. In fact, a more interesting idea might be just around the bend.

Because it’s impractical to invite you on a composition walk, I’d like to take you on a virtual tour through the landscape and share some of what I’ve learned over the years.

**Think About Relationships**

Imagine you’re standing at the edge of a broad river valley. Cottonwood groves border pastures and flank the silver ribbon of river in the middle distance. Beyond the far bank, the mountains rise up in a long chain, backlit and blue in the morning light. A tourist would exclaim the beauty of the land, but you—the artist—must articulate your relationship to it. As you scan the broad scene, something catches your eye—a curve in the river or the nascent light edging the mountain ridges. Or perhaps something closer catches your eye, such as a grove of trees at the edge of a field. Pay attention to that initial sensation. It could be the simple, salient idea that will anchor your painting. Find it, study it and then articulate what makes it interesting.

Let’s say that you’re focused on a small grove of trees at the edge of a meadow. Study it in relation to the rest of the landscape. In the context of composition, relationship is the key element. The mountain relates to the trees; the trees relate to the meadows; and you, the artist, relate to all of it in a unique way. In those first moments, you move from sensation to articulation, from the initial impulse to the visual idea. Imagine the grove of trees as your soloist and the rest of the landscape as the chorus. Is the soloist strong enough to carry the tune? Does the chorus support the soloist in a harmonious way?

Resist the temptation to set up your easel just yet. Instead, grab your sketchbook and sketch the initial spot, keeping in mind that the grove of trees is your center of interest. Keep your drawing simple, reducing the pictorial elements to basic forms.

**Move and Compare**

Now it’s time to move. With your eye once again fixed on the grove of trees, take 20 or 30 paces toward it. It’s your fixed point around which everything else pivots. As you approach the trees, notice the changes in the landscape. The mountain seems to shrink in relation to them. The scale adjusts in favor of the trees. By moving, you’ve changed the relationship of the trees to the mountain, river and meadows. What happens if you move to the left?
To the right? How does it change the relationship of the major forms? Stop and sketch the trees from three or four different vantage points; notice how the composition and mood change depending on your position.

Next, compare the sketches and jot down a few notes about what you’ve discovered. If one composition works better than the others, then try to articulate the reason for this. Sometimes you’ll find that two vantages work well for the same scene. In this case, go back and forth between the two spots so that you can compare them. Then compare the sketches. If you’re still having trouble deciding which is the stronger composition, trust your instinct and choose whichever vantage feels right at that moment.

If the main idea, or center of interest, is close (the rocks at the edge of a creek, for example), then moving just a few feet in any direction will change the nature of the composition substantially. If your center of interest is farther back—and consequently broader in scope—then you need to cover more ground to see major changes. When a mountain or distant element is my focus, I think about how the components of the middle and foreground frame, or lead, my eye back to the mountain.

If my focus is closer, I look for a middle- and background that enhance and support the main idea. Think of the first as traveling through the landscape, and the

What really caught my eye as I walked was the light on the far bank of the creek. It wasn’t until I walked up to a bend in the river that I realized the best light had been obscured.
second as resting in one spot. The mood of the painting changes depending on what you choose to focus on.

Remember to fix one element of the landscape and observe how the others change in relation to it. The fixed point is your basis for comparison. You can do this experiment just about anywhere. Take a walk through your neighborhood and notice how the perspective in a back alley changes relative to your position, or how a stately old tree changes as you approach it in relation to the house behind it.

**Resolutions**
This approach takes a certain level of patience. It’s tempting to set up close to the vehicle and just edit out awkward parts of the scene. My experience is that while subtle edits are often necessary to make a composition work, major changes are difficult to pull off effectively. If I can find a better composition by walking a little, I’ll always choose to do that.

Walking through the landscape in this way becomes a habit of seeing that, in time, will become second nature. You’ll find yourself mentally composing paintings wherever you go.

**Something Hidden**
Learning to articulate visual stimulus is, at its heart, a process of abstraction. The mountain becomes a dark shape of a certain quantity against a light shape of certain quantity. Trees become visual notes to move the eye through the composition. The foreground must relate to the background in a pleasing, logical way, supporting the main idea like the chorus supporting the soloist. Move through the landscape, and shapes interlock and interact like dancers, converging and diverging, morphing and changing.

It’s our task to be observant, to respond openly and honestly to the myriad possibilities. We’re not passive audience members; we’re a part of the dance. You have a unique and lasting contribution that only you can make. Kipling’s whisper in "The Explorer" could have been written for you, the artist.

*Something hidden. Go and find it.*
*Go and look behind the Ranges—*
*Something lost behind the Ranges.*
*Lost and waiting for you. Go!*

---

AARON SCHUERR (www.aaronschuerr.com) is a plein air artist based in Livingston, Mont., and a new ProArt Critique reviewer.