

7 Keys to Better Painting



Todd A. Williams painting Sette DiVino during the workshop he recently taught in Italy

During a recent workshop, Arkansas artist Todd A. Williams explained to students how to apply what he calls the "7 Keys to Plein Air Painting." He summarizes those important considerations here.



Sette DiVino, by Todd A. Williams, oil, 9 x 12 in.

During a workshop in **Val d'Orcia** in the **Tuscany** region of Italy — organized by **Susan Truitt** of Open Air Italy — Todd A. Williams reviewed the seven basic aspects of outdoor painting. The point he made to the participating students was that understanding and applying these seven "keys" would unlock their creative potential and help them develop more successful paintings.

Williams presented the keys in the same sequence in which they might be considered when developing a plein air painting. That is, when he talked about first key, "Knowledge vs. Observation," he was addressing some preparatory steps one might take before beginning to paint, and when he

discussed the seventh key, "Spirit — Soul and Body," he was introducing ideas relevant to the later stages of creative process. Here are the seven keys as Williams presented them in his workshop.

1. Knowledge vs. Observation: Experience can be a great source of knowledge for you because it is an inventory of what you have learned from your instructors and from your previous attempts at painting. The instruction you received, the mistakes you made, and the successes you enjoyed can guide you toward selecting good subjects and knowing how to express them.

2. Design: The key to finding a good design for a painting is using a viewfinder to determine the most powerful overall design, and to place the centrality of focus in or near the Golden Mean. As you begin to lay in your sketch, use the viewfinder to analyze the correct shapes and prospective angles. The process is all about comparative measuring using the frame and guidelines of a viewfinder.

3. Squinting: You should squint your eyes in order to eliminate the unnecessary details and to simplify your chosen subject. That's the best way to find the correct relationship of the value color mixture — VCM — and edges.



Selvoli, Tuscany, by Todd A. Williams, oil, 9 x 12 in.

4. "VCM": Value Color Mixture: After establishing your design and drawing the outlines of the major shapes on the canvas, you can mix the correct VCMs for each value plane. Ask yourself if each new mixture of paint needs to be lighter or darker (value) than what you've already been painted, or if it should be warmer or cooler (color) than the paint around it.

5. Paint Application: This key allows you to be free, experimental, and joyous as if you were a kid again. Consider using different tools (variously shaped brushes, palette knives, or fingers) to gradually build the layers of paint from thin to thick and lean to fat. You can see in the

reproductions of my paintings that I love to move thick oil color around in my paintings. I believe those textural qualities gives my paintings more vitality, energy, and individuality. I am not striving for a mechanically precise representation of what I see. Instead, I want to use a variety of paint applications to capture the sense of light, atmosphere, and energy I observe in nature. I achieve that by changing the directions of the marks, varying the thickness of the paint, and applying the color in both broad and linear strokes.



Ancient Etruscan Springs, by Todd A. Williams, oil, 9 x 12 in.

6. Edges: As your painting progresses, consider how the edges are working to express what is important about the subject you are painting. You'll want some hard, found edges as well as soft, lost edges. You can

evaluate this balance of edges as the painting progresses and make the necessary adjustments by relating one edge to another. It is always good to have four edges represented that will lead the eye of the viewer through the painting and to the focal area.



Todd A. Williams painting the Ancient Etruscan Springs in Bango Vignoni, Italy

7. Spirit - Soul and Body: The three essential parts of the human experience are the body, the soul, and the spirit. All of them come into play when you paint. The movement of your body affects the physical appearance of the painting, your character and personality (soul) are expressed through your choice of subject and style of painting, and your spirit will breathe life into the images you create. Knowing this, you can review whether or not your painting is exciting on multiple levels, whether it

has poetic passages that speak creatively about the you, and if the overall character or focal point of the painting is successful in directing the viewer.

For more information, visit www.toddwilliamsfineart.com.