

Painting Landscapes in Exact Scale

Marc Dalessio explains how he paints landscapes using an adaptation of the sight-size method normally associated with studio work. His method is to paint what he observes in such a way that the subject and painted image are exactly the same scale when viewed from a constant position. | **by Marc Dalessio**

AMERICAN ARTIST has published a number of articles on the sight-size method, which is integral to much academic drawing and painting. Briefly, the method involves creating an image on canvas or paper so that it is precisely the same as the subject when both are viewed from a measured distance away from the easel. That is, if one stands 10 feet back from the drawing or painting, it will be the same size as the subject, whether that is a still life arrangement, posed figure, or drawing. All the decisions about scale, proportion, and value are made from that distance, and then the artist steps forward to execute the artwork.

The value of using the sight-size method is that it trains artists to represent what they actually see rather than what they interpret, and it gives them a way of creating precise drawings and paintings quickly and effectively. The process is so exacting that some artists will wear the same shoes each time they go back to work on a picture so that there isn't even a fraction of an inch difference in their height.

Because of the normal requirements for the sight-size method, it is seldom used when artists work outdoors because the subject will not be static. But the American artist Marc Dalessio found a way to apply a variation of the method to plein air landscape painting when he works near his home in Italy or when traveling. In the text that follows, which is edited from Dalessio's writing and interviews, he explains that adaptation, as well as other aspects of his artistic processes.



TOP
Essaouira From the Rocks
2004, oil, 49 x 79. All photos of artwork this article courtesy Grenning Gallery, Sag Harbor, New York.

ABOVE
Dalessio using the sight-size method to paint a scene in Bagan, Myanmar.

LEFT
Chinthe of Lawkananda Paya
2009, oil, 10 x 14.



LEFT, TOP
Dalesio painting Soe-
Min-Gyi Pagoda on
location in Myanmar.

LEFT, BOTTOM
**Soe-Min-Gyi
Pagoda (Myanmar)**
2009, oil, 32 x 39.

BELOW
Monti
2009, oil, 54 x 70.



TOP
**In the Face of All
Aridity**
2009, oil, 47 x 58.

ABOVE
**Hay Bales at Colle
Val d'Elsa**
2009, oil, 20 x 27.

The Sight-Size Method en Plein Air

The sight-size method is incredibly useful for landscape painting as it allows the artist to focus on colors, values, and edges; the shapes one paints seem to take care of themselves. For atelier-trained artists like me, it seems a waste not to continue using the method outdoors. Obviously the subject will not remain static, and one may find it awkward to have the vantage point several inches away from the painting surface, but sight-size offers landscape painters an effective means of composing and developing paintings.

I stand in the same spot next to the easel when I make decisions about shape, scale, perspective, color, and value. The trick is to make sure my head is always in the same position so that the subject fits onto the panel. I consider adjustments for the sake of the compositional strength and in response to the constant changes in nature, for which I might move the canvas or adjust my point of view. That is, after blocking in the major shapes according to their correct proportional and spatial relationships, I adjust my vantage point in order to articulate the individual elements. In this way, small adjustments can be made to the scene while maintaining the accuracy in proportion that sight-size makes possible.

It should also be remembered that the greatest application of sight-size is in portraiture, in which both speed and accuracy are essential in capturing a likeness and an individual personality. In plein air work, the painter has more leeway with

the shapes and proportions since no one will complain that a tree is too tall or too wide as they might if an artist were to make a similar mistake in scale with a nose or a mouth.

As for changes in the subject, variations in light and atmosphere are not dissimilar to the changes that inevitably happen when a portrait subject takes a break or resumes a pose after an absence of several days. I was taught to chase effects both in portraiture and in landscape, so returning to the same site day after day and observing the changing effects is quite similar. If a scene worked better before, I stick with what I already painted. And if the scene gets better, I change it. The opportunity to choose from a range of effects over the course of time is a huge advantage in the creation of any work of art. It just takes some getting used to, as you have to learn to predict what might happen.

My approach comes from the training I received at Charles H. Cecil Studios, in Florence, Italy, and from Charles himself when I observed him painting landscapes. He didn't use the sight-size method outdoors, but he taught me a great many things besides that particular method.

I now teach students in Italy who studied in an atelier and are already familiar with the sight-size technique. When I teach in the United States, I take time to demonstrate the concept, and I find that most people paint and draw using a procedure that approximates sight-size even if they don't realize it. It is just a formalization of what painters do instinctively.

Materials and Preparation

I don't use a formal system for composing my pictures. In fact, I'm always trying to do something new and avoid repeating myself. I've studied the Golden Mean, but I don't use it very often. I don't like the 5-to-8 proportions of canvases, because I find them too narrow for landscapes. My goal in painting has always been a pure experience of nature, and I find that the 3-to-4-proportioned supports more accurately mimic human eyesight. Another way my landscape work has become more naturalistic over the years is the size of my paintings. The larger work is also more representative of being present before a scene.

My earlier teachers were influential in getting me interested in traditional painting, but technically and aesthetically they had little or no influence on my current work. My ten years of study and friendship with Charles Cecil is the strongest influence on the technical aspect of my work. At Charles' studio I was taught a fair amount about traditional composition rules that I still use in my paintings. I still use a variation of his standard balsam/sun-thickened-oil medium and his bone-colored canvas (although I've been using the Florence Academy of Art's imprimaturas for small sketches), and I still hand-grind many of the colors on my limited palette. Ultimately, my painting style is based on my own experience with nature and the influence of late-19th-century landscape painters.



LEFT
The artist painting in Myanmar.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Fennel and Balsamic Vinegar
2007, oil, 10 x 14.

Limited Palette

Because I use a limited palette, I need to be very exact in selecting specific brands or making my own paints. I grind about half of my colors and use mostly very high-chroma colors (three cadmiums). My flesh palette for portraits is just red, yellow, black, and white.

Over the years I've whittled down the palette I was taught to use fewer and fewer colors. At present I use:

- cadmium yellow from Michael Harding, or I'll grind my own cadmium yellow light using Zecchi pigment
- Roman ochre pigment from Zecchi
- vermilion, hand-ground from Robert Doak, though I sometimes use the Zecchi brand outdoors
- cadmium red medium, either Michael Harding or hand-ground from Zecchi pigment
- alizarin crimson, either hand-ground or Robert Doak's Florentine lake
- cerulean blue from Old Holland or hand-ground if I need a lot for a large painting
- ultramarine blue deep from Old Holland
- manganese blue from Old Holland
- cobalt blue from either Old Holland or Michael Harding
- lead or titanium white (I prefer the handling of lead, but I'm currently using titanium for health and environmental reasons)

I also use hand-ground ivory black when painting indoors, and I've tried to find a use for it outside but can't. Some landscape painters use it for clouds, but I can never see the point.

The palette I started with included Naples yellow, an earth red (such as Pozzuoli earth or English red), and viridian. I have also used high-chroma oranges and purples for such specific projects as orange trees and irises.

I use an Italian steel easel on location because it is portable and durable, and I work with the Silver brushes with the green handle and copper ferrule, as well as with Blick Masterstroke bristle brushes. Rather than fly with my Italian painting panels or canvas, I order a number of different-size substrates from New Traditions. Usually I travel with my own homemade canvases and panels, however, recently I've used New Traditions and RayMar artists' panels because they are lightweight and therefore easy to transport.

For many years I made my own sun-thickened linseed oil, but after the Zecchi store in Florence finally got its sun-thickened linseed oil to the right consistency I started using it. The store's oil medium is usually "August oil," meaning the company puts it outside in the very hot summer months, so it thickens very quickly. I've also worked with "Spring oil" which takes much longer to thicken and absorbs more oxygen. My

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medium is 1 part sun-thickened linseed oil mixed with 1 part thinned Canada balsam (cut 1:1 with turpentine).

My wife once asked why I only own blue shirts, and I explained that when I paint on canvas in the shade I am likely to be standing in full sunlight (I don't use an umbrella), and my shirt reflects light on the painting and affects the hues. I learned to only wear blue shirts a few years ago when I put on a favorite orange T-shirt my brother gave me. As soon as I realized the orange was influencing the colors on the canvas, I had to go back to the house to change. I've tried wearing black shirts, but if I'm up against a hedge or in an area with very little reflected light, I find the canvas can be too dark. White can also be annoying, as I see my shirt reflected in the painting. Now all of my shirts are sky blue, long sleeved (to protect my arms from sun and mosquitoes), with a pocket to hold my glasses and iPod.

I've always pushed the limits of the canvas sizes I use outside, and I've managed to paint on canvases up to 60" x 40".



In the winters, I enlarge my plein air sketches into studio paintings. Recently, I've tried projecting the image so that I will have access to more information, and sometimes I use photographs to develop large studio pictures, always avoiding the inclination to take an excessive amount of information from them.

As for finding compositions, I rely on drawing to decide the best approach to each subject. I believe this is one thing that is greatly ignored by landscape students who only focus on painting. If one looks at the work of Levitan and Corot (two of my favorites), or any great landscape artist, it becomes clear that they filled sketchbooks with preliminary compositional evaluations.

Finding Inspiration in the Landscape

When I first began painting outdoors, I remember walking for hours trying to find something that inspired me. Now I see beauty everywhere. Being inspired is like any other skill in that practice makes it easier. Having a personal vision of what an artist wants to paint also helps a great deal, but the best artists are always pushing themselves to tackle new subjects. I believe an artist can learn to develop an awareness and sensitivity to inspirational subjects to the point that he or she feels inspiration almost on demand.

I have traveled to exotic locations in the winters to paint outdoors, and going to locations where the colors, light, and shapes are completely different from what I'm accustomed to seeing makes it very easy to be inspired right away. I see

so much more after a month in a place than I did when I first arrived. Six weeks, I think, is the ideal time for a painting trip, as that gives you the last two very productive weeks in which to develop a feel for the subjects.

Ironically, my best trips are the ones that started with me looking at the landscape and saying, "My God, did I come all this way for this?" I couldn't see anything worth painting when I first surveyed potential locations, but I forced myself to squeeze good paintings out of an uninspiring area. I've learned that these challenging locations are easier to paint than ones that are filled with exotic and beautiful elements.

I live in the Chianti region of Italy, which is surprisingly unpicturesque, despite its fame. Olive trees and vineyards make for very poor compositional elements when seen from a distance, and I believe that's the reason many great landscape painters of the past avoided the area.

Painting in a pictorially uninspiring place is a bit like training for a marathon race by running in locations that are higher in elevation than the site of the competition. One winds up better-conditioned for the race. When I travel from Chianti to places with great compositions everywhere, I am all the more inspired. After 17 years of forcing myself to paint here, I have become very good at seeing beauty just by stepping outside. ■

The text of this article is based on interviews with the artist, blog posts on his website, www.marcalessio.com, and an interview by Larry Groff that was posted on Groff's website, <http://paintingperceptions.com>.