

Martha Saudek

Bringing the Outside In: Stream, Rocks, and Water in Oil

Review by Adele Greenfield
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Not only is this an oil painting lesson, it's a good lesson on composition beginning with questions you should ask yourself when working in plein air like what is your subject and why. Is it the water, the rocks, the foliage, or do you want to emphasize the sky? What about it excites you, and what attracts you to the scene? And consider how the shape and size of the canvas you choose impacts the mood of your painting.

Planning her composition, she believes in solving design problems ahead of time so you don't have to go back and readjust. Figure out where you want your focal point because it will have more contrast and detail so you'll spend most of your time painting this area. Decide on your dominant color temperature (she works with Hal Reed's analogous color wheel). Think of your shapes and value distribution. As she sketches her darker values, she says, "I'm not thinking rock; I'm thinking values."

Martha has an interesting and concrete way of explaining midtone, light, and dark values. She sees them in terms of a gallon, a quart, and a pint. Using this idea however you wish (you'll see how it works), you will have a foolproof method for distributing your values.

In the section on "The Core Shadow," she draws a cylinder and shows you the direction of the sun, where it will hit, and how it washes out the color on one side. Then she illustrates in easy-to-understand terms, the reflected light and the shadow on the bottom. Shadows should be lighter than the object. Also pay attention to clouds. In many paintings, they're often too dark.

Painting from a photograph she took of rocks, foliage and water, she explains each step from start to finish. And she talks about the high-quality brushes she chooses to get better results, exact colors and paint manufacturers, what she uses for toning, and the painting medium that works best for her. She gets her medium at the supermarket . . . cheap.

"Keep your painting as loose as you can for as long as you can," she advises. You're always drawing with your paintbrush so the better you draw, the better you paint. The brush describes what's happening so let the brush suggest the direction of the water, branches, and rocks.

Talking us through the changes and refinements she makes as she progresses, Martha reminds us again to paint the shape and value of the subject, not the subject itself. Learning why she makes certain adjustments will give you some ideas for your own work.

She tells us that eventually the painting starts to “talk” to her and tell her what it wants. This way she knows where she needs to tone things down or bring things out. “Just because it was there in real life, doesn’t mean it has to be there in the painting,” she says.

To make it easy for you, from time to time, the DVD shows the photo she’s painting from and you can see what’s going on. Occasionally, the area on the photo is highlighted so you know exactly where she’s looking.

Before she thinks she’s finished, she stops to let her painting “cool off” but not dry off. In the section, “Painting Analysis,” while it’s still wet, she checks her work by viewing it upside down (a mirror works too) for a fresh perspective. Look at direction and negative/positive space. See the areas of rest, changes in value, warm and cool hues. Make sure foreground darks are darker than the background darks. Then go back to do your finishing touches. Painting right into the wet paint gives you your best results.

If you don’t get it at first, keep going until you’re satisfied. “Be patient,” she tells us. Actually, if you don’t get it right away, watch the video again. You’re sure to pick up something new that you missed as it’s jam-packed with useful information on landscape and oil painting.