

Alan Flattmann:

Controlling Paint Application for Better Results

This oil painter showed two methods of painting the landscape in two days, with one overarching theme: always think of the whole painting to ensure a unified image. | by John R. Kemp



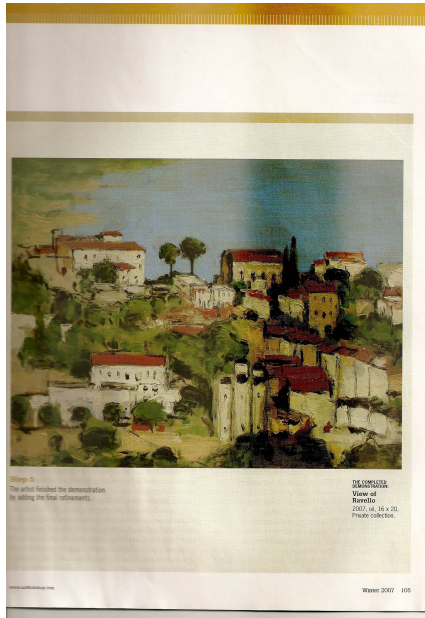
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A Workshop with Alan Flattmann

“Before applying paint to canvas, think about how you will systematically approach your entire painting,” said Louisiana artist Alan Flattmann to a group of students attending his recent oil-painting workshop in central Mississippi.

“You must have a plan and think about how you will paint the entire picture at one time. You must get away from painting one item at a time. Paint as a whole. The great mistake did the entire painting at once. Paintings by John Constable and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, for example, have connectivity throughout. Like connecting ideas.” As the instructor explained, a painting is one unit—not a sum of its parts. During the three-day workshop last August at Bob Tompkins Studio in the small Mississippi crossroads community of Chickadee, located just north of Jackson, Flattmann took 18 local art students through the steps of interpreting landscapes in oil. The workshop consisted of two sessions, with demonstrations focusing on two ideas: painting landscapes with brushes and painting with a palette or painting knife to create sharp edges and more painterly effects. Flattmann dedicated morning sessions to demonstrations and allowed students to work on their canvases under his gentle but critical eyes in the afternoons. While he painted, he described each step, each process, and his choice of materials. He posed in logical rooms to give students a chance to examine his painting up close to see what he had done. To the students’ delight, he demonstrated the flexibility of painting in oil wet-on-wet, during which rules and long-accepted beliefs about oil painting—such as working from dark to light—were broken.

The self-spoken Flattmann knows what he’s talking about. The New Orleans native is a master painter and popular teacher who has taught painting workshops throughout the United States since 1968. He also has led painting tours to Barbados, Bermuda, Croatia, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, and Mexico. During those three days in August in central Mississippi he had the full attention of 18 students who watched every stroke of his brush and took notes as he talked them through every phase of creating a painting. From taping a canvas to the final varnish. On the first morning, Flattmann described his materials. For paints, he uses Winsor & Newton, Rembrandt, and Gamblin brands, cautioning students to use only high-quality paints. “A good-quality oil paint has more pigment, usually two-thirds pigment to one-third linseed-oil binder,” he said. “Cheap paints might be only 5 to 10 percent pigment, and the rest some type of filler.” His brushes are an eclectic mix of brushes made by Winsor & Newton, Strathmore, and Grand Prix, and some synthetic sables. “They are cheaper and work just as well,” Flattmann explained. For painting surfaces, he prefers Old Holland or Praline protected linen canvases rather than cotton. The artist feels that linen’s texture gives the surface more tooth and is visually more interesting than cotton. Prior to painting, Flattmann demonstrated how he tapes his canvases. “By taping the canvas in advance,” he said, “you speed up the process. It’s hard to glue colors against a white surface. On lined canvases you can better tell the values of color and contrast. Also, as you scrub and pull colors up, a white canvas will show through.” Even when painting with oil, the artist prefers an acrylic ground and tapes his canvases with an acrylic paint, usually burnt umber, raw umber, raw sienna or, sometimes, a gray. Oil



Demonstration: View of Ravello



Flattmann

Flattmann's Materials

- PALETTE**
- Winsor & Newton, Rembrandt, and Gamblin oils in the following colors:
 - alizarin crimson
 - burnt sienna
 - burnt umber
 - cadmium yellow
 - light or medium
 - cadmium orange
 - cadmium red
 - lake or titanium white
 - yellow ochre
 - ivory black
 - olive green
 - cerulean blue
 - raw sienna
 - raw umber
 - sap green
 - ultramarine blue
 - violet
 - yellow ochre

- BRUSHES AND KNIVES**
- Winsor & Newton, Strathmore, and Grand Prix brushes in the following styles: flat or short bristles, sizes 2, 4, 6, 8, and 12 round, sizes 1 and 5 synthetics for real sable brush, size 6 Gypsy and Morris 5" long-handle palette knives Gertsch, Grumbacher, and Holbein 1" and 2" long-handle painting knives

- MEDIUMS**
- Gamblin Galkyd Lite
 - Liquin
 - amber liquid acrylic paint to tint canvases
 - paper palette
 - Daniel Smith matte and gloss archival varnishes
 - Krylon Kansair varnish spray
 - Krylon Crystal Clear acrylic fixative
 - Winsor & Newton's acrylic gesso
 - Winsor & Newton's petroleum jelly to prevent brushes from drying out

grounds, he finds, are too slick and not as absorbent as an acrylic base. Flattmann mixed the acrylic with water and then applied the water mixture to the canvas with a foam rubber brush. Excess paint was wiped off with paper towels, and the canvas was allowed to dry. “You don’t want the first to be too dark,” he told the class.

Flattmann urged students to not paint the same way every time, putting similar colors next to each other. Doing so eliminates confusion and distortion while painting. In the bottom left corner, he begins with ivory black. Following in ascending order by phthalocyanine blue, ultramarine blue, viridian, sap green, olive green, raw umber, burnt umber, burnt sienna, raw sienna, yellow ochre, titanium white, cadmium yellow, cadmium orange, cadmium red, and alizarin crimson. In recent years, Flattmann has begun using Gamblin White White

Replacement. “It has all the characteristics of the old lake white, but without the toxicity,” he explained. The artist also mounts his canvases to a black plywood panel slightly larger than the canvas; the black border eliminates some distracting objects from his view and gives him a place to mount photographs for easy reference. With discussions about materials and palette out of the way, Flattmann began his first painting from a photograph of a small stream cutting through a wooded southern Louisiana landscape. The second day, he painted a view of the hillside village of Ravello, on the Amalfi Coast of Italy. In each painting, he started by doing a quick sketch on the canvas to establish the composition and perspective. He recommended drawing with thin, soft-vein charcoal. “It goes on and comes off easily,” he pointed out. “It gives you great flexibility to work out your composition. If you make a mistake, you just wipe it off.” He also recommended spraying the first drawing with Krylon



Flattmann outlined a student's drawing.



Demonstration: The Abita River



to a year before applying a final coat of varnish. He then uses equal parts of Daniel Smith's matte and gloss archival varnish thinned with turpentine. If the painting must be varnished sooner, he sprays the painting's surface with Krylon Kansair varnish. Each afternoon, Flattmann slowly moved among the students working at their easels. He inspected each canvas and gave advice on such topics as how to measure to create correct perspective, or how dense the paint should be at various phases. On occasion, the instructor would wipe out sections of a student's charcoal drawing. He would then redraw those sections to show the student how to lead the eye into the drawing's focal point. When the artists began to paint, the instructor gave suggestions on where to start painting and what colors to mix to get desired values. He showed them how to block in larger color values without painting specific details. As he moved around the room, one student, whispering in her strong Mississippi drawl, summed up Flattmann's two demonstrations and teaching methods: “It's amazing how he can add a little bit of color and change the whole painting,” she said. “It all comes together.” Student Pat Van Decar has taken five Flattmann workshops—three in Jackson and two in Italy. “I don't come by for rendering sophisticated concepts to levels that everyone can understand. And he has a profound generosity of spirit, which brings his students back again and again.”

About the Artist

Alan Flattmann is the author of *The Art of Pastel* (Falcon Publishing Company, Gretna, Louisiana) and his work has appeared in several other books and numerous art magazines. The Pastel Society of America inducted him into its hall of fame in 2006. In 2007 he became a Master Circle Honoree of the International Association of Pastel Societies (IAPS), and that same year he won the Gold Award at the IAPS 10th International Exhibition. In 1996 he received the American Artist Art Masters Award for pastel teacher and in 1991 the Master Pastelist distinction from the Pastel Society of America. For more information on Flattmann, visit his website at www.alanflattmann.com.