

Twelve Days in Provence



Sycamores, by Elizabeth Mowry, 9"x11"



Field study by Dannielle Mick, 5½"x7½"



Field study by Hazen Folse (size information not available)

As Editor of *The Pastel Journal*, I normally prefer to remain behind the scenes. However, I've just returned from a workshop in the south of France, and I feel my experiences and those of other participants may be of interest to readers of the magazine. Taking a workshop in a foreign country is vastly different than taking one near home, particularly when in a country where English is not the primary language.

The seventeen artist participants chose a wide variety of subjects for their paintings, and a selection of them are included here. Paintings done on location convey a special feeling of place often missing from a studio work, even though the studio work may be more finished and perfected. In years to come, nothing will bring back the sights and sounds of Provence like the paintings and sketches from this trip.

No matter how hard I worked to get ready, I still feel a bit edgy and unprepared as our flight takes off for France. I've taken quite a few workshops in the United States, and I've traveled in other countries, but I always worry about what I might have forgotten.

We're headed to the village of St. Remy de Provence. It's a small village that isn't likely to have a store carrying anything in the way of art supplies, so I've prepared by bringing more paper than I can possibly use. The excess can stay in the hotel once we arrive, but there's security in knowing I won't be limited by lack of paper.

I'm well-equipped with information.

Susan Webster, who is the organizer for this painting workshop with Elizabeth Mowry, has provided us with details about where we're staying, what will be provided and what won't, and even reminded us ahead of time to check our passport expiration dates and not to forget our swimsuits.

Elizabeth sent us lists of workshop participants and recommended supplies. She's reminded us to pack lightly and to be prepared to carry all of our stuff by ourselves, something which can be difficult for pastelists.

Personally, I'm on my seventeenth set-up for plein aire painting. Not really—it just seems that way. In reality I've probably bought six or seven easels, and the newest is the one I've just had to stow in the overhead compartment. I knew it was too big when I bought it but I was determined to have something lightweight and at the same time tall enough. It's a Stanrite, and its main attraction was the metal triangular support, on which I plan to set my pastels while I'm working.

To haul the stuff, both Janie Hutchinson (publisher of *The Pastel Journal* and a fellow workshop participant) and I have bought wheeled carry-on bags with removable backpacks. They have lots of pockets and straps, and are easy to move around. I have all my art supplies and on-the-plane necessities in mine, and I've checked one bag with clothing and other essentials.

The next day, I'm glad I didn't trust the airlines with my art supplies. Our checked baggage has taken a different

route than we did, and we arrive in St. Remy without it. It's supposed to be delivered soon, but at least we can go out to paint on our first day.

We have quite an itinerary of day trips laid out for us, but we begin with an easy day of exploring St.

Remy. Elizabeth sets up to paint in a beautiful courtyard framed by fascinating buildings, shuttered windows, hanging vines and soft shadows. There are so many painting subjects in every direction, it's overwhelming.

Choosing a subject is a difficult task in a foreign environment, and Elizabeth recommends considering the scope of the painting. Instead of taking in the whole vista, she suggests zooming in on a window, perhaps, with its decorative potted plant; or the side of a building or arched doorway. It's hard for me to comprehend this, as I'm a landscape painter by choice, but I watch others and begin to see possibilities.

We have a number of day trips scheduled. On some days we have an English-speaking tour guide accompanying us on the bus, and on others we rely on guidebooks and explore on our own. The painting locations are varied and range from outdoor river scenes to villages, both perched on hills and close up. Each has its own challenges and opportunities for inspiration.

On the first day trip we visit Les Baux, an old Roman fortress site, with an impressive ruin of a Middle Ages castle atop a hill. Driving up the winding road to a viewpoint we notice the rock along the road is a snowy white. Our tour guide, Christophe, tells us this is where they mine bauxite, and that the word bauxite refers to Les Baux. Painting it is a challenge. The shadows are a cold blue, which, when they occur in the foreground of the picture, can be difficult.

Everywhere we go, it seems, the

There's an advantage to having so many painters in the group—you get to see what subjects each of them chose and how they chose to handle them.

roads are lined with plane trees. They look like our sycamores, but a bit different, and Christophe tells us that what they call sycamore in France is a different tree entirely. These plane trees are old and gnarled and have a significant presence. The bark of the trees could be a painting in itself—varied colors, grays and greens and yellow and ivory. Elizabeth portrays the feel of the plane trees by the river Sorgue, and Jim Markle paints them lining a road near town. Both of them capture the massiveness typical of these trees.

Frequently featured in the Provençal landscape are the cypress trees. Tall and spindly, they are often the darkest element in a composition. Roland Folse quickly develops an aptitude for cedars, and jokes about adding them to his landscape at home. By the end of the workshop, many others have become adept at painting them.

Olive trees are another difficult subject. During one painting day out in an olive grove I heard someone say, "I just don't *have* that color!" Their grayish-green leaves tend towards the blue in shadow, and the tiny leaves are difficult to paint either as masses or as individuals. Seeing olive trees in real life makes Vincent Van Gogh's portrayal more understandable. Perhaps he painted these very trees—we have visited many of the places he lived and painted.

Foliage in general has its own unique characteristics in Provence. For those of us from the Southwest, the ashy and dusty greens and grays feel somewhat familiar, but we have to deal with the unusual element of humidity in the air. Those from more humid climates think it is dry in Provence and claim there is less humidity here. Either way, the accurate portrayal of trees and tree-covered hills as affected by the local atmosphere is a challenge.



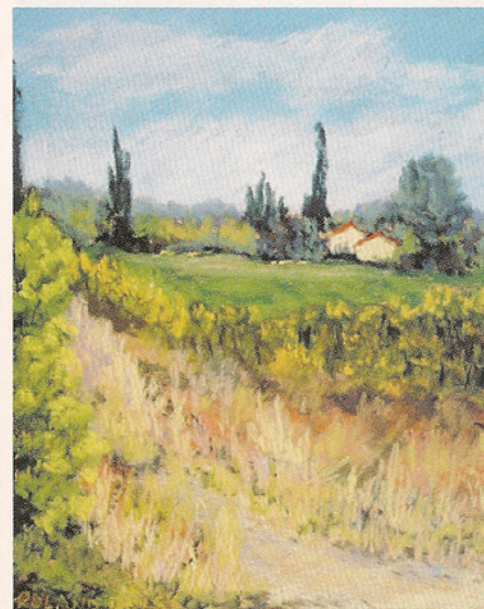
Avenue de la Libération, St. Remy de Provence, by Jim Markle, 9"x12"



Lourmarin, by Sheri Ramsey, 9"x12"



Field study by Marty Nichols, approx. 12"x16"



Field study by Roland Folse (size information not available)



Verges d'Oliviers, by Annemie Janssen, 17"x11½"



Field study, hotel entry, by Betsy Pearson, approx. 12"x16"



Field study, St. Remy de Provence, by Marjorie Lutes (size not available)



St. Remy street, field study by Claire Henkel, approx. 16"x12"

One day we are scheduled to visit the village of Fontaine de Vaucluse. At first glance it is a typical Provençal village, with the addition of a beautiful river.

The Sorgue flows right through the village, past overhanging shops and trees, and several defunct waterwheels. A steep path leads up a hillside beside the river, and following it offers one spectacular view after another. The stream is fast-flowing, with masses of bright green plants visible through the crystal-clear water. At the top of a cliff overlooking the river is a ruined castle, brilliantly backlit in the morning but more easily visible by afternoon. Those trekking to the rock-covered hilltop are rewarded with finding the source of the river—a deep underground spring, its bottom yet unplumbed by human divers, erupts from a cavern.

Mid-day, we leave the village to have lunch on the banks of the Sorgue. The peace and beauty of the greenish stream and overhanging plane trees captivate some of our group, and they stay there to paint through the afternoon, while others return to the village to paint castles and waterfalls, rivers and buildings. It's one of the joys of this workshop that there is so much freedom to choose one's own painting locations, as well as so much to choose from every day.

At Roussillon, painters have to choose from many different kinds of scenes. The



Path to the Quarry, St. Remy, by Maryam Hjersted (size information not available)

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perched village is complex but fascinating; it sits atop a massive reddish cliff. Looking out from the village one sees an endless view of farms and fields, hills and trees vanishing into the distance. A trail leads to an area of red and yellow rocks, a place where yellow ochre and perhaps red ochre are still mined today for use in pigments. Artists who've followed that trail are identifiable at the end of the day by their reddish or yellowish shoes.

What to paint? We scatter like leaves on the wind to all these directions, and come back to the afternoon critique with representations of most everything. There's an advantage to having so many painters in the group—you get to see what subjects each of them chose and how they chose to handle them.

Critiques at the end of each day sounded like a lot at the beginning, but there's a party atmosphere. We meet in the inner courtyard of the hotel and several evenings wine is served during the critique. A little wine makes a critique flow quite nicely, we find, and the hour passes quickly.

One night we have a birthday party, and help Marty Nichols celebrate her 86th. She and her sister Betsy, along with their husbands Clyde Nichols and Bob Pearson, accompanied Elizabeth and some others in this group to a workshop in Scotland a few years ago. Those of us who've just met them for the first time on this trip soon feel an "old friends" kind of bond as well, and it's a pleasure to help celebrate Marty's birthday. By the end of the workshop, Marty and Betsy have a reputation as our cafe painters—they often stop at a cafe with a great view, and paint from a comfortable spot while enjoying coffee, ice cream or other goodies.

Market day in St. Remy is a delight. I'm certain that in the months to come, many paintings will result from this day.

But it's too busy, too overwhelming, too *much* to paint on location. The market is setting up as we're finishing breakfast in the hotel. We can see the action beginning from our windows—the hotel sits right on the central plaza, and the booths and tables are appearing just outside our door. We all head out with cameras and sketchbooks.

Every now and then, we run into each other. "Did you see those flowers?...the bottles of olive oil with the light striking them?...the baskets of spices, the reds and yellows and browns?...the strings of purple garlic?...the piles of grapes and peaches...did you see?" Eventually, we remember that we too can spend money, and we stagger back to the hotel laden with purchases, bargains, wonderful things that we then have to figure out how to pack into our bulging bags.

Although we have day trips out on six of our workshop days, some days we work close to home. St. Remy itself could provide painting subjects for months. A couple of days after the market day, we visit a site very close to St. Remy—St. Paul's sanatorium, where Vincent Van Gogh stayed for a while, and painted. Next to that are the Roman ruins of Glanum, fascinating remains of an ancient settlement. Once again we scatter, some staying in groups



Photograph by Phyllis McCabe, *L'Assiette de Marie Restaurant* in St. Remy de Provence

and some going off to painting spots that attract them. Elizabeth and several others paint near the sanatorium, and by noontime several of us have found the Roman cafe at Glanum, where ancient recipes are recreated for our present pleasure.

A few artists find inspiration on our very doorstep, and there are numerous portrayals of the olive tree, with its table and chairs surrounding it, that grace our hotel entry courtyard. St. Remy is full of picturesque painting spots, and we cannot paint or sketch them all in just a couple of weeks. I think I'm being extravagant with film until I hear how many others have exceeded my 18 rolls. And I feel *much* better when I hear photographer Phyllis McCabe say she brought 70 rolls. Of course, she's a professional photographer, so she needed lots of film.

All too soon, it's starting to be the end of the trip. We've seen an incredible number of spots in Provence and painted or sketched in many of them. We've visited Cezanne's studio and seen Mt. St. Victoire, Arles, Aix-en-Provence, and we've painted at the Pont du Gard. From olive groves to vineyards ripe with soon-to-be harvested grapes, from lavender fields to precariously perched villages, the Luberon valley and the bridge at Avignon, we've seen Provence. We've made new friends whom we hope to keep as friends forever. And we've learned a lot about painting, and especially painting in a foreign country.

I'm looking forward to the next trip, wherever and whenever that may be. I've learned a few good lessons from this trip. First, no matter that I pared down my supplies considerably, they're still too heavy, and I need to get lighter still. I need to be prepared to draw and sketch more—not try to paint in pastels at every location, but gather material for paintings at home, even if I shoot 30 rolls of film. But most of all, I need to go again.

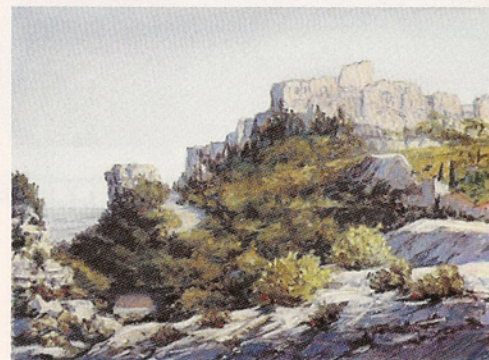
■ Maggie Price is a pastel artist and writer, and editor of *The Pastel Journal*.



Study, Along the Canal, by Pat Anderson (size information not available)



Pont du Gard, by Janie Hutchinson, 11"x15"



Study of Les Baux, by Maggie Price, 8"x11"



Abbaye de Sénanque, by Ruth Summer, 11"x8"