

SHERI RAMSEY

Plein air studies can promote sales of larger paintings

BY MAGGIE PRICE

SHERI RAMSEY has been painting and teaching art for thirty years. She graduated from Indiana University with a degree in Art Education. She continued her own art studies through selected workshops, and has since exhibited her work in numerous juried shows and exhibitions. Her work is in collections throughout the United States and Canada, as well as Europe and Asia. She lives in Springfield, Illinois, where she paints and teaches pastel.

Sheri Ramsey has developed an unusual method of selling her art directly to buyers without the intermediaries of galleries or agents.

She developed the process almost accidentally. Several years ago, on a trip to France, she painted over 30 plein air studies in a little over two weeks. When she returned home, she didn't want to sell any of those studies, since they were personal memories of her visit, but she wanted to share them with others. She had friends who were starting a new partnership and business. The group wanted art to display on the walls of their new office, and wanted to have a grand opening party. They loved France, and loved Sheri's paintings. She agreed to frame and hang her studies from the trip to France in the office.

At the grand opening party, people were very interested in her work and enjoyed talking to her about it. While none of her studies were for sale, she was able to take orders for new, finished paintings of the same subjects.

"The paintings stayed on the walls after the opening, and I could take people in to look at them at any time," Sheri says. "If I got a commission, then I took the study home to use as reference. I usually replaced it with another piece so the office still had artwork."

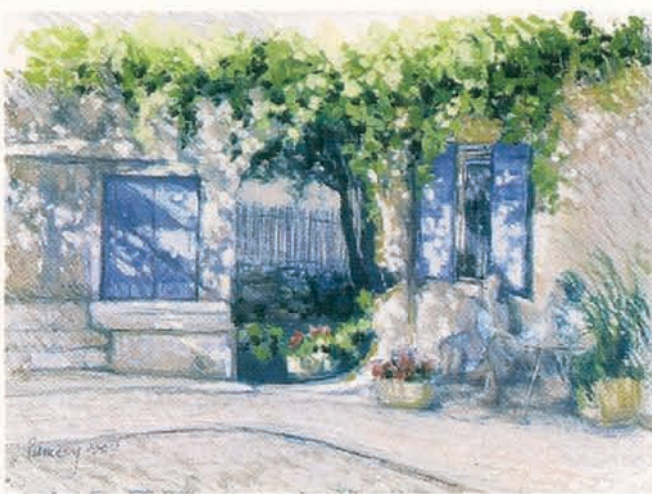
Over time, there has been a lot of traffic through the office, Sheri adds. People have continued to call her to



talk about the paintings and to place orders. "I still get calls as a result of that first open house," Sheri says.

"Springfield is a town with lots of lawyers and doctors, and they all seem to go to each other's offices. At one point, an attorney who worked in a different office visited the one where my art was exhibited. That led to a sale of a whole series of barn paintings for an office whose clientele is mainly in farming-related businesses."

That first exhibition of paintings from France was about two years ago. The next fall, Sheri took a trip to Italy, and came home with another group of 30 or so paintings. As luck would have it, the attorneys' office that hosted the first exhibition was about to relocate to a larger office space. "So they asked if I would be interested in showing the paintings from Italy," Sheri says. "We're hanging that exhibition right now."



Left, study; above, final painting, *St. Remy Square*, 11"x14"

Opposite page, *Crowned Field*, 8"x12" (study)

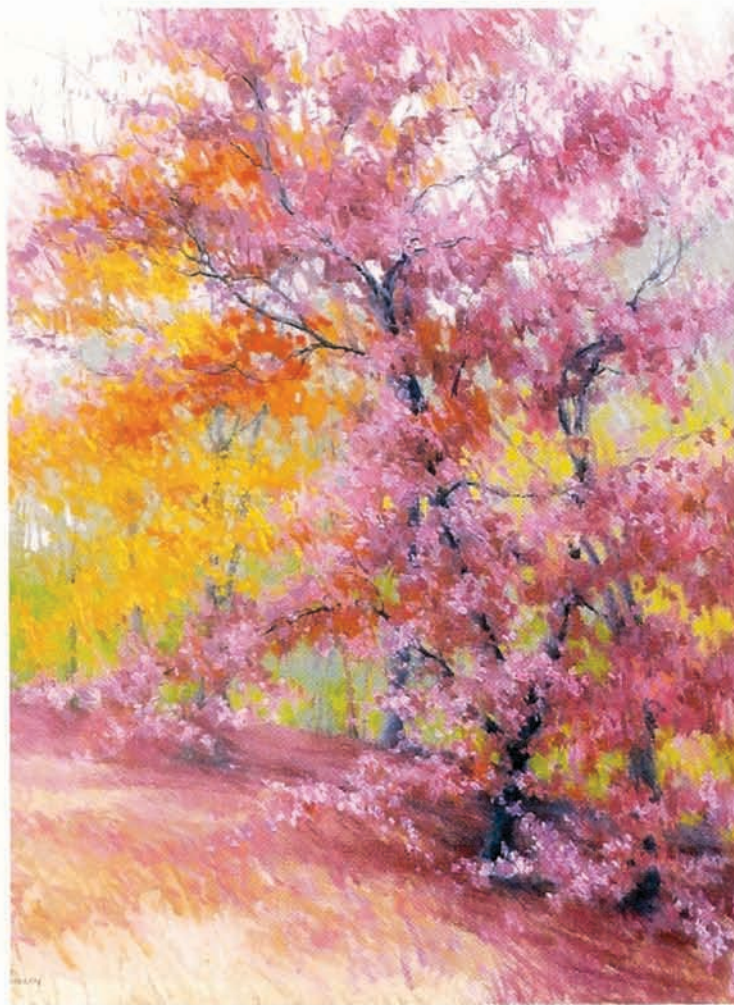
One reason this has worked so well for Sheri is that she is a prolific painter, and can create a large body of work from one area. "I paint very fast on location," she says. "The main advantage I have, I believe, is that I'm easily excited. I'm impressed by nature. I have to love what I'm looking at in order to paint it, but there are so many things

I'm drawn to that I don't have to waste a lot of time looking for a subject. I usually see something that I want to paint and can get started right away. Also, I took a workshop with Bob Rohm some time ago, and learned to paint in plein air. He suggested we paint fast, before the light changes.

"Of course, I've also been drawing



Above left, study; right, the final painting, *Oaks before Maple*, 18"x24"



for about 40 years, so I've had lots of practice and can draw quickly."

Sheri selects her subject and uses her camera's viewfinder to find her composition. Then she makes a quick sketch on museum-grade Wallis Sanded Pastel Paper—the only surface she uses—with a purple-gray pastel pencil. Using that same pencil, she blocks in the dark values with quick strokes. She uses a more open stroke for middle values if she notes them at all, but says she usually doesn't bother with them. The shapes of the light values are simply outlined with the pencil.

"Once I'm sure of my composition, I take a photo," she says. "Then I move quickly into color. It's important to learn to see color; I think I sometimes see colors others don't. I had to analyze this in order to discuss it with my students in a workshop I just taught. I came up with five objectives or ways to see and use color.

"I came up with five ways to see and use color: as a focal point, as temperature (warm or cool), as a complement, as a value, and to create pleasing but unexpected color relationships."

"First, you can use color itself as a focal point. For example, I demonstrated a painting which was just leaves on a sidewalk, but with light shining through one leaf, which made it the focal point. Then I did another demonstration of a red tree in front of a blue wall, and the blue of the wall seen through the leaves of the tree was the

focus. The color itself, not the object, became the focal point.

"Second, you can use temperature to help create the color you need. I have my palette set up like a color wheel, separated by warm, middle and cool temperatures of each color. If I need a green, I ask myself first, should it be a warm green or cool green? If it's a cool green, then maybe to add excitement I might go a step or two cooler, towards the blue.

"Third, you can use complements to bring out a focal point. A good example of this is a subject of yellow trees with purple branches. The purple might be grayed back, to keep from being garish.

"Fourth, look at color simply as a value. If you get your values right, any color works. A tree can be blue or purple, or red, if the value is correct.

"Fifth, I like to find pleasing but unexpected color relationships that can be a focal point. I look for surprises,

like peach-colored leaves with blue shadows."

While all these concepts come into play in Sheri's paintings, she clearly doesn't have time to be too analytical while working on a plein air painting.

"I allow myself one hour, because I'm aware the light will change. I work until the colors are in place and I think I've captured what was exciting to me about the scene in the beginning.

"If I find I'm not catching that excitement, I focus on trying to get the color and mood recorded. I don't finish the painting but I usually cover the paper.

"I also want to like it. If I'm having trouble achieving that, I might work more than an hour, but with the awareness that the light has changed."

When Sheri takes a painting trip and gets to paint all day, without spending any time traveling from one place to another or sight-seeing, she tries to paint four paintings in a day.

"For fun, I sometimes try to beat my record. Once I did six paintings in a day, but then I was completely drained at the end of the day. I decided that was a bit unreasonable, so I won't try for more than that. Four a day is fine.

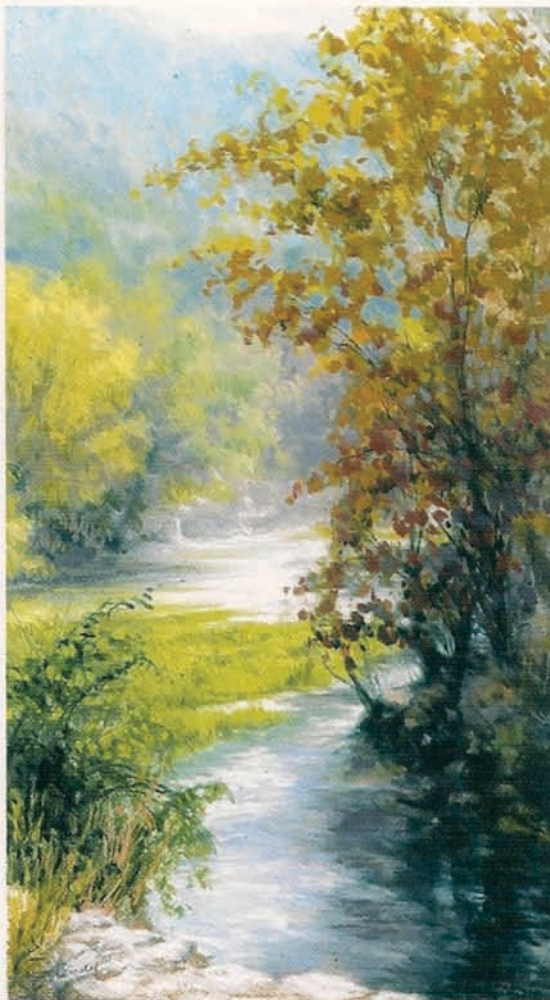
"These aren't finished paintings, of course. When I get home I tweak them a little in the studio, work a little more using my photos as a reference or to jog my memory. I don't want to lose the color or the feeling of the plein air piece, but there may be things in the photos I missed originally.

"Of course the colors in the photos are weaker, but there may be other things I can use, shapes I couldn't get when I was working so fast on location."

Sheri's approach is a little different when she's working in her studio.

"If I've sold a painting based on a study, the first thing I tell the buyer is that I won't paint exactly the same thing again. I change the composition or the size, or something.

"Sometimes it's the buyer who wants something different. One lady wanted a painting to take to her apartment in



Above right, study;
left, final painting,
*Fontaine de
Vaucluse, 19"x10"*

"If I've sold a painting based on a study, the first thing I tell the buyer is that I won't paint exactly the same thing again. I change the composition or the size, or something."

France. The finished, framed painting was going to have to fit into her suitcase, so she brought the suitcase over for me to use to determine the size. I used several photos to create a new composition." (*Les Baux*, shown on following page.)

"Another time a buyer had a beautiful antique frame she wanted the painting to fit into, so I had to make adjustments in size and composition for that."

In the studio, Sheri usually works in a larger size than she uses for her studies. She starts in a similar way, but applies the first layer of pastel lightly, then uses a wash of turpenoid over it to let the colors bleed together and eliminate the white of the surface. "After that, the main difference is that I don't have to hurry," she says. "I take the painting to near-completion, then hang it on the wall for a week or two to study it. Then I finish it."

The other big difference between plein air and studio work is in her supplies. "When I'm working plein air, I use almost all Rembrandts, with about four dark Sennelier pastels and a few bright-colored Unisons, Sennelier, Schminckes and Winsor-Newtons. I use a Soltek easel and carrying bag. First I bought just the easel and thought I could get by without the bag, but eventually I went back and bought it. Now everything goes on my back, there are pockets to hold everything



Above, the study for *Les Baux*. Left, *Les Baux de Provence*, 10"x19". The composition and shape of the final painting was changed to fit the buyer's requirements.

I need that doesn't fit inside the easel, and it works great! I recommend this easel to all my serious students. I carry the easel and bag in my car all the time in case I see something I need to stop to paint, and I also carry my camera and a zip-lock bag full of film. Then I'm ready for anything!"

In the studio, she has far more pastels available for use. "I still start with Rembrandts, but then I use Schmincke, Unison, Great American Artworks, and Sennelier pastels. I have complete sets

of all those. I bought whole sets of them because I didn't know what there would be in the set. I like the brighter colors, the purples and greens in the Unison and Schmincke brands.

"My favorite dark Senneliers are #45 red, #463 blue, #180 green, and #478 purple. I know these numbers because my students and I often make a group order together. Another favorite pastel is a bright yellow-green that Unison makes.

"I don't use black or white pastels except in an emergency. But there are

emergencies. If I've painted a whole painting and there's something dull about it, or it lacks contrast, one little dot of black may do it. If I had already used black, there would be no way to get a darker value. But, in most cases, I don't need to use black, Sennelier #463 will do."

Sheri says there are a few things that are absolutely critical to successful paintings, and she's happy to share them with her students and others. "Composition is important, of course. It's necessary for a good painting, you can't do without it. Paying attention to values is important. But excitement—that's number one. I guess you could create a good painting without it, but for me, without the excitement in the painting, I wouldn't want to paint it!"

Sheri teaches a regular session each year through the Springfield Art Association. The course runs eight weeks, one three-hour session each week. "It's fun," she says. "There's always a good group of students, advanced and sometimes beginners." She teaches an occasional workshop as well, and enjoys doing demonstrations. "I've taught classes and workshops in this area since 1975," she says.

Sheri has exhibited her work regularly over the years, as well. In addition to the open houses she has arranged through the attorneys' office, she's shown in countless group and solo

Valinia Posted II, 18"x24"





exhibitions. All of these factors have contributed to making her well known in the Springfield area. "I used to paint portraits, too, so people know me from that. They call to make an appointment to come see my work."

She has a gallery next to her studio, both at her home. At the time of the interview, the studio is undergoing a major renovation. "It's going to be twice as big," Sheri says. "It's going to be great. It's a big job, though, which was kind of forced upon us because of leaks in the skylights. We got rid of the skylights, and thought we might as well raise the roof, and make other changes." The gallery gives her a regular place to hang her work for people who want to come see it and discuss purchases or commissions.

Sheri's main focus isn't in exhibiting her work or in teaching, though she enjoys both. Her focus is the painting

itself. "My goal is to paint more. I've never been able to paint as much as I really want to, which is all of the time! I frequently see things that I want to paint, and for some reason I don't get to do it. And there are all these studies I have—I want to do big paintings of those and just haven't had time yet.

"I want to paint lots of paintings. I do get to paint a lot; I'm lucky to have people around me who are very supportive—especially my husband Don—when I say I need to paint. And I've gotten to paint in Europe three times, and that was wonderful. So I'm happy with my life now—I just want to paint even more. It's really an easy goal, not at all unachievable. There's a lot of beauty out there, and I want to get it all down on paper."

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

Above, Lit, 24"x36".

Below, Sheri Ramsey painting outdoors. Sheri is always careful to cover up to avoid sun exposure. She wears a big floppy hat to protect her skin and shade her face.

