

Plein Air Watercolor From a Different Point of View.

By Mike Shirk



Point Loma

What does Inclusion Body Myositis have to do with watercolor?

I have a rare, untreatable, muscle disease - Inclusion Body Myositis. Besides preventing me from climbing stairs or walking more than a few feet, it severely restricts my manual dexterity. This physical limitation has actually had a positive role in my development as a plein air artist, by forcing me to focus on simple strong shapes and evocative color choices rather than accurate drawing and precise painting.



Guarding the Coast

Painted on location at the Coast Guard Lighthouse at the foot of Point Loma in San Diego.



Rancho Santa Fe Alley

Painted on location near the Rancho Santa Fe Library.

Playing fast and loose.

Plein air painting gives me the excuse to work fast, work loose, and not be overly critical of the results. I know that my most important breakthroughs have been made on location. I may refine them later on, but about half the time, I simply add a mat and a frame.

I've tried to understand why and when those breakthrough paintings come along. I've decided that I'm at my best when the medium itself does most of the work and my own contribution is a simple statement of design or mood.

Escaping from Reality.

When I paint, I constantly remind myself that I am creating a painting, not a picture. One way I help that process along is to turn my back on the subject after I have done my initial sketches. That way I will only remember what is important - mostly the big shapes of light and dark, and where I want to place the center of interest. What about detail? My approach to detail is this: near the center of interest, I will place smaller shapes that are more distinct. However they generally won't be accurate renderings of what was there, instead they will at most suggest the actual subject. I always enjoy watching a viewer approach one of my paintings for a closer look, only to be puzzled when the detail that drew them in really doesn't exist.

Anyone who looks at my sketchbook is also in for a disappointment, because I don't make finished pictures. Instead I put down three to five important shapes and give myself a hint as to where I think the center of interest should be.



Behind Spanish Village

From an earlier plein air painting in Balboa Park.



Old Town Diners

Painted on location in Old Town San Diego.

I also try to limit the amount of drawing I do on the watercolor paper. Generally I only draw something if it outlines an area that needs to be saved as white paper or if it is tedious subject that I don't want to have to worry about when I'm in the middle of a wash.



This panoramic photo shows the confusing scene that awaits the plein air painter at the tip of Shelter Island, overlooking Point Loma. The peninsula itself is a long, wiener-like, shape that doesn't lend itself to a good design. But within that scene can be found many interesting compositions.



During my first visit, I painted "From Shelter Island" by concentrating only on the light buildings and trees, not even attempting to show Point Loma.



Later I introduced a sailboat I had sketched, and exaggerated the perspective of the Point for "Motoring Out" (above).

For "Point Loma," (pictured on the cover) I imagined myself being lifted hundreds of feet above the harbor to reveal a more interesting coastline.



Demonstration

For a paintout demonstration, I chose to make an even more simplified composition, by placing three America's Cup Class sailboats in front of the very tip of Point Loma. These boats are known for their strikingly tall sails, which made a strong intersecting shape against the peninsula.

My sketch was done on location during an earlier visit. Once I visualized the end result, making it happen in watercolor was a snap.

I began with three consecutive washes of New Gamboge (with a little Hansa Yellow Medium), Permanent Rose, and Cobalt Blue. I made the washes smoother in the sky area and more varied in the water area. Of course I saved much of the sail areas as white.

Then I simply added the midtones of Point Loma to make the sails and shoreline structures pop out. The colors used were a repeat of the New Gamboge and Permanent Rose combined to make an orange, plus a few touches of Viridian for interest. The boats are very simple abstract forms so that they won't distract from the overall mood. A few cool darks near the shore, some adjustments to the sails, and the painting "To the Point", was complete.



Where is the detail?



When this painting, “Harbor Island Reflections,” was exhibited, several people commented on the “boats” below the hotel.



A closer look reveals that the most literally painted boat is just three abstract shapes. It is their context that makes them a boat. As one of my favorite painters, Eric Weigardt, says “if you take care of the big shapes, the small shapes will take care of themselves.”

The difference between a painting and a picture.

When I am attracted by a scene, I believe it is because the subject itself is obeying the rules of good design. An interesting juxtaposition of lights against darks, several good shapes, a rhythmic orientation of edges. But so much of that good design is due to the light that was present at the exact moment we took notice and also due to the way our brains filter out things that bore us and focus on things that interest us.

So before I begin to design the page, I try to figure out exactly what it is that I find exciting and whether it is something that I can paint given my skill level, the natural attributes of watercolor, and the time available.

Whether I’m painting or drawing, I try to avoid letting the subject dictate where my pencil or brush goes. That means trusting my interpretation of the subject. It may be trite or oversimplified compared to a more experienced artist, but I know that if I can paint in a relaxed state of mind, I will end up with a true expression. I do the same thing with color, that is, I avoid letting local color dictate my palette.

Keeping it simple.

My favorite paintings have generally been my simplest ones. Some kind of an overall wash, hopefully an interesting one, followed by some wet into wet midtones and then a few darks and calligraphy at the end. If I do any more steps than that, I find it is easy for the painting to look overworked - because it is. I try to keep in mind that watercolor's greatest strength is its ability to glow, and that quality is lost once the white of the paper can no longer show through.

I constantly fight the tendency to overwork unimportant areas. These should be places where I can take maximum advantage of watercolor's inherent beauty - gradated washes, flat washes, wet into wet washes - state them and let them be. So I identify those areas and address them in the initial wash or washes.

Swinging for the fences.

Beyond making an early decision as to the overall composition and point of interest, I like to let my subconscious do most of the real art. This means resisting the urge to control the brush. The less I "think" about the painting, the more I can feel it, and the more of me that winds up on the page.

During the painting process, I keep reminding myself that I am creating a painting and not a photograph. One thing that helps that process for me is to kind of watch the painting out of the corner of my eye rather than looking at it directly.

Finding myself.

Two years ago, after I had only been painting for a few months, "Beyond Recuerdo" showed up on my easel. I spent the next year and a half trying to improve and find "my style". If I had only realized that my true style was with me from the beginning. I only needed to release it and let it fly.



Beyond Recuerdo

Painted on location in Del Mar, CA.

About the Artist



Mike Shirk, NWWS, is a Past President and Life Member of the San Diego Watercolor Society. More than 100 of his paintings have been accepted in juried watercolor exhibitions, including Watercolor West, Northwest Watercolor Society, Western Federation Exhibition and the International Exhibition of SDWS. His paintings have received dozens of awards and been purchased by private collectors throughout the country. Point Piños Light, (see image below) was accepted into the Permanent Art Collection of the Muscular Dystrophy Association and hangs in their headquarters in Tucson, Arizona.



Point Piños Light