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Plein Air Events: Tips on Participation

by Lori Putnam

Plein air-painting festivals and competitions offer landscape artists not only a chance to paint in new locations, compete for awards, and participate in the sale of their work but also the opportunity to connect with fellow *plein air* painters and other influential people in the art world. These organized events involve painting outdoors from life for a predetermined amount of time in a particular location, using whichever media the artist chooses. Certain festivals last only a weekend, while others span an entire month. Participation in these events vary, with some being by personal invitation only, others accepting artists through a juried process or application, and some open to anyone.



Chicago artist Scott Tallman Powers participated in the Plein Air Easton! paint out in Maryland last July. Photo: Kevin Kleppinger, www.kleppingerphoto.com.

Entering and Traveling to *Plein Air* Event

To participate in a juried event, you will need to submit an application form, images of recent *plein air* work (usually slides or digital), an application fee, and perhaps a brief biographical statement. Your application will be reviewed either by a committee or a single juror. Once you receive notification that you've been accepted, you will be expected to respond promptly and to submit certain additional materials. Because the event's organizers will begin advertising and promoting the event immediately, they may need additional images of your work for brochures, post-card mailings, or web promotion. You may also be asked to pay additional fees to help cover event costs or to help share the costs of advertising the event in magazines. Some event organizers also request a list of your patrons' addresses so they can send event-related mailings to members of your art circle.

As far as getting to the destination where the *plein air* event will be held, you will be expected to make all of your own travel arrangements, including booking your flight, rental car, and hotel room. Some organizers will offer hosted accommodations, which involves individuals in the community opening their homes to artists. Not only is this a wonderful way to save on lodging expenses but your host can also be a great source of learning more about the area and getting insider tips on painting locations. Hosts are always eager to meet the artists and often provide extraordinary hospitality while respecting the artist's time and privacy. If you end up in a hosted situation, you may want to consider giving the host a small painting done during your stay as a thank-you gift.

Registration and Reception

When you arrive at the festival venue, you will need to register. Usually you will receive some material in the mail a few weeks prior to your arrival, but when you check in you will also receive a packet of regional information, including maps, painting locations, schedules, and details regarding special events you are invited to and/or required to attend. Before you begin painting, you will be required to get your canvases, papers, boards, or other support surfaces stamped. By placing a special marking or stamp on the reverse side of your painting surface, the event



Artists gathered at PleinAir Festival '07 San Luis Obispo in California this past October. Photo: Lori Putnam.

organizers can be certain that a work was created during the allotted competition period and not months before in your studio. Sometimes you may also be given a welcome gift of regional specialties.

Plein air events throughout the country have different ways of kicking off their outdoor-painting festivities. The “PleinAir Festival ‘07, San Luis Obispo” in California, for instance, commenced their weeklong activities this past October with an artists’ reception held at one of the city’s historical landmarks, the Dallidet Adobe. This type of social opportunity is a great way to meet the organizers of the event and the participating painters who can offer information about their favorite painting locales. You can also use such an occasion to find someone to paint alongside during the festival. (As with all *plein air* painting, it is recommended that you do not paint alone.)

During the next few days you will be on your own schedule and are free to explore the area, discover great locations in which to paint, and create fresh works of art. There may be a day during the competition when you will be asked to paint within a certain area, such as the center of town. Those times may be connected to a media day and are used to help promote the festival, as well as to get residents and visitors of the town excited about the upcoming exhibition openings, auctions, or sales. Toward the end of the official painting time, you will select two or three of your best works, frame them, and present them as entries in the competition’s exhibition. Check with organizers to see if frames will be available for purchase. Some artists choose to bring or ship their own frames to the event ahead of time.

Events, Exhibitions, and Awards

The exhibition opening and awards presentation usually associated with a *plein air* festival or competition are often open to the public at no charge. This is the case in the “Estes Park *Plein Air* Competition,” a large competition in Colorado sponsored by Paint the Parks. In this particular event, there are 75 juried and invited artists each year, each of whom submit three works of art for a total of 225 paintings. Competitions of this size usually require three or four local galleries simultaneously involved in exhibiting artwork and hosting openings and awards presentations.



An artist used an umbrella to protect his canvas from glare during the PleinAir Festival '07 San Luis Obispo event. Photo: Lori Putnam.

More usually the exhibition-opening gala is an upscale, ticketed event with attendees paying upwards of \$100 per person to attend, as is the case with the “*Plein Air*, Easton!” event, in Maryland. Held in the town’s museum, the festival involves approximately 53 competing artists, each of whom submit two paintings for judging. Local art patrons are usually eager to buy, so organizers allow each artist to submit several extra pieces to serve as replacements after their competition works have been sold.

Because artists are vying for prizes ranging from a few hundred to several thousand dollars, advertising in major magazines, and purchase awards, the judging at *plein air* competitions is taken very seriously. Only the most successful artists are asked to judge a competition, with more prestigious competitions enlisting first-tier judges. Awards may also be given for works selected as artists’ choice and peoples’ choice.

Other events, such as a Quick Draw competition, can be held in conjunction with the festival. A Quick Draw usually requires separate registration and provides an additional opportunity for artists to sell their work produced during the *plein air* event, often in a silent or live auction. For these types of events, participants are given up to two hours to paint one painting in a specific area of town; they then frame the work and enter it into a competition judged separately from the larger competition.

Determining if *Plein Air* Competitions Are Right for You

The pressure to produce a certain number of “good” works in a limited time can be overwhelming for some artists, which is why these types of competitions are not for everyone. Most of the artists who find *plein air* events enjoyable are those who thrive on competition, enjoy painting different

types of landscapes, and welcome the opportunity to sell their artwork, win awards, and connect with other *plein* painters. Artists should evaluate the monetary commitment involved in participating in these events as well, including the cost of travel, shipping supplies and frames, and time away from the studio.

Once you've made the decision to participate in a *plein air* competition, it's a good idea to do some investigating before submitting an application. A noted judge is often a good indicator of the legitimacy of the event—and the level of competition. Speak to a reputable source (such as the event coordinator) to find out how the event will be promoted, what the percentage split of sales will be, and how the raised funds will be used. Visit the event's website for a list of past participants who may be willing to tell you if they found the event well organized, if exposure and sales were good, and if they would attend the event again.

For more information on plein air festivals and competitions that are happening throughout the country, check the Bulletin Board section of American Artist magazine, or visit the Regional Roundup section of Plein Air.

Lori Putnam is an artist, instructor, and plein air-event participant and organizer from Nashville, Tennessee. To view her work or learn about her upcoming workshops, visit her website at www.loriputnam.com.