



Ken Backhaus is featured in the December Issue 2004

Ken Backhaus Oil Painting Demonstration



Step 1:

This painting was completed in July during the Sixth Annual Laguna Plein Air event in Laguna Beach, CA. I used a digital camera to capture the painting's various stages. Depending on the intricacy of the scene, I may begin with a more refined sketch. In this case, I started with a loose oil paint/mineral spirits wash to define the masses on Classens oil single-primed No. 15 linen. This first stage sets the pace regarding the scene's point of view, the light and shadow masses, and the positive and negative areas. The artist must develop the focal point early on or at least know where it will be located.



Step 2:

This second stage is very important: I have to develop the areas that are in shadow in relation to the areas that are in light. This will become the secondary focal area of the painting. I already know where the main focal point will be, but I just do not have time at this point to put it in. The plein-air painter must concern himself or herself with the constantly moving light. What is now in shadow may in 10 minutes become filled with light, so the artist should develop the painting with this in mind. Here I start to place paint in a more opaque fashion over the initial wash areas of light and shadow to establish the correct value and color temperature. The water area surrounding the rocks is also given attention.



Step 3:

From the beginning, one thing that caught my interest in this scene was the occasional wave action against the far rocks. This will be my main focal point. In this stage, I observe the waves, to determine the point at which the wave hits the rocks. This is indicated while developing the foundation of the ocean with the horizon line and placing some of the sky value and color.



Step 4:

This is a refinement stage. My eyes continually scan the scene to see its harmony and to retain that harmony throughout the painting. The sky is developed further with subtle color temperature changes, rather than values. More attention is given to subtle ocean colors that merely suggest wave movement. I also make understated additions to the rock area. While observing my tide chart, I notice that the tide is going out, exposing more rocks. This may be helpful to the finished composition.



Step 5:

I continue developing subtleties of the ocean with additional light and dark values placed in certain areas, giving the suggestion of waves and waves breaking on the rocks. I start to develop the shadowed foreground in the lower left-hand corner.



Finished Stage:

I give final attention to edges, softening those of the wave splash and suggesting wind and spray. I review other areas to determine the edge quality and contrast of value, especially at the focal point. I apply more definition to rocks farther out in the ocean and a few indications of waves farther out. The shadow area of the foreground in the lower right corner is finished. The very last stage is getting away from the painting for a while — looking at it with a fresh eye the next morning. Observing the painting in the studio allows me to see the painting for what it is, and I should have the visceral response I had from the scene. Any refinements I make now are design decisions — either simplifying or more boldly stating various areas of the painting. Sign it, and it's off to start another.

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