

LORI PUTNAM

LESSONS FROM TRAVELING PAINTERS



Spring in Ukraine

2019, oil, 9 x 12 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air study

Lori Putnam stops for a moment to share what a decade of painting away from home 120 days of the year has taught her.

— BY STEFANIE LAUFERSWEILER —

I never dreamed I'd be painting as a profession, let alone seeing the world," says Tennessee artist Lori Putnam, who left her graphic design business in 2005 to pursue painting in oils full time. "I never even thought I'd see much of my own country, and my very first plein air piece actually happened on my first trip to Italy." In fact, she and her husband, Mark, sold their home and belongings and lived in the Italian countryside for seven months at the start of her art career so she could immerse herself in largely self-taught exploration.

"Fast-forward, and for the past 10 years or so, I've traveled about 120 days out of the year," says Putnam, who has honed her impressionistic style while painting in more than 15 different countries and hundreds of towns and villages in the United States and abroad. She had just returned home from a trip to Ukraine when we talked with her. Facing a yearlong sabbatical from teaching and trips in 2020 to make up for lost time in the studio and to prepare for a Nashville exhibition coming in 2021, Putnam shared this insight and advice on making the most of traveling and painting.

Don't overplan a trip. I used to look up images and locations, take "Google walks," and even imagine paintings before I ever hopped on



Lori Putnam was painting along the Matukituki River on New Zealand's South Island (shown) when about 4,000 ewes suddenly joined her and her class. "They were being driven down to the field where I was teaching on their way to be sheared," she says. "All of our little easels were sticking up amidst the fuzzy woolies baaing so loudly we couldn't think."

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(RIGHT) An Early Response, 2013, oil, 8 x 10 in., private collection, plein air study • **(BELOW) Down to the Sea**, 2014, oil, 20 x 24 in., private collection, studio

"This is the small town of Peschici, Italy, where we lived in 2008," says Putnam. "On a return visit in 2013 I was rushing to get down to the sea to paint with some friends when this scene stopped me in my tracks. Morning light moves so quickly that there was no time to consider any details. I only needed to capture the shadow pattern and line movement." Along with An Early Response, she made a thumbnail sketch with more accurate notes on color to jog her visual memory for future paintings. The studio painting, Down to the Sea, was made in the same manner using only the study, sketch, and notes. "Had I looked at a photograph," she says, "I would have been too tempted by details."





(ABOVE) Detangling, 2014, oil, 18 x 24 in., private collection, studio • **(RIGHT) Long Walk to the Ferry**, 2013, oil, 9 x 12 in., private collection, plein air study

Putnam painted *Long Walk to the Ferry* while visiting a friend on the French island of Île-de-Bréhat, which is actually an archipelago, composed of two main islands that are separated only at high tide. No vehicles are allowed on the island, which is only 2 miles long. "What fascinated me was just how extreme the tides are there, about 26 feet between high and low tide levels," Putnam says. "As the water recedes, boats are scattered along with mooring buoys and ropes, exposing a mosaic pattern." *Detangling* was painted about five months later. "By changing my viewpoint, I was able to paint a more intimate scene, which included the fishermen untangling ropes as the tide began to rise again."

a plane. That only leads to disappointment. What I try now is to arrive a day before I'll be painting, and just allow myself the time to explore and observe. Still, it isn't always the exact place I find on day one that I go to paint on day two. It is the feel of the place as well as the color and quality of the light that I'm soaking in. After driving or walking around for a day, I'm so ready to get started painting the next day.

Manage your time and expectations honestly and realistically. Sometimes not managing our time well is in truth just our fear of



jumping in and painting. So, first, be honest about that. If your trip is mainly a family vacation, don't put so much pressure on yourself. Bring a sketchbook; give yourself permission to just observe; don't try to paint at all. You're still learning and growing either way, but without the added feeling of having failed at your mission. If it is a painting trip, however, forgo the late nights out with friends (most nights, anyway), get up before sunrise, stop at the first thing that grabs you, and paint.



(ABOVE) Fall Magic in West Glacier, 2018, oil, 24 x 30 in., collection the artist, studio • (RIGHT) Magic in West Glacier, 2017, oil, 9 x 12 in., collection the artist, plein air study

During a period of plein air burnout, when she felt more exhausted and homesick than inspired, Putnam felt a boost while painting in areas of Glacier National Park that had been affected by massive wildfires moving through Montana (more than a million acres burned in 2017). Her works from that time, including these, are among her favorites. “Big blue skies, intense gold leaves, the promise of new growth amidst the devastation — it was as if I was looking at nature and peering inside my own soul,” she says. “The paintings flowed out of me.”

Avoid wasting too much time on the hunt. It does no good to go out thinking, “I want to paint a mountain today,” only to pass by a dozen beautiful streams and lakes along the way. Always looking around the corner for the next thing that might be better is just frustrating. It is said that one of the reasons John Singer Sargent got so good is that he saw opportunity in everything. He found a spot and just painted it, rather than wandering around all day searching.

Paint adverbs and adjectives, not nouns. I don’t really paint subjects. The world around us offers some amazing patterns, shapes, and



color harmony. That is what gets me excited about painting. Remember this wherever you are painting.

Never paint something you feel confident painting. Even in a competition, growth is more important to me than winning. I’m always trying to capture something new. Every canvas is an opportunity. Be open to paintings that push you.

Even the most picturesque places have hidden stories to paint, if you learn to see them. Lots of painters can paint majestic mountain peaks or prominent landmarks much better than I ever will. It is more important to me to share my individual creative eye. If I have any gift at all, that is it. That's what I try to teach my students as well. I don't expect them to paint as I paint; I want to teach them to have new vision and tools for managing that vision. That takes some time, but once they begin to see that way, it opens up an entirely different world.

Simply seeing the world through another artist's eyes can be fruitful. Like going to a great museum, I really examine the pieces that fascinate me most when I'm at a plein air exhibition. I also take the opportunity to talk with other artists at such events. Everyone sharing is the way we all get better at this. Twenty different painters can paint the exact same location and you will get 20 different paintings. It is an eye-opening experience to see what others painted and how they painted it.

Advertising will get you noticed. Countless times I've been told that the reason someone signed up for a workshop is that they saw it in an advertisement. I've also been invited to plein air invitationals because of ads, and those appearances have brought my art to the attention of people who ultimately helped me expand my audience and gain collectors.

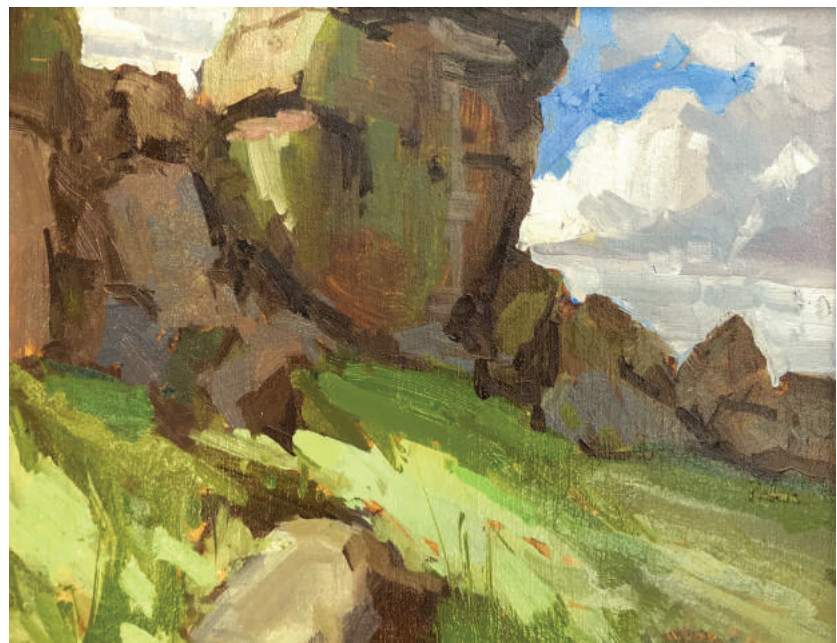
Be gracious and grateful, beginning with the organizers and volunteers of events you're participating in. It's a smaller world than you think, and it's so easy to get tagged as the troublemaker who never gets invited back. Also, painters are often approached for names of people to invite to future events. No one likes a jerk, even if that jerk can paint well.

When returning from a trip, if you can, take to your studio while you're still enthusiastic. Don't go through every photo you took right when you get back. Instead, let your studies and memories spark your creativity. The photos will always be there, but you'll lose the soulful connection you have to where you visited very quickly. Paint more small studies of the snapshots that exist only in your mind. It's a challenge, but it works to keep things fresh. Go so far as to try large works without a photo. Those are the best paintings you will ever make.

Art opens borders, connects cultures, and changes the world. You don't need to speak the language to share what you are doing when you're standing out on the street painting — the art speaks for you. Passersby nod and smile. It brings both them and me joy. More than once I've had someone bring me an espresso or a glass of wine and share a word or two with hand gestures to suggest I have touched their heart. In Guatemala, little children stand so close that you honestly have to work hard not to get paint on them. Sometimes I hand them the brush and just let them paint. 🎨



STEFANIE LAUFERSWEILER is a writer based in Cincinnati, Ohio.



The Cow and Calf
2018, oil, 11 x 14 in.
Private collection
Plein air

"A demonstration must always be about the lesson I need to teach, not about making an amazing work of art," says Putnam, who created this painting for a workshop in Ilkley Moor, West Yorkshire, United Kingdom, admitting it was one of the rare times she felt a decent painting resulted from a demo.



Clouds Above the Crown Range
2018, oil, 10 x 12 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air

While most of her workshop students were preparing to paint the New Zealand mountain range before them, Putnam turned in the opposite direction to make this study of the clouds growing on the hillside behind them. "I was able to set up and paint the scene before most of the students even got started," she says. "Capturing this kind of drama is more important to me than painting the quintessential or expected, even if I have flown 19 hours to get there."