

Windows to Experience

by Diane Cruickshanks May

Several years ago, while planning my first trip to California, a good friend presented me with a list of must-see landmarks, restaurants, museums and other noteworthy destinations I might find interesting. Though I did intend to visit several places on her list, it was primarily a painting trip. Each morning I would go out early to paint, grab lunch and a nap at midday, then head back out to paint until sundown. I ended up with quite a few field paintings and a sketchbook with numerous value and composition studies, and little time for sightseeing.

Although my friend was disappointed to hear that I hadn't been a very good tourist, she was happy to see my sketchbook and my little paintings. I'll never forget her response: "Diane, you didn't just visit California, you really saw California."

There have been a lot of painting trips since that one. I have painted summers in Italy and New England snow in February. I have painted by moonlight and under stormy skies. Each time I am intently focused on the visual elements of the moment that will translate my experience of place onto canvas. My other senses remain secondary: my feet can be wet or my fingers numb, yet I am only singularly aware of looking at my subject. As I push my vision to see all the nuances, I become aware of color, light and shapes in the landscape that are extraordinary. Thus, in my paintings, I am constantly pushing color, discarding discordant elements, and creating avenues of movement and light. It is my mission to share what I see on canvas as best I can.



I've painted dramatic landmarks like the Eiffel Tower, but I've also found great beauty in my own backyard. I recently took my paints and pochade box out into a whole field of yellow daffodils, and for three days I painted daffodil vistas, daffodil portraits, daffodils lit from above and daffodils glowing with warmth in the late afternoon sun. Their faces, frills and trumpets en mass, along with the endless combinations of color, value and form, are etched in my visual memory. I didn't just look at flowers; I breathed them in. I didn't just paint flowers; I celebrated them.

A daffodil will always be for me a window to that experience. This way of seeing has transformed my view of even the smallest detail in my daily life. A jar of marmalade in the morning light, the color of telephone wires at dusk, the pattern of children's discarded shoes in the hallway all can be viewed as a magical connection between light, pattern and color.

I have been told that my paintings are "happy." I do hope that they are. I hope that they somehow convey my choice to see in this world that which is lovely and hopeful, and to celebrate what exists for all of us if we only allow ourselves moments of awareness to be mindful of them.