

MINI PLEIN AIR PAINTING

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PRIMARY COLORS: POPPIES AT THE FLATIRONS



In almost any painting situation, it is possible to make a painting that is fairly true to the colors that exist in real life, using only primary colors. This is an example of painting with primary colors. I think it is a relatively easy landscape to paint because it is made up of only a few very graphic forms, with not too much fine detail. What's nice is that there is an opportunity to paint some fine detail if desired.

There are many versions of a primary color palette. For this exercise, I picked pure, saturated pigments that I thought could produce a fairly realistic representation of the colors that exist in reality: Bismuth Yellow, Bright Red, and Oriental Blue. Check out the gallery on page 46 to see some more examples of paintings made with primary colors.

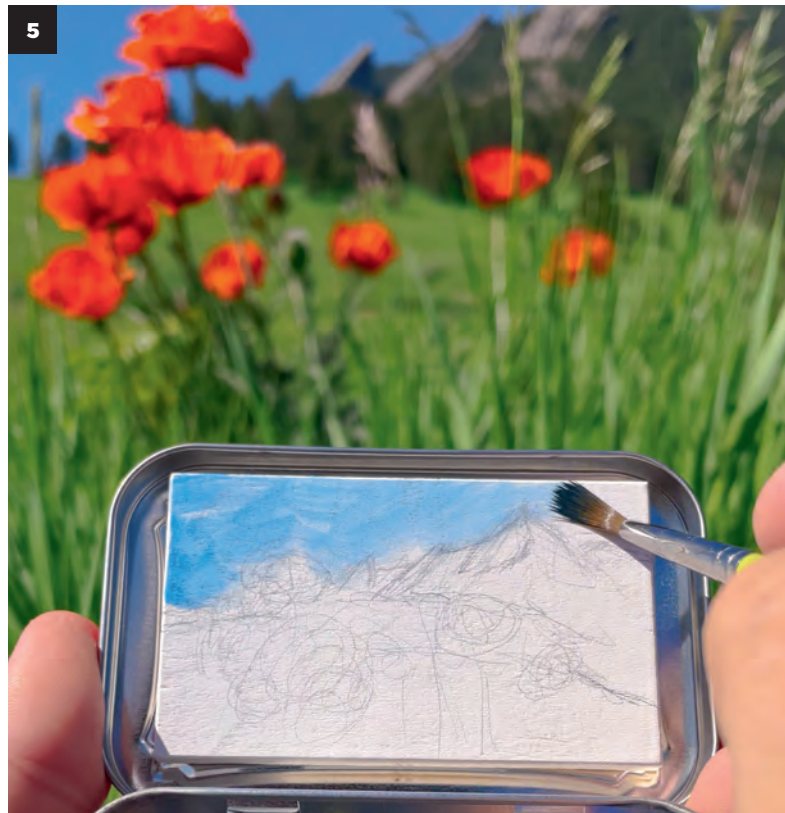
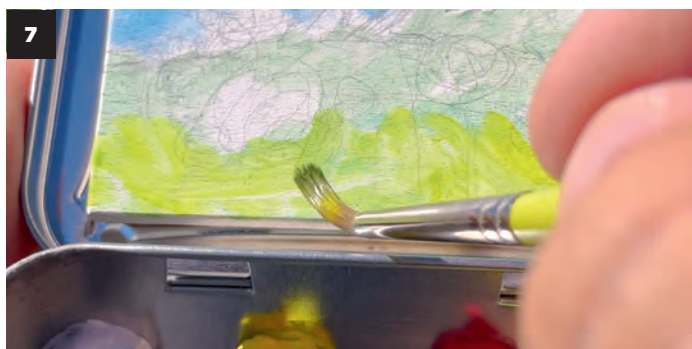
This painting is a great example of one that I sketched first, before I painted it. As I mentioned when discussing my process (page 25), I usually have a composition in mind first, and sketching is a familiar way to try out what the composition will look like before committing to paint.



1. Here you can see my tin with the colors for this painting—Bismuth Yellow, Bright Red, and Oriental Blue.

2. The beginning of the sketch is always very light and gestural. I'm just getting a feel for my subject and envisioning how the final painting could look. This stage is fast, and I can always erase it if I don't like it.

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3. The sketch is becoming finalized, as I distinguish the rock formations and the tree line. One thing to keep in mind with using a pencil is that it should be done lightly, because the gray pencil lead can wash into the paint and affect the color of the paint if it is overdone.

4. Now that my sketch is done, I can pick up a paintbrush. This is a medium-sized round brush with soft synthetic fibers. The first thing I do is dip it in odorless mineral spirits to wet the brush. Since I am going to populate the shapes in my composition with some light washes of color, the brush needs to be fairly saturated with liquid.

5. At this stage, it doesn't really matter which order I go about filling in colors. The main goal is to quickly and loosely cover some of the white up in my largest areas of color. Having some color on the surface makes it easier to see how the final painting is going to end up, and the wet surface allows the paint to spread a little easier when filling in those large areas.

6. Notice that I'm not being very meticulous or careful with where I put my pigment, because at this basic color-blocking stage, everything is still approximate. I'm also being fairly liberal with my mineral spirits.

7. I'm going a little heavier on pigment now with the grass color, but it's still a fairly wet mixture. This is basically just yellow with the smallest touch of blue.

8. For the pine trees on the mountain, this is the first time I've employed all the paint on my palette. This particular color is heaviest on the blue and yellow, with a touch of red and a tiny bit of white. The red is crucial here. When mixing green for conifers, depending on the variety, they typically have more orange or red in their color mixture. Deciduous trees usually have less red or orange mixed into their green color mixture.

9. Now that all the largest areas are filled in with a base layer of color, I can start to lock in the final direction of the painting by applying a layer of paint at full opacity. This layer of paint is thick enough that it covers up what's underneath, but is still thin enough to be able to lightly add detail over the top of later.

The sunlit side of the Flatirons is a warm, light yellowish-brown color, which is mostly white and yellow but has a tiny touch of red to shift it towards orange. I muted the color just slightly, to make it a little muddy and brown by adding the tiniest amount of blue, since blue is the opposite of orange in the color wheel.

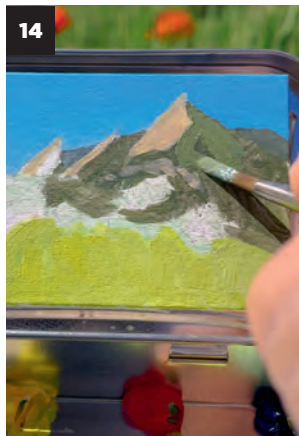
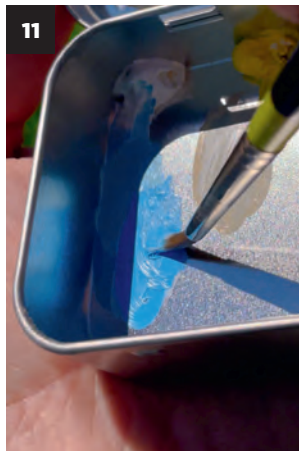




10. The clear blue sky is almost always lighter the closer you get to the horizon, and shifts in color toward green. I mixed a light blue and touched a little yellow into the mixture to achieve that.



11. Now that the lower part of the sky is painted in, I'm mixing the upper part of the sky with just blue and white, but slightly heavier on the blue in this mixture to make a darker and more saturated blue.



12. I ran out of my mixture and had to mix another batch of blue, which ended up darker than my original mix. That's totally fine since I'm going to blend it all together later anyway. It's actually good though, since the sun is off to the left, and the sky really does gradually get darker the further right I look.

13. The grass is next for the thicker paint. You can see I had to mix a new color a few times, and each time it was slightly different. That's fine since I am going to be adding grass texture to this later.

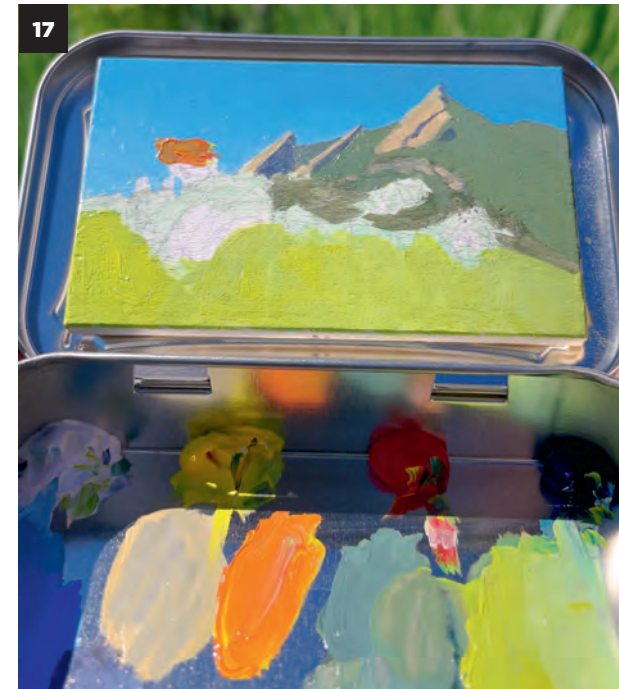
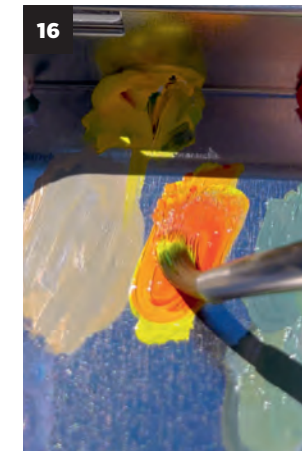
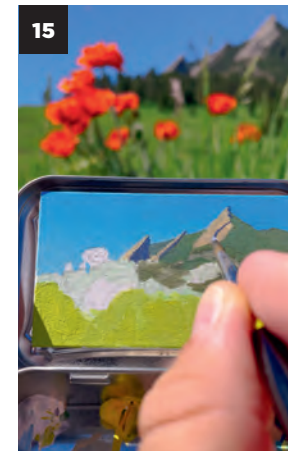
14. Now I add thicker paint application to the conifer forest on the mountain. There is not very much moisture in the air, but still enough that some atmospheric perspective can be observed. The farther away each part of the mountain is, the more atmosphere is between it and me. The color I apply for the mountain corresponds to that—the parts of the mountain that are farther away will be lighter and slightly more blue.

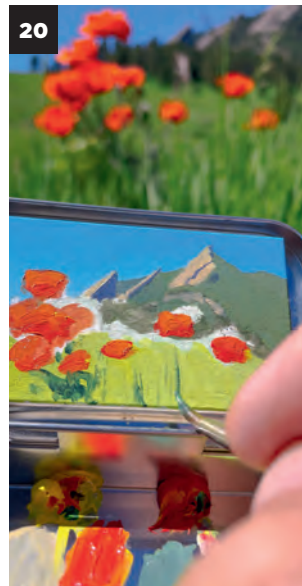
15. Up until now, I've painted in midtones, but that is all about to change with the shadows on the Flatirons. I started out a little darker than I wanted, so now I lighten it up. The color is a slightly muted dark bluish-purple.

16. The time is right to mix that saturated red-orange color for the poppies, and to begin painting them into the scene.

17. As soon as I put some color down, I realized I made an error in my excitement. My brush, with that saturated red-orange color, touched the blue paint of the sky and mixed into it. Because blue and orange are opposites, this muted the color and robbed it of its saturated quality. Instead of continuing on, I'm going to start the flowers over and do them properly. The first step here is to wash and dry my brush.

18. With my dry brush, I carefully lift away the muddy orange color, scraping away the paint into the bristles and washing my brush as I go, until all of that pigment is lifted away.





19. Now I can apply that color again more carefully. One thing to add here is that I intentionally left filling in the red poppies for after the sky and the grass. Had I painted the red before the sky, the smallest amount of that very saturated color would have contaminated the sky and compromised my plan to make a nice gradient that is lighter on the bottom. Likewise, had I painted the red before the light green grass color, it is likely that the red would have contaminated that color.

You can see that the powerful red pigment can be painted over the light green with little consequence, as long as the paint is applied with a brush at a low angle. The poppies are not filling up all the space I had allocated for them, and that's okay, as I can close in on them later with the other colors that are still mixed in my palette.

20. Now for the darker green poppy leaves and some grass details, which are in shadow.

21. I've now moved to my smallest round brush to fill in details all around this painting. In the background, you might notice that I put in tree shadows on the mountains, more light and shadow detail on the rocks, some trees on the far left, and brought the sky color into the areas where it was missing. In the foreground, I added the dark spots on the underside of the poppies and some light areas on the red petals, painted in the light bluish-green highlights on the poppy leaves, and added more grass details.

22. To finish up this painting, I'm adding more variation into the grassy foreground.

23. I'm putting some shadow details on the Flatirons, which are the main subject of this painting, with the poppies providing a very nice accent of color.

24. Here is a view of the finished painting.



GALLERY: PRIMARY COLOR PALETTE

The following is a small selection of paintings made with a primary color palette.



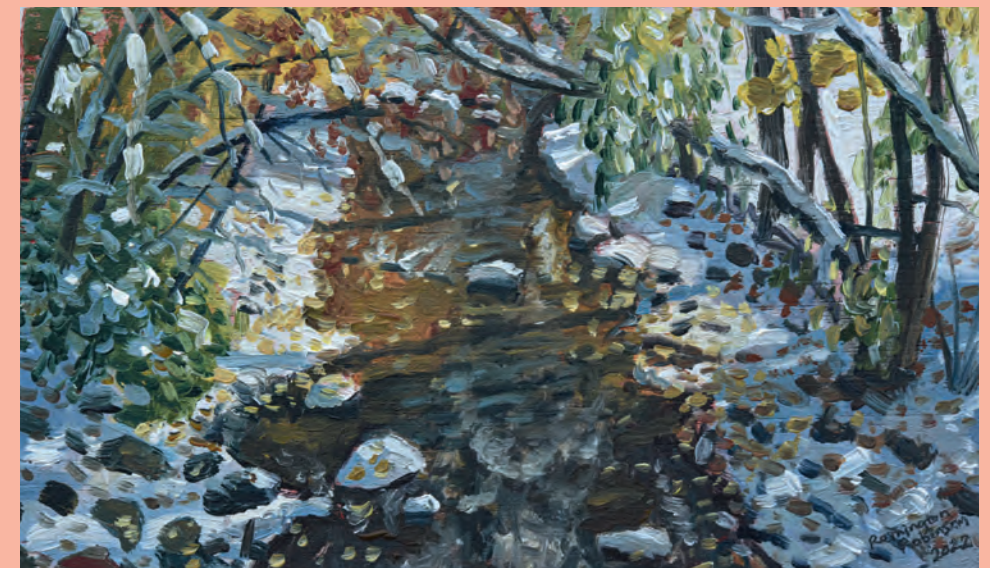
Poppies at the Flatirons in Boulder, Colorado. This was painted with Titanium White, Bismuth Yellow, Bright Red, and Oriental Blue.



A barn in Boulder, Colorado. This was painted with Titanium White, Chrome Yellow Deep, Mars Red, and Prussian Blue.



A swimming pool in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. This was painted with Titanium White, Winsor Lemon, Permanent Geranium Lake, and Phthalo Blue.



Fall colors and snow on Boulder Creek in Boulder, Colorado. This was painted with Titanium White, Indian Yellow Deep, Venetian Red, and Indanthrene Blue.