IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF CÉZANNE:

A Watercolor Workshop in Provence

A weeklong workshop exploring the legacy of Cézanne restores the artistic spirit of teacher and students.

BY JOHN HULSEY

"We are all willy-nilly consciously or unconsciously the artistic children of Cézanne.

—VERNON BLAKE

Aix-en-Provence is a strikingly beautiful town in which to paint. The old part of Aix, known as the *centre ville*, suggests the presence of an artist's hand in many parts of the built environment, from the architecture of the fine old buildings to the beautiful design of the lampposts; from the sculptural fountains in every square to the pollarded plane trees that line the streets and boulevards. Each reflects an intense appreciation of art and beauty.

Aix is also Paul Cézanne's (1839–1906) hometown, and the subjects that inspired him are at every turn. Such a rich setting is the perfect locale in which to lead a watercolor workshop. On my latest excursion, I focused on the artistic legacy of Cézanne. From the outset, I implored the students to consider how the artist explored not only visual phenomena but also the phenomena of vision itself. I hoped they would join me in leaving behind old, comfortable ways of working and reach for something new, something unique to our own vision, and express it without reservation or fear, just as Cézanne did.



SUNDAY

"To draw is to seek connection."

—PAUL CÉZANNE

We spent the first morning of class working in the magnificent formal gardens behind our hotel. Our first lesson focused on drawing, during which I



emphasized that drawing is a way of focusing our attention intensely on a subject so that we learn it intimately. Drawing also improves concentration and sharpens our visual memory. Furthermore, drawing can serve as a method for exploring personal expression and working out ideas rapidly in preparation for painting. This is especially valuable for the student, who often has a fear of wasting expensive painting supplies while trying something new.

My method is to have the students work out compositional ideas and learn the painting subject by drawing thumbnail sketches, six of them at least, before choosing one of them to enlarge to 4" x 6". Over that drawing, I have them paint an accurate tonal wash in one color, reserving the white of the paper for the lightest tone. They then attach this value study to their easel or board for reference during the painting process. Now familiar with the details and



À Votre Santé, by John Hulsey, 2004, watercolor, 30 x 22½. Collection the artist.

Opposite page, above: Inset into the sidewalks are brass plaques commemorating Cezanne's life and work in his beloved birthplace.

Opposite page, below: The hotel garden in Aix where students painted.

Right: Students painting on a high terrace in Gordes.

Below: *Gordes*, by John Hulsey, 2004, watercolor, 9 x 11. Collection the artist.





structure of their subject, they can focus on learning to use the watercolor medium.

MONDAY

"Here on the edge of the river, the motifs are very plentiful, the same subject seen from a different angle gives a subject for study of the highest interest and so varied that I think I could be occupied for months without changing my place, simply bending a little more to the right or left."

—PAUL CÉZANNE

Day two was our first field trip. We traveled to the walled, medieval town of Gordes and, afterward, to the multihued town of Rousillon, famous for its mines of the pigment ochre. Gordes is referred to as a perched village, because it was built on top of a high hill and surrounded by defensive walls. It appears to have been carved out of one solid mountain of rock and is filled with ancient warrens of steep alleys and winding streets. Buildings seem to grow into and over one another, which creates an endlessly interesting arrangement of painting subjects. It is both a delight and a challenge to paint, and I wanted the class to spend the morning simply wandering around and enjoying all those sensations before we met at our rendezvous point for class work.

I always feel that I would be remiss in my teaching if I didn't spend at least some time on basic design principles, since each student brings widely varying familiarity with this all-important



***Street in Gordes*, by John Hulsey, 2004, watercolor, 16 x 12. Collection the artist.**

The workshop described here is sponsored by Sunflower Creative Workshops. **John Hulsey** is scheduled to make another trip to Aix and the Dordogne in April 2005. That workshop offers his watercolor instruction as well as digital photography classes with **Mark Braswell**. For more information, visit www.hulseytrustystudios.com.



subject. As we improve our ability to see more accurately, we must have a method for organizing all this visual information. Cézanne labored mightily at this task, repeatedly painting the same scenes, but each time altering his design, his brushstrokes, even the application and thickness of his paints in order to create new compositions from the same landscape.

I try to provide a few pointers each day that I believe will help improve the design of my students' paintings. With so much visual complexity to take in, it can be easy to miss the importance of large, unifying masses and shapes while overfocusing on details. Simplification of complex visual information is essential to creating a successful landscape painting. We must decide what is most important, what inspires us, and organize our paintings around those elements. All else is superfluous.

Another pivotal design tool is the creation of a path for the eye to follow in the composition. This can be anything from an actual path or road, to a meandering stream running from foreground to background, or simply a lighter or warmer color "path" that could draw the eye into the center of interest in the painting. One can also create a path by juxtaposing shapes and masses. The opportunities for sophisticated design are endless, once one becomes aware of the principles at work.



Top: Flower market.

Above: The produce market occupies one of the largest squares in the centre ville of Aix.

No design discussion would be complete without touching on the science of linear perspective. Because it is a complicated subject, all I can offer my students is a brief introduction to the main concepts: one-, two-, and three-point perspectives, vanishing points and how to use them, parallax, and scale. All of our painting subjects within the town of Aix can be easily understood and handled with the most basic knowledge of perspective. Once we leave town and set up in the Provencal countryside, however, the solutions to effectively painting the natural landscape rely more on the use of color and tone, and bring us ever closer to understanding the task that Cézanne had before him. For the remainder of the afternoon, I had the class spread out along the walled terrace I had selected as our painting site and concentrate on painting the aerial perspective of the olive orchards, farms, and vineyards spread out below us.

That evening we were driven to nearby Rousillon, where the class assignment was to make thumbnails and take photographs for future paintings, based on the design principles that we had discussed earlier. All the buildings in Rousillon are painted or plastered in varying shades of the local ochre, from dark pinks and salmons to red-ochres and yellow-oranges. This is also a hilltop town, so the effect of the setting sun on all these colorful buildings feels almost like one is walking

into a three-dimensional painting.

TUESDAY

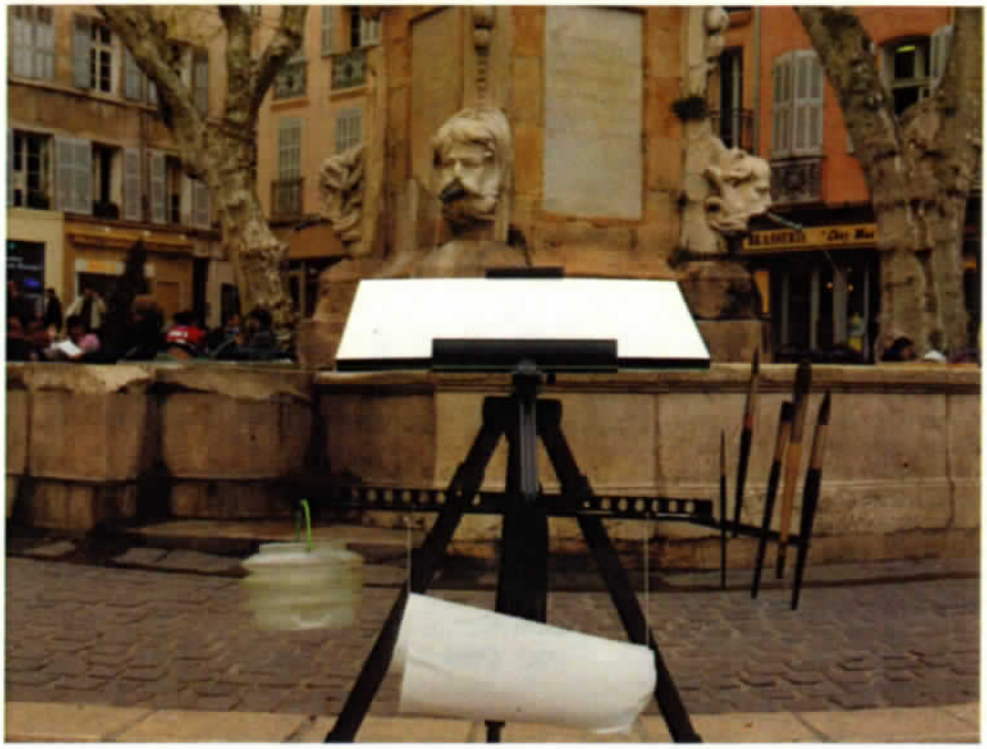
"There are two things in the painter, the eye and the mind; each of them should aid each other."

—PAUL CÉZANNE

This was the market day in Aix, when most of the centre ville would be occupied by vendors of everything from vegetables and flowers to soaps, fresh honey, fish, and an enormous flea market. The people-packed streets and squares were filled with bright awnings and stalls decorated in the traditional Provencal colors and offering the artist a veritable visual feast. The atmosphere was festive and more like a carnival than commerce. The class was free to spend the morning sketching and sampling the goods and visual delights of market day before we were to meet at a prearranged spot for the afternoon session.

I have noticed that most of us take the everyday act of seeing for granted, but not everyone sees the same things in the same way. We see what we are interested in or have a bias toward. Even then, we often get crucial details wrong, or leave them out entirely. To help my students overcome this obstacle, I ask them to set up their painting gear at a painting site and instruct them to sit quietly and study the subject I've chosen for five minutes. After the five minutes are up, we turn around, and with our backs to the subject, spend five more minutes making a complete drawing of what we observe.

The students are always astonished when they turn around and compare the drawings with the reality.



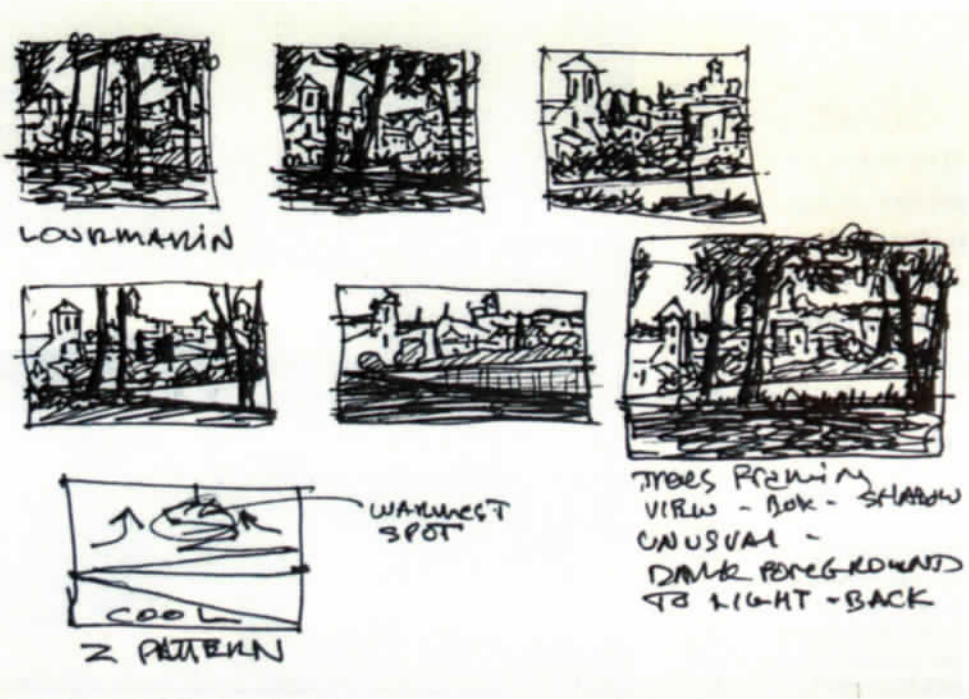


Top: Easel setup for plein air painting at a fountain in Aix.

Above: *The Fountain Cleaner—Aix* (from sketchbook), by John Hulsey, 2004, watercolor, 5 x 7. Collection the artist.

Each person will have left out different parts of the subject—anything from a predominant cast shadow area to entire buildings or streets. Especially noticeable is the inexact relationship of size, placement, and scale of large masses to one another. The crucial point to observe is that each person remembers some major details and completely misses others. This is what I call our "personal visual bias," and the first step in learning to see more of the world around us objectively is to understand what exactly our personal biases tend to be.

The next step in this exercise is to redraw our subject with a new awareness of our visual selectivity fully engaged. It is always interesting to hear the comments of my students at this point—it is as though they



Above: Thumbnails in sketchbook for *Through the Trees, Lourmarin*, by John Hulsey, 2004, ink, 5 x 7. Collection the artist.

Below: *Provence Sketchbook Page*, by John Hulsey, 2004, 11 x 13¾. Collection the artist.



are seeing the subject with fresh eyes, and in a sense, they are. Visual judgment becomes more critical, drawings more accurate, and curiously, color discrimination also shows a marked improvement. The drawing directly influences the painting.

WEDNESDAY

Wednesday was a free day. The students could choose to spend their time any way they liked. A few of us rented a car and drove up into the Luberon to paint the mountain villages, while others used the opportunity to visit other areas or spend a relaxed, unstructured day in Aix.

THURSDAY

"Painting from nature is not copying the object; it is realizing one's sensations."

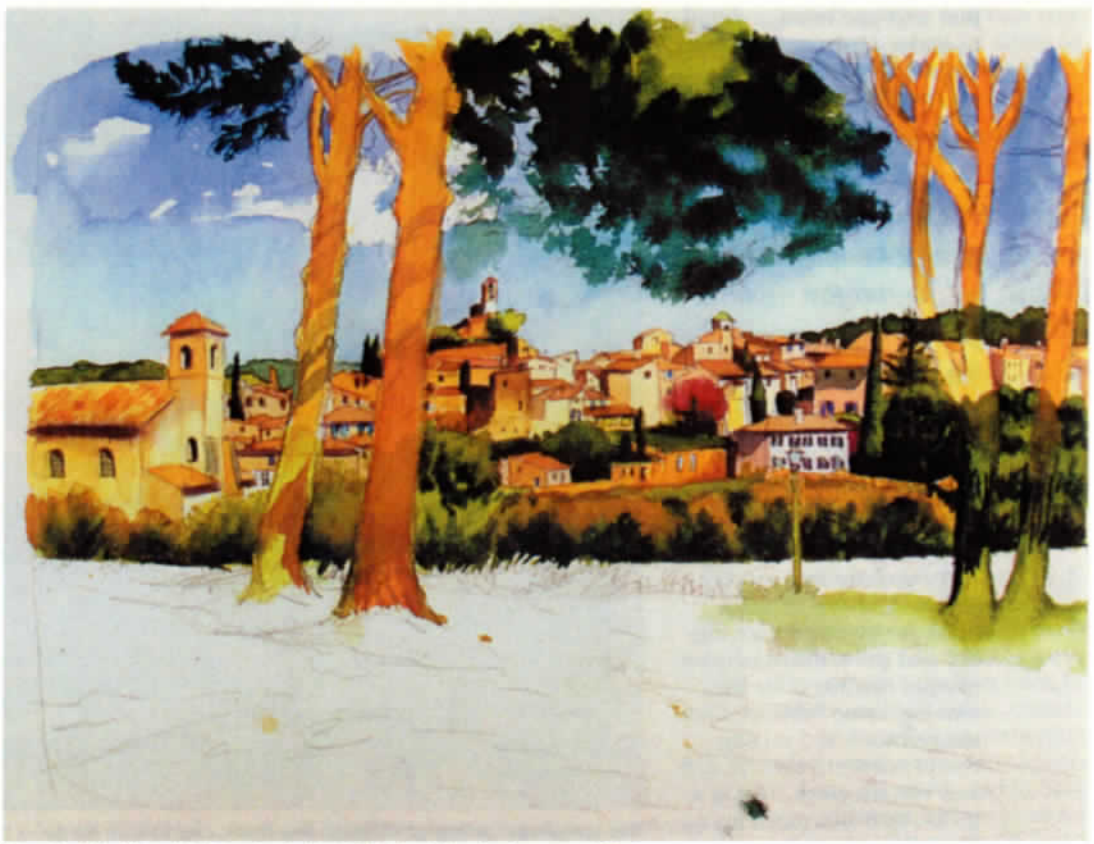
—PAUL CÉZANNE

Thursday's class took place in Avignon, a medieval walled city on the bank of the Rhône River, about an hour ride west of Aix. We spent half of our painting day at a lovely park next to the Papal Palace, painting the view of the Rhône River Valley and the distant snow-covered peak of Mont Ventoux. Afterward, we boarded the bus to travel a short distance to the papal vineyards of Chateauneuf-du-Pape, where we had arranged to picnic for lunch and paint the famous vineyards. We had a lot of wonderful things to see that day, so we quickly worked our way up through the winding streets of Avignon to our painting site.

Over the course of 30 years I have looked at hundreds of the best watercolor paintings in the world, and I have come to believe that a truly great watercolor is



Step 1. First, I made a graphite sketch to determine the value structure.



Step 2. Working light to dark, I established the background first.

made up of 90 percent magnificent washes and 10 percent detail strokes. For this reason, I offered a lesson on executing the broad wash, covering a sheet of paper from top to bottom in one even, seamless color. We worked on dry paper and wet, noticing how gravity can assist in the flow of color down the paper. The next wash to learn and master is the graded wash—first from color to white paper and vice versa, and then color graded into color.

We also explored the different properties of watercolor pigments, the difference between staining colors and sedimentary ones, how they combine or don't, and tips on making them behave together. Finally, we worked on drybrush techniques and the expressive potential of various brushstrokes and brush types. This last lesson of the day concerned those strokes and touches that add just enough detail to make a picture come alive and read as a representation of reality.



Step 3. Notice how the dark tree trunks create a rhythmic pattern of verticals that guides the eye up from the ground and into the background.

FRIDAY

"Drawing and color are not separate at all; in so far as you paint, you draw. The more the color harmonizes, the more exact the drawing becomes."

—PAUL CÉZANNE

My goal for this last day of class was to introduce the basics of color theory and cover the principles of color mixing, color harmonies, value families, color temperature, and mixing complements to achieve rich and vibrant grays. This is a lot to cover in a morning, so I had the class paint again in the hotel garden. The setting was perfect to my intent,



The completed painting: *Through the Trees, Lourmarin*, by John Hulsey, 2004, watercolor, 9¼ x 13. Collection the artist.

and I could simply point from my color charts and demonstration painting to parts of the garden where the light and colors performed illustrations of the issue at hand. Most students can quickly grasp the concepts of color temperature, hue, and value, and my color wheel efficiently explains the concept of primary, secondary, and complementary colors. The two areas that require the most practice are color harmonies and mixing grays, and without a working knowledge of these two concepts, it is very difficult to give a painting any life.

I demonstrated harmony through the use of an overall tone and the importance of colors that bridge or link two colors together and the unifying effect of repeating the same few colors in all parts of a picture. I pointed out how nature shares the colors of sun and sky with all parts of the land, and how colors can reflect back up off of foliage, water, and buildings to color nearby objects, and so on. In any given setting, be it a still life indoors or a landscape, there is an overall color or tone that dominates and is shared by all parts of the scene. The trick is to become aware of it, identify it, and then use it to our advantage. I next explained the advantages of a limited palette, which led to the subject of mixing grays.

With the remaining hour of the morning session, the class painted in the garden, again using the building blocks and lessons of the week to make a finished painting. The afternoon was spent revisiting painting sites, finishing up previous work, and seeing more of Aix before our departure the next day. That evening, we gathered again in the garden for a final review of the week's work. It is always revealing to lay out the paintings and take note of the progress made. Each person had struggled with and resolved some pictorial stumbling blocks that had been a source of frustration in their work. Day by day, the paintings improved.

The review is also a time for all of us to relax, have a glass of wine, and realize how wonderful it was to be able to leave our stateside concerns behind and simply focus on the pleasure of painting in the company and support of fellow artists. Our sketchbooks and heads were bursting with ideas for potential paintings and our cameras were filled with reference material. It had been an inspiring week, and I believe that we had grown to understand the powerful attraction Provence held for Cézanne, and why he saw it as a place of continuous artistic renewal. ■





Top: Painting at Le Pont d'Avignon.

Above: The workshop group at Mont Redon Vineyards, Chateauneuf-du-Pape. From left: Marie and Jonathan Braswell, Mim Galligan, John Hulsey, Ann Trusty Hulsey, Karen Kimmel, Phyllis Nolan, Belinda Hulsey, Joan and Mark Braswell, Susan Jeffers, and Bob Copeland. Missing from photo: Dan and Karen McClure and Debra Cantley.