

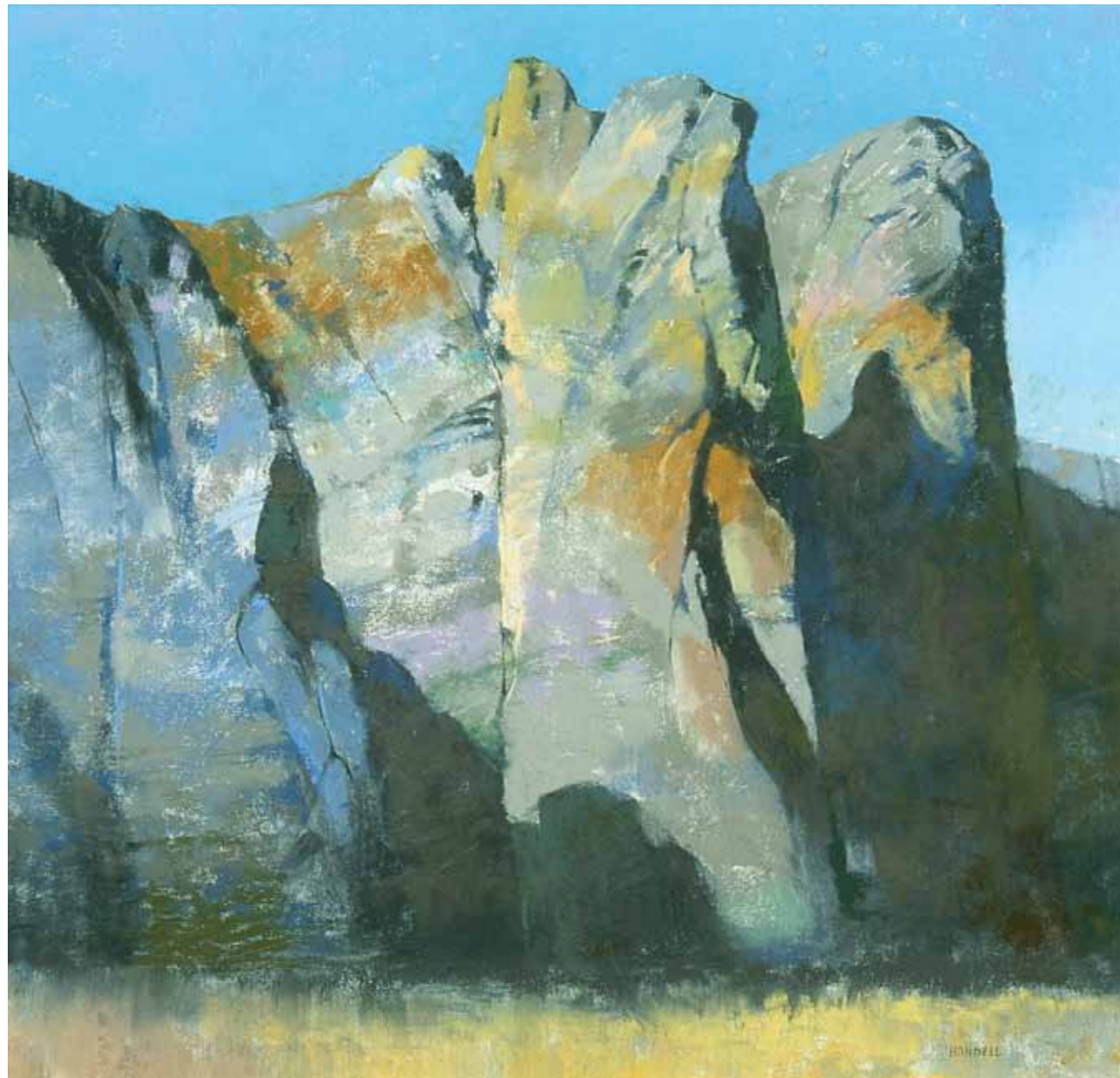
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# ROCK SOLID

Whether the main subject of a painting or as an element within a broader landscape, rocks offer dramatic shapes for a composition and an opportunity for lively passages of beautiful color.

BY ALBERT HANDELL

*A Touch of Yellow* (14x18)



**Smith Rock, Oregon** (16x17) is a painting of Smith Rock, part of a vast and beautiful state park near Redmond, Oregon, that's well-known to rock climbers. I found the scene just as soon as I stepped out of my car in the parking lot. The rock was absolutely beautiful with the most interesting combination of shapes and local color—particularly striking in the morning light. Although the strong shadows appeared to be black, I didn't use black, instead reaching for those rich, dark pastel sticks in my palette. I loved the relationship of positive (rock) and negative (sky) shapes in this composition.

### THE SOLIDITY OF A ROCK FORMATION

**IN REALITY** doesn't mean that it has to be a static element in your landscape paintings. As someone who loves to paint rocks and groupings of rocks, I've considered how to best capture the character and beauty of this sometimes overlooked subject in pastel.

When I view an outcrop of rock in a landscape, I'm instantly intrigued by the shapes and color nuances that make up the formation. How I approach painting the subject refers back, perhaps ironically, to lessons I learned years ago painting still life and the figure.

### From Top to Rock Bottom

Early in my art career, while studying at the Art Students League of New York, I painted the figure in natural light—a light that brings out subtle colors. By standing at a distance and not focusing on the finer details, I was able to note an overall transition of color in the model from the top of the face to the lower part. The forehead was whitish, because the frontal bone is close to the skin—but the colors of the face changed, becoming increasingly red and dark below the forehead, where there is more blood flow closer to the skin. I could see this color transition in the standing



**Taos Valley** (11x15) features a rock formation that I've painted several times over the past few years: Each time, something different attracts me. In this version, I was excited about the range of very light to very dark color from the warm and neutral side of the palette that contrasted so nicely with the rich blues of the sky. The colors of the deep shadows also offered great contrast with the overall local colors.

nude as well: The chest, like the forehead, was whiter in color, but below the chest, the color of the skin gradually darkened down to the feet where the color became a darker, colder reddish tone. The idea of observing color transitions from top to bottom intrigued me, and I never forgot it. I began to look for these transitions everywhere, in every subject—even rocks.

I view rock formations, therefore, from top to bottom, and from left to right, to see what color transitions exist. I scan and appreciate the entire formation to observe the subtle differences formed from the different minerals, weather conditions, and the growth of moss and lichen.

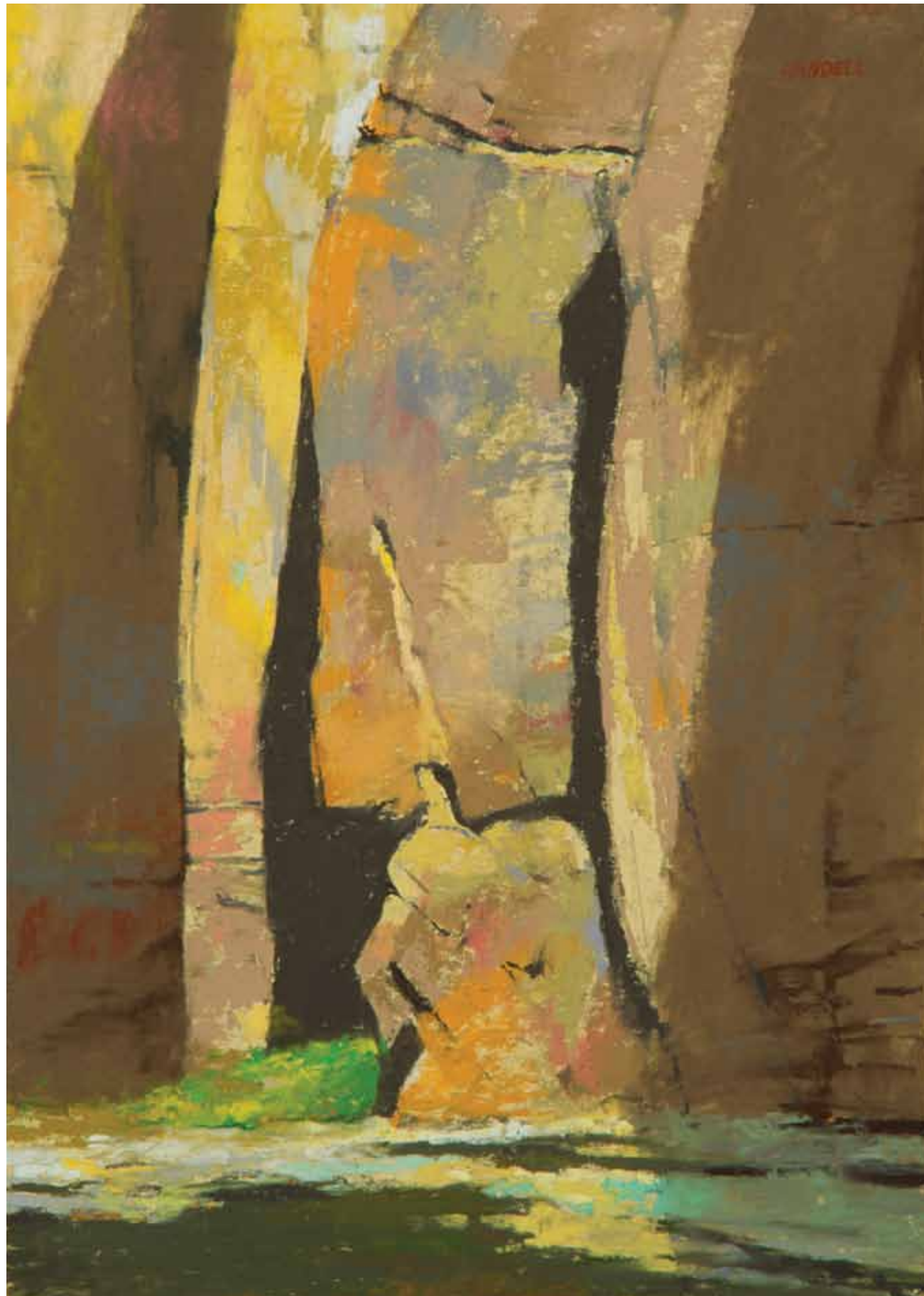
To make the most of these color nuances, I choose to paint these rock formations in a flat, frontal light. I avoid a situation of half light and half shadow that features such strong patterns of light and dark—as well as rim lighting—both of which can too easily dominate a painting.

Another part of my training at the Art Students League involved still life studies. I'd take two apples and place them on a table, leaving one whole and cutting the second in half. I would then cut one of the halves in half again, leaving me with a whole apple, one half apple and two quarters of an apple. While painting, I'd consider how the pieces of the cut-up apple were part of a whole—rebuilding the apple in my mind. This practice forced me to consider proportions,



In my pastel, **A Quiet Moment** (17x18), the rocks are defined by the light and dark values of the planes that make up the rock formation. After first establishing the darks, I moved to the pink colors in the top planes which are in light. The darker, upright planes of the rocks that are in shadow echo this local color. Notice how much darker the upright planes of the rocks are at the bottom of the pastel as they come closer to the viewer. I also chose to echo the pink tones of the rock in the foreground water, creating a harmony between the two areas.

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By zooming in on the outcrop of rock in *Dihedral Patterns* (16x17), I could see the abstract quality. I was fascinated by the strong and dark diagonal that runs from upper left to lower right, which felt like an arrow pointing downward. The strong diagonal shape of the cast shadow, right of center, adds to the drama of the composition. I began the painting with a very transparent watercolor underpainting in local colors, which added textural variety to the work.

foreshortening, light and shade—all essential to learning about form. And all of which can be applied to painting rocks as well.

#### Cracks, Crevices and Character

A painter of rocks can ignore the cracks and crevices and simply focus on expressing aerial perspective by painting the planes of the rock as they recede. While this is beautiful, I'm actually intrigued by the cracks in rocks. These fissures offer an opportunity to inject a little "calligraphy" into a painting. If a crack is shallow, then the line is lighter and thinner; the line for a wider, more open

#### QUICK TIP

I like to establish and reestablish the darks early on in a painting to ensure that they're dark enough in relation to the local colors I place next to them. I want to be able to see the sharp edge between an adjacent local color and the dark shadows. Once the darks are established, I try not to change the value but to modify the colors within the shadows by using different dark colors that are the same value or very close in value.

*Morning Light* (opposite; 18x12) is another composition in which I chose to zoom in on the part of the rock formation that fascinated me. I established the base of the rock formation low on the page, adding to the feeling of weightiness. The cast shadows on both the right and left sides of the composition frame the area of interest. I kept the different colors that drift through the rock formation close in value but varying in tone and color.

The scene featured in *Rock Wall at Rio Rancho* (12x18) is one that I came across while driving. I parked the car, walked to this spot and started painting. I realized that some of the rock face had slipped off, leaving a sharp straight edge on the remaining wall face. I also liked how the rock formation was on a slant or tilt to the right. It was as though—by painting it—I could read the history of this rock face and sense its future too.



*At Water's Edge, Taos* (12x18) was painted in two separate sessions. In the first, I focused on the beautiful variety of color that comprised the foreground rocks. These were illuminated by a straight-on, flat light, so there was a minimum of shadows. I tried to keep these few small shadow areas—which give a sense of weight to the rock—simple. In the second session, I surrounded the rocks with a dark greenish color to suggest the flowing stream.



Some say the rock formation in *The Lion King Rocks at Indian Gardens* (17x18) was the inspiration behind Pride Rock in the Disney animated film, *The Lion King*.

fissure becomes darker as the area of separation is slightly deeper. Including linework that varies, meanders and delineates form can infuse a pastel with expressive calligraphic mark-making.

Also worth contemplating is how gravity and weather cause the fissures in rocks to become larger and larger until part of the rock breaks off, leaving sharp, jagged edges that alter the rock face. It's from these places that surrounding rocks and boulders have fallen. As I'm painting the rock, I try to think about how these various rock parts might have fit together—like the aforementioned apple exercise. This keeps me tuned in to the “history” of the rock I'm painting, which makes me better able to tell a story, bringing more drama into my work.

The paintings on these pages—all painted on location—offer a view into my approach and methods: how I choose a scene, land on a composition, capture color nuance, and make other decisions that all lead to rock-solid results. 🍷



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