

Eye on the SKY

If the sky isn't responsible for all of the drama in a landscape, it's usually a significant part. Here are a few techniques to help you master this key landscape component.

BY ALBERT HANDELL

NOTHING IN THE LANDSCAPE CAPTURES THE attention quite like a stunning sky, and Santa Fe, N.M., where I've made my home for the past 28 years, just may be the apex when it comes to incredible skies. Covering every aspect of painting the sky, however, calls for a big fat book. So, for the purposes of this article, I've narrowed my focus to just a few key considerations.

The Color of the Sky

The blue skies here in New Mexico can be dark and intense, yet luminous. I've found that just using blue for the sky isn't satisfying by itself. Using different colors of the *exact same value* as the blue you're using, however, can provide an extra touch of vibrancy.

I've also developed an easy practice for finding a different color of the same value: Once you've selected the blue you'll be using, make a large patch of the color on scrap paper (the same type of paper and tone as you're using for the painting). Then pick out a cool or warm mauve/purple and apply it next to the blue, making sure the colors are touching. If there's no discernible edge between the two colors, you know they're identical in value. Another way to think about it: If both colors were to be photographed in black and white, both would photograph as the same gray. You can use these other pastels as intermingling colors, but keep the blue dominant. Don't blend the colors together; they'll blend optically. That's what adds to the vibrancy. For a blue sky, I usually use warm and cool mauves, but I will even use warm and cool greens at times. As long as the colors are of the same value, they can help you create a vibrant sky that's never muddy.

Overhead Clouds (11x12)



Drifting Clouds
(10x14)

Quiet Landscape
(10x14)

Morning Light
(16x17)

On a gray day, if the sky is gray but cloudless, it can be the lightest element in a pastel. On the other hand, a gray sky can also be turbulent, creating one of the darker parts of the painting.

If the sky is simply a mono-gray, I begin by finding the closest match in my pastels. Even though this is the primary color I'll be using, I still like to incorporate amounts of some other colors of the same value, again, to add vibrancy. Or, I might use a combination of warm and cool grays of the exact same value, letting one of them predominate. In either case, I am always trying to respond to what I see.



Pastel Society of America Hall of Fame artist **Albert Handell** has been painting in pastels for more than 40 years. His work has been represented by the Ventana Fine Art Gallery in Santa Fe, N.M., for more than 25 years, and can also be featured at the M Gallery in Charlestown, S.C. Handell is the author of several books and also shares his expertise as a teacher, offering plein air painting workshops from coast to coast and a Paint-A-Long mentoring program in which previous students or advanced painters can join him for painting trips to his favorite locations. Visit www.alberthandell.com for more information.



At the Horizon

In terms of composition, there are several options to consider when painting skies. One approach is the low horizon line, when just about the entire pastel is composed of sky. In this approach, with the sky as the center of interest, consider the foreground plane simply as comparatively dark shapes, positioning the line of the foreground as low as you dare. Then, paint the most beautiful sky that you can. *Monterey Sky* (at 00) is an example of a painting with a low horizon and a large sky. The dark and lighter greens of the golf course at the base of the pastel take up about a fifth of the composition; the rest is the sky with its soft floating horizontal clouds. Because of the prominence of greens, I added a touch of pink to the clouds for contrast.

The opposite approach is a composition in which the sky is treated as a negative shape. In other words, the pastel is not about the sky at all, but rather a simple shape or set of shapes that works as part of the background. In *Morning Light* (at 00), I consider the sky the negative space of the composition, which simply resolves the rest of the pastel. The painting, with its high horizon, is basically about the rock formations; the sky area comprises only about one-seventh of the composition. I chose a combination of a rich ultramarine blue plus a cool mauve identical in value. Also, part

of the sky—on the left—starts drifting into the rock formation, helping to tie together both areas and add atmosphere to the pastel.

Another design option is a composition in which the sky and earth are equal in importance, making the pastel about both areas. For this option, you must first determine what percentage of the painting will be sky. Forty percent? 60 percent? In *A Blustery Moment* (at 00), the sky and tree intertwine and are equally important, almost inseparable. I started this rather tricky painting by placing the tree in the composition. I painted the tree first, only slightly suggesting the sky. Later, I was able to relate the colors of the sky and clouds to the dark silhouette of the tree. By working in this order, I could focus on the movement and different colors of the sky. Notice that the movement of the clouds from upper left to lower right helps create a sense of looking up.

Another compositional approach I use occasionally, if rarely, is to paint just the sky. See, for example, *Drifting Clouds* (at 00). In this sky scenario, it was the clouds, which were definitely not sitting still, that just grabbed me. I had to work quickly, painting the piece in an hour or less. To start, I covered the surface immediately using watercolor in cobalt blue, ultramarine blue and a bit of reddish purple as an underpainting. The watercolors all flowed into each other, then dried quickly. I then started with pastel,



Setting Sun

Sunsets are eye-catching to say the least, but fleeting, and therefore a challenge to capture in a painting. If you want to paint sunsets, make it your business to get out there and be set up to paint at least one and a half hours before sundown. Work small at the beginning—8 x 10 or 9 x 12. You may want to have two or three pastel papers or boards on hand in case you want to chase the changing colors and shapes as the sun sets. (I use light-weight Gator boards for my supports).

Keep in mind, if you're looking west, you're looking at cloud formations that are covering the lowering of the sun. The brightest colors—yellows, oranges, reds and purples—are usually on the underlying plane of the clouds. Bright intense colors have to be used to paint sunsets; don't hold back.

choosing for the clouds a gray that was the same value as the blue of the sky (Notice the dark grays of the clouds at the top of the pastel). Next, I picked out the blues to go over the watercolor washes, and worked quickly, coming to a finish in an hour or less.

On Cloud Nine

For a *plein air* painter like myself, painting clouds can be a bit of a race. I've been told that the sun changes 15 degrees every 45 minutes. If that's true, then the sun is practically standing still when compared to the clouds; they just float along and in a state of constant change.

Looking Back:

ON PAINTING CLOUDS

When students see me paint a sky, they say I'm whispering onto paper, because I move the pastel around quickly and barely touch the surface with it. I've had students watch from the side of the easel as I paint—that really helps them see that you don't have to press those pastels down. You get more believable skies by using a feather-light touch.

— Stan Sperlak

"The Colors of Light and Air"
October 2005



Monterey Sky (14x15)



A Blustery Moment
(11x15)

Lavender Hills
(14x15)

A chart of various cloud types can be a helpful thing to post in the studio, but this does not take the place of going outside to observe, paint and photograph these skies. Here's a list of a few of the more common cloud types that I study:


Cirrus clouds are low-floating clouds, and reasonably full in form, as if they were low and small cumulus clouds.

Cumulus clouds—a family of clouds that includes the cumulonimbus—are large, full-bodied clouds. These are the clouds that can develop into thunderheads, particularly in the summer. Cumulus clouds usually develop and peak in size in the afternoon. When they're in full sunlight, they're the largest and the brightest part of the landscape.

Virga clouds, soft darkish clouds with wisps that fall to the earth, are some of the most unique clouds I've observed. They occur when it's raining, but the rain is evaporating in the sky before it hits the ground. While common to the desert climate, they're a type of cloud I never saw when I lived in the East.

Regardless of the type of cloud, when painting a cloud-filled sky, there are three aspects that I consider: the gray of the cloud, the blue of

the sky, and the white of the cloud. Comparing the blue of the sky with the dark grays of the white clouds is essential. Once these colors are established, I can more easily respond to the other complicated aspects of the surrounding cloud formations. Again, I have to emphasize, I compare the gray of the cloud's shadow edge to the color of the blue sky that touches it. I then ask myself: Do they melt together? Or, are they different in value? I answer that question *first* as it is my key to understanding what are the pastels I should use for the rest of the colors of the sky and clouds.

A lot of the drama in a landscape happens in the sky, and hopefully, these considerations will be helpful tools as you compose and paint. The sky, after all, is a source of energy. Making sure it becomes a vibrant area of the painting—not just an extra color somewhere in the pastel—can go a long way in taking your landscape painting sky high. 



See more of Albert Handell's work—and learn about his techniques for capturing the beauty of the sky—on our website at www.pasteljournal.com/handell-skies.