Palm trees aren’t actually trees at all, but rather are part of the same botanical family as grasses. Although commonly characterized by large, evergreen leaves that sit atop an unbranched stem, the plant includes some 2,000 species, and therefore presents tremendous diversity in terms of shape and color. Once you start to factor in other considerations such as lighting conditions and environment, you begin to appreciate just how much variation—and beauty—is offered to artists by the subject.

Although such variation is exciting, it can also be confusing. I’ve had the pleasure of painting palm trees from coast to coast and have developed a number of approaches over the years that have worked well to capture the palm tree’s unique features. In this article, we’ll take a look at some of the distinct characteristics of palm trees as well as some of the situations you’re likely to encounter when painting them.

Issues of Lighting
The lighting conditions on the day you’re painting have a huge impact on the scene, of course. A gray, overcast day offers the most stable type of lighting condition for painting and is, therefore, a great opportunity to observe palm trees in their purest colors. Unfortunately, gray days can be few and far between when you consider the tropical locales in which palm trees are most abundant.

Palm Patterns (14x18)
When painting in sunny conditions, always make sure to have a camera with you to photograph your subject every 20 minutes or so. Keep your pastel palette the same. You don’t want to weaken its strength by bringing in too much detail or using colors of very different values. I also added some yellow-green leaf stalk, which I think of as a “center line.” Since some fronds droop forward and others fly high, locating the central leaf stalk helps to determine the perspective and angle of that particular frond.

My pastel, *Palm Patterns*, at 00, was painted in a desert setting on one of those rare overcast days. In this lighting situation, the upright planes are usually the darkest, and the sky the lightest. Note that the silhouettes are quite strong, bringing out the patterns of the entire tree. The sky, which is much lighter than the trees, features a lot of movement and interest—a necessary complement to the simplicity of the palms. Although I treated the palms as a simplified mass, I did work some detail into this mass, but made sure that I didn’t weaken its strength by bringing in too much detail or using colors of very different values. I also added some strong blue in the upper right of the sky in order to keep the eye moving through the composition.

**In Sunlight**

When painting in sunny conditions, always make sure that the light on your surface and the light on your pastel palette is the same. You don’t want one to be in sunlight and one in shade. Also, it’s wise to have a camera with you to photograph your subject every 20 minutes or so. Keep in mind that some lighting situations change more radically and quickly than others.

The next consideration, when painting in sunlight, is choosing whether to paint in flat light, half light or rim light. My preference is for flat (or direct) light. I prefer to be standing and painting with the sun directly behind me and my subject directly in front of me. This way I can see my subject clearly with fewer dramatic or changing shadows to confuse me. Since I’m right-handed, it’s important for me to position myself so that the sunlight is coming over my left shoulder, so that I can see my marks on my surface as I apply them. If the sun comes over my right shoulder, my right hand throws a short, cast shadow onto my surface, right where I’m applying pastel, so I can’t see my pastel application.

Just the opposite of flat light, is backlighting, also known as rim-lighting or silhouette lighting. In this situation, the sun sits behind the subject. My pastel, *Palm Study*, at 00, which was painted in the morning—as the title indicates—is an example of backlighting. The upright planes of the palm trees are like silhouettes against the light sky. By the time I was finishing this pastel, the light had changed on the grasses on the right-hand side. I loved the colors and the contrast, however, so I painted them as I saw them. Although it was incorrect, sometimes beauty wins out over accuracy.

Half-light or side-lighting is when the sun is to the side of the artist and the subject. I’ve found that the shadows on palm trees change most radically and quickly in this lighting situation. Therefore, for side-lighting, I block in the light and shadow patterns first. Then I try to keep up with them as they change. This is one of those times when a camera will come in very handy.

**Palm Fponds and Leaf Stalks**

I think of the palm fronds as pointed fan shapes or half-fans, overlapping each other and going every which way. When I paint, I first find the points at which the frond appears to begin and end, and then paint it from left to right, following its movement. I first establish the main fronds of the palm—those that are clearest to understand—and then merely suggest the others, playing them down, especially any fronds that sit behind or to the side.

In the center of each frond there’s a light yellow-green leaf stalk, which I think of as a “center line.” Since some fronds droop forward and others fly high, locating the central leaf stalk helps to determine the perspective and angle of that particular frond.

**Palm Study, Detail** (20x16)

I’ve used a mixed-media approach for many of my palm tree landscapes, and have found it to be an effective technique for the subject. In *Majestic Palms*, at 00, I began with a watercolor underpainting. In some areas of the painting, very little of the watercolor shows through, but in other areas, you can see clearly how the opaque pastel and transparent watercolor weave in and out of each other. The marriage of these two different media has a special beauty and power, and adds a wonderful textural quality to a painting, which I find perfectly suited to palm trees.

**Majestic Palms** (17x18)

I’m careful to be aware of lighting changes—which fronds are in sunlight and which are in cool dark shadow areas—all of which can make for a kaleidoscope of different, beautiful greens. To complement those strong greens, and to control the variety and create harmony, I turn (sparingly) to cool blush-purple pastels that are similar in value to the greens.

My mixed-media pastel, *Palm Study*, at 00, is a good example of my approach to palm fronds. Painting a detailed study such as this can be very helpful for artists hoping to gain a better understanding of a complicated subject.

**The Palm Skirts**

One of my favorite locations to paint palms is at Indian Canyons in Palm Springs, California.
Unlike the other pastels shared in this article, which were painted on location, my mixed-media pastel, *The Giant*, at 00, was painted indoors as a demonstration during a workshop. When photographing the scene, I was aware that the group of palm trees was truly larger and more dynamic than any other around, so I decided to step back and photograph the entire group of palms, but I also shot some close-ups. Much to my surprise, when I composed the painting, I found that I was better able to create a sense of the largeness of the tree when focusing in on its base.

In this pastel, the silvery yellows of the dried-up palm skirts were very prominent compared to the green fronds and the dark brown trunks. To modify the pastel colors, I used a feathering technique in which I softly apply charcoal (the natural willow charcoal, not the hard, compressed charcoal). Feathering is especially useful for “pushing back” color and simplifying a too colorful background that competes with the foreground.

I hope you’ll experience as much pleasure in the painting of palms as I do. For one thing, painting this subject can take you to some incredibly inspiring settings. At Indian Canyon, the spot I mentioned earlier, there is an area called Andreas Canyon, just a mile or two from the entrance. The scenery includes many stands of palm trees, some standing majestic in groups, and others hovering over and lining a lovely desert stream. There are also extraordinary rock formations and excellent vistas in every direction—all very paintable.

because here, the dried-out palm fronds, or skirts, are left untrimmed. The Agua Caliente Cahuilla Indians who own and maintain these ancestral lands, choose not to remove the dead fronds of the palm trees. The result is a contrast of smooth, green fronds against the straw-like texture and light yellows and tans of the palm skirts, which—in my opinion—makes the trees all the more paintable.

My plein air pastel, *Standing Palms at Indian Gardens*, at 00, was painted in these canyons. And for me, the scene had everything: the skirts, trunks and fronds, plus the lacy delicate desert plant in front of it all. Once I had painted these areas of the pastel to my satisfaction, I added a suggestion of sky, relating the strong sky blue (married with some warm, reddish mauve of the same value) to what I had already established in the palms.

The Trunks
The trunks of palms vary just as much as the fronds. Some grow straight, tall and relatively smooth, while others may be shorter, twisted and quite rough. As I’m painting, I first scan the trunk from top to bottom to observe any color or value changes.

I painted the pastel, *A Rugged Beauty*, at 00, on location at the Agua Caliente Park, in Tucson, Arizona. I was so interested in the light on the trunks, and the dynamic way in which the trunks seemed to spiral upward, that I decided to make them the focus of the composition. The placement of the trunks in the composition was important. I wanted them to work both as a group, but also individually. The variation of light and shade on the trunks, and the pattern of the greens that surround them, made for an interesting composition.

Composition and Color Modifications
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