

PHOTOS & ADVICE FROM TEACHERS

AMERICAN  
ARTIST

BASIC & ADVANCED INSTRUCTION

SUMMER 2006  
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# Workshop

FOR OIL & ACRYLIC PAINTERS

AMERICAN ARTIST  
WORKSHOP  
SUMMER 2006

## How to Pick, Mix, and Paint Colors

### TECHNIQUES OF Acrylic Painting

DISPLAY UNTIL SEPTEMBER 11, 2006

\$8.99 U.S./\$10.99 CAN.



**JOHN EBERSBERGER:**

**STRESSING THE**

# **Relationship of Colors,**

**NOT LINES OR VALUES**

The 19th-century Impressionists pointed out that planes of light and shadow can be described by the relationship of colors. Several contemporary artists now help other artists understand how to use high-intensity pigments to capture the way light reveals figures, still lifes, and landscapes. Maryland artist John Ebersberger is one of the most articulate and enthusiastic of these Impressionist painters and teachers.

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**by M. Stephen Doherty**

**OPPOSITE PAGE**

Ebersberger helped Nancy McCarra with her initial drawing of colored blocks.









**OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE**

Ebersberger showed students reproductions of Impressionist paintings in art books.

**OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW**

A palette made by artist Lee Boynton with all the recommended colors arranged on it.

## “Impressionism is an advancement of the painter’s visual language from value-oriented, tone-based pictures to creating paintings with a full spectrum of color,”

John Ebersberger wrote in literature distributed to artists who recently participated in his still-life painting workshop in Edgewater, Maryland, just south of Annapolis. “Color is used to depict light and the illusion of objects in a specific light environment. It is the relationship of the colors that creates the illusion of light—the light plane vs. the shadow plane, or the silhouette of an object seen against the light.”

In simple terms, Ebersberger is dedicated to helping artists understand that one effective way of creating the appearance of light and shadow in an oil painting is to balance the relationship of colors rather than values. Instead of modeling an object with lighter and darker versions of the same color, he points out that the light plane of an object is actually a different color than the shadow plane. “Although this is true in all cases, it is most easily seen outside on a bright, sunny day. For example, a pink shirt in sunlight might lean toward a tint of bright scarlet, but the shadow plane, influenced by the illumination of the sky, will be a shade of violet.” Ebersberger goes on to explain

that by mixing across the color wheel, color intensity can be adjusted accurately. “Mixing down from a brighter range of pigments to achieve a specific color is far better than arbitrarily adding a brown or black color to make a color darker.”

When asked if he pushes colors to make the relationships between them more obvious—that is, if he makes the shadows bluer or the sunlit surfaces more yellow than they really are—Ebersberger responds by saying that opaque oil paints are limited in their ability to rival the brilliance of light observed directly from nature. “Any paint that artists select will be a translation of the colors in nature,” he explains. “It is not a distortion of the truth for an artist to use any available means to recreate the illusion of light. Making a strong color statement at the outset of a painting will lay a solid foundation for its development.”

One way of keeping a wide range of tube colors bright and intense is to apply thick oil paint with a palette knife rather than a paintbrush. “When Charles Hawthorne (1872–1930) first started teaching this approach, he had his students apply paint with a putty knife,” Ebersberger points out. “His reasoning was that if students were forced to apply lots of paint and only concern themselves with big shapes, they were more apt to appreciate the beauty of the color relationships rather than the outlines.” Hawthorne’s

## Demonstration: Triumph of Spirit



### Step 1

The still-life arrangement from which Ebersberger completed the painting.



### Step 2

Ebersberger first used charcoal and white pastel to sketch a preparatory drawing on cardboard then trimmed the cardboard to the actual size of the painting.



### Step 3

Moving to the actual board on which the subject would be painted, Ebersberger drew a more detailed charcoal drawing of the setup.





#### Step 4

Next, the artist began the initial lay-in of the main masses of color. "At this stage I am establishing the relationship of the color in the light to the color in shadow," the artist says. "This creates the illusion of an object in a specific light environment."



#### Step 5 (LEFT)

Filling in the white areas of the canvas "so as not to influence my perception of the colors," Ebersberger completed the main masses.

#### Step 6 (ABOVE)

The artist continued to refine the main masses and began studying the major variations of color, including the half-tone on the torso of the figure.

## Demonstration: Triumph of Spirit



### Step 7

Ebersberger completed the major variations, including the shadow shapes of the figure.

### Step 8

Breaking each of the major areas of color into minor variations, the artist worked the painting to completion, adding details and accents as needed.







THE COMPLETED PAINTING:  
**Triumph of Spirit**  
2005, oil, 32 x 24.  
Collection Emile Henault.

**BELOW**

Student Rick Casali laid in the masses of color with a palette knife.

**BOTTOM**

Casali continued to develop his still-life painting.



student and artistic heir was Henry Hensche (1899–1992), who switched from putty knives to flexible palette knives. “I was introduced to Hensche in 1982 by Cedric Egeli (1936–), with whom I was studying portraiture and figure painting. I subsequently studied with Hensche during the last 10 years of his life.”

Ebersberger, his students, and others who trained in this tradition of Impressionist painting now create the proof of the theories handed down from Hawthorne to Hensche to Egeli. There is a growing community of Impressionist artists in the Baltimore/Annapolis/Washington, DC, area who capture the brilliance and variety of light effects in both studio and outdoor paintings.

One of the basic exercises used by Ebersberger and others who teach an Impressionist approach to oil painting is to have students paint colored blocks sitting in the sunlight. “Henry Hensche had beginners working outside in Provincetown, Massachusetts, paint colored blocks of wood, and it really was a good way to address the fundamental aspects of painting planes of light and shadow,” Ebersberger explains. “The procedure is to divide each facet of a block into a colored shape for the light plane and a colored shape for the shadow plane, each of them painted with oil colors applied with a palette knife. The students only paint the large, flat, simple shapes of color and then adjust the relationship.

“With more experience, students are ready to paint still-life arrangements of objects with simple shapes and surfaces, such as ceramic crockery, undecorated bowls, and fruit,” Ebersberger continues. “Once again, they begin by painting the simple, overall forms of the objects before breaking up the shapes into smaller areas.” As students focus on the individual surfaces and divide those masses, Ebersberger encourages them to ask the following questions:

1. Where are the darkest darks?
2. Where is the lightest light?
3. Which are the brightest, most saturated colors?
4. Which are the muted, duller colors?

As a next step, Ebersberger encourages the students to continue dividing each of the main masses into major variations, or color shapes, of smaller size that model the forms. Those include halftones on cylindrical and spherical forms painted distinctly with different colors, not the same color adjusted in value.

In the literature distributed to workshop participants,



**BELOW LEFT**  
Ebersberger advised  
Abigail McBride as she  
began her painting.



**BELOW RIGHT**  
McBride worked on her  
still life.



**BOTTOM**  
A comparison of  
McBride's painting with  
the objects she was  
painting.



## Students' Work

Ebersberger offered the following hints to help students better understand the concepts he presented:

1. Think beyond local colors. You are recreating a visual impression, not a literal description.
2. Do not think in terms of relative values. Make the shadow plane a different color than the light plane. If you get the color right, the value will automatically be correct.
3. Mix across the color wheel to attain your neutral grays, browns, and muted colors. This allows for a greater and more specific range of neutrals. For example, mix cerulean blue with scarlet for a gray and adjust the combination of pigments to make the gray warmer or cooler.
4. All shadow colors are not blue. Do not trade in a tonal prejudice of seeing brown shadows with an Impressionist prejudice of seeing blue and purple shadows. In a north-lit studio, the primary illumination is the blue sky and the light planes will probably be cooler than the cast shadows. The most important thing is to paint what you see, not your preconceived notions about color relationships.
5. When establishing the shapes of major and minor variations, make shapes that help to define and model the form of the object.

Most of the students participating in Ebersberger's recent workshop were experienced painters who had studied in his weekly classes at Maryland Hall for the Creative Arts, in Annapolis. "I've been teaching there since 1984, and most of the people attending this workshop learned the basics of Impressionist painting sometime during the past 10 years," Ebersberger explains. "They didn't need as much help making elementary studies or learning the fundamental principles. Instead, they were ready to work on more subtle refinements that lend beauty to oil paintings."

Beauty is something Ebersberger talks about frequently when discussing the aims of his workshops or his own figure and landscape paintings. "Beauty beckons an artist into the studio or out into the landscape, and Impressionism is one of the natural vehicles for expressing the beauty of nature as revealed in the light," he says enthusiastically. "It's beauty that compels me to paint figures outdoors in the light, still-life arrangements set up







1. Abigail McBride
2. Michele Donovan
3. Caroline Sims
4. Rick Casali
5. Nancy McCarra



## Ebersberger's Work



ABOVE

### **The Wanderer II**

2005, oil, 27 x 31.  
Courtesy McBride  
Gallery, Annapolis,  
Maryland.

OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

### **Elizabeth**

2005, oil, 19 x 16.  
Collection the artist.

### **Bottled Light**

2005, oil, 16 x 12.  
Collection Douglas  
Walters.

### **The Cellist**

2005, oil, 25 x 17.  
Collection the artist.

### **Rose Cascade**

2005, oil, 30 x 24.  
Courtesy Edgartown Art  
Gallery, Edgartown,  
Massachusetts.





## Ebersberger's Materials

### PALETTE

- titanium white
- viridian
- cadmium yellow light
- cadmium yellow
- cadmium orange
- cadmium red deep
- scarlet lake or cadmium scarlet
- permanent rose
- ultramarine blue
- cerulean blue
- permanent green light

### OTHER SUPPLIES

- Loew-Cornell J-1 or RGM 44 or Dick Blick stainless-steel palette knives
- gessoed Masonite hard board (16" x 20" or 12" x 16")
- large wooden or acrylic palette
- Bounty paper towels
- visor or baseball cap with brim
- Grumbacher extra-soft vine charcoal

## About the Artist

**John Ebersberger** graduated with a B.F.A. degree from the Maryland Institute College of Art, in Baltimore, and then began an intensive period of study with artist Cedric Egeli. He also studied extensively with Henry Hensche and sculptor Steve Perkins. He is a co-founder of the Mid-Atlantic Plein Air Painters Association, an artist member of the Maryland Society of Portrait Painters, and an instructor at Maryland Hall for the Creative Arts, in Annapolis. He has exhibited with galleries throughout the United States, and his paintings are included in the collections of the U.S. Naval Academy, Lockheed Martin Corporation, the First Alabama Bank, and the Federal Reserve Bank of Maryland. For more information, visit his website: [www.johnebersberger.com](http://www.johnebersberger.com).

**“Beauty beckons an artist into the studio or out into the landscape, and Impressionism is one of the natural vehicles for expressing the beauty of nature as revealed in the light.”**

in the garden beside my home, models posing in the studio, or portrait clients in their homes. Sometimes I’m captivated by the rich, somber tones I find indoors; and other times it’s the strong light and shadow of the morning that motivate me.”

Ebersberger prefers to work directly from his subject so he can study the subtle color relationships, although he does occasionally work from photographs to complete commissioned portraits. “When painting outdoors, I generally limit my painting time to about 90 minutes because the light—and therefore the relationship between colors—changes after that interval of time,” he explains. “Toward the end of the day, the opposition of the warm light planes to the cooler shadow notes is dramatic. The light changes very rapidly, so the painting time is shorter. The midday light has its own beauty and, because the color shift is subtler, the painting time can be extended.”

Sometimes Ebersberger paints the same outdoor location over several days. In those situations he might put his wet palette in a freezer chest overnight to keep the paints from drying out before the next day’s session. “That’s obviously not necessary when I’m painting during the winter months in the Northeastern section of the country,” he says with a laugh. “For the past 20 years a group of us have painted outdoors at Deep Creek Lake, Maryland, during the holidays between Christmas and New Year’s, and we leave our wet palettes outside the cabin. They might be covered with ice in the morning, but the paint hasn’t dried.” ■

*M. Stephen Doherty is the editor-in-chief of Workshop.*



**BELOW LEFT**  
Casali completed the major variations in his painting.



**BELOW RIGHT**  
McCarra's painting in which most of the masses have been painted.



**BOTTOM**  
A comparison of two student paintings of the same still-life arrangement.

