



Painter delights in Northwest landscape

By JAMIE HALE
The Oregonian

There are a lot of ways to enjoy nature in the Pacific Northwest. You can go hiking, mountain biking or trail running. There's kayaking, white water rafting and rock climbing.

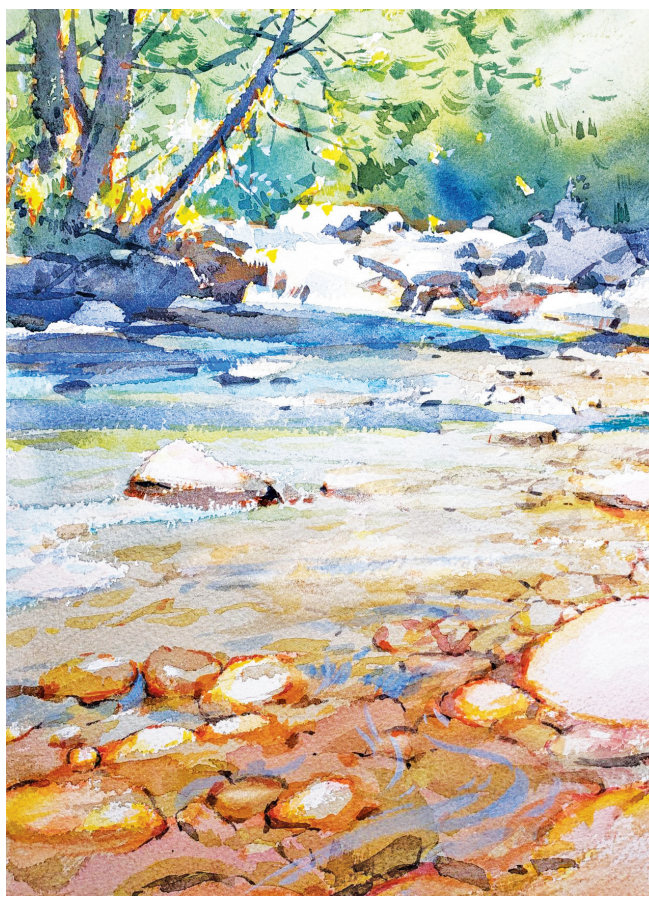
Or you can break out an easel and some brushes to paint. The process of painting landscapes outside was embraced 18th century French artists, who called the process painting en plein air, or outdoors. Today, that method is practiced around the world, and is beloved by many Pacific Northwest artists who have no shortage of beautiful landscapes to choose from.

Yong Hong Zhong is one such artist, an Oregon-based watercolor painter who finds great joy in connecting with nature through the tip of a paintbrush. Setting up an easel outside, digging his toes into the dirt, he can immerse himself into the landscape that he's painting, an experience he said results in not just better paintings but a more rewarding experience all around.

"A lot of times we just focus on hiking and not having a lot of time to slow down and really enjoy being in that moment," Zhong said. "So the plein air painting really just slows you down, to stay in one location and take an hour or two just to paint that location. You can really sense the mood, the feelings of that location."

"It's like you walk past a rose garden ... and then you turn around and you see how that beautiful light hits the rose, and then the petal is semi-transparent and the light's going through it," he said. "These are the things I find in life that I want to be able to share with people. It could be just a pebble on the ground, but because the light hits it a certain way, it makes you look at things on a more deeper level."

Plein air painting can be a radical act in slowing down, especially when it's done in places where people are usually rushing around.



Photos by Yong Hong Zhong

TOP LEFT: Yong Hong Zhong in his Lake Oswego studio. **TOP RIGHT:** Zhong is an Oregon-based watercolor painter who left a career of animation to paint landscapes around the Pacific Northwest. **ABOVE:** One of Zhong's most recent plein air paintings from around the Portland area.

That applies to the many trails that run through outdoor recreation areas in the Pacific Northwest, places where Zhong especially loves to set up his easel. And while he's visited many scenic destinations around the region, the painter has a clear favorite: the Columbia River Gorge.

"I've done a three-month road trip around the perimeter of this country, and I still think the Columbia gorge is by far one of the best locations to paint," he said. "All the different terrain, the waterfalls — it's just incredible. We're so, so lucky to be here in Portland and have access to all this beauty around us."

For some, connecting with nature through the tip of a paintbrush might seem out of reach, something only a "real artist" can achieve. Zhong couldn't disagree more. He is adamant that plein air painting is open to anyone with the desire to do it — though he said it might be wise to work your way up.

Those looking to take a first step should get a sketchbook and just start sketching whenever you're outdoors and feel so inspired, Zhong said. From there, you can graduate to adding color with a basic watercolor set, and once you've gained more comfort, you can invest in some pricier art supplies, like better brushes, paints and an easel.

"If you want to give it a try, just keep drawing and don't worry about the end result in the beginning," he said. "Enjoy the process of creating art."

Zhong acknowledged that plein air painting isn't for everyone, although those who give it a try may find themselves rewarded with a rich experience, and a deeper connection to the natural world.

"You can look at a photograph of a location; it is not the same when you are actually stepping into nature," Zhong said. "You can feel the water, you can feel the breeze, the sun. I mean all those things you cannot appreciate just by looking at a photograph or watching a video clip."

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