Make Your Landscapes Glow

Create pastels that resonate with natural light by using a variety of contrasts.

By David Garrison

Natural light makes every subject vibrate with energy. From the warm light of the sun silhouetting a stand of trees to the dusky twilight settling across a winter field, something in the way light falls over a natural setting makes the scene come alive. Whenever I see a landscape like this, I feel as if there's a story being told—a story I want to share with others. That's when I want to stop and try to replicate these lighting effects.

Over the years, I've learned to capture the glow of light by focusing on the contrast in both values and colors. In general, contrast—an obvious difference between two extremes—tends to create a subtle, visual energy or vibration. Used in specific ways, various types of contrast appear to glow, mimicking the warmth and vitality in any naturally lit setting.

Taking Advantage of Contrast

Like most artists, I begin each painting by establishing the values in my scene. I give the greatest definition to my main subject by using contrasting strokes of extreme lights and darks on it. In *Country Shadows*, for example, I wanted the central tree and shed to be the stars, so I used my darkest darks on these elements and my lightest lights in the sky behind them. Concentrating these vibrating values in one area creates a center of interest and ensures that my viewers' eyes will be repeatedly drawn back to it. This initial step also lays the foundation for the glowing light to come.

When most of the colors are in place, I start looking for ways to emphasize the light. At this point, I bring several different color-contrast techniques into play. For example, if I've painted a rainy day scene in primarily cool temperatures, I'll add an opposing warm streak to "disrupt" the somber sky and make the clouds glow. Another favorite technique is to break up the light and dark forms by layering strokes and dots of varying colors in the same value family, such as mint green, pale pink and pale yellow. This "cluster" technique is especially visible in the closer cornstalks in *Harvest*, where I clustered light colors in the cornstalk tops and warm and cool colors in the shadows. I like to use clusters to bring shimmering color to any area, but I have to do it sparingly since this effect can be overdone and needs to be subdued.

Typically the last method I use to bring out the glow is applying pure color, which is best seen in unblended strokes of pastel pigment. It's a technique that takes advantage of the unique interaction between light and bright. For example, notice how the pure strokes of light blue and dusky orange in *Winter Fields* make the bright white snow stand out.

Giving My Surface Some Tooth

I work on either a 200-lb. pH neutral board stock or an 80-lb. Bainbridge board because I prefer a sturdy surface. In fact, if my pastel painting surface is larger than 18x24, I'll mount it on a lightweight wood panel for added strength.

To texturize a board so its tooth is suitable for holding pastel dust, I mix up a gritty primer made from two parts heated hide glue (also known as rabbit-skin glue), two parts gesso and one part finely ground pumice. I apply two coats of this texturing medium to the front of the board and one to the back to prevent warping. To create a neutral-toned ground for my work, I'll either add a little watered-down gray acrylic paint to the medium before applying it to my board, or paint a separate layer of gray on the board after I apply the medium.

Adjusting the Temperature

I evoked the hushed, twilight mood of Evening Bliss *(pastel, 18x30) by using harmonious colors—all of the blues, greens and whites are cool. But then I added an invigorating dash of warm burnt sienna to liven things up.*
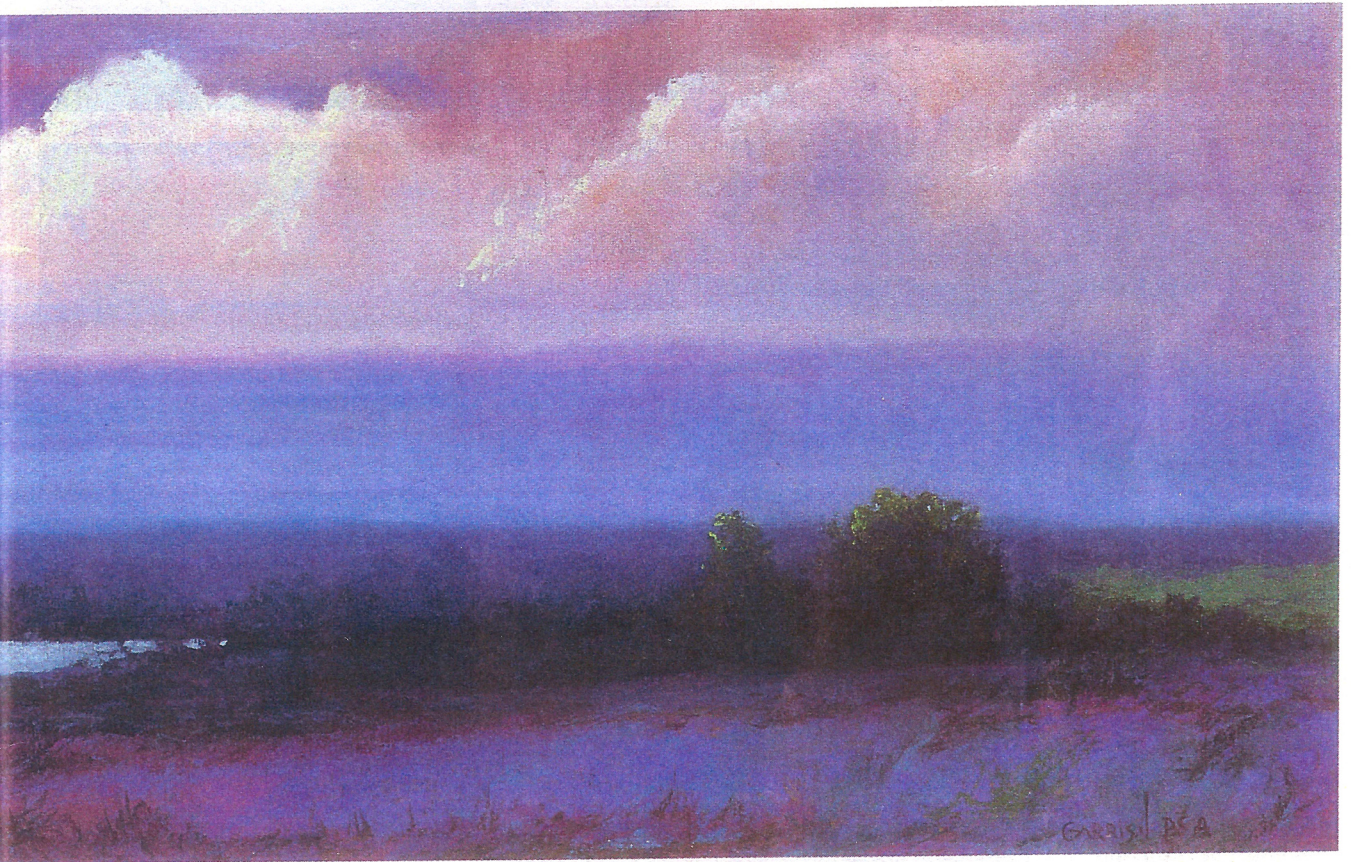
Capturing Values On Location

With my prepared boards and other materials in tow, I start scouting for a pleasing landscape. Most important in my mind is an unusual interplay of light and objects and a harmonious combination of shapes and planes. If I find something with a strong center of interest that meets these requirements, I'll start sketching in the basic shapes in black and white, moving things around until I find the best composition. I may notice a fallen tree that I find captivating, for example, so I'll create an "entrance" to that center of interest by altering the contour of the ground or adding crisscrossing grasses to draw my eye up to the tree.

To bring more attention to my center of interest, I place the highest value contrasts in this area of my underpainting. Then I start building up many of the other intermediary values in the scene, using lower contrasts and like values to support the main subject. At this stage of the painting, I don't worry much about which color I'm looking at or using. Instead, I stick to a limited palette of basic colors to map out my value scheme.

I limit my on-site sessions to about an hour and a half. But before returning to the studio, I make sure the proper values have been established—enough to suggest a mood—and then quickly rough in the local and reflected colors. My goal is to re-create the lighting that first attracted me to the setting.

Developing Glowing Color

Back in my studio, I expand the full range of light and color. Guided by my value underpainting and local colors done on location, I develop the colors that will contribute to the feeling of light, time of day and atmospheric conditions. I find muted tones work best for early morning or evening, brighter colors for midday and, of course, cool tones for rainy scenes. Even as more and more layers are built up over the underpainting, I take care to keep the colors consistent with the original value plan.

While adding color, I use my fingers or a swatch of very soft fabric to soften and blend the edges and intermix the colors. Working over the entire surface, I build my scene slowly, incorporating a variety of color and value contrasts as I go. Finally, I add a few final strokes of pure color to make my paintings sparkle.

Adding the Finishing Touches

When I think I've finished a piece, I set it aside, then come back to it with an open mind. If

Step One: Zeroing In on the Focal Point

I liked this arrangement of cornstalks, so I decided to make it the focal point of my painting. I placed the cornstalks just to the left of center for asymmetrical balance, and adjusted the fence posts and the contours of the ground to lead the eye back to the corn. Then I used mainly white, yellow and black on a gray ground to indicate the lightest and darkest values in my major shapes.
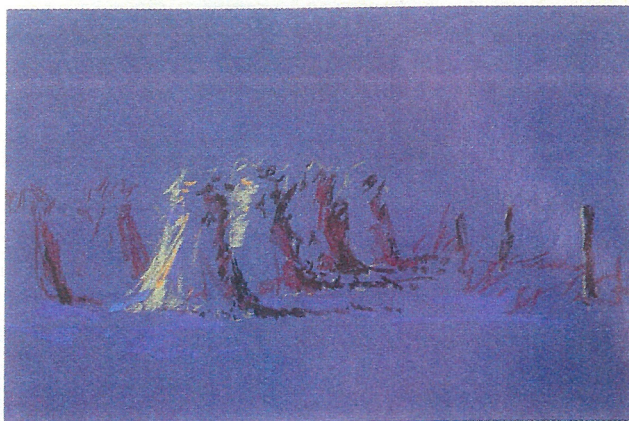
Step Two: Squinting to Find the Values

Looking back and forth between my scene and my painting, I continued developing the underpainting with the addition of blues and purples. I didn't use the actual colors of the objects, but instead I squinted at the scene to help me distinguish the proper values. Notice how the highest contrast in values appears on the central cornstalks—this will eventually become the glowing center of interest.

Step Three: Applying the Local Colors

In my last on-site step, I started putting in the proper hues and tying things together through color. For example, I added stronger golds and yellows in the corn, and echoed them on the fence posts to keep the eye moving back and forth between these areas. I applied a combination of soft, medium-soft and hard pastels in no particular order, which I blended as needed.

Step Four: Maximizing the Contrasts

Back in my studio, I took several steps to enhance the light in Harvest (pastel, 20x25). I began by placing clusters of warm whites and yellows in the tops of the cornstalks to provide a final punch against the purple-violet background. I also applied warm and cool mixed clusters in the shadow areas for energy. Finally, I placed pure pink against the snow and a pure yellow-gold on top of the cornstalks for extra brightness and contrast.

Inviting the Viewer In

It's not necessary to use exact colors to re-create a landscape—instead, I use the color that contributes to the story. In Winter Fields *(pastel, 20x25), I wanted to draw the viewer into the warmth of the sun on a snowy day. So I used lighter blues in the shadowed snow to enhance the warmth in that one bright, sunlit spot.*
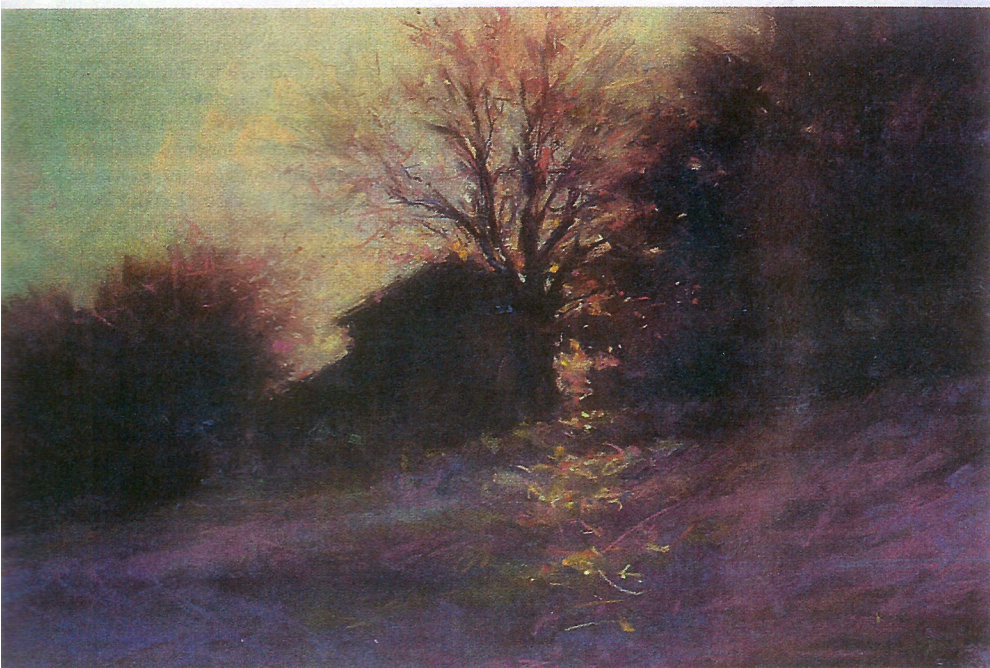
Silhouetting the Focal Point

My key to success in Country Shadows *(pastel, 22x28) is value contrast. I used relatively few colors here—mostly white, yellow and pale blue in the sky, and reds, blues and violets for the trees, shed and hill. But it's the intense contrast emanating from the center of the painting that brings out the glow of a sunrise.*

necessary, I make the most obvious corrections first, then the second and so on until all of the problems are eliminated. When I was finishing *Evening Bliss*, for example, I noticed that the foreground was weak because it was filled with a vague green mist. To make the area stronger, I wiped out the green with a soft cloth and invented that raw hillside. I applied bold strokes of pure soft blues, crimson, violets and warm burnt sienna—all in the same value range—to break up the greens and bring the rocks and hillside to life.

With each final glance, I consider my outcome. Have I told the story I intended to share with my viewers? Does my composition reflect what first attracted me to the scene? Do the colors harmonize and make the viewer want to be in that place? And most importantly, have I used enough contrasts to make the painting resonate with natural light? Only about a third of my pastels meet these standards, but I persevere, motivated by my desire to combine accurate observation with careful artistic enhancement into fresh, lively results. 🖌

About the Artist

For 30 years, David Garrison, PSA, has observed life through the artist's eye and enjoyed capturing life's many moods by way of figures and landscapes in pastel. Formally educated in art at Iowa Wesleyan College and the American Academy of Art in Chicago, Garrison occasionally teaches pastel workshops around the country. He's a member of several art societies, including the Pastel Society of America and The Palette & Chisel Academy of Fine Arts, and is listed in *Who's Who in American Art*. Garrison works out of his studio near the Mississippi River in Burlington, Iowa.