



WINTER PAINTING TIPS FOR PLEIN AIR PAINTERS

Compiled by Colleen Cosgrove, Social Media Director, Outdoor Painters of Minnesota Dec. 2019

Equipment

Try to streamline your gear to maximize paint time, increase mobility, and make packing up quick if the weather turns really ugly.

- Hand and foot warmers: USB rechargeable, butane (think large Zippo lighter), or disposables.
- Rug or piece of foam to stand on (cardboard can get slippery).
- Umbrella to cut glare and protect you from snow
- Stay hydrated – it's easy to forget when you're cold, but bring an insulated container of your preferred beverage.
- Some recommend eating a high-fat, high-protein meal to keep your metabolism up and help your body stay warm.

Clothing

DRESS IN LAYERS – always dress warmer than you think you need to. You will get cold. And you will get paint on your clothes.

- Hand ideas: Large warm mittens with a hole cut in them for the paintbrush, disposable nitrile gloves with fingerless wool gloves over them, lined goatskin gloves for warmth and flexibility, disposable hand warmers. Keep in mind that nitrile gloves can make your hands sweat, which can make them feel colder. (Tip: Warm Skin is a heavy lotion marketed to Nordic skiers and winter campers. It works by adding a non-water-based layer of heavy bodied lotion as insulation to hands [think whale blubber] so that fingers are less sensitive to cold.)
- Lined jeans, snow pants, warm socks, good warm boots, yak-tracks or other cleats for walking in slippery snow and ice, disposable foot warmers, a good warm coat that you don't mind getting paint on, neck protection such as a scarf or neck gaiter, warm head covering, and long underwear.

Art Materials

Most art materials are affected by the cold – they will be harder to work with. Some say oil paint freezes at -6 F, others say it never freezes. Even chalk pastels will get harder in cold weather.

- Stick-on hand warmers on the back of a disposable palette or a large flat plastic bin full of hot water to place your palette on can help keep your paint workable longer.
- Try adding solvents, mediums, or alcohol such as vodka to your paint to prevent freeze. Solvents and mediums behave differently at low temperatures, so experiment and talk to other winter painters to find out what they use.
- Keep your materials in a closed bag so they will stay a bit warmer and drier.
- Putting down a rug will keep you from sinking into the snow, and helps to prevent losing things that you might drop.
- Pre-tone your canvases to save time and cut down on glare.
- Try using a neutral toned palette to cut glare on your paints
- Wrap the ferrule of your brush in tape if glare off the metal is a problem
- Snow falling on your palette can make the paint wet or give it a crunchy texture. Consider using an umbrella, or learn to embrace the effect!

Process

Painting outdoors in the winter is great training for working quickly and efficiently.

- Choose a spot that is sheltered from wind if possible
- Take a photo first, in case you need to pack up and leave quickly or get so cold you can't feel your fingers later. Also, batteries drain quicker in the cold, and you might be unable to use your phone camera if you wait too long. Weather and light change quickly in the winter, so it's good to get an initial reference photo so you can finish your painting in studio if you need to.
- It can be tricky to manipulate a brush or pastel stick with gloves on. Consider just doing a color study and get your composition down, then add as much detail as possible before you need to go indoors to warm up.
- Try working in small sessions, retreating indoors to warm up periodically.
- Remember to allow time to pack up at the end. Don't wait until you are already too cold!

Technique

- Try using a limited palette to speed your color mixing and painting process
- Think beyond white, blue, and gray. There is a surprising amount of color in a winter landscape, even on a cloudy day.
- Add touches of warmth for contrast – remember you're an artist, not a camera!
- Atmospheric perspective can be very effective in conveying a sense of cold or a distant snowfall.
- When painting a snowy scene, think about reflected light on the snow from sun, trees, nearby buildings. Don't immediately reach for the white paint.
- Sunrise and sunset can be especially dramatic in winter – but also very short!

Other

- Stop and move around periodically. Walk away from your easel, move your limbs around to keep warm, have a snack, dance a little!
- Tell someone where you are going or paint with a friend in extreme cold conditions for safety.
- Keep an eye on the time. It's easy to lose track and an artist often doesn't feel the cold when they are in creative flow state, so set a time limit and check in occasionally with your physical condition.
- Leave enough time to pack up (this goes slower when your fingers are cold.) And remember you still have to walk back to shelter with all your gear.

