

One Week in PARIS

BY KELLY KANE

This September Christine Lashley, Jane Hunt, Michele Byrne, and Suzie Baker took a “girls’ painting trip” to the City of Light. Find out what they learned from the experience — and from one another, and why you should start planning your own painting adventure with friends now.

After a few false starts, four of today’s finest plein air painters finally made their “wouldn’t it be nice” conversations a reality. “When my artist friends mentioned they would be teaching in Europe at the same time I would be, it didn’t seem like a stretch for us to make room for a few days in Paris before or after our workshops,” says Christine Lashley. But when initial plans fell through, they realized that if they were ever going to make it happen, they would need to carve time out of their busy schedules to make the journey.

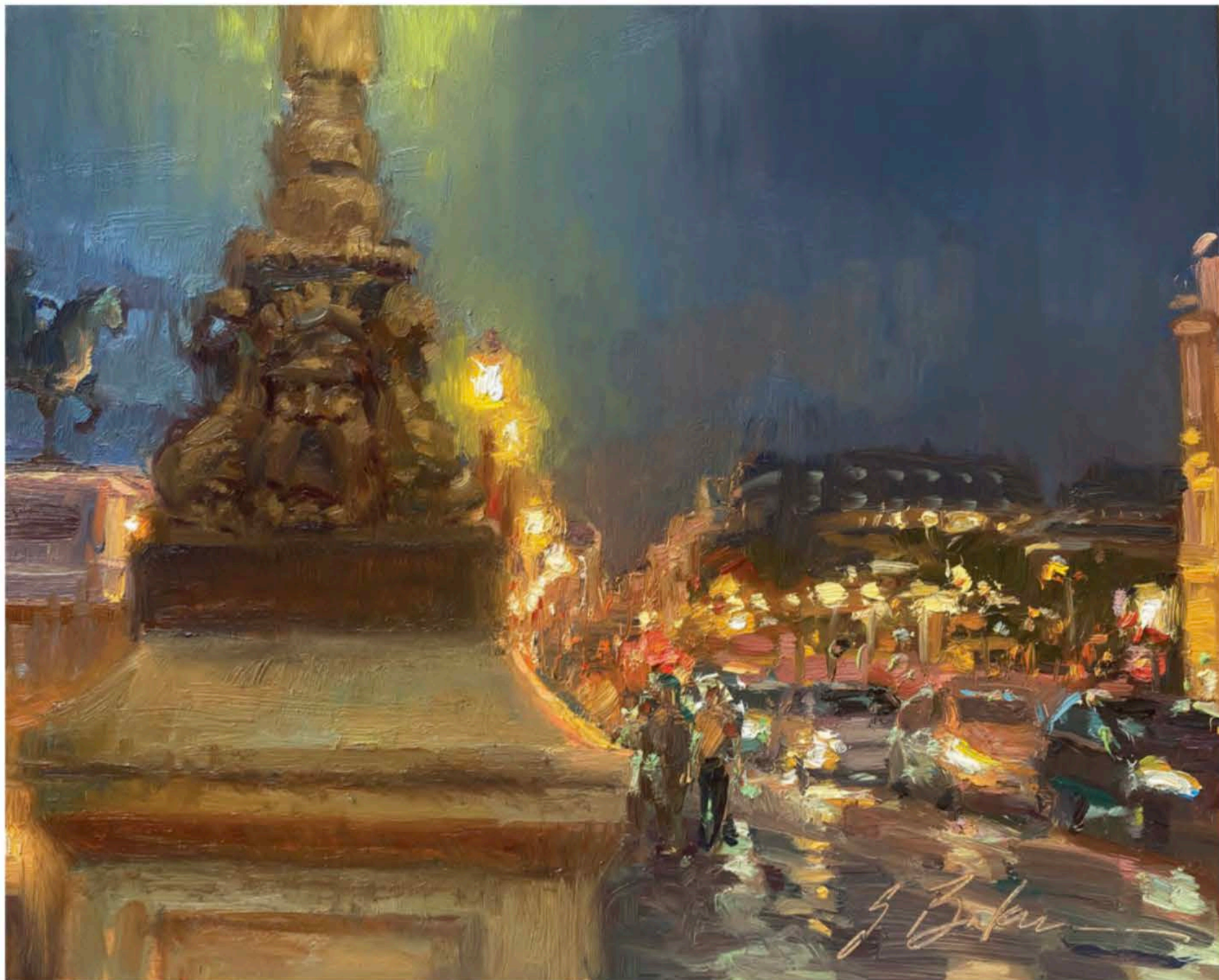
Ultimately, the trip went from a casual one- or two-day jaunt to a full-week commitment, but the goal remained the same: “Early on we agreed this would primarily be an ‘artist retreat’ for learning and exploring more than producing artwork, which is what is expected of us when we’re teaching or meeting exhibit deadlines,” says Lashley. Even though all the artists had been to Paris many times before, they each walked away with a new appreciation for the city and their artist friends, along with lots of new painting ideas and inspiration.



Michele Byrne, Jane Hunt, Suzie Baker, and Christine Lashley



Sun and Seine, Suzie Baker, 2022, oil, 6 x 8 in., available from VRFA Gallery, plein air



SUZIE BAKER | A SENSE OF PLACE

Our base was the 6th arrondissement — an area Christine, who had lived in Paris for four years, knew well. Once we all got our bearings, we had no shortage of inspiring places to set up our easels. We stayed together most of the trip but broke into pairs on the last day to revisit select spots. Some of the locations we painted were: Pont Neuf, Cafe De Flore, Les Deux Magots, the Tuileries, Luxembourg Garden, and views along the Seine. We even dropped into a life drawing session at the Academie de la Grand Chaumiere.

One of the best things about being a plein air painter is the sense of place you get by standing, observing, and recording a location. Whether that place is a calm mountain stream populated by elk and swaying aspens or the hustle and bustle of Paris, we artists get to tune into the experience of a site that few others have the



(ABOVE) *Pont Neuf, Oldest Bridge in Paris*, Suzie Baker, 2022, oil, 8 x 10 in., available from VRFA Gallery, plein air and studio ■ (LEFT) Suzie Baker's oil pastel drawing

extended time to enjoy — and it's even better when we can do it together.

My artist buddy Aimee Erickson once said, “All my best ideas come from the easel next to me.” True words! Life is too short to learn everything firsthand when our talented artist friends can help us lop off the tops of learning curves. Spending time with Christine, Jane, and Michele wasn't just an immersive week of painting and spying on each other's canvases but also one long conversation about studio practices, teaching, the business of art, social media tactics, knowledge about art materials, and so much more.

“The amount of shop talk we did would try the patience of any non-artist, so fair warning, you should only plan these trips with other artists, or plus-ones with a preternatural amount of patience and ability to entertain themselves.



“The trip wasn't all about painting. We did a lot of eating too,” says Suzie Baker, pictured here with Michele Byrne at Copains — a gluten-free bakery.

Aside from traveling with some fantastic, thoughtful, and talented women, the thing I valued most about this trip was that I could give myself permission to experiment, observe, and learn. Of course, I love teaching and participating in plein air events, but the overarching purpose of those experiences is informing the student or producing finished paintings. Taking this trip, with the sole ambition of personal growth and camaraderie, was a welcome bit of “me time” in my otherwise packed year.

I even picked up some new tools when Christine and I visited the Sennelier shop along the Seine — a fancy ink pen for Christine and some mid-tone oil pastels for me. I used the oil pastels to draw in my composition before proceeding to brush and oil paint. I liked this technique so much that I went back later in the week with Jane for more colors.

In general, I worked small on 8 x 10 or even 6 x 8-inch lightweight panels coated with Michael Harding Non-Absorbent Acrylic Primer. My goal was to try new things and get color notes, photos, and video resources for studio work. I chose paint colors that would give me the most variety with the fewest tubes. I spent a long time before the trip devising easel hacks to maximize functionality while keeping my supplies as light as possible. Usually, it all goes in a backpack, but since we were walking on paved streets, I wheeled my gear around in a small, carry-on piece of luggage.

CHRISTINE LASHLEY | AN IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

Painting a city is an immersive experience that goes beyond photos. Creating art, especially in a place I'm already familiar with, lets me slow down and appreciate the ebb and flow of everyday life. The nuance of light changing, the flow of traffic on the Seine — these qualities weaved their way into my plein air work. An added bonus was that I could speak and understand French enough to hear what people were saying and be able to interact if I chose to while painting.

On the first day, I had great fun talking and joking with some laborers suited up to work in the tunnels under the city.

IF YOU GO

Christine Lashley has planned her own art workshops for 20 years, including several trips to Paris. Here's her best advice for how to plan your own painting trip.

When to Go: Avoid peak season and crowds. Late spring or fall is a good time to paint in Paris.

Getting Started: Plan two years in advance, and invite a small group. Find at least one other person to commit to being “all in.” It's hard to be the first to purchase airfare. Once two are confirmed, it's easier to get others to join.

Staying Organized: One person should be the primary organizer for dates and lodging. Another person can do museum exhibits, tickets, and times (museum tickets should be purchased in advance of the trip). Here's a handy timeline guide: pick dates and invite friends (2 years); confirm participants (1 year); buy air tickets and reserve lodging (8-12 months); secure museum tickets or special reservations (1-4 months).

Group Size: Four participants is ideal. Four can share a cab or easily split in two and still maintain a “buddy system,” and four is easy to seat at a cafe. Larger groups block walkways and draw unwanted attention. City officials may have issues with an “assembly” or “gathering” and require permits for group activities in public spaces. This is of special concern in Europe, with the small sidewalks, limited public space, and crowded tourist spots.

Where to Stay: It's unrealistic to roam all over Paris lugging your gear, so pick a neighborhood to paint as “home base.” You want to be able to walk to good street scenes from your lodgings. Do you want Montmartre — angles, hills, vista, but a bit gritty? Do you want the Marais — trendy shops and cafes? Do you want to be near a landmark such as Luxembourg Gardens or the Eiffel Tower? We opted to be near the Seine.

Housing: Hotel or rental? We initially wanted a rental apartment with a large living room or place to hang out and review our art (where we slept seemed less important). Things got tricky when I realized I would have to purchase the entire rental and the fine-print policy for refunds wasn't flexible. Plus, the bathroom-to-bedroom ratio was always a problem. After COVID came along, I decided a hotel was the answer. This way we could each have our own room and bathroom, plus the cancellation policy was good. I was even able to negotiate a special group rate directly with the hotel that included breakfast.

Meals: There are grocery stores (Carrefour) for picnic options, carryout from restaurants, or street food such as a crepe stand. Pastry shops offer delicious options to go (quiche, salads, sandwiches). Be like the Parisians, and picnic on the banks of the Seine or in a park. Ask first if you want to paint at a cafe; sometimes they are fine with it and sometimes not. Order some food or a beverage at intervals so passersby see you consuming something at your table. This is polite cafe etiquette and appreciated. French food is wonderful, but a sit-down meal three times a day will take over art time quickly.

Art Supplies: Rougier & Ple is a large store and has quality paints and brushes, but paper and panels are mostly student-grade. Sennelier is small but packed with fun upscale art materials. Check out the scrap bin of linen pre-primed canvas rolls for only 5 Euros. Charvin has mini watercolor travel kits in metal palettes, wood pochade boxes, and a large Charvin paint selection.

Pitfalls to Avoid: The “wow” factor of being in Paris can affect painting time. Consider the balance of tourist versus art time before the trip, and separate sightseeing and painting. Popular sights (Eiffel Tower, Sacre Coeur, Louvre courtyard) are very crowded all year and have a higher risk of pickpockets. Paint off the beaten path in small side streets and parks. Painting with a small group offers protection from curious onlookers. We got the most attention when painting solo.



Pont Neuf studies, Jane Hunt, 2022, oil, 11 x 14 in., collection the artist, plein air

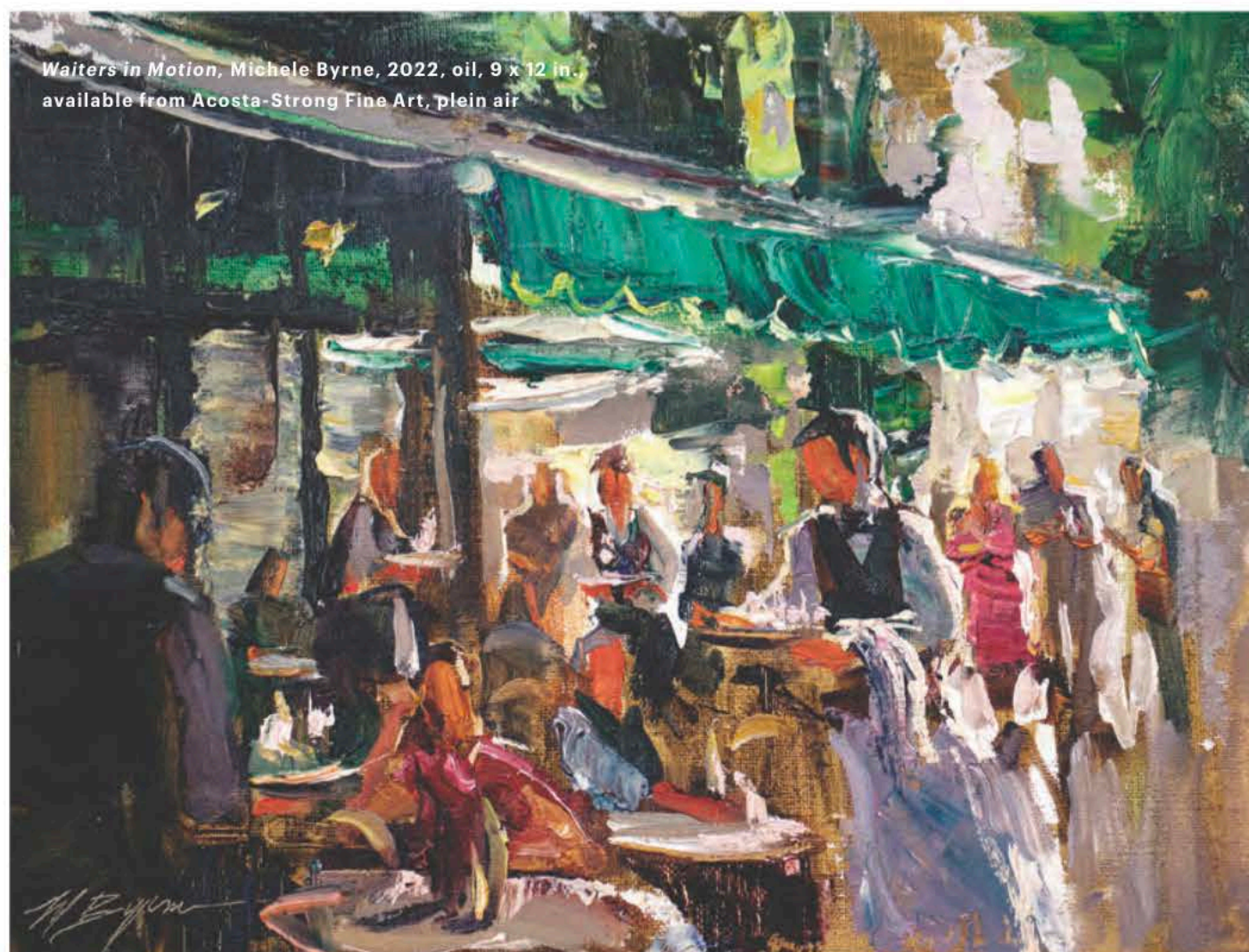


Jane Hunt and Christine Lashley

I think plein air painting can largely be broken down into “practice” and “performance” modes, and there are positive things about both. During a competition I’m often in performance mode because I know I have to get a certain number of pieces finished, so it’s generally not a time when I’m going to stretch myself. Practice mode, on the other hand, allows for more experimentation.

Because none of us were feeling rushed or pressured on this trip, we had plenty of time to compare notes, enjoy each other’s work, and help each other problem-solve. We even had time to go to a figure drawing group and visit some of my favorite museums together. I found it interesting to see what the others’ favorite pieces were, and it helped me reconsider paintings I may have previously overlooked (like Michele’s appreciation of Toulouse-Lautrec, for example).

With most groups of painters there’s a certain level of camaraderie. However, with this group of friends, because we’re all painters and mothers, at similar life and career stages, there was a certain level of intimacy that happened effortlessly. Our personalities meshed well, and we painted hard but also had a lot of laughs.



Waiters in Motion, Michele Byrne, 2022, oil, 9 x 12 in., available from Acosta-Strong Fine Art, plein air



(LEFT) *Le Deux Magots Morning*, Michele Byrne, 2022, oil, 12 x 9 in., private collection, plein air ■ (BELOW) Thumbnail pencil sketch for *Le Deux Magots Morning*

MICHELE BYRNE | A PAINTING FRENZY

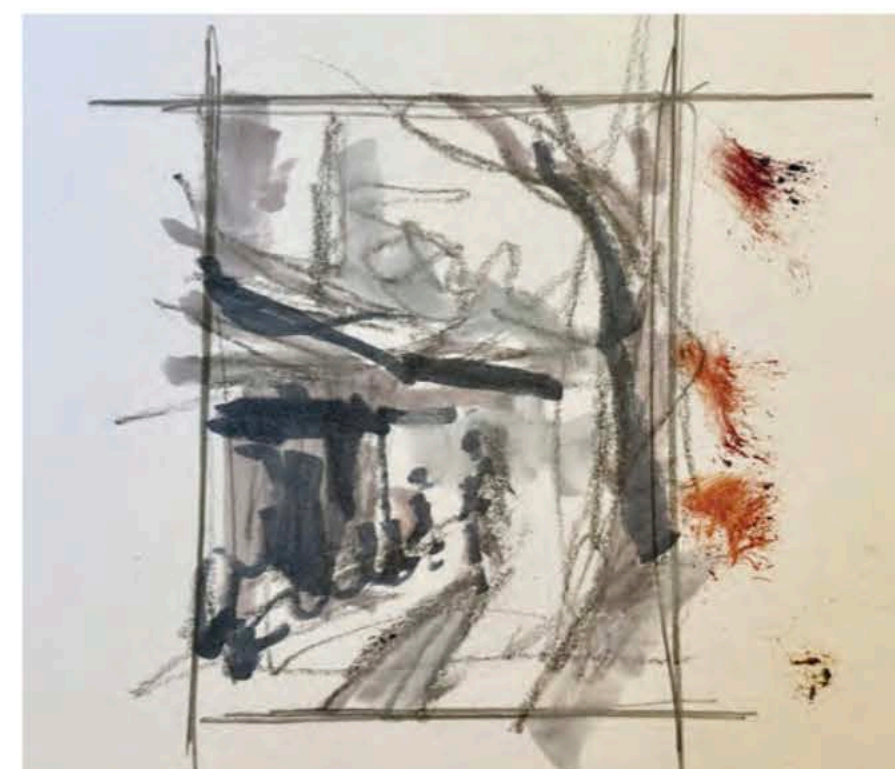
Unlike most plein air painters, I thrive on painting in the city, any city, but especially Paris and New York City. The culture and energy of Paris puts me in this kind of painting frenzy that shows through in my brush and knife work. I find the unknown of the outcome thrilling. Who I meet and who I talk to sometimes affects the final piece.

I’ve been to Paris about eight times, the first time as a 23-year-old backpacking through Europe, but this time, we visited a few places I had not been. One highlight was the day we went to the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere to paint live models. It didn’t matter who we were, or what language we spoke or didn’t speak. We were all just artists and shared that unique bond.

Another high point was the day we painted at La Deux Magots, the popular and infamous meeting place of artistic minds. I did a thumbnail for my first painting of the week, *Le Deux Magots Morning*, with the best intentions. But after that I found the time too limited and precious, so I just painted using my intuition and knowledge. Experience is the best teacher, and I have had a lot of that, painting city scenes plein air for the last 30 years.

Just as I had finished that first piece, Christine said she was starting a second painting. I’d spent a bit of time painting already, but decided to do the same and placed a new 9 x 12-inch panel on my easel. Without any plan (unusual for me), I went to work on a close-up version of the waiters and patrons. This piece has a raw energy that I’m very pleased with. In the future, when time allows, I believe making a second piece could be very valuable.

After 16 years of painting competitions, I decided to take a break and have not participated in any since the start of the pandemic. I’m finding I enjoy the freedom to paint where and when I choose. If you’re thinking about taking a trip with artist friends, my advice is to do it! Don’t just talk about it. Make a plan at least a year in advance. Pick a few folks whose company you enjoy and whose artwork you appreciate. And don’t be shy about painting on the sidewalks. People are generally kind; they love seeing artists paint and will respect you. 🌸



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They were fascinated that an artist saw their work site on a rainy day as picturesque and puzzled by my beginning marks, but complimentary of the final piece when they emerged an hour later.

My goal for this trip was to learn more about the pearlescent quality of light in Paris. I'd been studying value and design in master artwork before the trip and was excited to try out some new ideas. My strategy was 1) use my iPhone 12 Pro for video instead of crisp, static still photos; 2) create memory studies to distill the essence of a scene; 3) examine repeating value relationships (same value, different color) en plein air; 4) capture color and value dots as accurately and quickly as possible; 5) worry less about finish and drawing. I paid particular attention to gray days, twilight, and cast shadows. Shifting my focus from finished work was difficult at first, but I was able to spend about half my time doing value and color relationship studies to serve as reference back in the studio.

When I got home, my experimental value and color dot studies helped me to work larger and more efficiently. Study-to-studio process is somewhat new for me, as I don't usually do preliminary sketches such as thumbnails. My Paris studies enabled me to start a large 48 x 60-inch oil quickly with a large brush and know which values to use for the sky and building. Color came later as a finishing touch. Since I'm mostly an intuitive painter, it has felt good to work this structure and discipline into my repertoire.

Seeing what inspired one artist versus another on the trip was insightful as well. I loved seeing Suzie's colorful start and decisive brushstrokes, Jane's tonal control of value for impact and composition, and Michele's palette knife marks and vitality in her work. One

day I arrived late to the spot we'd planned to paint on the Concorde bridge and everyone had a great start going. Seeing the half-finished work inspired me to work extra fast and not overthink things.

Painting is primarily a solo activity, and it's easy to fall into a rut. Learning from other artists is critical for growth; it shakes up our creative world in a good way, sparking new directions and challenging artistic ideas. Group creativity has a short-term payoff of synergy and excitement, and long-lasting benefit of deeper learning. I can't wait to see what continues to develop from my Paris trip.



Life drawing at Academie de la Grand Chaumiere



Sunset Impression, Christine Lashley, 2022, oil, 6 x 8 in., private collection, plein air



Paris Sunset 1, Jane Hunt, 2022, oil, 4 1/2 x 8 in., available from Vanessa Rothe Fine Art, plein air



JANE HUNT | IN PRACTICE MODE

I was coming off teaching and painting for two weeks in Giverny when I met the others in the city. Growing up in Europe, I've spent a ton of time in Paris, but Christine introduced me to some great places off the beaten path. After a month in France, I also learned that a combo of burnt sienna and ultramarine blue can be used to touch up your roots if you're in a real pinch!

Any time I paint en plein air, all my senses are engaged, which infuses the finished piece with a real sense of place. I also find that people in Paris really appreciate the arts; our onlookers were overwhelmingly supportive and friendly.

For a series of studies of the River Seine, I chose to tape my panels into smaller sections. Having just come from Giverny, with a deep immersion in all things Monet, I loved the idea of following in his tradition of quick color studies of the same scene in changing light. The first night I simply taped my panel in two, which made me realize I wanted to push the experiment further.

The second night I taped my panel into nine sections, which at first felt overwhelming. However, it forced me to work incredibly fast just to capture the color and impression of the place. From these color studies I learned a tremendous amount about painting faster and not becoming too attached to creating finished pieces.

It was fantastic to be with a group of really strong painters. Because Christine, Michele, and I all work solvent-free, it was helpful to put our heads together and compare notes. I use water-miscible oils, and one day when I was out with Suzie it rained hard enough that my painting was literally running down the panel. I used Suzie's oil paints for the next couple of pieces, and it was lovely to be able to stand and paint in the rain. Going forward, I may adopt a technique similar to Christine's for certain situations. Essentially, I'd block in with water-miscible oils and then move to traditional oils later in the painting.

Paris Sketchbook Study (copied in black and white to showcase the values), Christine Lashley, 2022, watercolor, 5 x 7 in., collection the artist, plein air



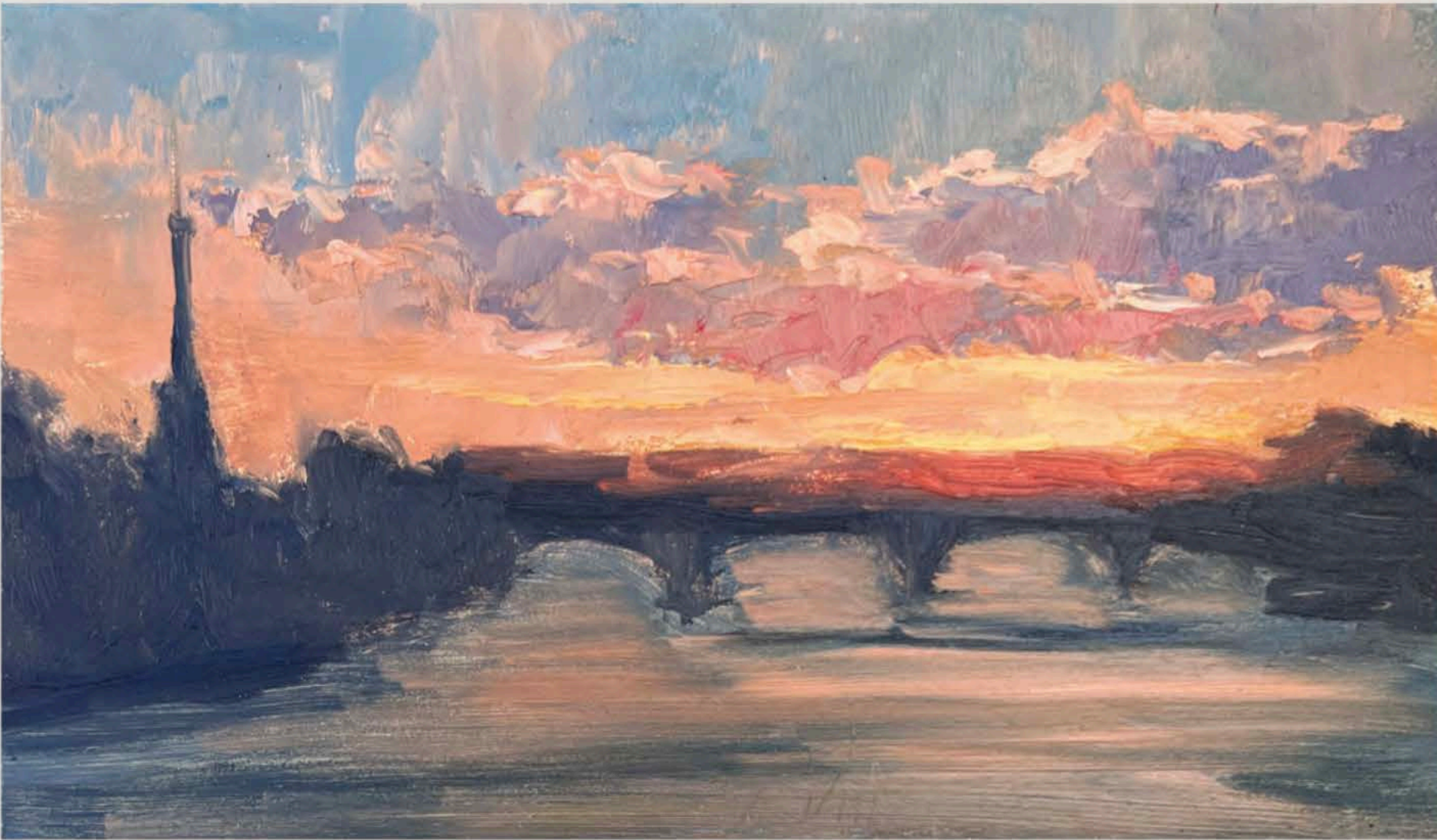
(TOP) *Boulevard Saint-Germain*, Suzie Baker, 2022, oil, 6 x 8 in., available from artist, plein air • (ABOVE, L-R) Suzie Baker with her plein air setup at Luxembourg Gardens • A metal box that had belonged to Baker's grandmother kept the artist's paints safe. • Baker's plein air oil sketches



(TOP) *Last Night in Paris*, Christine Lashley, 2022, oil, 6 x 12 in., available from Vanessa Rothe Fine Art, plein air • (ABOVE) *Paris Glow*, Christine Lashley, 2022, oil, 6 x 12 in., available from Vanessa Rothe Fine Art, plein air and studio



(TOP) Saint Germain Corner, Christine Lashley, 2022, oil, 8 x 6 in., available at Principle Gallery, plein air



Paris Sunset 2, Jane Hunt, 2022, oil, 4 1/2 x 8 in., available from Vanessa Rothe Fine Art, plein air



Tuileries, Suzie Baker, 2022, oil, 8 x 10 in., available from VRFA Gallery, plein air



Cafe Flore, Christine Lashley, 2022, oil, 6 x 8 in., private collection, plein air



Christine Lashley



Jane Hunt



(TOP) *Le Café Express*, Michele Byrne, 2022, oil, 10 x 8 in., private collection, plein air • (ABOVE) *Moody Morn on Pont Neuf*, Michele Byrne, 2022, oil, 10 x 8 in., private collection, plein air (LEFT) *Tuileries*, Jane Hunt, 2022, oil, 10 x 8 in., available from artist, plein air and studio



Vin Rouge in Odeon
Michele Byrne
2022, oil, 8 x 10 in.
Private collection
Plein air