

Plein Camaraderie

Paint Al Fresco in France

BY CHARLIE MILLER ALDINGER

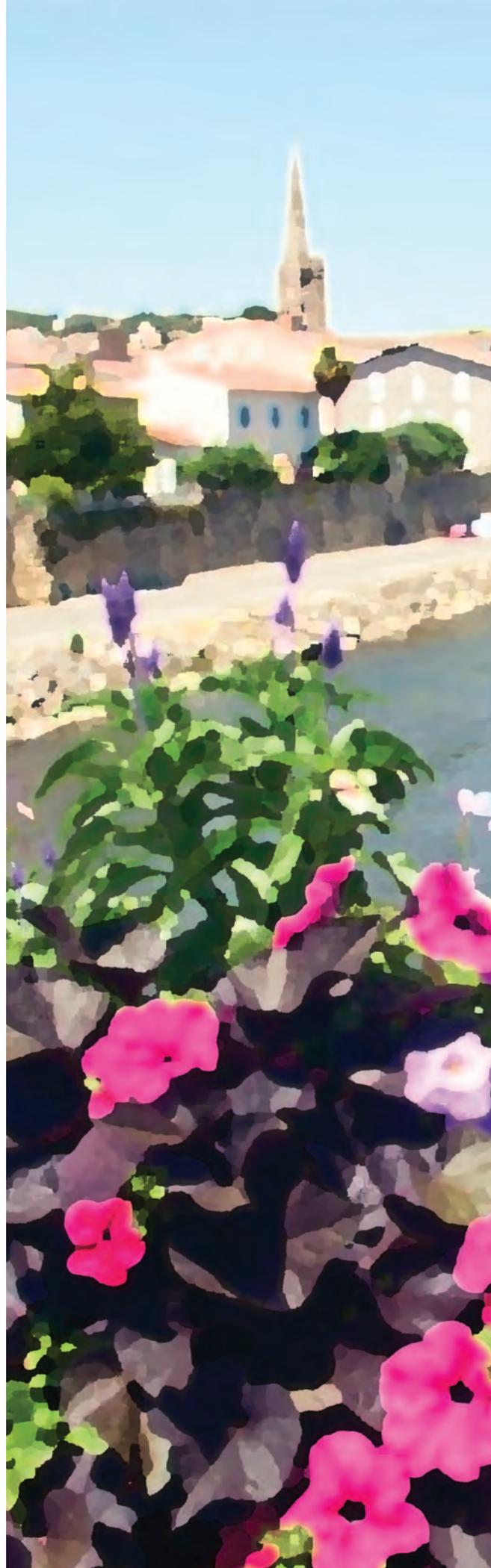
CLAUDE MONET ESCAPED THE HEAT OF PARIS by traveling to Giverny, where the gardens, lily ponds and picturesque bridges captured his imagination. His friend Pierre-Auguste Renoir painted on the banks of the Seine River, in Guernsey on the English Channel, and in later years, on a farm at Cagnes-sur-Mer near the Mediterranean. Camille Pissarro, mentor to Post-Impressionists Paul Gauguin and Paul Cézanne, painted scenes of rural and urban French life, particularly landscapes in and around Pontoise and Montmartre. Gauguin once spent nine weeks painting in Arles with his friend Vincent van Gogh before sailing off to the tropics “to escape everything that is artificial and conventional.”

En Plein Air. It’s the simple, solitary act of painting out of doors, in the open air. More than any other art form, en plein air celebrates “the spirit of place.” The French had their love affair with natural light—something shared by those with a flair for visual arts find in the islands, as well.

Artists of Hawai‘i—here’s your dream-come-true. Maui artist Julie Houck will lead you on her once-a-year trip of a lifetime, “A Plein Air Journey,” to the south of France. Think sun-soaked canvases, painting by moonlight and communal suppers with farm-fresh vegetables and regional French wines. Participants whet their brushes in and around the picturesque village of Limoux, where there’s no shortage of medieval bridges, abbeys, churches and fields of wheat. The locale is flanked by the Mediterranean coastline on one side and the majestic Pyrenees mountains on the other, complete with miles of vineyards in between, spotted with sunflowers. If you can’t tap your inner Cézanne here, then it quite simply isn’t meant to be.

You’ll bed down in Montfaucon, a fully restored 14th century country residence with river views from the multiple terraces, cozy fireplaces, and (something Matisse only dreamed of) air conditioning and Internet access. The group has the entire house to themselves. Chef Monoz prepares most of the meals on site, while other evenings will explore some of the best restaurants in town. It’s all very leisurely and civilized.

Houck has been teaching plein air painting for more than a decade. She provides encouragement, instruction, unlimited enthusiasm and patience, and certainly by now knows how to nurse an artist’s hangover or two. Her art career began in Boston, where she was a professional photographer for 17 years. After traveling throughout Europe, Asia and the United States, she redirected her career, studying painting





If you can't tap into your inner Cézanne here, in Limoux, France, then it simply isn't meant to be.

photo courtesy Montfaucon



photos courtesy Montfaucon

photo by Jeanette Evans

Houck's one-on-one instruction and attention to individuals sets her above the rest; your accommodations at Montfaucon.



at the Atelier of Classical Realism in San Francisco with David Hardy, at the Academy of Fine Art in Seattle with Anthony Ryder, and in France at the L'Ecole Albert Defois with Ted Seth Jacobs. She was one of only 40 artists invited to participate in the Pacific Northwest Plein Air Invitational in Hood River, Ore., and the Nomades del Arte in Dallas, Texas.

“As a photographer, I learned the importance of composition and light, and now I’ve combined this knowledge with the classical principles of painting utilizing the direct observation of light, color and form in nature,” says Houck. “Atmosphere, emotion and the transmission of light fascinate me.”

While in France, the group, which includes less than a dozen artists, venture out each day into the French countryside to paint. Houck’s instruction focuses on teaching the dynamics of light, going from easel to easel for personalized feedback throughout the

day followed by a shared critique session in the afternoon (held in a medieval wine cellar) while enjoying the region’s famous aperitif blanquette.

“It’s not a cookie-cutter course. I really encourage each artist to pursue their own style, whatever the medium they are using,” says Houck. “It’s quite amazing the growth I see in the artists when they are freed from the distractions of home and allowed to totally focus on their work and let their creative selves emerge. There’s a lot of bonding and cross-pollination that is exchanged between the artists. It’s completely transformative, living and working together in such an inspirational setting.” ♦

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