

# Into Plein Air



Capturing Florida's Forgotten Coast on canvas, more than twenty plein air artists painting on location visited last spring for a ten-day inaugural "paint-out."

**m**

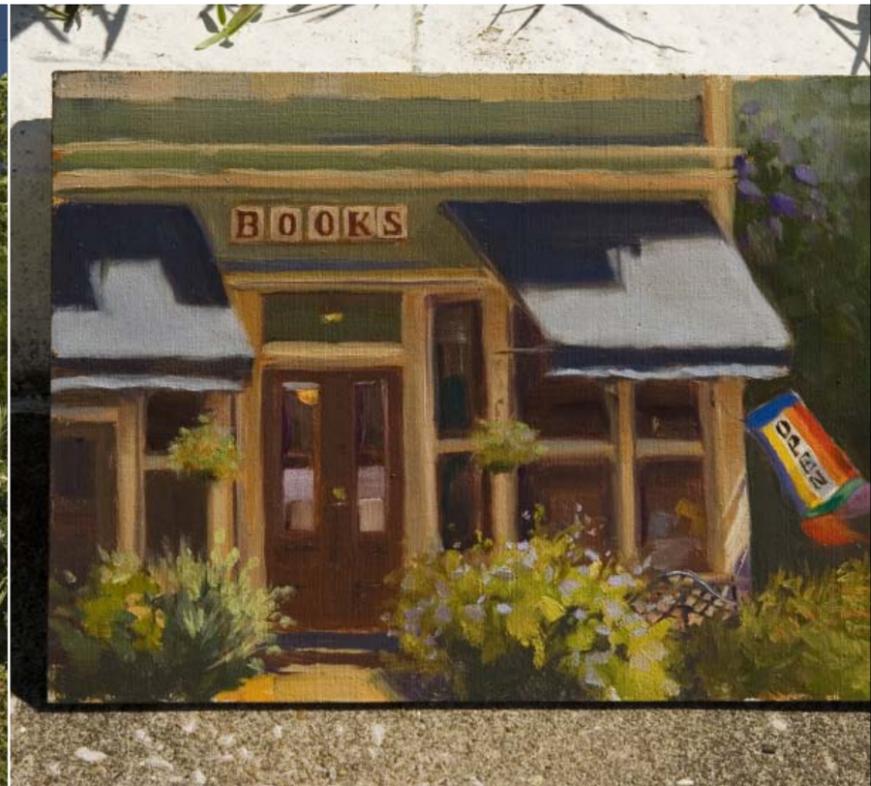
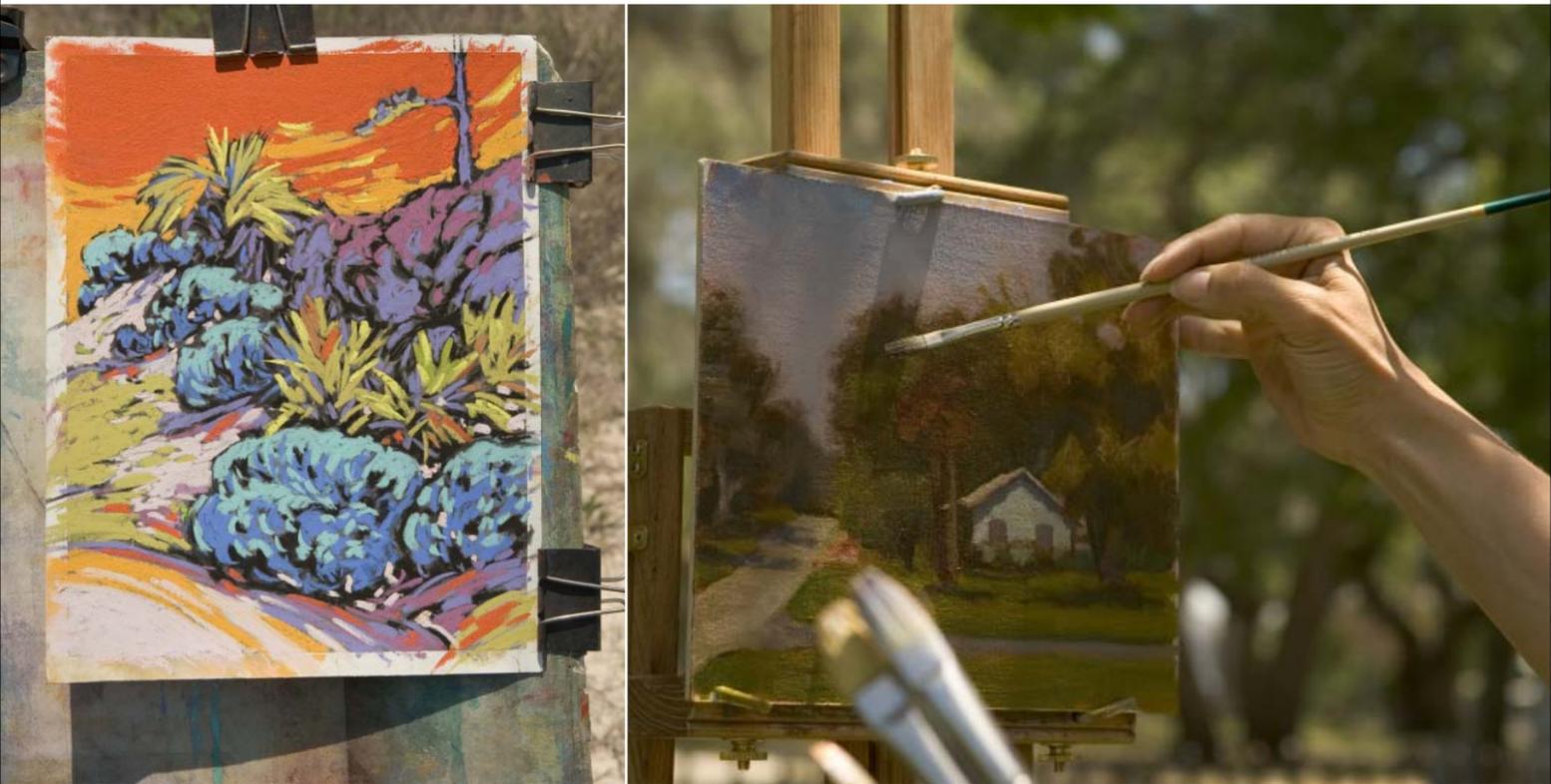
Martin Figlinski hops out of his white Enterprise rental van and quickly strides up and down Avenue G and Commerce Street in downtown Apalachicola. Two abandoned buildings in the city's bowery district have caught his eye—the former Two Spot package store and Isabelle's—and the plein air artist wants to see if they'll make a good subject for this morning's painting. Pausing at various spots on the two streets, he forms his hands into a rectangular picture frame around his right eye and squints through at the buildings. He doesn't like what he sees.

"I'm looking for a site with old buildings that moves me," he says. "Something that captures the old charm of this place.

But it also has to be a place where the light is hitting something in a certain way that will really give the painting life." The morning light isn't good enough here, Figlinski determines, so he moves on. And quickly strikes pay dirt.

The old Apalach Marine building at 81 Water Street is perfect, he says. It seems a curious choice. The second story of the gray corrugated-tin building is heavily streaked with a burnt orange rust that clashes with the first story's baby blue facade. Broken windows abound, and there's a murky pool of

**LEFT:** The Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve is the setting for Plein Air artist Charles Dickenson's nautical painting.



**ABOVE (LEFT TO RIGHT):** Sally Evans' vivid use of bright, colorful pastels offers a striking take on this Indian Pass scene. Joy Bristol of Burbank, California, paints under the cover of live oaks near the old city cemetery off Highway 98 in Apalachicola. Downtown Books in Apalachicola is a popular haunt for those looking for quality books about the area. North Carolina native Mary Erickson uses oils on linen panels for her take on the landmark.

stagnant water in the crawl space underneath what was once the front office. To the casual observer, Apalach Marine is, well, an eyesore. But Figlinski doesn't see it that way.

"See how the sun is hitting those adjacent trees really hard, making spots of bright color on the building's side?" he asks excitedly. "There's good shadows, good light, good contrast here." Gesturing toward the water in the crawl space, Figlinski continues, "That dark part at the bottom will create a lot of drama in the painting, and there's good color with the light blue metal front, rusted second floor, and the blue sky with those big white clouds." Suddenly, the beauty of the place—its intriguing colors, shapes, and light—is embarrassingly evident.

**F**iglinski, from Lynn Haven, Florida, was one of about twenty artists who converged late last spring for a "paint-out" along Florida's Forgotten Coast, a remote and beautiful expanse of shoreline stretching from Mexico Beach in the west to Panacea in the east. Brought in by the Gulf Alliance for Local Arts with backing by The St. Joe Company, these painters were charged with capturing the region's spirit and Old Florida charm before they're forever lost to modernity and the vestiges of time. A select group of artists will be invited back every spring for at

least the next four years, eventually creating an extensive body of work more than a thousand paintings strong. While most of the paintings will be offered for sale to the general public, The St. Joe Company is buying some to display in new developments. The company also is photographing every painting to be compiled into a tome sometime in the next few years that will, in essence, be a visual encyclopedic record of the Forgotten Coast in the early part of the twenty-first century—a treasure for generations to come.

Richard Carrell, a Gulf Alliance board member, former gallery owner, and the project's instigator, selected artists who would create "plein air" paintings. A French term meaning "open air," the plein air style emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century, when artists left their studios to paint outside. Seeking to capture "true" nature, and trusting their sight, they painted outdoors in any weather, experimenting with the changing quality of the light throughout the day. These artists were eventually known as Impressionists. Painting en plein air, or on site, soon became central to the budding Impressionist movement, which involved quick sketching. Plein air tenets eventually affected the work of famed Impressionists such as Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

The movement caught on in America in the middle to late

*A French term meaning "open air," the plein air style emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century, when artists left their studios to paint outside.*

nineteenth century, when a group of artists based in the Hudson River Valley began exploring its rich natural environment for sites to paint. Eventually these pioneers, who became known as the Hudson River School Artists, opened Americans' eyes to the beauty, tranquility, and grandeur of nature; their paintings today hang in prestigious locales such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. "We're reviving this same tradition to capture the Forgotten Coast," Carrell says. "Those Hudson River School paintings by artists such as Thomas Cole, Mary Cassatt, Frederic Edwin Church, and Albert Bierstadt are now national treasures—and I foresee that the pictures coming from our paint-outs will be too, someday."

The plein air artists had ten days to capture a slice of the Forgotten Coast's beauty, from secluded pine forests to more than eighty miles of shore along the Gulf of Mexico. Organizers steered them toward Apalachicola, Indian Pass, Cape San Blas, Wewahitchka, Port St. Joe, and Mexico Beach, noting several spots in each location they'd likely find appeal-

ing: the lighthouse and St. Joseph Peninsula State Park in Cape San Blas, for example, or the Old Presbyterian Church, Dead Lakes, and L. L. Lanier's beehives further inland in Wewahitchka. The artists headed to these spots, and then let inspiration lead them by the hand.

**J**oy Bristol, a young, red-haired artist hailing from Burbank, California, sets up her easel just outside the old cemetery in Apalachicola. She's painting a home across the street this morning, and plans to find a spot to paint in the cemetery this afternoon. Unlike studio painters, who often base their artwork on photographs and can take days or even weeks to complete just one piece, plein air painters typically finish one or even two or three paintings every day they're in the field. That's because their work is tied so closely to the light. As the sun slowly arcs toward its zenith in the sky, then drops back down, the intensity and position of its light change. Shadows appear and disappear, elongate and shorten. Colors sharpen and mute. The artists must move quickly, locking in the shadows



**LEFT:** Plein Air artist Charles Dickinson of St. Augustine, Florida, and his wife, Debbie, begin a full day of marine scenes as a shrimp boat docks on Scipio Creek in Apalachicola. Participants in the Forgotten Coast Paint Off like Mary Erickson are required to finish their paintings the same day they started. At the end of a frantic day of painting and framing for public display, nothing is left but the oils.

and shapes on their stretched canvas or linen before filling in the colors. Typically, they have about three hours to finish before the moment is lost. Because of this, their paintings typically measure sixteen by twenty inches or smaller.

Bristol has been painting scenes from the Forgotten Coast for seven days now and has about eighteen finished pieces waiting to be framed. You'd think she might be running out of inspiring sites, yet so many places have caught her eye she doesn't know where to turn next. "There is an endless variety of subjects to paint here," Bristol says. She's found beautiful landscapes, old oak trees, even broken-down homes and rusting factories. In fact, the first place she just knew she had to paint was the Arizona Chemical Company just off U.S.

Highway 98 on the western edge of Port St. Joe.

Built around the 1930s, Arizona Chemical's signature gray twin peaks stew resins twenty-four hours a day. Many people dismiss the place as just a typical ugly factory, or even a blight on the pristine shoreline just across the road. Others appreciate it as the city's main employer. Few think of it as attractive. But Bristol's painting shows the industrial elegance of its rusty catwalks, encircling each tower like glistening garland, and reveals the warmth in the numerous yellow spotlights dotting the peaks. "I'm being drawn to the things that are old here," Bristol says. "They have such a magical quality and feeling that's hard to pin down."

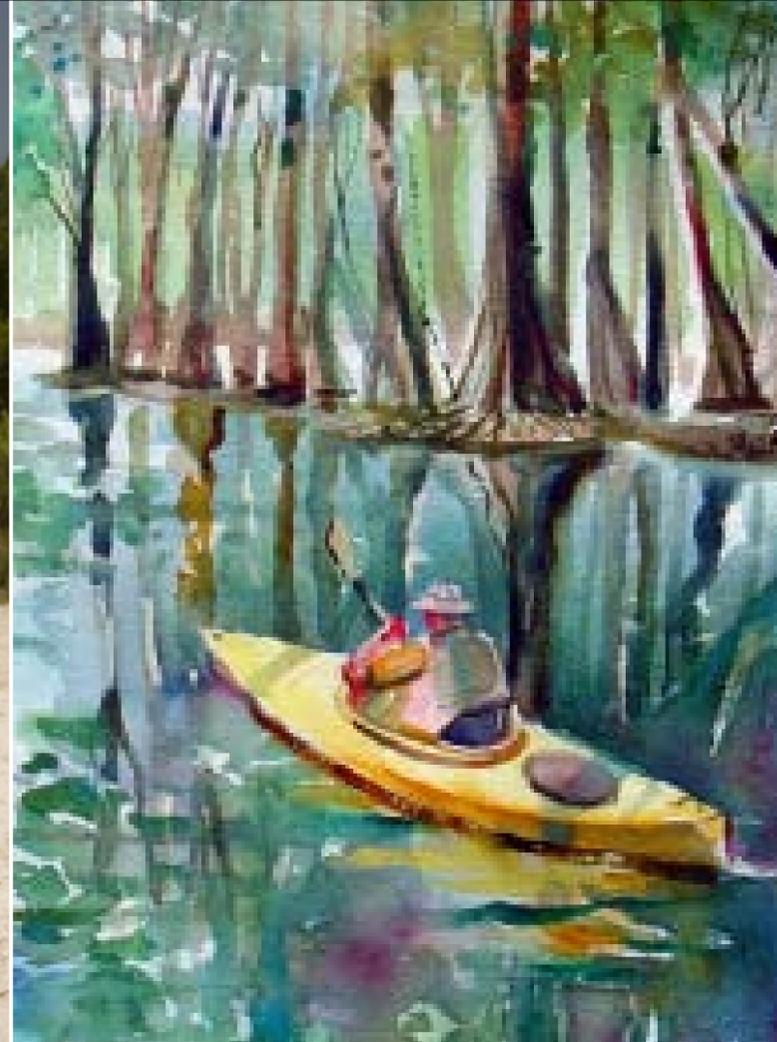
In downtown Apalachicola, artist Mary Erickson of North Carolina is tucked behind a shady bush next to the post office. Erickson is almost finished painting Downtown Books, which sits just across Commerce Street. The five-year-old bookshop is housed in a slightly-tilting 1900 building that's held everything from a barbershop to a dry goods store and art gallery in its previous incarnations. "I like to document what's around me," Erickson says, "whether it's people doing their jobs or an old building that may not be here later on, in order to capture this moment in time. Our lives change so quickly, it's my way of saying, 'Hey! This was here!'"

As the artists paint all over the Forgotten Coast day after day, they pique the interest of many locals, who often stop by to chat with the artists and see what they're up to. Some are initially perplexed about why an artist would paint something

as run-down as Apalach Marine. But as they see the history of their region—and, really, of themselves—come alive in glistening oils and airy watercolors, many are swept up in the artists' excitement. And they start to appreciate the meaning behind every weathered board, puckered shingle, and snow-white sand dune in their backyard.

"Every painting has a story," Erickson says. "People will always stop and tell you the name of the creek you're painting, for instance, and that it's Joe's favorite spot but he's been sick and won't be able to fish there for a while."

One fellow asks Bristol to paint the Purple Bar, a local hot spot in Mexico Beach. It doesn't sound appealing, but when she eventually sees the grape-colored establishment, something about its spirit grabs her, compelling her to set up her easel. As she paints, a steady stream of residents stop by to regale her with stories about the place. One guy explains the



**ABOVE (LEFT TO RIGHT):** Mary Erickson's "Old Florida Palms" involved hours spent in the sun searching for the right light and angle for her painting. Philip S. Steel captures a kayaker exploring the cypress environs of the Dead Lakes near Wewahitchka.

details of a bar fight he was ensnared in; an elderly couple living in Mexico Beach since the 1940s reminisces about its early days as an ice cream parlor.

Hank Fleck is sitting in the shade outside of St. Patrick's Seafood in Port St. Joe, smothered in ferns as he paints the landmark seafood market that's been in business since 1972. "It's certainly a unique building with a great feeling about it," he says. "And it's surrounded by this great foliage—that's what attracted me to it."

Patrick McFarland Jr. isn't surprised. A lot of people stop to paint the business he owns with his father, lured to its gardens like ants to honey. As customers steadily drop in for St. Patrick's fresh oysters, grouper and mounds of shrimp (the best-seller), McFarland proudly notes his shop is the oldest seafood market in Port St. Joe. "We have a good reputation," he says, "and most of our business comes by word of mouth." McFarland pauses to push up his glasses, which are slipping down his nose from perspiration in the late-afternoon heat. "My parents like to garden. We have a greenhouse over there with hibiscus and spotter plants, and we planted azaleas in the '80s." And the ferns? They once grew at his aunt and uncle's home, McFarland says. But his aunt died four years ago, and

his seventy-something uncle wasn't able to care for them, so his father dug them up and planted them in front of the seafood market, where they spread like wildfire. And where, together with the longtime seafood market, they became a part of the Forgotten Coast's rich legacy.

**L**inda Blondheim is taking a lunch break at Papa Joe's Oyster Bar & Grill in Apalachicola. Although she's a Floridian, hailing from Gainesville just several hours away, she's overwhelmed by the beauty and diversity she's finding in her state's Panhandle. "I could paint here for years and never finish," she says. In 2001, Blondheim cofounded Plein Air Florida, a group of state-based plein air artists that now totals somewhere between three to four hundred. She wants to make sure people outside of the arts community understand plein air painting isn't a fad or style. "We paint on location for a lot of reasons," she says, one of which is to visually preserve not only history, but also an area's culture. "The land is always about our culture," she says, "no matter where we live."

On Friday, two days before the paint-out ends, a crowd of about two hundred locals and visitors shell out \$100 apiece

to attend a gala featuring food, drink, and music—not to mention the chance to have first dibs on purchasing the completed paintings, which number nearly 250. Even to those with no ties to the Forgotten Coast, the display that's carefully set up under billowing tents sends shivers down the spine. Painting after painting poignantly depicts instantly recogniz-

able scenes. The area's ubiquitous salt marshes. The old black-and-white lighthouse on Cape San Blas. The narrow shotgun homes in Port St. Joe. Shrimping boats bobbing in the bay. The Old Presbyterian Church in Wewahitchka and Trinity Episcopal in Apalachicola. The striking cypress snags and stumps poking out from the Dead Lakes like a Floridian Stonehenge. And, yes, the Purple Bar.

grace. A nostalgic feeling for days gone by, tinged with hope and excitement for the future. The certainty that there's a magic in this tiny corner of the world that can never be snuffed out.

*"We paint on location for a lot of reasons," Linda Blondheim says, one of which is to visually preserve not only history, but also an area's culture. "The land is always about our culture,..."*

able scenes. The area's ubiquitous salt marshes. The old black-and-white lighthouse on Cape San Blas. The narrow shotgun homes in Port St. Joe. Shrimping boats bobbing in the bay. The Old Presbyterian Church in Wewahitchka and Trinity Episcopal in Apalachicola. The striking cypress snags and stumps poking out from the Dead Lakes like a Floridian Stonehenge. And, yes, the Purple Bar.

The paintings impart a powerful sense of dignity and

Figlinski whispers. "I hope she puts a few by my paintings!" The Dot Fairy steadily works throughout the evening and again on Sunday, when the paintings are on display for sale to the general public. Yes, Figlinski scores plenty of dots, including one by each of the two paintings he did of rusty old Apalach Marine. By the time the paint-out ends, about 120 pieces from various artists have found new homes. And the Forgotten Coast lives on.



**Artist:** Joy Bristol  
**Hometown:** Burbank, California  
**Thoughts on Forgotten Coast:** It's really amazing here. California is beautiful, but this is different. It would be really great if this paint-out caught on and photographers, painters, and poets all came to the area to be inspired.



**Artist:** Barbara Perrotti  
**Hometown:** Ormond Beach, Florida  
**Thoughts on Forgotten Coast:** Indian Pass was unbelievable—the marshes were gorgeous, the dunes, the fencing, the little paths down to the ocean.



**Artist:** Charles Dickinson  
**Hometown:** St. Augustine, Florida  
**Thoughts on Forgotten Coast:** I look at subject matter as an artist's diet—a little of everything is healthy. And that's what's here: water, beaches, trains ... so it's fun.



**Artist:** Mary Jane Volkmann  
**Hometown:** Gainesville, Florida  
**Thoughts on Forgotten Coast:** The people here are unbelievable. They're people of humility, kindness, and friendliness. They pull over all the time and are so excited and fascinated by what we're doing. It's very gratifying for us.