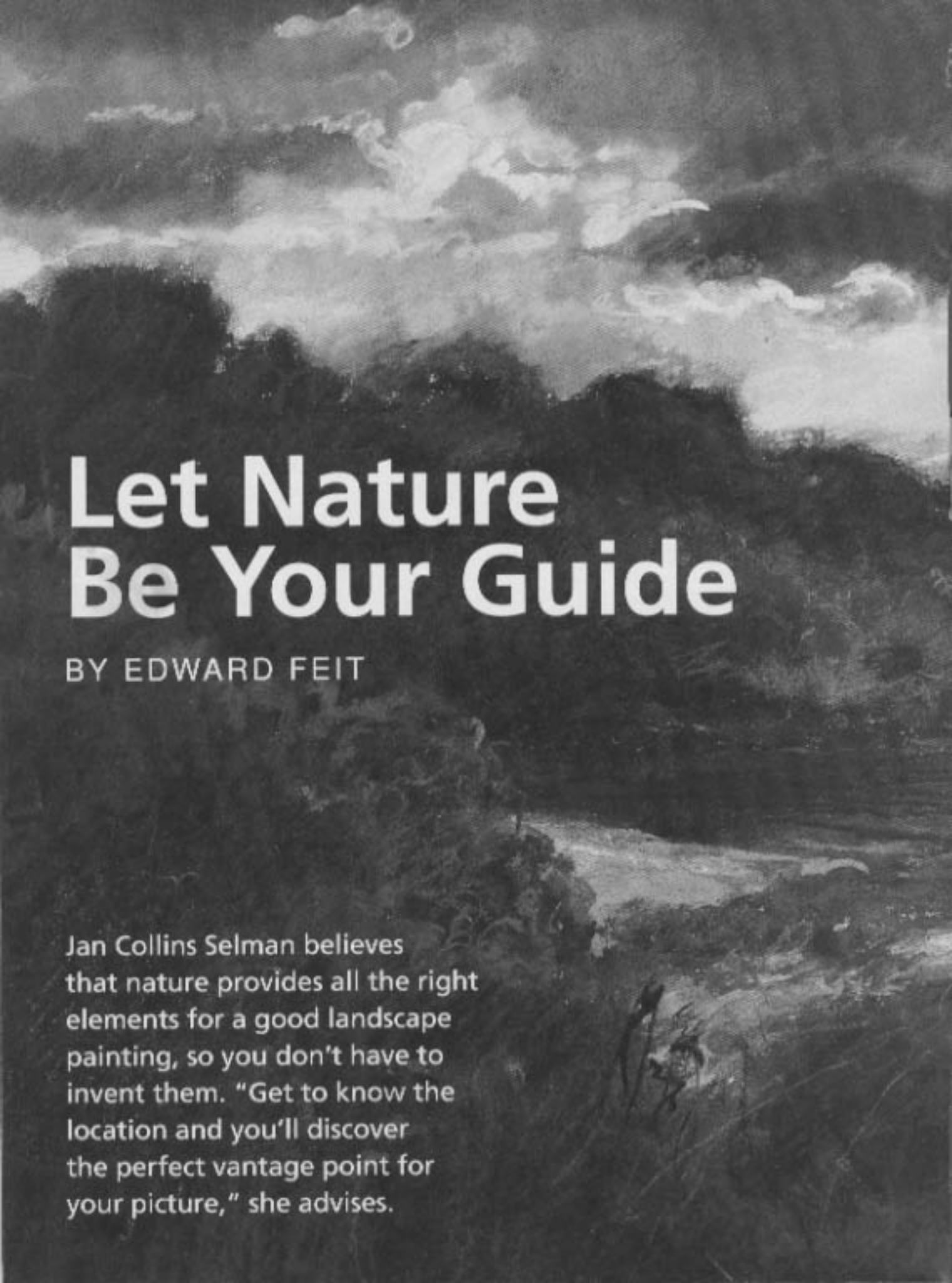


Let Nature Be Your Guide

BY EDWARD FEIT

Jan Collins Selman believes that nature provides all the right elements for a good landscape painting, so you don't have to invent them. "Get to know the location and you'll discover the perfect vantage point for your picture," she advises.

"When you settle on a particular spot of land for a painting, you've got to get a feel for it before you start to work," Jan Collins Selman declares. "Walk around it. Visit it in rain and in snow, in spring and summer. Touch the leaves scattered on the road that will be in the painting's foreground, feel the moss on the trees that will be in the background. But no matter what landscape you're painting, never move a tree from one hill to another in your composition. Don't mix and match. Pick your subject with care and preserve the unity of the scene. Learn to be selective *from the start*."

Refreshingly direct, Selman believes that when it comes to organizing a composition, no one does it better than nature. It is a viewpoint obviously shared by many painters. These artists feel that some landscape painters all too frequently resort to the "surefire" combinations: the breaking wave upon the rocks, the lonely sand dune, the perfectly balanced valley. They, like Selman, feel these clichéd images are merely "scenery," little more than ready-made compositions of subjects worked on in art schools. After more than a decade of plein-air painting around East Falmouth, Massachusetts, Selman has little use for an approach that would have her manipulate the elements in a landscape in order to achieve an easy effect.

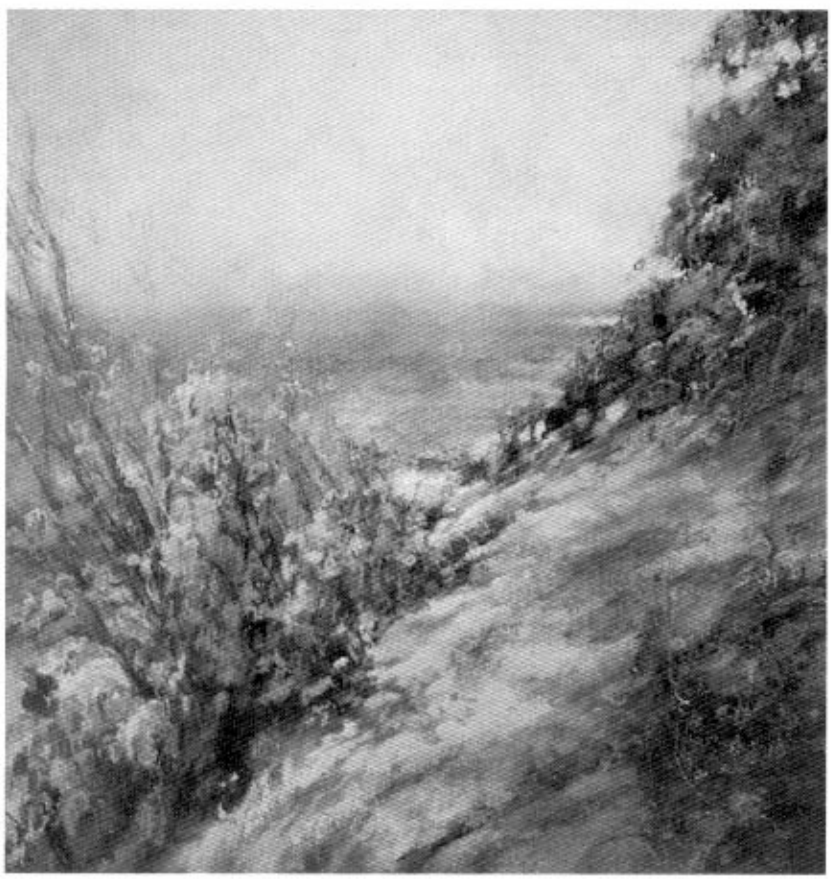
Photo: Edward Fet

Opposite page: *March Thaw: Edge of the Bog*, 1988, pastel, 28 x 22. Private collection.

Below: *Morning Dunes*, 1990, pastel, 20 x 30. Private collection.

When Selman creates one of her pastels, she submerges herself almost totally in the scene. For instance, when she was painting *Morning Dunes*, which is reproduced below, she often walked the distance between the wild grasses that appear in the painting's foreground and the rose bushes on top of the hill that first attracted her to the scene—"just to get a sense of how the place felt and to see how far the distance was," she says. "There's no better way to gain a sense of depth and to feel the terrain than by exploring it yourself." Although Selman paints a scene as it appears to her from afar—a blending of shapes, colors, and textures—she enjoys examining individual trees, grasses, and leaves. Indeed, to truly get the feel of a chosen landscape, she believes it's best to take an exacting inventory of it, tree by tree, hillock by hillock, even leaf by leaf.

"In the face of nature's complexity, I think it's a bit misleading to talk about a landscape in terms of simplicity," she observes. "Still, you have to make sure your work doesn't get *too* complicated." She protects against this by trying to figure out what will be compositionally dominant in a particular scene. A clump of bulrushes? A snow-covered hill? "Once you figure out the dominant compositional element or elements," Selman observes, "you should then determine what will be aesthetically dominant. To a large degree, subject determines style, so your style may very well change from picture to picture; in your treat-



Above: *Cliffside and Beyond—Morris Island,* 1990, pastel, 25 x 29. Collection the Cape Museum of Fine Arts, Dennis, Massachusetts.

Top: *January Thaw,* 1990, pastel, 8 ¼ x 9 ¼. Private collection.

Opposite page: *Good Morning Glory—Cahoon Hollow, Wellfleet,* 1990, pastel, 22 x 28. Collection the artist.

ment of various subjects, you may find yourself giving more or less emphasis to shape, space, edges, color, texture, or line. Monet, perhaps my favorite painter, was a master at matching style to subject."

Another way Selman remains true to the richness and complexity of nature is through her use of color. Working with forty to sixty sticks of pastel on a typical painting, she frequently fractures color into the full range of the spectrum and, in doing so, uses color *as* form. If you study one of her pastels of wild grasses

along the Massachusetts coast such as *Morning Dunes*, you'll notice first a dazzling multitude of yellow strokes that comprises a mass of marsh reeds and then—darting beneath the surface like fish swimming beneath waves—strokes of green representing the grass. Using an expressionistic mark, Selman frequently likes to dissolve a landscape into light and motion in this manner.

Selman usually avoids using black and white in her landscapes. She prefers mixtures of ultramarine blue, rose madder, carmine, and red oxide for her deepest darks. Instead of white, her lightest light is created by mixing cream and a bright lemon yellow. She uses this last color even in paintings depicting overcast scenes, which offer the light she prefers the most.

Selman enjoys sunny weather (especially for capturing new winter snows), but she has discovered that the best weather patterns for a painting come when there are overcast skies, fog, or stormy clouds. She loves painting in rain or snow (she carries minimal materials on these forays in order to make the painting process less cumbersome). Little wonder she loves the emotional force of J.M.W. Turner's landscapes. "Too often, contemporary landscapists try to paint picture-perfect scenes," she observes. "I always feel that a tree that has suffered damage from storms is so much more interesting than one that hasn't. My taste in subject matter resembles the emotional tenor found in a Van Gogh landscape; even in his sunniest landscapes, you sense an almost

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take my camera with me and use it for gathering reference material and for framing my view of a scene. It has a zoom lens, which allows me to bring the subject in closer if need be.

When painting a landscape, I first determine what will be the center of interest in the painting and then, with graphite, sketch that on the paper with very few lines. After that, I roughly establish elements of the foreground, middle ground, and background. If there is some sort of structure in the scene—a house, a bridge, or a boat—I make a more careful drawing of that shape.

After I have sketched in the composition, I wet the entire surface of the paper. When the sheen has disappeared, I paint in the background. Working on the damp paper keeps the edges soft and atmospheric. I use a rather classical watercolor technique, applying washes of color to build up the values from light to dark and preserving the white of the paper for the lightest shapes and edges. I sometimes work wet-in-wet or combine working wet with a dry-brush technique, depending on what will give me the results I'm after.

After the first soft tones of the background have been established, I paint the middle ground and the center of interest. When painting trees, I usually start with blue since I can always add yellow to make green. I also locate where sunlight hits the foliage and paint these areas yellow. Green is the last color I use because I find that I may need very little of it. If I am depicting water, I paint everything else first; this way, I paint only what is needed to make the painting look convincing.

With this much completed on the background and middle ground, the rest of the foreground becomes easy to resolve. The color will be purer and the lights and darks stronger than they are in the background since there is less atmosphere between the viewer and the subject. The last stage of the painting involves what I refer to as calligraphy—all the lines and finishing touches needed to complete the painting.

Recently, I have been combining my floral paintings with landscapes. In these works, I find it effective to retain the crisp realism of the floral forms and the less defined, softer qualities of the background landscape. I remove any obvious focal point from the landscape since I want the floral composition to be the central theme.

After getting as far as I can with a painting, I allow time for a thorough critique before framing it and sending it off to a gallery or show. I hang it in my living room where I can pass by and catch a glimpse of it during the day. I study it for days, take it back to the studio when I find something that needs to be changed, and keep studying and reworking it until I am satisfied.

At this point, if the paper has buckled, I block it by dampening the entire back with distilled water and a sponge, place it face down on a clean surface, and then lay a piece of Plexiglas over it. I apply weights evenly over the Plexiglas and allow the paper to dry overnight. After it spends a few more hours air drying in the studio, I mat and frame the painting using archival materials. ■

SELMAN

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ominous presence. I always remember that many people feel the greatest modern landscape painting ever created is Van Gogh's *Rain* (a recent bequest of Henry P. McIlhenny to the Philadelphia Museum of Art).

"I'm both a plein-air and a studio painter," she continues. "I tend to do my smaller work outside because I'm often painting in precarious places, climbing trees, or wading in water. When I get back to my studio—sometimes really late at night when the phone is blissfully quiet—I'll turn that small painting into something larger."

Primarily a pastelist, Selman favors Rembrandt and Schmincke pastels because she feels they are the smoothest and least gritty. When combining different brands of pastels on a painting, it's Selman's experience that some brands physically grate on each other like steel against steel because of their base or binding content. She finds that Rembrandt pastels, although stiffer, cover over the Schmincke pastels and work beautifully with them. "Both brands are wonderful," she states, "and since both companies make plenty of colors, their distributors and suppliers always have most of what I need on hand, and I've never experienced a shortage."

Selman prefers Rising four-ply rag board because of its rough surface. Other four-ply rag mats or museum mounting boards tend to have smooth surfaces or peculiar textures that resist the pastel. Whereas pastels may flake off other boards, she finds that Rising's distinctive nap holds them fast. She knows of no one else working in the medium who exploits this particular board's features the same way she does.

"I discovered many things in the seven years I worked at Almack's, a framing shop in Falmouth, Massachusetts," she says. "Much of what I learned comes in handy while working with pastels: using four-ply board, for example. I sometimes like to dampen the surface of the board, tack it down, and then apply the pastel. The pastel goes on easily and smoothly, and has a creamy, lush appearance that almost has the consistency of oils. It produces just the right smudge, though it's best used in small areas or for effects such as fog rolling in over water. I then let it dry, leaving a very textured look, which I like to experiment with."

Other techniques she enjoys exploring are steaming her pastels or using a fixative like a glaze—for layering—which she read about in Denis Rouart's writings on Degas. She often puts on her paintings as many as six to twelve layers of pastel and heavily fixes each layer. The results are similar to an oil painting, where medium is repeatedly used as a glaze.

In addition to layering her pastels with fixative in a traditional way, she also uses a more unique method: She begins her painting with hard pastels, such as those manufactured by Grumbacher or Nupastel, then paints the next layer with Rembrandt pastels, which tend to be softer, and finally draws the image with the softest of all pastels, Schmincke. After she applies a thin film of fixative, she begins the layering process all over again. "There's a completely different feel when you work this way," she says. "Although my work isn't tight, paintings in which I use only one type of pastel appear tighter than those where I layer the different brands. The layered works tend to be freer and more painterly."

Selman, however, doesn't always fix the finished work. "If it feels right, if the softness of the Schmincke pas-

tels is perfect for the feeling and quality of the scene, I'll leave it alone," she remarks. "For example, if the finished piece involves a thick fog, a final layer of Schmincke pastels is wonderful for that. If I want, I can achieve a more transparent fog by using the fixative plus, perhaps, a light rub with the side of a Rembrandt pastel. So there are different looks and ways of finishing each painting."

One of Selman's most cherished goals is for her collectors to be able to, as she puts it, "take a small part of Cape Cod home with them" in the form of one of her pastels. She believes that the light, the color, and the coolness or warmth of each painting comes from being a full-time "record keeper." "An artist must always keep searching for what lies beyond the familiar," she says, "and only by being truly faithful to nature can a painter do so. I'll never get tired of painting the world that surrounds me. Having the natural landscape as your subject makes each new canvas part of a process of self-discovery."

On a personal level, a struggle with alcoholism almost ended Selman's artistic career and very nearly ruined her life. She speaks openly now about the experience, feeling that the example of her recovery may offer support to those undergoing similar hardship. She studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, at the Cape Cod Community College, and at Southeastern Massachusetts University. After finishing school, she earned her living painting decorative murals for banks in New England. She then worked at the frame shop in Falmouth, where the owners allowed her to display some of her own work. Her paintings sold and soon she was picked up by the Hermine Merrell Smith gallery of Martha's Vineyard. Currently, she is represented by the Sherburne Gallery in Nantucket and the Andrew Usiskin Gallery in London.

"Everything's been sort of accidental," Selman remarks of the unpredictable course of her artistic career. "But I've worked for a long time painting and drawing—over thirty years—and I did so even when I was confronting serious obstacles. After all, I'm a painter." ■

For more information on supports for pastel paintings, see the "Nuts & Bolts" section in this issue.

Edward Feit is a longtime art enthusiast, collector, and now freelance writer on art.

HAMILTON

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often difficult to decide if a scene is night, day, or something in between. His desert night scenes often seem too bright to be nocturnal images, although, as anyone who has experienced the magic of a moonlit New Mexican sky can tell you, nights can be very bright and luminous there. "Not many people try to see things at night without resorting to artificial light," says Hamilton, "so most people miss out on a whole world of beautiful effects."

Hamilton has spent hours studying the nighttime desert sky and knows the way city lights can be reflected by a stray cloud, turning it pink. He knows how a cloudless sky can glow from a