

# Finding Direction in Historic Masterpieces

I questioned the disconnect between the work of contemporary “perceptual” painters and that of artists on the circuit of plein air festivals, so I went in search of answers at a workshop in Italy. I learned many things and gained a deeper understanding of my own painting heritage.

*By John P. Lasater IV*

Over the past few years, I have become interested in contemporary realists whose paintings are distinctly different from the typical plein air paintings exhibited in festivals and events. Those artists show little interest in documenting specific locations, romanticizing a scene with dramatic light or soft edges, or completing a painting in one session of two or three hours. They often call themselves “perceptual painters,” and a website founded by Larry Groff ([www.paintingperceptions.com](http://www.paintingperceptions.com)) says the term applies to “contemporary observational painting with some type of modernistic viewpoint.”

With “modernist viewpoint,” Groff suggests there is a direct link between perceptual painters and artists like Paul Cézanne, Pierre Bonnard, Willem DeKooning, and Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot — painters who are seldom listed as influences on artists profiled in *PleinAir* magazine.

I found my taste in art shifting to a more perceptual, design-based form of representation without really understanding the broader context of that philosophy. In searching, I found connections between perceptual painters and the work of Edwin Dickinson (1891-1978), a highly influential 20th-century painter and teacher. Dickinson was a student of William Merritt Chase (1849-1916) and Charles Hawthorne (1872-1930), and he was considered by some to be the visible manifestation of Hawthorne’s teaching. Dickinson and his students were progressive in their thinking, yet equally keen on empirical study of light and nature. They influenced painting throughout the 20th century, and consequently you and me.

One of the best known painters who has carried on this legacy of representation (or figuration)



**John P. Lasater IV stands next to some of the oil sketches he created on canvas taped to boards.**



**Monte Soratte in Civita Castellana**

**Israel Hershberg reviews student plein air paintings.**



## PLEIN AIR JOURNEYS

**View of Monte Soratte***2016, oil, 10 x 12 in.**Collection the artist**Plein air***A photograph of Civita Castellana**

is Israel Hershberg. Israel was trained in New York and identified with a 1960s post-abstract group called the Alliance of Figurative Artists. After teaching in American universities, he started the Jerusalem Studio School (JSS) in his native country of Israel. In studying his career, I began to hear of an Italy-based master class that Hershberg developed called JSS in Civita. I was juried into the class and attended the

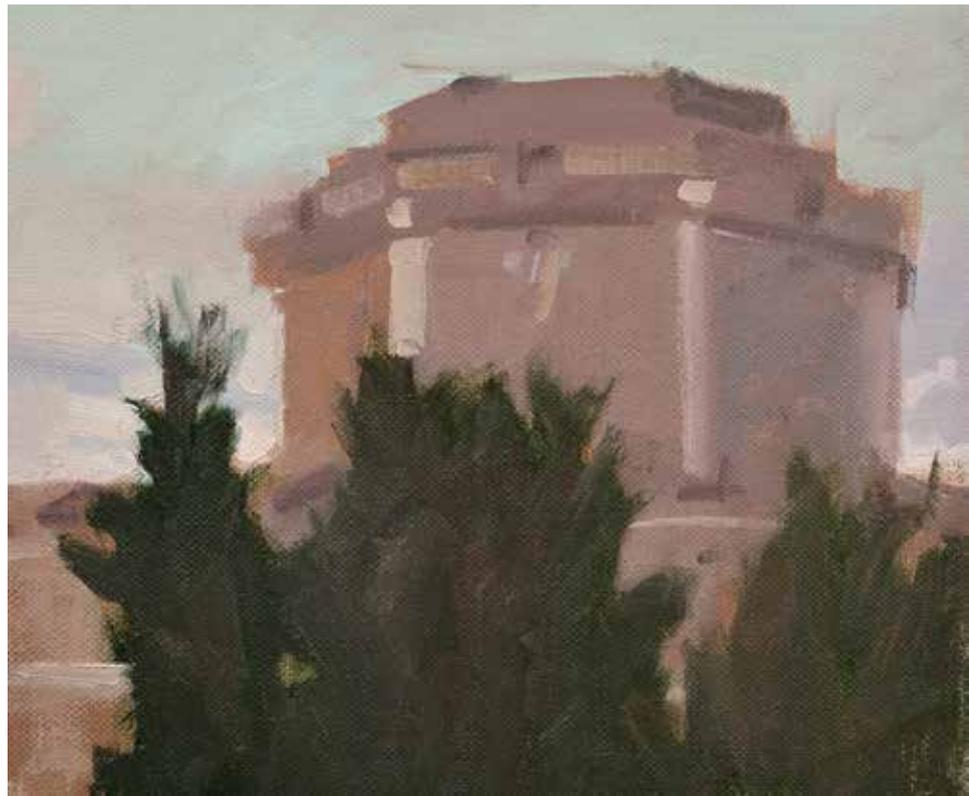
last half of the full six-week program, August 1-22, 2016, in the picturesque town of Civita Castellana, a short drive north of Rome.

“We are all pilgrims who seek Italy,” Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once said after his journeys in Italy from 1786-88. He reflected a timely sentiment popular with artists and writers of all kinds, but none so pioneering in his pure artistic response to nature as Jean-Baptiste-Camille

**Civita Castellana***2016, oil, 5 x 12 in.**Collection the artist**Plein air*



**Villa Maria**  
2016, oil, 11 x 14 in.  
Collection the artist  
Plein air



**Fort at Dusk**  
2016, oil, 10 x 12 in.  
Collection the artist  
Plein air



**Villa Morandi**

2016, oil, 11 x 14 in.

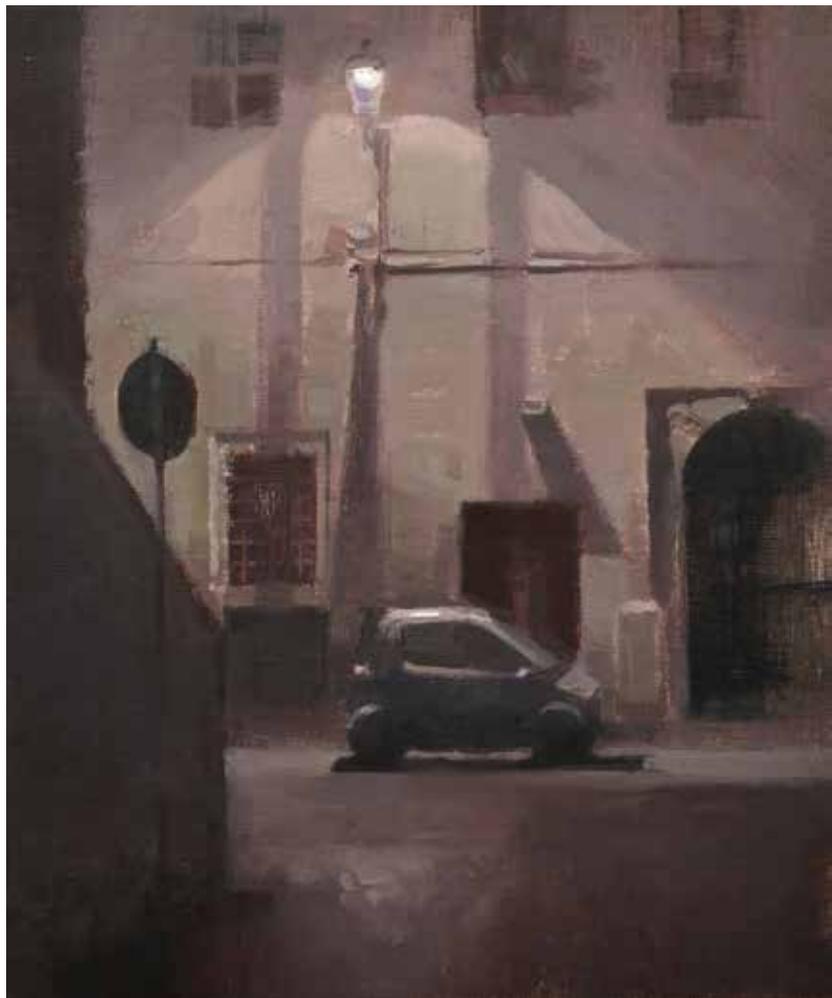
Collection the artist

*Plein air*

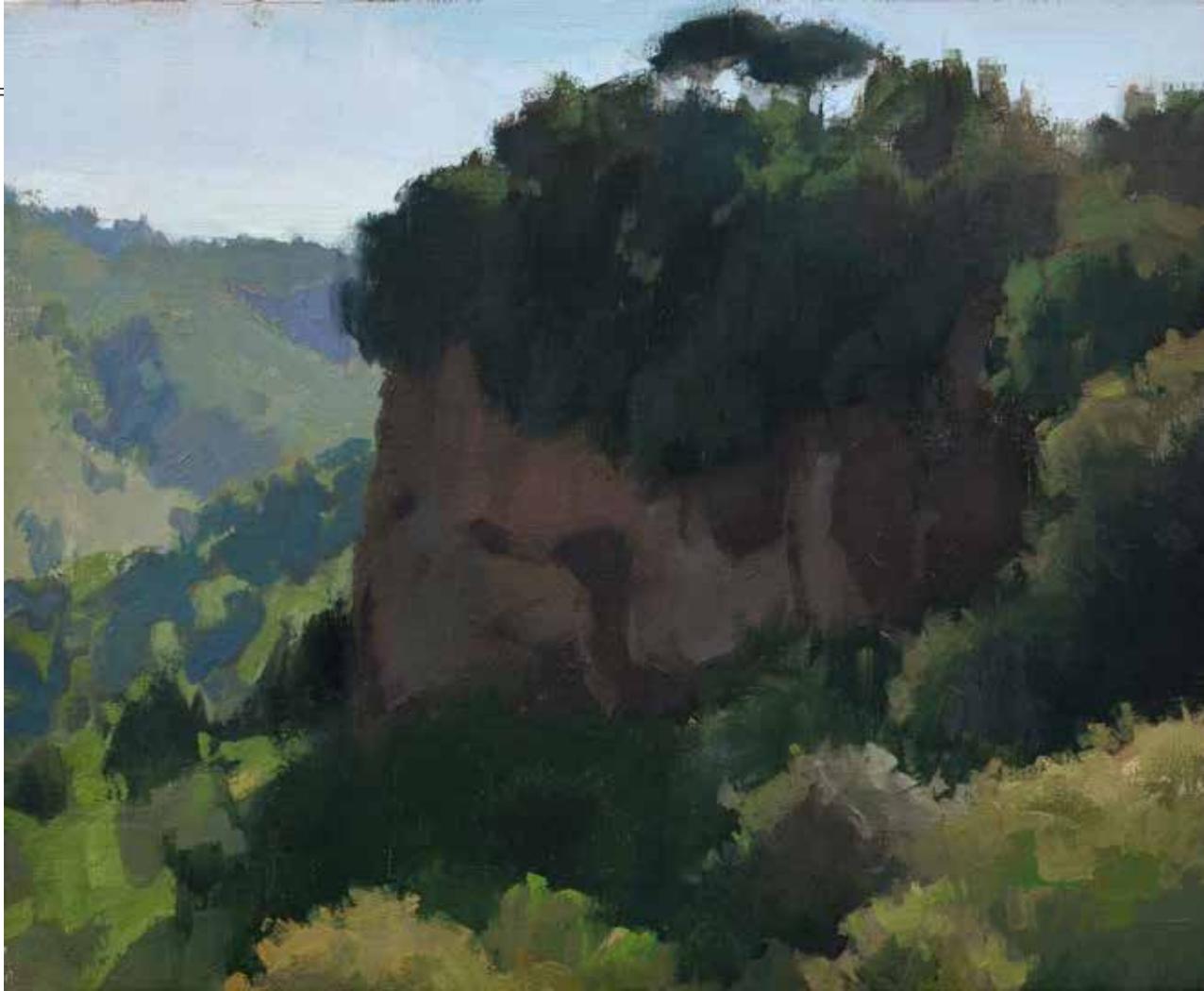
PLEIN AIR JOURNEYS



**Villa Bianca Entrance**  
2016, oil, 18 x 12 in.  
Collection the artist  
Plein air



**Civita Castellana at Night**  
2016, oil, 14 x 11 in.  
Collection the artist  
Plein air



**Edge of the Plateau**

2016, oil, 10 x 12 in.

Collection the artist

*Plein air*

Corot (1796-1875). Hershberg invokes Corot's name quite often, and as it turned out, this trip to Civita Castellana was a true Corot pilgrimage. It was also a pilgrimage to a location painted by Turner, Ingres, Bidault, and Bertin, who considered Civita Castellana a favorite painting location. The severe plateaus and pastoral hills dotted with ancient architecture are nothing short of Arcadian. It's an *en plein air* dream and arguably the birthplace of outdoor painting.

Italy is a long way from my home in Arkansas, and I traveled over 4,000 miles to reach Civita Castellana. Everything was uncomfortable about being alone in a new culture, around people more familiar with Italian and Israeli culture than American culture (although there were perhaps a dozen other artists from the U.S. and Canada). This uneasiness made it a milestone trip for me. Honestly, I hadn't had directed training in over 10 years, and I was tired of the sugar-coated positive feedback available on Facebook. It was time for some artistic reassessment and renewal. I hoped

Hershberg would be hard on me, identifying weaknesses in my work.

The best things I learned during those three weeks were philosophical in nature, like perception, completeness, essence, and objectivity. Technical skills were also covered and critiqued. Subjects that were covered included design, structure, unity, form, brushwork, and the basics of shape/color/value. As a result of viewing so much great art, getting helpful critiques, and creating 25-30 paintings, I am now spending more time considering different motifs and compositional ideas when I paint on location. Instead of just pursuing my first reaction and inclination, I am considering three or four other approaches.

Already I am seeing new ways of expressing what I see and feel, and I believe my work reflects more observation and a greater sense of realism. I'm still trying to incorporate loose brushwork and knock down distracting brush marks with a palette knife, two things I was working on before the trip to Italy.

A major benefit to being in Italy was the opportunity to visit museums, churches, and other architectural wonders. The JSS in Civita program included Thursday excursions to cities like Florence, Naples, Siena, and Bologna. Rome is a short one-hour bus ride away. One of the greatest things I took away from the trip was the need to be more in touch with my artistic forebears.

"Painting is an act of homage," Hershberg said at one point. Starting with some of the best paintings in artistic history (frescoes painted on villa walls during the height of the Roman Empire), JSS in Civita introduced me to an overwhelming historical perspective that all points toward the need for honest empirical study, coupled with a desire to be creative and improve on the information nature provides. And contrary to the opinion of some, the 20th century opened up an artistic liberty that is equally important to the way we paint now, and it shouldn't be ignored. 🖼️