

[plein air]



# MAJESTIC SCENERY

The plein-air paintings of  
David W. Mayer capture  
the drama of the Rocky  
Mountain West

By Mark Mussari

▲ END OF THE SEASON, OIL, 9 X 12.





**AH, THE HAZARDS** of painting *en plein air*. Artists contend with windblown canvases, knocked-over easels, biting insects, and Mother Nature's fickle moods, among other challenges. Colorado artist David W. Mayer had an especially harrowing experience while painting in Rocky Mountain National Park, shortly after a snowstorm had left a blanket of fresh snow. "I left my Jeep and went out into a field to paint," he remembers. "When I came back to get something, I noticed mountain lion tracks in the snow. I immediately hopped back in the Jeep and left," says the artist, who knew better than to stick around and become prey to a large and stealthy natural predator.

On another outing, Mayer was painting near the headwaters of the Colorado River, also in Rocky Mountain National Park. "There was a moose wandering around on the far shore," he recalls. When he heard a crashing sound behind him, he assumed the moose had crossed the creek and was barreling toward him. "I turned around suddenly," says Mayer, "only to discover a pair of tourists rushing toward me to see what I was doing."

Despite mountain lions and curious tourists, Mayer has managed to become an award-winning and respected painter of Rocky Mountain scenes. "There's majesty in this scenery. Everything is so paint-



#### DOSSIER

##### REPRESENTATION

Peterson-Cody Gallery, Santa Fe, NM; Big Horn Galleries, Cody, WY; Horizon Fine Art Gallery, Jackson, WY; Arts at Denver, Denver, CO; Evergreen Fine Art, Evergreen, CO; The Gallery at Rich Designs, Colorado Springs, CO; Grand Lake Art Gallery, Grand Lake, CO; [www.dwmayer.com](http://www.dwmayer.com).

##### UPCOMING SHOWS

Big Horn Galleries, July 3-30. Richard Schmid Fine Art Auction, Bellvue, CO, September 6.

**BUFFALO CREEK SPRING, OIL, 12 X 16. ▲**



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▲ **SUNRISE RANCH, OIL, 24 X 30.**

able,” he says of western landscapes. And although his easel has been picked up by the wind and “dumped into a creek” on more than one occasion, Mayer remains a strong proponent of painting *en plein air*. “It helps to calibrate your color eye. It’s the only way to get a true sense of color,” observes the artist.

Mayer first encountered the colors of the western landscape when he moved to Denver from the Midwest. He was born in Madison, WI, and raised in the southern part of the state. “I always drew, painted, and sculpted as a child,” he comments. “My talents were supported at home.” After high school, he went to an art college where he studied graphic design and commercial illustration. Those skills led him into corporate life in the advertising and publishing worlds, where he worked as both a marketing and creative director. His first job was with an advertising agency in Wisconsin; he then had a stint with the Caterpillar Corporation.

During this time Mayer painted on the side. He worked in watercolors—even studying with famed instructor Tony Couch—and won some awards. Early on, he found himself attracted to the regionalist art of Andrew Wyeth (after seeing an exhibit of his work in New York) and to Emile Gruppe, who was heavily influenced by the French Impressionists. “I had no exposure to western artists,” he notes.

About 25 years ago, he moved to Denver for a job, and an entirely new world opened before him. “Until then, I literally had no idea one could paint for a living,” he admits. “It was a revelation.” Visits to Vail and Santa Fe exposed Mayer to more of the art scene in the West. Switching from watercolors to acrylics and finally to oils, he turned his painterly eye on the natural beauty surrounding him at every turn. “The heavens opened,” he adds. “Western landscapes allow you to engage with the painting—there is no comparable drama.”





SUNLIGHT AND SHADOW, OIL, 12 X 16. ▲

To become a part of that drama, Mayer began to study the early Taos artists and western landscape painters but was particularly drawn to the California Impressionists. “Especially in the beauty of their interpretation of the West,” he says, and he mentions painter Edgar Payne as a major inspiration. Mayer has also studied with notable contemporary painters such as Scott Christensen, T. Allen Lawson, Kevin Macpherson, and Ted Goerschner.

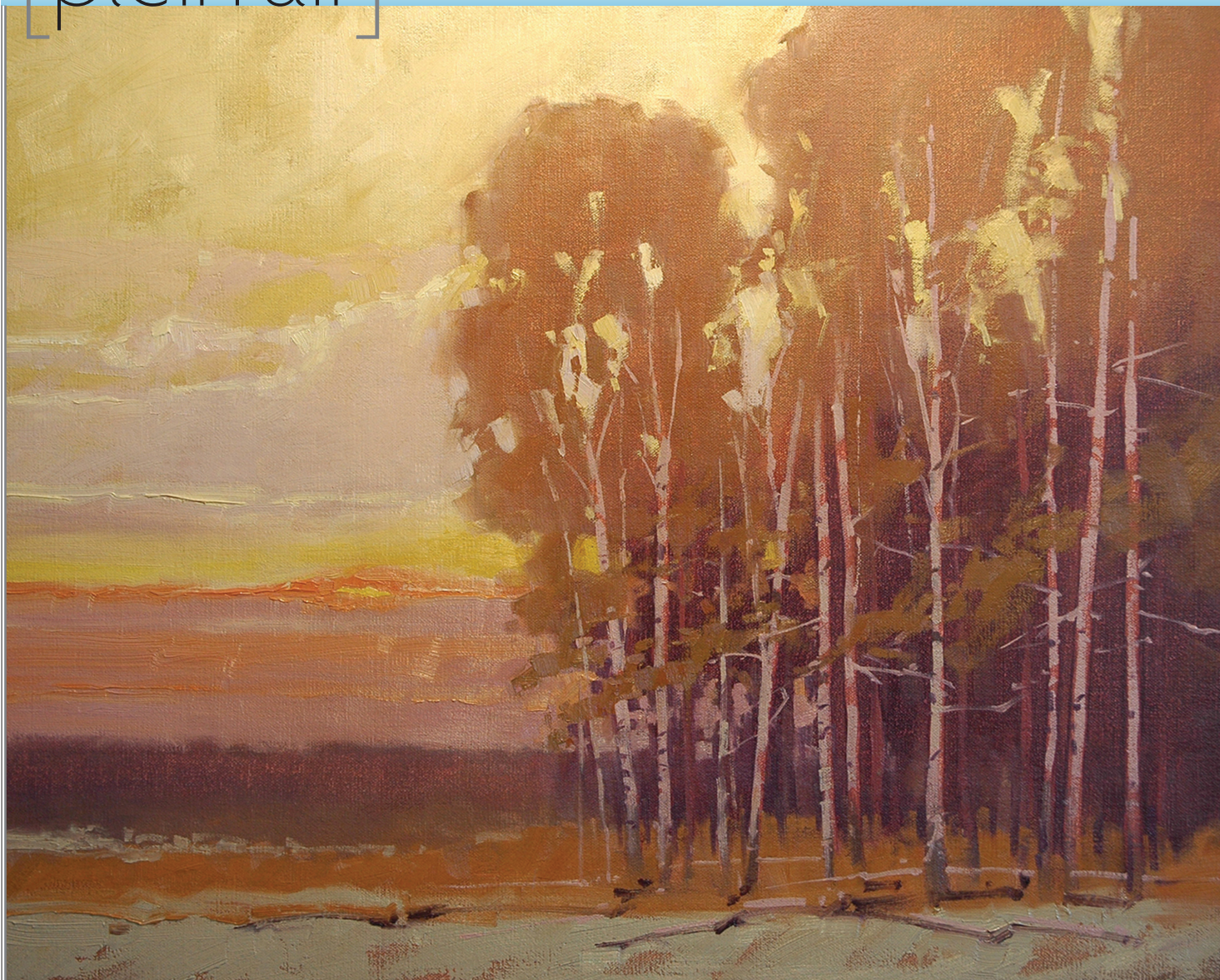
As his interest in oils grew and he became more comfortable with the medium, Mayer began to paint *en plein air*, the perfect outlet for his affection for western scenery and his artistic proclivities. “I’m often out painting by myself or with friends,” he says, “or I go outdoors to do color studies.” He acknowledges the limitations of painting on location, including “the problem of time and environmental constraints.” Yet he also emphasizes the positive aspects: “It’s more impressionistic—you can indicate a tree in just a few strokes.”

Mayer feels the attraction of impressionism is that “things aren’t so finished that people can’t complete the experience in their minds.” Collectors frequently tell him that they identify with the undeniable sense of place found in his landscapes. “They often say, ‘I’ve been there,’” he relates. “The biggest thrill is hearing their feedback about enjoying that experience.” The demand of painting *en plein air*, says Mayer, is “not to compete with nature but to interpret it. The artist distills and synthesizes the scene—it’s a constant challenge and reward.”

A LOVELY chromatic subtlety characterizes much of Mayer’s art, which he defines as western American impressionism. His quick, elliptical brushstrokes with their feathery assurance disclose a mastery of both technique and palette. He says he hopes his color sense, with its emphasis on contrasts, imparts “a painterly quality” to his work.



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▲ ASPEN SUNRISE, OIL, 18 X 24.

Over time, Mayer has noticed a quickness in his brush strokes and—like many plein-air painters—an increasing adroitness at indicating more with less. This approach drives the painterly effect in *SUNLIGHT AND SHADOW*, a creekside scene captured in winter light. The canvas provides elegant contrast in warm and cool tones. Mayer explains that early on he had to decide “how much blue to use in the shadows.” To do so, he spent a great deal of time studying snow, especially in photographs, and zeroing in on its value ranges. In an economy of strokes, Mayer indicates the sunlit evergreens on the left, with their warm olive accents, and the shadowy hillside with its darker trees on the right. A few quick, geometric shapes denote snow on the hillside. “In the center of the painting,” says Mayer, “is a transition from light to shadow.” He also intentionally toned-down the sky so that it would not compete with the canvas’ icy shadows.

His piece *ASPEN SUNRISE* offers a fine example of his highly attuned color sense and deft rendering of scenery. Mayer painted it in early morning near a grove of aspen trees in western Colorado. “It’s more of a tonalist approach than many of my paintings,” he notes. The canvas’ misty effect comes partially from the broad, horizontal strokes establishing foreground and background planes. Soft, abstract shapes indicate the aspens’ golden leaves. “It’s a little more modernist for me, and involves a different palette, one that is more complementary,” Mayer says. “This painting is more about color, shape, and mood than about rendering detail.”

When not outdoors, Mayer can be found in his home studio. He divides his time between working there and going on location, with at least 30 percent of his time spent painting *en plein air*. In addition to landscapes, he also paints the occasional ranch





**AUTUMN LIGHT, OIL, 11 X 14. ▲**

scene, and water shows up in many of his works, with depictions of lakes, creeks, rivers, and even the ocean. Each year he and his wife, Nancy, travel to the Carmel and Monterey areas of California, where he paint seascapes.

In recent years Nancy has become the business and marketing manager for Mayer's studio. Previously she had a long career with a nonprofit organization researching the connection between neuroscience and meditation. "When she traveled to India to do research, I went with her and took photographs for the organization," says Mayer. During the trip, the couple also met with the Dalai Lama and received his blessing.

Mayer, who paints five days a week, is a member of Oil Painters of America, as well as the American Impressionist Society and both Rocky Mountain and Colorado Plein Air Painters. In 2007, he received an Award of Excellence at the Oil Painters of

America National Juried Exhibition. For the last several years he has had works selected for the annual American Miniatures Show at Settlers West Galleries in Tucson, where this year he sold a nocturnal piece titled MOONLIGHT RANCH. "I had finished a glorious day of painting in the Yampa Valley and was driving back to my motel as the moon was coming up," he says of the snowy, moonlit scene. "When I spotted this ranch at twilight, I knew I had to stop and capture it on canvas."

A painter of shadow and light, Mayer has captured many such scenes on canvas, and, in his ongoing love affair with the Rocky Mountain West, he looks forward to painting many, many more. ❖

Tucson-based journalist Mark Mussari, Ph.D., writes frequently about art and design.