

## PAINTING IN THE CYCLADES

### Some Like It Hot !!

A couple of years ago I had the good fortune of spending a few days on Syros. I had never been there before and discovered it to be the capital of the Cyclades. In the past I had visited some of the Cyclades but I had forgotten just how wonderful the characteristics of this group of Greek islands are and the fascinating and exciting opportunities they provide for the painter: the magnificent clarity of the light, the brilliant colours, the intensity of the sun, the varied coastlines and beautiful villages, friendly people, plus all of those surprises and gifts that can thrill the artist that is looking for them.

On Syros one of my surprises were the cranes associated with a floating dry dock, which at the time seemed to have closed down. The appearance of these structures reminded me of the docks of my home city of Liverpool rather than a small island in the Aegean.



Above is one of my studies of those cranes

However there are a few challenges for the artist to overcome so be prepared to adapt. My visit was in June and it was hot, very hot. I realized very quickly I had to work out where I was going to paint my chosen subject from without being cooked alive. I knew it was going to be essential to choose the time of day when the shadows and the shade were favorable enough to enable me to paint. Planning ahead was a prerequisite and I had to work out my location for every sketch in advance.

Before I set off I had decided this visit was going to be about capturing atmosphere with speedy sketches as opposed to developing more complex compositions and chose my kit accordingly. I didn't take an easel, as I wanted to blend into the place and work without being noticed, which worked out well. Clearly this means a bit of inconvenience but that is all part of painting en plein air. Mostly I worked sitting down or crouching with my sketchpad on my knees. A small folding stool would have been a welcome addition though.

If you do visit in summer please make sure you take a hat, sunglasses, lots of sun block and think carefully about the medium that you choose. I decided to take graphite and pans of watercolour as I thought it could be messy using tubes in the heat. I took a range of brushes, my papers were 140lb Not and I went for a small format. The pans of watercolour also have the advantage of not needing to be separated from my luggage for airport security checks.

In reality I had no choice but to produce quick sketches as when working in watercolour in high temperatures like these the paint dries almost the instant it hits the paper's surface. So you do not have time to fiddle about you simply have to get on with the job. I found this constraint really positive as it forced me to make a minimum of marks and strokes and to think ahead and plan each sketch carefully. The temperature made it difficult to use a lot of washes and certainly not as many as I would use at home or in the studio.



A gleaming icon of a building painted from below when sitting in a waterside bar



Another one of the crane studies, I loved their colour and the engineering forms of these objects.



I discovered this rather delicate pretty building near the theatre in a small square.



I found this bar at the junction of two streets, near the harbour; all its different components juxtaposed together attracted me. There was also a lot of coming and going during my stay, a meeting place perhaps for the locals and parking for deliveries. I felt I shared briefly in the day to day business of the place. I also got into a conversation with a local shopkeeper, a chat that helped me to understand the place. It was a typical encounter that makes en plein air working so charming and memorable.

I greatly enjoyed the island, meeting its inhabitants and also working outside my comfort zone, which forced me to change my habits and approach. Painting in new locations can challenge the way you see, think and paint and that is something I always find refreshing. I would certainly recommend Syros as a venue for painters and one day I hope to return.

Article by Paul Scragg

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