

WESLEY JAMES DRAKE

Painters & Marathon Runners

When Illinois artist Wesley James Drake first ran a marathon, he knew he had to train to build his physical and mental strength. He's found that plein air painting requires the same level of skill, patience, and commitment. Now he is a champion at both, as well as a world traveler and painter.

From an early age, Wesley James Drake was passionate about both traveling and creating art, but it wasn't until he was in his mid-30s that he found a way to combine his interests. A friend with whom he shared a studio encouraged him to paint outside on a beautiful Chicago day, and he advised Drake about supplies, equipment, and techniques.

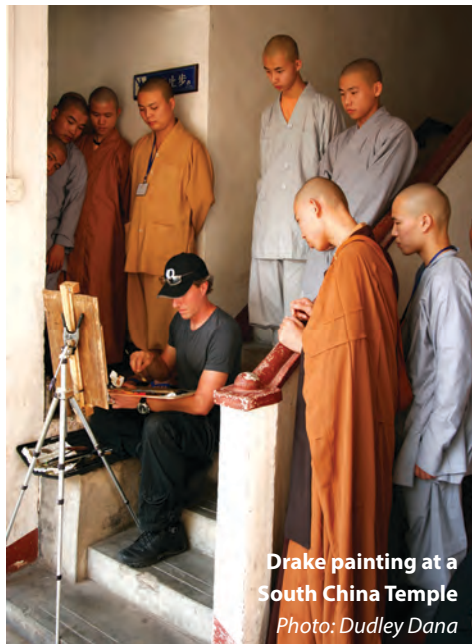
"Even though I had been an illustrator and studio artist for more than 10 years, that first plein air painting was not successful," Drake recalls. "However, I loved the idea of being outside painting so much that I bought all the equipment I would need and started plein air painting, and soon afterward I joined a group of dedicated plein air artists who met once a week. My friend who first got me out to paint encouraged me to save my first painting as a measure of my growth, and I'm glad he did, because when I get discouraged by the bugs, heat, rain, or snow I can measure my progress and remind myself why I remain committed to the process."

It was around that same time that Drake started running marathons, in part because he'd met an experienced runner — who eventually became his wife. "I'll admit that part of my motivation was to impress her and to find a way to spend more time with her," says Drake. "But even though I was involved in a number of sports in school, I was not in condition to immediately start running a full marathon. Looking back on the process of getting myself in shape both physically and mentally, I see the experience as being similar to my training as a plein air painter."

"The great people I met with every week were prepared to work under almost any conditions, and when we were together on the streets of Chicago they helped me stay motivated and growing. They shared their knowledge and experience, and they helped me see aspects of my painting process I could improve. I'm not saying



Wesley James Drake
painting in Venice, Italy
Photo: Scott Tallman Powers



Drake painting at a
South China Temple
Photo: Dudley Dana

that every artist needs a lot of physical training to paint outdoors, but for me it was important in terms of achieving my creative and personal goals. I wanted to be a better professional artist and to combine my interests in hiking, traveling, and painting, so for me personally the idea of setting ambitious goals and taking on significant challenges helped me make progress toward those objectives."

ARTIST DATA

NAME: Wesley James Drake

BIRTHDATE: 1970

LOCATION: Chicago, IL

INFLUENCES: "John Singer Sargent, the Orientalist painters."

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Wabash Street Bridge, Chicago

2014, oil, 10 x 20 in.

Private collection

Plein air

One reason Drake sees a correspondence between athletic training and plein air training is that he enjoys taking challenging painting trips around the U.S. and abroad. He has carried a backpack filled with painting supplies to Europe, Cuba, Morocco, and China, and he has driven his car loaded with supplies to plein air festivals in Maryland, Florida, Wisconsin, and Illinois. When he heads out to paint, he manages to fit a tripod, pochade box, paints, brushes, panels, and a wet-canvas carrying case into that backpack, along with rain gear, bug spray, sunblock, and solvent.

“When I drive to a painting location, I take a Gloucester easel,” says Drake. “However, when I am hiking or flying to a location, I reduce the supplies down to the bare necessities so I can carry them all on my back. If I am heading to a country where it is difficult or impossible to buy solvents and painting supplies, I work with water-soluble oils rather than traditional oil colors. On long trips, I paint on thin, linen-covered RayMar panels, almost always 9 x 12 inches because that size panel easily fits into the wet-paint carrying case I made. If I want to change the format, I just tape out part of the panel to establish a vertical or long horizontal painting. And if I am flying to a painting event, I usually ship my supplies to my host family so I don’t have a hassle with airport security. However, I always take my backpack along, because I want to be mobile enough to reach painting sites that might be a distance from my car.”

Off the Beaten Path

2011, oil, 12 x 9 in.

Private collection

Plein air





4 Hour Cleaner

2012, oil, 12 x 9 in.

Private collection

Plein air

ited palette of oil colors, a version of what is known as the “Zorn palette.” It includes black, ultramarine blue, titanium white, burnt umber, permanent red, yellow ochre, and permanent yellow medium. He’ll occasionally add Indian yellow or naphthol red when he is painting a sunset. “Aside from reducing the weight of my backpack, the limited palette is beneficial when there is very little light available for distinguishing one color from another,” Drake says. “In those situations, I can rely on my experience of intermixing colors in order to get the right value and color with which to paint at the end of a day or during the night.”

Drake almost always works on a surface toned with yellow ochre, often preparing panels well in advance of going out on location. Once his equipment is set up, he determines the subject of his painting by looking at scenes through his thumbs and index fingers, held in the shape of a rectangle in front of his eyes. When he has a good idea of which elements he will include or edit out of the landscape, he sketches the outlines of the major shapes with thin oil color, then he fills in the biggest shapes with local colors.

“I set up a focal point as I paint those big shapes,” he says, “and then I narrow my focus



Rosa Marie

2010, oil, 12 x 9 in.

Private collection

Plein air

Being prepared for challenging situations also helps Drake paint the atmospheric conditions he favors most. “I know it will seem odd, but I prefer rainy, misty, snowy, or foggy days to those with bright sunlight,” says the artist. “I like the drama, the lost and found edges, and the uncertainty of objects observed under those kinds of conditions. As long as it isn’t so cold that my oils are at risk of freezing, I can find a way to paint outdoors.”

Because he often operates out of his backpack, Drake is prepared to go anywhere and immediately paint under prevailing weather conditions. To minimize the time needed to get set up for painting, he uses a very lim-



Istanbul Commute

2012, oil, 20 x 24 in.

Private collection

Studio



Mojitos in Havana

2014, oil, 24 x 36 in.

Private collection

Studio




Tribune Tower

2013, oil, 24 x 18 in.

Private collection

Studio

strokes on a canvas, but my voice as an artist is best expressed through thick applications of paint with a brush or palette knife. That can establish unity, focus, and mood in a painting in unexpected ways.”

Drake continues to find a correspondence between running and painting, especially when it comes to commitment and attitude. “Marathon running and painting quickly reveal to us what we might consider to be limitations — our age, lack of talent or opportunities — which are largely mental restrictions we place on ourselves,” he says. “We can run faster and paint better if we trust that we have the ability to persevere and improve. Much of that perseverance comes from wisely focusing our physical and mental resources.” 

M. STEPHEN DOHERTY is editor-in-chief of *PleinAir* magazine.



See more plein air and studio paintings by Wesley James Drake in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.

to smaller and smaller shapes. I make a point of starting with the contrast between the light and dark shapes because that will govern all the other relationships within the composition.”

As Drake continues painting, he sometimes mixes colors to the point that they become muddy because he finds that muted colors can add to the mood of his final painting. “I know teachers often caution students against mixing colors together to the point that they lose intensity and clarity, but I find there are many scenes in nature that involve subtle shifts of

muted grays, browns, and greens,” he explains. “There are also a lot of situations in which one bright color set against a field of ‘muddy’ colors can make that color really pop within a painting. My approach might not work for others who adhere to the idea that they should be economical about the number of brush-

Sunflowers

2014, oil, 14 x 11 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

