

To re-create the drama and subtleties of the night, take up sky gazing and remain faithful to the prismatic colors in light.

# into the NIGHT

BY STAN SPERLAK

**M**AXFIELD PARRISH, George Inness and James McNeill Whistler stop by often for dinner. They're a diverse crew, but with ease they find common ground and certainly keep me entertained—Parrish with his ethereal luminescence, Inness with his drama and Whistler with his daring and handling of paint. They have but one demand: We meet at sunset and remain quiet, for the tale of the sky is for the eyes. The words, if

they exist, will only be translated in pigment.

To what do I owe the company of my sunset dinner guests? Simply that I've been lucky and blessed in my art education to have had the most sharing and fantastical teachers, most notably one Patricia Vanaman Witt of Millville, New Jersey, who regaled students with stories of times past (whether the incidents happened or not) of famous artists



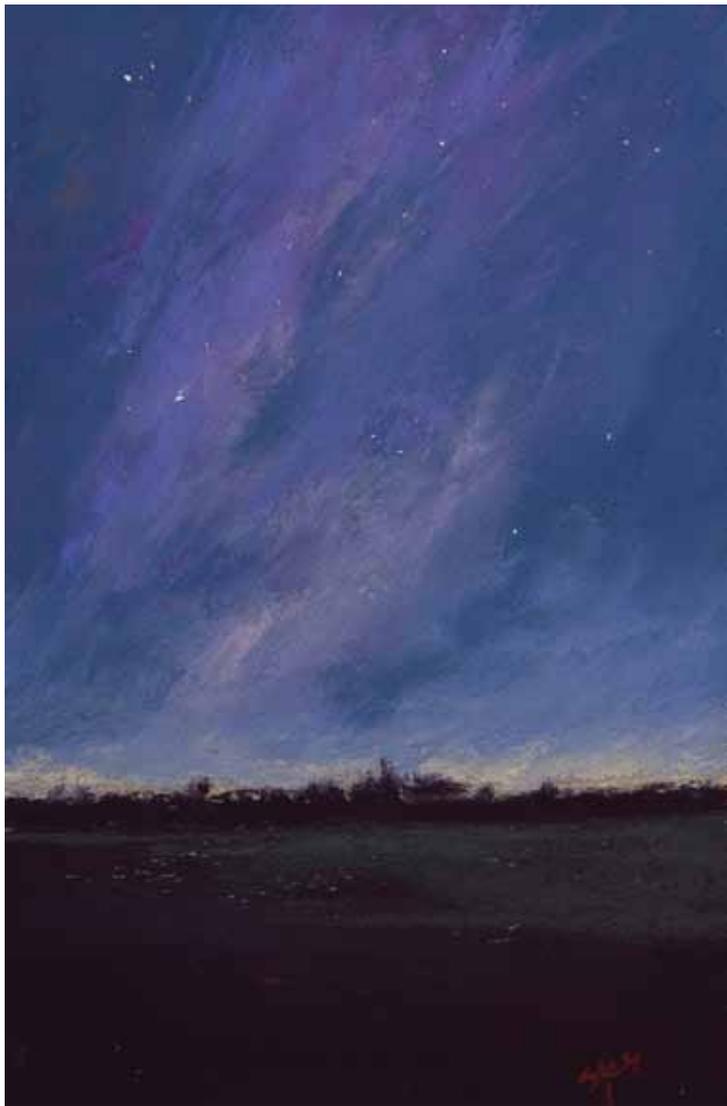
**LEFT: *Aura*** (pastel, 12x20) depicts a conjunction of Venus and Jupiter with the late afterglow of a winter's sunset. The blue-violet in the sky represents the glow of the Milky Way.

dropping by her studio and explaining their painting processes so she could pass the lessons on to us. The vision of these artists in her studio was pure magic. A typical quotation from Pat, as her class called her, upon critiquing a work by a student, might contain hypothetical questions such as, “What would Sargent do with that passage?” or “Homer would never be caught with a dirty brush like that!” or “You

have outdone my friend Degas!” But she was careful in these lessons not to be glib, to relate to an actual painting and to be clear that so much of what has come before is worthy of revisiting—an education unto itself.

### **Intimate of the Night**

I live on the western side of a Mid-Atlantic peninsula called Cape May. It's barely five thin



**ABOVE:** I gave myself a project: study the Milky Way and paint it. For the plein air piece *Study for In the Beginning* (pastel, 9x6), I felt my way through the greenish blues, red, blue-violet, a hint of orange and touch of magenta to portray the veils of the universe.

miles wide by 25 adventurous miles long, jutting precariously into the Atlantic Ocean and Delaware Bay. Even though many millions live within 80 miles of this glorified sand spit, I can barely see their light. I'm surrounded by thousands of acres of marsh and a land so flat that the sky is as fully visible as it would be on a boat at sea. I'm seduced by the sky. How could I not be? Every weather pattern and all the solar, lunar, and celestial events pass above my stage.

I feel that I must be true to myself and to the lineage of artists such as John Henry Twachtman and Andrew Wyeth, who painted the places where they lived—their fields, skies, paths and people—because in my own teaching, I now emphasize the same: Paint what you know, what you see and how it makes you feel. Old and repeated advice, but sometimes not embraced. I know the night. I follow the stars, and I plan my days around the sunsets and sunrises, celestial conjunctions, cold weather fronts and tides.



Painting the drama of the evening, dawn and twilight can be clichéd and can easily lead to trouble, mainly unbelievability. Artists introduce garish yellows, pinks and oranges in areas of the sky where those colors just can't be. Sunsets with dazzling clouds seem to give license to toss about color, but if you stop to analyze the anatomy of the sky and, for that matter, light, more credible color choices come easily. This observation is best done in person. Put your camera down. Your paintings will improve tenfold if you just let go of this crutch. Commit the scene to memory and make mental notes for hours. Thomas Cole, Sanford Gifford, and Frederic Church did not have cameras.

Paintings of the night and evening require a special quality, and that is nuance. Webster defines *nuance* as “sensitivity to, awareness of, or ability to express delicate shadings (as of meaning, feeling, or value).” Very well put, Daniel, I say! Just as you develop your sensitivities to fine wine, tasteful seasonings and delicate perfumes, you must develop your senses and abilities to see the slightest changes in value and color.

### Controlled Vision

In painting, *control* is also a key word. You need to understand and employ colors in meaningful ways that express a personal vision of the



## Materials

**Soft Pastels:** Terry Ludwig, Schmincke, Art Spectrum, Sennelier

**Surfaces:** Wallis, Dakota, Uart Pastel Paper and Fabriano Roma pastel paper or board; Ampersand Pastelbord for works on which Sperlak applies water and alcohol mixtures with a mister to allow the pastel to run, float and otherwise move about before drying (good for stormy and other atmospheric effects)

**Primer:** two coats of gesso brushed on in varied directions followed by an application of equal parts gesso and marble dust or pumice plus acrylic paint (often burnt umber or red oxide) for toning

**Tools:** finger, hand, and palette knife (to blend); razors (to smear and distort, and to shave pastel bits into moist passages); spoons (to rub); sharp pins (to pull details); spray bottle of alcohol (to apply a mist over stormy skies)

**Fixative:** none

subject, not exactitude—for that may be the photographer’s realm—but a painterly vision. This vision is one that you can control, not guess at, with the paints and tools and surfaces you possess and the experience level at which you find yourself. For me, this is the point at which pastel stands apart from other media.

I find that soft, gentle and tactile applications of these dried pastes of nearly pure pigment excel in expressing the subtleties of light, vapor and endless distance. One value can lead to another so easily, and modeling of the subject, such as the moon or trees or clouds, once perfected, can make that subject appear lifelike and luminous, spellbinding viewers.

### Orderly Light

The approach you must take is to *build* a painting. Whether it’s the sky or the land or a figure, for that matter, you must build with masses and break those masses up in subtle ways and sometimes in dramatic ways to show how light actually plays into the scene. Because of the relatively transparent qualities of dark pastels (and I have been saying for years, “Don’t be afraid of the darks!”), you need to employ them first.

If I were painting a clear sky just after sunset that possessed only a few low clouds, I would apply a wide and thin layer of a medium-to-dark ultramarine or Prussian blue or even

**ABOVE:** Late in December on the eve of the solstice, I took a dangerous walk across the frozen marsh to a spot I’d never been. The sky cleared and a tremendous afterglow from the sunset became visible. In *Solstice Eve* (pastel, 18x36), I used simple shapes and minimal colors and values to tell the truth about the sky. I articulated the foreground slightly, making it truly subordinate to the light.

indigo. Pastel brands are so varied, but I’ve found Terry Ludwig handmade pastels to have incredible soft and blendable qualities, well-suited for starting a sky. For my painting, I would have started at the upper portion of my support, often Wallis paper or hardboard panel prepared with marble dust and gesso. Then I would work downward, adding and overlapping close, progressively lighter values of the same color. To keep the space interesting, I would create varied passages with marks or gestures.

As I’d step into the next portion of the painting, moving down, preparing to change color and controlling the process carefully, I’d heed the sage advice of my long-ago, fictitious Russian Impressionist teacher, Royznika Gbivneskhov—or Roy or Mr. Gbiv, as his “class” respectfully called him: Follow the order of the light, the prism, and the spectral radiance that exists if one were just to look. Green

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# Progression of Heavenly Hues

The moments after the sun sets provide an opportunity for an easy lesson in painting the order and values of prismatic colors as they appear in the sky. If painting from life, try to match the range of colors in a small work that you can use as a study.



1  
On a Belgian mist Dakota Wallis board, I lightly drew the horizon line in vine charcoal. I then began to build sky colors from the top with a layer of dark indigo, specifically Art Spectrum (AS) D528.



2  
I added a layer of indigo blue (AS P534), working downward on the paper, from dark to light.



3  
I continued with ultramarine blue, using Terry Ludwig (TL) B030. Note that the layers overlap each other and that areas of the previous layers are visible in the newer layers.



4  
I skipped down on the surface to the horizon line and lay in a wonderful violet by Art Spectrum called jacaranda (V522). This allowed me to continue working from dark to light—but progressing upward rather than downward. Thus, the area between the blues and the violet will be the lightest part of the sky.



5  
I added red (TL R350) and then orange (TL A080), bridging the blues and the violet. The warm “glow” indicates where the atmosphere is most dense—with ozone, moisture and low clouds—as opposed to the cooler upper sky.



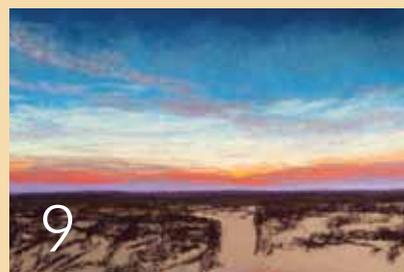
6  
I added yellow (TL Y080) and began to blend the colors, stroking very lightly in only one direction with the side of my palm and cleaning my hand between strokes. (I use my hands or fingers for blending only in the sky area.)



7  
I layered on more yellow and then, to add visual interest, dragged a grayish violet (TL V260) through the range of the sky to hint at tight clouds in the distance. The clouds break from the order of the prism (red-orange-yellow-green-blue-indigo-violet) because they're separate masses—phenomena within the sky that have their own properties.



8  
I then laid in broader clouds higher in the sky, adding depth and drama. As opposed to the clouds in step 7, these clouds are slightly darker and warmer. They're also thinner in density to allow the under-painted sky to show through. Their larger size adds a sense of scale and perspective, thus making them appear to be overhead.



9  
With the sky basically complete, I massed in the foreground to contrast with the sky. I used one of my favorite red-violets (TL V100) and a slightly warmer and lighter burnt umber (TL N130).



I added warm colors (umbers and ochres) and cool colors (blue-greens) to the foreground. Taking a cue from the greenish blue in the sky, I chose a darker value of blue-green to start the base of the water and to indicate moisture in the marsh grass. I blended with the sides of the pastel sticks, cleaning them often.



I warmed the horizontal plane of the foreground grasses with ochres and burnt sienna (warm colors bring items seemingly closer to the viewer). To bring out detail, I added highlights to the grasses and water, using sharper intensities of the light and dark values of the original tones.



After adding a few subtle details, such as highlights on the water, I signed *The Secret of the Evening* (pastel, 12x18).

**BELOW: *In the Still of the Morning***

(pastel, 36x48) is an example of the variants to prismatic colors that artists must deal with when depicting the sky. The green is expanded and the red is almost missing. The earth's shadow creates a delicious blue-violet that shrouds the orange of the rising full moon. There are just hints of yellow highlights in the transition to green.

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follows blue, yellow follows green, orange follows yellow, and then red leads to violet. Indigo, that distant and exotic color, can jump in also, maybe, if you're painting a higher expanse of sky. You see, if you're painting the effect of luminosity, you must employ the principles of light. Think rainbow colors, and remember their order with the help of Mr. Roy Gbiv (R-O-Y-G-B-I-V).

**Nuanced Variants**

When you try to paint your way through the dawn, late night, sunset or even daylight, you can discern the subtle shifts that follow this order of light. But the key is NUANCE! I didn't mean to shout that gentle word, but you must understand that you have to practice control and lay your colors down in an order. Further, you must remember that you're not choosing just any green, yellow or orange, but

particular ones, each in a value that relates to the value preceding it, each adjusted for the color that you chose first, and each in a gradient that varies ever so slightly from those around it in order to roll light through the sky.

To reinforce the principle of the order of colors in light, I often have my students paint a series of swatches in the form of prisms, rainbows or sunsets just to see the color potentials and gradients that can be accomplished, given each student's supplies. When I set out to paint, I also like to keep nearby a small scratch sheet of Wallis sanded pastel paper, on which I lay down my first color and then work away from it in different directions with value and color options to see which one pleases me for the effect I want.

You should note that as the night deepens, fewer of the colors are evident, and the colors' values can be even closer. A midnight sky may show only green to blue-green to blue to





**ABOVE:** I painted *The Edge of Dusk* (pastel, 12x12) near the ocean *en plein air*; hence the simplicity of the unblended colors. The sand reflects the warm violet of the sky, and the dearth of detail in the dune grasses forces the eye to the light.

indigo and violets, while a predawn scene can have a thin arrangement of all the colors just near the horizon. Clouds have their own rules, but that's a topic for another article.

A revelation concerning the order of light came to me when I was observing the daytime sky one fall day. Yellow seemed to emanate from just above the land. It diffused into cerulean (a term derived from the Latin *caelum*, meaning "heaven sky") or greenish blue and proceeded through azure, then into something along the lines of a cool cobalt. Later in the same day, a light orange started to appear on the horizon, and as evening came, a fine red-violet at the earth's surface emerged, followed soon after, as the sun set, by a new blue-violet rising into the sky.

This observed R-O-Y-G-B-I-V order should stay constant, yet the colors will vary widely in dimension, saturation, and intensity, and as a painter portraying your vision, you may use those variations as the subject and emotion call for them.

### Blending Pastels

Once you have your pastel colors applied, the magic happens. Carefully blend the pastel. This doesn't mean smear the pastel; neither does it mean burnish it into the paper nor come away with bleeding hands. It means work the pastel pastes into one another.

## Meet Stan Sperlak



Stan Sperlak studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts from 1995 to 1998, after which he participated for a year in private classes taught by Academy instructor Patrick Arnold and conducted outdoors in the home garden of landscape architect William

H. Frederick Jr. Sperlak also studied plein air landscape painting with Patricia Vanaman Witt from 1997 to 2003. Sperlak now teaches at his own facility, Crow Creek Farm, in Goshen, New Jersey, as well as in workshops across the United States and abroad. In 2012 the Noyes Museum of Art in Oceanville, New Jersey, presented Sperlak's 25th solo exhibition, "Stan Sperlak: Into the Night," featuring pastel landscapes of twilight, evening and nighttime skies. Sperlak is represented by SOMA NewArt Gallery, Cape May, New Jersey; William Ris Gallery, Stone Harbor, New Jersey; Hardcastle Gallery, Wilmington, Delaware; Main St. Gallery, Annapolis, Maryland; and Bishop's Stock, Snow Hill, Maryland. Visit his website at [www.stansperlak.com](http://www.stansperlak.com).

Pastel, as you move it about, should feel like velvet or the touch of a soft cheek. You must clean your brush (my "brush" is the side of my small finger) between any color change. I clean my finger with a paper towel every few swipes. If you don't clean your blending tool, whatever it is, you stand the chance of errantly marking passages with a recently touched darker color.

After you've created a convincing sky, you can move to the earth with its weight, form, density, and darks. Yes, again we're back to making plans for building on darks. Be not afraid. You can always build on darks with halftones and lights. You may even be able to nearly cover and eliminate the value and color, but having it there as a base, showing off the other colors, is a practical investment. Your values for foreground, trees, beach, farm fields, mountains, or buildings are now to be calculated with serious consideration. If you base your values upon what you see or remember in photos, you'll have an overexposed sky and an underexposed foreground. If you instead observe and record the values and "exposure" correctly in your mind, you'll have a wonderfully nuanced series of values and colors to deploy—deep but pure, with warms coming forward with vague detail and relative cools softening in detail as your subject fades into the night. ■