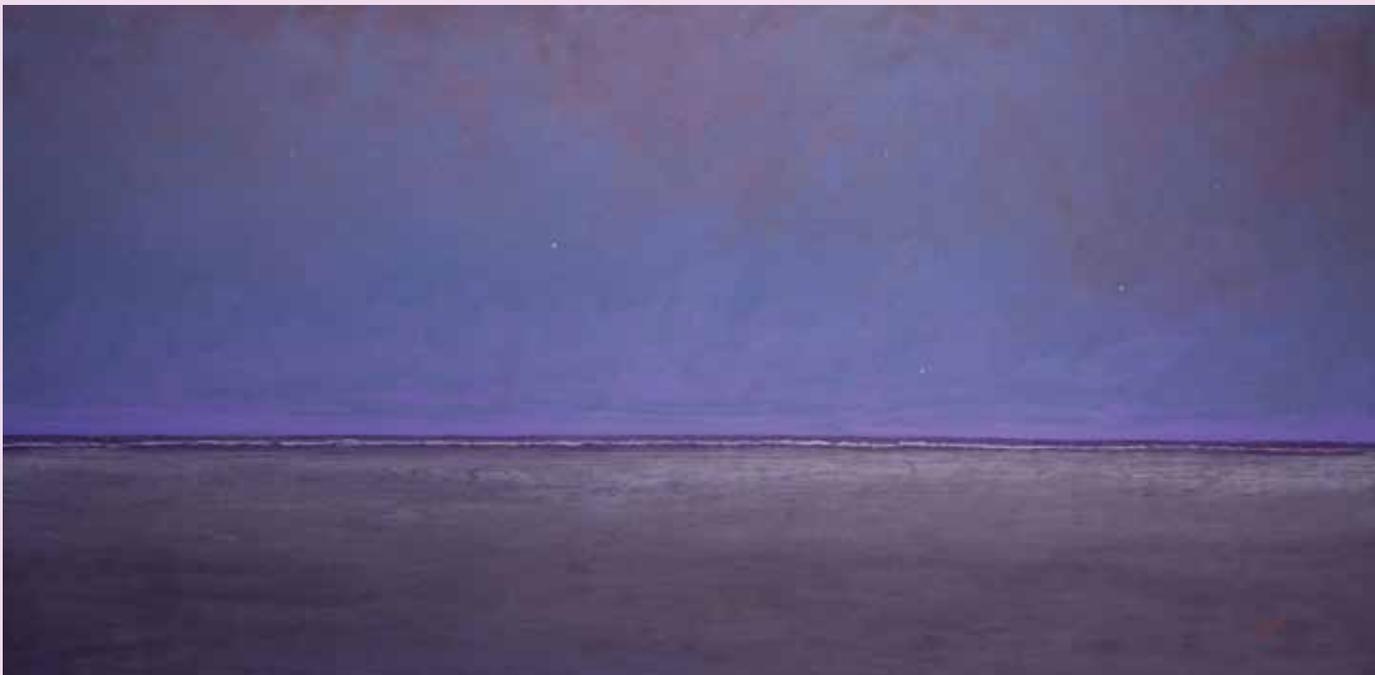
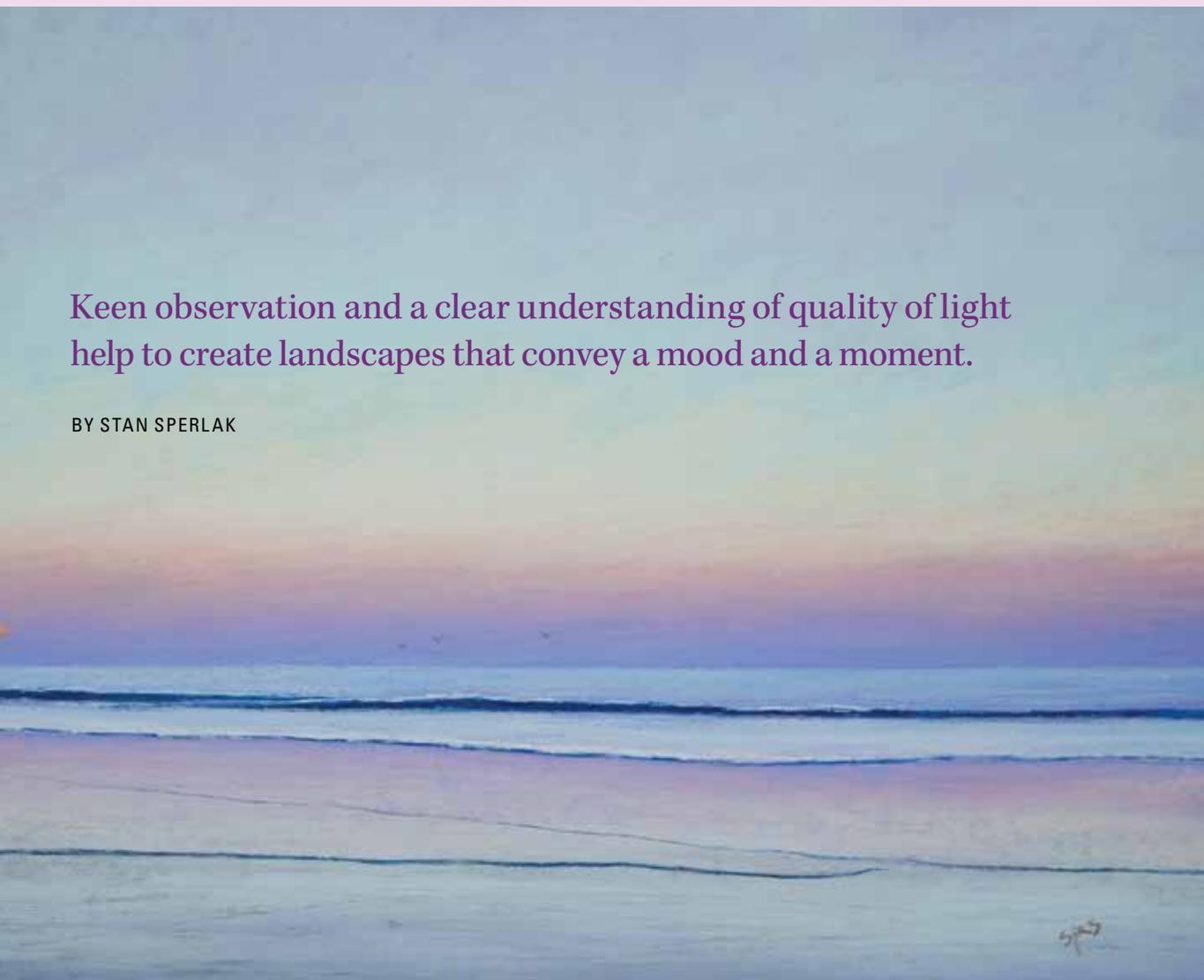


# Time Passages



Keen observation and a clear understanding of quality of light help to create landscapes that convey a mood and a moment.

BY STAN SPERLAK



***When It Is Still***  
(above; 16x36)

***Over the Surf***  
(opposite; 18x36)

***Sunset on the Bay***  
(12x20)



**I THREW AWAY MY WRISTWATCH WHEN I LEARNED** to paint correctly. My wall clocks were the next timepieces to go. They were no longer needed and were, in fact, becoming a distraction. This didn't happen overnight; it occurred once I realized that I could use careful observation to determine time of day with my own eyes.

My art teachers and historical heroes often talked about “quality of light,” “sense of place” and “painting the moment.” Those useful phrases resonated with me and set me on my quest for the accurate portrayal of the time of day in which I was living, observing and painting. Learning nature’s subtle cues that reveal time became an obsession, but it also tapped inherent instincts that we all have—celebrating our place on the earth and embracing the stars and moon, wind and tide, seasonal changes, and flora and fauna.

If we're to be appreciated for our work as artists, we must be able to make viewers believe in our vision. I need viewers to understand the story I'm telling, feel my emotion for the subject, and want to have been there, to have lived that same moment I've painted. To do that, I have to be truthful to time of day as well as location.

I almost always try to establish the light source—the sky—first, because everything

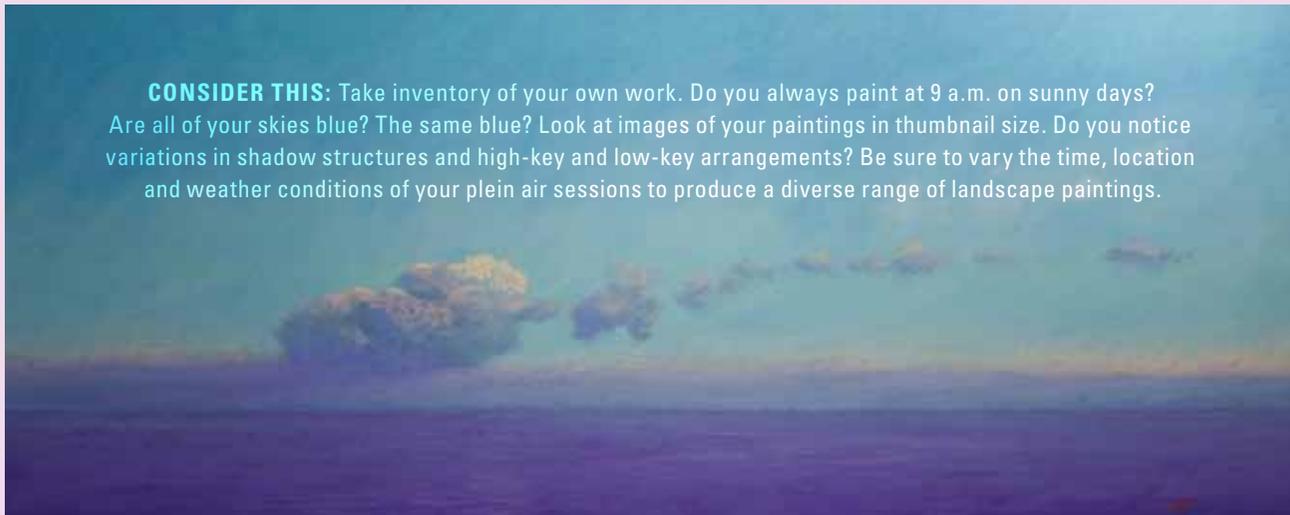
is affected by the quality of light. Here are some tips for understanding time of day, shadows and color temperature—and how they work together to create a true-to-life landscape.

### **Night Observations**

If you have a partial view of the sky from your bed and wake in the middle of the night, try to guess the time by observing the quality of the dark. Stars, for example, will be much brighter after 10 p.m. and until 4 a.m. in most locales. After 4 a.m., they begin to dim and give way as the Earth turns toward the appearing sun.

As you train yourself to become more aware of the world around you, you'll eventually learn the major stars and understand that they move across the sky as the Earth turns. For instance, Venus is an easy one: Morning star one year, evening star the next, it appears just before or after sunset and never during true night. It's slightly higher or lower each day progressively. When I wake and see Venus a couple of “fists” (a quick measuring trick) above the horizon, I know I have just one more toss and turn before I must awake, as it's never visible before 4:30 a.m. (Modern smartphones now have apps to help you identify stars, but put that phone away after you get comfortable with finding them.)

**CONSIDER THIS:** Take inventory of your own work. Do you always paint at 9 a.m. on sunny days? Are all of your skies blue? The same blue? Look at images of your paintings in thumbnail size. Do you notice variations in shadow structures and high-key and low-key arrangements? Be sure to vary the time, location and weather conditions of your plein air sessions to produce a diverse range of landscape paintings.



**Summer Storm**  
(opposite; 18x24)

**Over the Sea**  
(above; 16x36)

**Moon and the Surf** (8x10)

The moon needn't be a mystery, either, because its phases are quite predictable.

- **New moon:** missing from the night sky
- **Full moon:** 100 percent lit and rising at sunset
- **Waxing moon:** builds on the right side
- **Waning moon:** fades to the left

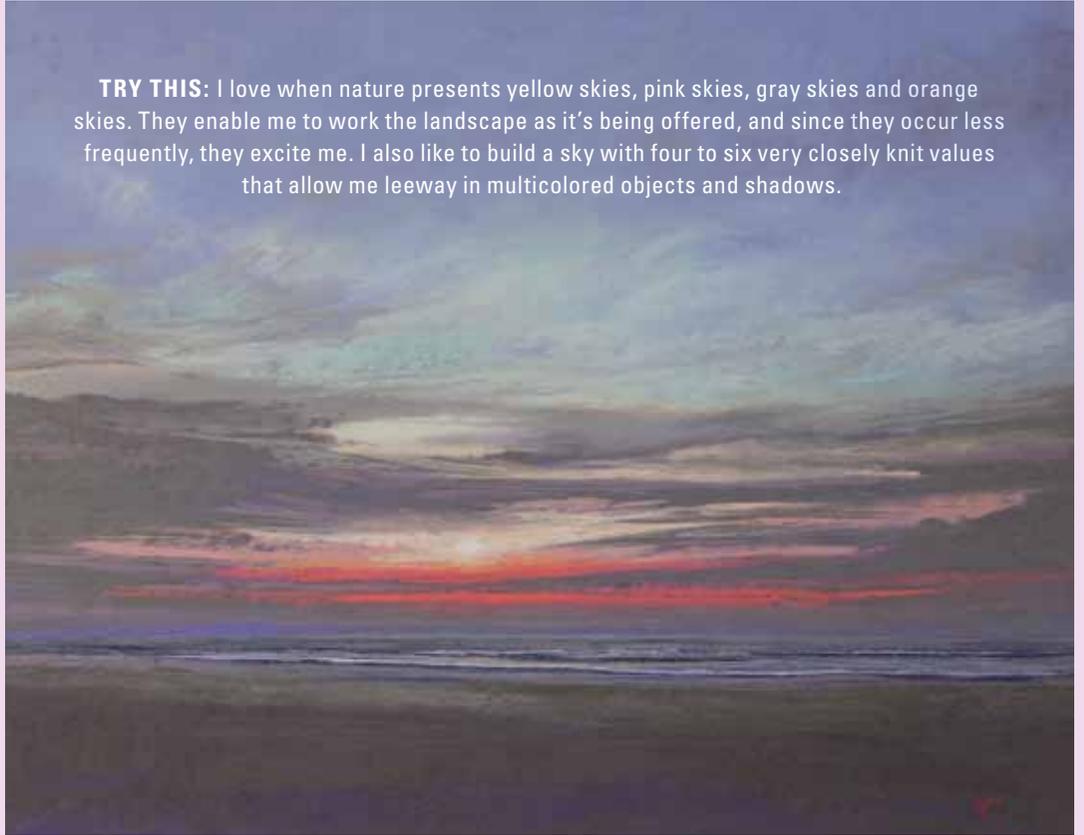
The moon is also processional, rising about 50 minutes later each subsequent night. If you see a full moon at sunset, you can bet it will rise about an hour later the next night, two the following and so on. A full moon is never out in broad daylight, but a half moon is visible half of the day.

### Here Comes the Sun

Let's now look at Earth's closest star: the sun. Use your fist as a measuring device by holding it at arm's length in front or above you. Count how many "fists" it takes to cross the sky from the visible eastern horizon line to the western horizon line. It usually takes about 16 to 18 fists for me. Assuming it's spring or fall, I find that eight or nine fists is noon; four fists closer to the East

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**TRY THIS:** I love when nature presents yellow skies, pink skies, gray skies and orange skies. They enable me to work the landscape as it's being offered, and since they occur less frequently, they excite me. I also like to build a sky with four to six very closely knit values that allow me leeway in multicolored objects and shadows.



**South by  
Southwest**  
(above; 12x24)

**The Light and  
the Sea** (opposite;  
24x30)

**The Tumbling  
Mirth of the Sun  
Split Clouds**  
(12x24)



is 9 a.m.; and about four fists from the Western horizon is 3 p.m.

How does this relate to painting? It's important to recognize the sun's position in the atmosphere and the conditions under which it's seen: low sun, high sun, filtered sun, clouded sun, winter sun, summer sun. Rain, snow, fog and humid conditions present some difficulties in timekeeping, but all must be respected in their slight variations

when telling a story with our paintings. Hot sunny days, cold winter days, windy views and still views should all have differences in them.

### **Only the Shadow Knows**

Shadows are imperative for creating form and making light believable. Here are some generally accepted guidelines for observing and painting shadows:



- **Long shadows:** morning or evening (diffused sky, colorful saturated surfaces)
- **Short shadows:** midday (saturated sky, high-key lit surfaces)
- **Cool shadows:** warm light (low sun, long distance through atmosphere)
- **Warm shadows:** cool light (high sun, short distance through atmosphere)
- **Color in a shadow:** can be the complement to the local color of the same item or a blend of the two
- **Light shadows:** overcast or moonlight
- **No shadows:** night

While employing good shadows will provide a scene with believable form, the degree of contrast between the lit surface and the shadow will convey the time of day or weather conditions better than overcompensating with too many colors.

- **Morning/evening:** stronger contrast, usually with great drama
- **Midday:** highest contrast, usually with great clarity
- **Night:** minimal contrast
- **Cloudy/foggy:** slight contrast

### Atmospheric Conditions

Color conveys the temperature of the scene. For example, in a scene describing a certain temperature quality, a monochromatic or tight value palette can be helpful: Think N.C. Wyeth's *The Scythers* or Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*. Both have heat built into them by showing the sense of humidity of an East Coast late summer day. This is shown by minimizing contrast and using warm, mildly monochromatic color tones to convey the heat. Here are

some other situations, and the temperature scales and colors, that create a desired effect:

- **Sunrise:** cool, moist atmosphere, resulting in less overall heat in the scene
- **Snowstorm:** a range of grayish-violets through cool greens, as well as very light blues and violets
- **Humid days:** natural grays
- **Cloudy days:** fewer reflections; objects in the landscape saturated in color
- **Sunset:** objects take on warm sunset tones
- **Night scenes:** tend toward greenish-blue and violet-blue monochromatic ranges

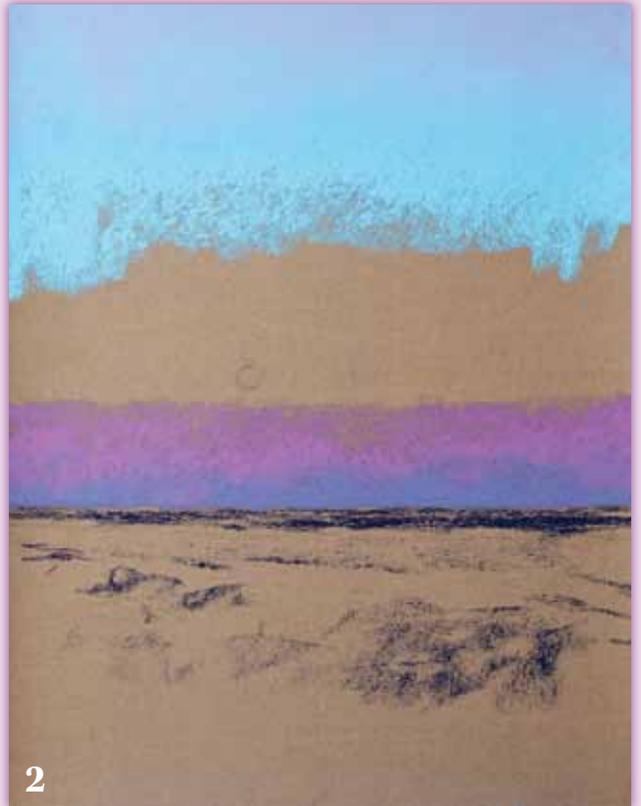
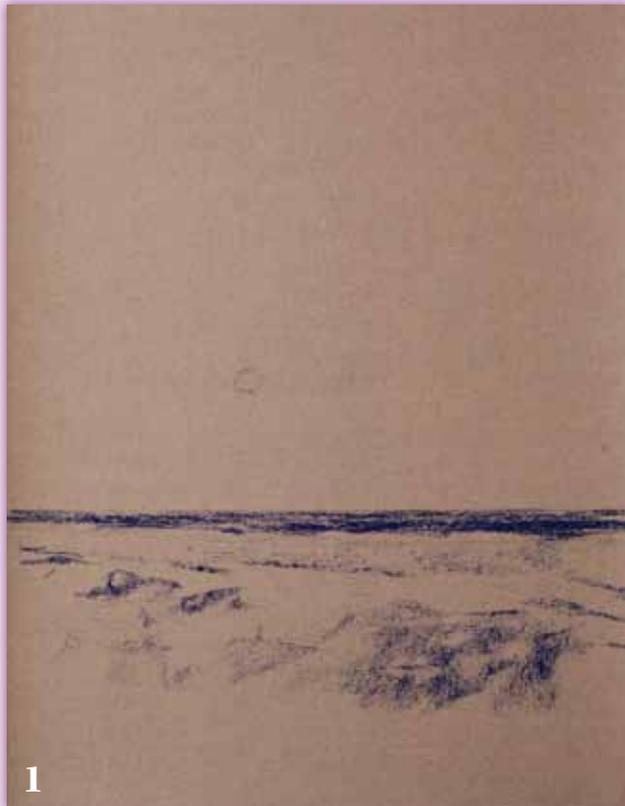
As I work, I spend time talking myself through a scene: OK, this is a cool autumn morning at the seashore. How do I handle it? I'll use long warm shadows; low, cool light; good but not too powerful contrasts; and local colors rising out of grays. Fast forward: It's now sunny noon. What needs to change? Well, there need to be higher contrasts, dark short shadows, reflected lights and higher keys in the local colors.

To see what I mean, follow along on the following pages as I paint a seaside scene at dusk.

PHOTO BY MIKE SPERLAK



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### Demo: Painting the Earth's Shadow

I'm lucky to live near the sea. The natural beauty of the landscape is reason enough to be joyful, but what I'm especially drawn to is the fast and changing action of it—the tides, the winds, the storms and the calm. The atmosphere above the water is charged with water, too, and the refractions, reflections and prisms all add up to a painter's bounty.

In this demo I'll show how to paint the layers of color that exist just above the horizon opposite the rising or setting sun. This is the cast shadow of the Earth flaring into the *troposphere*—the lowest, densest part of the atmosphere in which most weather changes occur. About every 29 days, you may be treated to the full moon climbing through this effect. In ancient times, the orange-pink layer just above the shadow was called Aphrodite's Belt.

**STEP 1:** I often do a quick placement sketch with a hard pastel, in this case indigo by Art Spectrum. I like to use larger sticks for

a broader, quicker approach. The sketch shows me where to build and where to keep things simple. Before I commit to the painting, I do several test swatches of colors to see how they work together, and to look for colors with subtle value shifts through the prismatic light spectrum for a unified, transparent sky palette. I like many pastels, including Terry Ludwig, Sennelier large sticks, Art Spectrum hard pastels, Diane Townsend and Unison (at left).

**STEP 2:** Having checked values, I apply colors at both the horizon and the upper portion of the scene, bringing bluish-violet through blue and greenish-blue down and building up from the deeper blue-violet, into a red-violet to set the darks. At this stage of the process, I'm fine with what appears as banding. After all, the sky is often quite layered when it's clear. Gravity pulls down particulates, and moisture rises evenly. I work the darker value first and bring it slightly into the next area that will be covered with the lighter value. I blend with the sticks, not my hand, and I keep the pastels clean between strokes. I use a more vertical stroke in the upper sky, but switch to a horizontal movement along the horizon to add weight.

**STEP 3:** One of the reasons I like to work from two directions is to "sneak up" on yellow. It's an easy color with which to make a mess,



especially when creating lighter values. I add a grayed violet moving into a pinkish-orange from below, and continuing to drop down with a lighter blue-green (cerulean), into a yellow-green. This leaves a small area that I reserve for pulling yellow “out of the hat.”

**STEP 4:** By continually wiping my yellow pastel with a paper towel, I’m able to make the most convincing area of the sky appear transparent and glowing. I then return to each combination of colors, carefully blending them together.

I use a stroke that’s more like one used when brushing velvet. I avoid rubbing into the paper; that would be burnishing, which results in a grayed painting.

**STEP 5:** When I add the moon, it’s barely visible, the sun having set and its last rays bringing the moon to light. The moon “hangs” in the Belt. If measured at arm’s length, the moon is barely as big as your small fingernail. Because it has form, I still use three values—violet, orange and yellow—to render it ever so carefully. I then pick at it with a small push pin to make the cratered surface. Next, I slightly brush across it my finger to make it recede into space.

At this point, I also refine some low-lying clouds for interest and redraw the foreground with larger marks. This prepares the foreground





for the final part of the painting by deepening it and providing better perspective.

**STEP 6:** To develop believable depth, I play with warms in the foreground. I also have to plan that these warms will show up through the next layers of sand to portray the minute shadows that come in rippled, blown sand. I like massing and find that a painting can't be controlled if I'm not willing to control the masses.

I also add the half-tone for the suggested waves, being sure to add a cooler gray-blue color before adding the foamy, crashing yellow-whites.

**STEP 7:** Now I add the half-tone for the sand—slightly cooler and lighter to continue the graying effect. My marks in the distance are strongly horizontal to convey distance. The marks in the foreground are open and angular to convey larger forms and changing directions. I also begin to add half-tones to the dune grass outcroppings.

**FINAL:** I introduce the lightest lights and the sharpest details. I quickly "brush" around a near white-yellow as if using a palette knife. I scumble over the grasses with higher-key ochres and scratch back into them for fine details—and to show the direction of the wind in ***Aphrodite's Belt*** (at left; 18x12). 🎨