

Stop Using Someone Else's Palette

What works in Wisconsin won't work in west Texas. Here, five top plein air painters share the colors, mixes, and hard-won knowledge that capture each region at its best.

BY KELLY KANE

Every landscape makes its own demands — from the granite coast of Maine to the sun-drenched coastline of California or the fog-softened foothills of Virginia. Each has its own light, its own unique features, its own color language.

In this region-by-region guide, five accomplished watercolorists share the palettes they've built and refined through years of painting their home landscapes. They'll walk you through their must-have colors, their surprise additions, and the specific mixes they reach for when the scene in front of them calls for something only experience can teach. Whether you're painting in your own backyard or heading somewhere new, their insights will help you see the landscape — and your palette — with fresh eyes.

Acadian Shores

Thomas Bucci

2026, watercolor, 11 x 15 in.

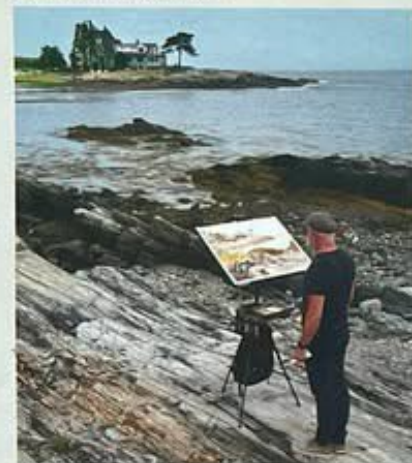
Available from artist

Studio from plein air studies





The artist's custom-made watercolor palette with wells sized precisely to accommodate his largest field brushes



Thomas Buccì



Rocks Like Petrified Wood
2025, watercolor, 22 x 30 in.
Private collection
Plain air

NORTHEAST | Thomas Buccì The Rocky Coast of Maine

Maine is not a landscape that flatters the unprepared. Its coastline is granite and shadow, earth and fog — a world of subtle, shifting neutrals that punishes painters who arrive with too much color and not enough restraint. Thomas Buccì has spent years learning to read it, and the palette he's built reflects that hard-earned understanding.

"This is a coastal area with the Appalachian Mountains meeting the sea," Buccì explains. "It's comprised of granite ledges, boulders, and smaller stones rather than wide sandy beaches — so that means a full range of earthen hues, browns, and grays."

At the core of his palette are four colors he returns to again and again: Pyrrol Orange or Red, Quinacridone Gold, Ultramarine Blue, and Viridian. Together, they function less as individual colors than as a system — a set of building blocks that, in various combinations, can produce almost anything the Maine coast requires.

"With a red, yellow, blue — and I like to add in a green — I can make a full range of color," Buccì says. His method is equally deliberate: he places dollops of his four go-to colors, fresh from the tube, into the corners of his main palette well and drags them toward the center to mix in various ways. "Color harmony results by default," he notes, "since every color is some variation of a mix of the four."

Each color earns its place. Pyrrol Orange or Red brings a granulating quality that's ideally suited to the textures of rock and soil. Quinacridone Gold, intense and transparent, is never used straight from the tube, but mixed with blues, browns, and blacks to produce what Buccì describes as "a perfect range of subtle greens" — exactly the kind of muted, complex greens that Maine's landscape demands. Ultramarine Blue he considers simply indispensable. "I think this one must be on every painter's palette," he says. "I don't know of any mix that can replace it." And Viridian, like the gold, earns its keep entirely through mixing — never alone, always in service of something richer.

For his favorite color recipes, Buccì returns to a few reliable combinations. Ultramarine Blue and Burnt Umber produce what he calls "a classic mix" — a rich base for the full range of grays and blacks that define the rocky Maine coast. He warms it with Pyrrol Orange or cools it with Viridian depending on the light. Quinacridone Gold mixed with Lunar Black — which he prizes for its granulation and transparency — yields a deep greenish-gray he finds irresistible.



Coming Through the Fog, Pond Cove
2025, watercolor, 22 x 30 in.
Available from artist
Plain air

Buccì's commitment to his tools extends to the palette itself, which he designed and had milled from a solid block of aluminum by a local machinist after testing a handmade mat board mock-up for six months. The layout features a large central mixing well flanked by two smaller side wells — one for shades (colors mixed with black), one for tints (colors mixed with white).

That the palette includes dedicated wells for both tells you something about the painter: Buccì is unapologetic about using black and white, a choice that raises eyebrows among purists. "Some watercolorists don't think that either black or white should be used," he acknowledges, "but I use both freely."

His full palette for outdoor painting includes these warm colors: Permanent Yellow Deep, Quinacridone Gold (Daniel Smith), Alizarin Crimson, Pyrrol Red (Daniel Smith), and Pyrrol Orange (Daniel Smith). His cool colors include Cerulean Blue (Daniel Smith or Michael Harding), Cobalt Blue (Daniel Smith or Michael Harding), Ultramarine Blue (Daniel Smith or Michael Harding), Phthalo Blue, Viridian, and Cobalt Teal. For creating tints or using on their own, he keeps these Holbein opaques on hand: Jaune Brilliant 1, Jaune Brilliant 2, and Chinese White. Earth colors round out the palette: Burnt Umber (Michael Harding), Burnt Sienna (Michael Harding), Raw Umber (Michael Harding), Raw Sienna, and Lunar Black (Daniel Smith).