

Frick advised a student painting a still life on the first day of the workshop. He prefers that students paint en plein air because rapidly changing light forces them to work quickly and not overthink their choices.

# Guido Frick: Learning to Paint With **Passion**

German Impressionist painter Guido Frick loves to capture the landscape of the Western United States, and during his semiannual painting trips there, he teaches workshop participants to relax and trust their eyes and their instincts.

—  
by Naomi Ekperigin

Photos in this article: Michael Clark, Santa Fe, [www.michaelclarkphoto.com](http://www.michaelclarkphoto.com)





## ABOVE

Frick worked on a student's canvas, holding his brush toward the end so he could make looser, freer strokes.

## RIGHT

Before he began his plein air-painting demonstration, Frick talked to students about his painting method and issues surrounding color, value, and temperature.



## Artists who choose to take a workshop with Guido Frick want to make a change.

The artist is known for his use of bold, vigorous brushwork and the sense of spontaneity that his paintings exude, and he aims for his students to adopt this same level of freshness—at least for the five days they study with him. At a recent New Mexico workshop sponsored by the Fredericksburg Artists' School, in Texas, students signed up to watch Frick "demonstrate how to combine your visual impressions with your inner sensitivity to find your own artistic language, allowing your individual personality to be recognizable in every brushstroke," as the course description stated. If this was their goal, participants certainly got what they were looking for—and more.

"Maybe 50 percent of the truth exists in the subject you paint," Frick told participants. "But the other 50 percent comes from within—your temperament, your emotions, your creativity, your past, and your passion. As Sergei Bongart once said, 'There is a tree. When you copy the tree, you have two trees—but you don't have a piece of art.'" Frick's views on the goal of art are deeply influenced by Bongart, with whom he studied in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One of the foremost teachers of the Russian method in the United States, Bongart stressed the importance of painting with emotion. "He literally opened my eyes and taught me how to see the world with the eyes of a painter," Frick said. "By that I mean to see the world in colors, temperatures, and values, and not be preoccupied with names, terms, and labels. His motto became a personal goal for me: 'Paint bold, vigorous, and brilliant!'"

Frick passed this lesson on to artists who did not have the privilege of studying with the Russian master. Although he acknowledged that his students are seeking to learn a particular way of painting, he stressed that what he provides is an example, not a prescribed methodology. "Most students think of 'style' as something you can grab in a weekend workshop, the way you can grab a skirt or blouse in a department store," the instructor said. "In my workshops I want them to learn that style is something that develops like handwriting—it happens naturally, and it does not happen overnight. It only comes from painting miles and miles of empty canvases, the same way handwriting forms over years of writing." He often notices that students lack the confidence to trust their own individuality, and instead focus on accurately copying their subject. "Too many paintings look like they could have been painted by Mr. Miller as well as Miss Smith," the artist asserted. "They appear flat, dull, boring—where is the unique personality of the painter?" Most students who attend Frick's workshops are beyond a beginner level and have a natural color sense and grasp of the language of color. Trusting their instincts is their biggest challenge.

"I always tell my students, 'Sacrifice one week of your life, leave your past as an artist behind, and go with me on an exploration into unknown territory. I will be with you, going from easel to easel, to correct you, advise you, and keep you on track,'" he continued. "After the workshop, you

## BELOW RIGHT

The still life setup on the first day of the workshop.

## Guido Frick's Golden Rules

For more than 15 years, Guido Frick has reminded his students to loosen up and paint with passion. Here are some of his main tenets:

1. Use your brain before you start painting, and then switch it off, letting your emotions take control.
2. See yourself as the master of your subject, not its slave.
3. It took you years to develop your own handwriting; don't expect to develop a painting style after one weeklong workshop.
4. How you paint is more important than what you paint.
5. Painting is like a race: If you want to win, you have to save some of your energy for the finish.
6. Your best tools are your eyes. You should rely on them more than any how-to book.
7. If you've just finished a good section of your painting, leave it alone and don't try to make it better. It is already good enough.



can go back to your comfort zone, but give yourself a chance for this one week." With such words of support, Frick created a comfortable environment for self-discovery, enabling his students to take risks and work with looser brushstrokes and bolder color, like the instructor himself. He then followed this introduction with a 45-minute explanation of his technique and showed numerous samples of his work, pointing out how he achieved particular effects. In this first lecture, the instructor laid out what he called the "three steps": color, values, and temperature. "Students often come to points where they don't know what to do next. In these moments, their first thought is that there must be a formula, a specific way to paint this tree, or this flower, or this apple," explained the artist. "But there is no

such thing. Assuming the drawing and composition are fine, there are only three possible areas in which a mistake is made: the hue, the value, or the temperature." The instructor called these the *theoretical steps*, and said he feels these are essential to understand in order to troubleshoot and take a painting to the next level. He followed his explanation with a demonstration of how these steps are executed in a painting—in workshops the instructor usually takes a floral still life as his subject.

"When I demonstrate, I want the students to be able to follow my three practical steps—the abstract step, the modeling step, and the finishing step—which are much clearer than a discussion of color, value, and temperature," Frick said. Before even beginning to paint, the instructor makes

sure he has a firm grasp of these three concepts. "I analyze my subject before I grab a brush, checking the temperature differences and the range of values, determining my focal point, and making sure the composition is balanced," he explained. "By studying my subject I create a road map so that when I decide to paint, I can work quickly." After toning the canvas (usually 24" x 30") and completing a graphite drawing, he begins the first step. "During the abstract phase, I am blocking in the big color shapes, but I'm not focusing on areas of light and dark, and I haven't even begun to think about detail," the instructor said. "In this stage the canvas should be divided into three to five big shapes—I am pulling items together, simplifying them, and focusing on the large masses.

"In the modeling phase I give roundness to the subject by adding some shadow and emphasizing light areas, but I don't put in the darkest darks or lightest lights, and there are still no details," he continued. "At this point the values are close together across the canvas, and the painting is

"I analyze my subject before I grab a brush, checking the temperature differences and the range of values, determining my focal point, and making sure the composition is balanced. By studying my subject I create a road map so that when I decide to paint, I can work quickly."

developing as a whole at the same level—like a pyramid. Pyramids aren't built one side at a time, or the top and then the bottom—the foundation is established all the way around." In the final step, the finishing phase, he adds the highlights and details—all with a brush that is roughly the same size as the large one used in the abstract stage. Overall, this first demonstration took just under an hour and a half, and was done entirely outdoors, with the students seated with a clear view of Frick's easel.

The instructor always paints en plein air, whether his subject is a still life or landscape, and he does not rely on reference photos. "My greatest passion is painting outdoors. I am not a studio painter," Frick said. "To paint outdoors is totally different than sitting in a comfortable studio—it is a

## Frick's Materials

### PALETTE

Gamblin, Schmincke, and Classic Artist oil paints in the following colors:

- ivory black
- phthalocyanine blue
- cobalt blue
- cadmium yellow light
- cadmium orange
- titanium white
- cadmium red light
- alizarin crimson
- Venetian red or terra rosa
- yellow ochre
- burnt sienna

### BRUSHES

- long-hair DaVinci, nos. 8 and 12 (for the abstract step)
- short-hair DaVinci, nos. 8 and 12 (for adding details and highlights)
- rigger with a long handle (for the long lines of branches, twigs, fences, posts, etc.)
- Bob Ross background brush for toning his canvas

### MEDIUMS

- turpentine gum
- damar varnish
- linseed oil

### SURFACES

- Unprimed linen and cotton, to which he applies two or three layers of gesso and stretches himself.

## Demonstration: Frick's Steps



### Step 1: The Drawing Step

Frick began by drawing an outline of his subject in dark oil color on his toned canvas. "It's a very simple drawing—I don't need more than this," he said. "My main goal here is to make sure there's a good balance between negative and positive space, and that my design is correct."



### Step 2: The Abstract Step

Frick next laid out the big color shapes, making sure to stay in a middle key. He used a large, thick brush, which prevented him from getting too detailed because "to even think about detail at this point is totally forbidden," the artist said. "I paint the way a fencer holds his weapon. I hold the brush at the very end, with my arm almost completely outstretched, as though I were attacking the canvas. I think I can get away with this because I've already studied my subject; I've seen my finished painting before picking up my brush loaded with color."

### Step 3: The Modeling Step

The artist had a clear idea of how the painting would look when he was done, but he still ignored the details. "Here I'm stressing the shadow areas and the lighter areas, but I'm still not adding the lightest lights or the darkest darks," the instructor said. "I'm giving roundness to the subjects and adding volume."

sure he has a firm grasp of these three concepts. "I analyze my subject before I grab a brush, checking the temperature differences and the range of values, determining my focal point, and making sure the composition is balanced," he explained. "By studying my subject I create a road map so that when I decide to paint, I can work quickly." After toning the canvas (usually 24" x 30") and completing a graphite drawing, he begins the first step. "During the abstract phase, I am blocking in the big color shapes, but I'm not focusing on areas of light and dark, and I haven't even begun to think about detail," the instructor said. "In this stage the canvas should be divided into three to five big shapes—I am pulling items together, simplifying them, and focusing on the large masses.

"In the modeling phase I give roundness to the subject by adding some shadow and emphasizing light areas, but I don't put in the darkest darks or lightest lights, and there are still no details," he continued. "At this point the values are close together across the canvas, and the painting is

"I analyze my subject before I grab a brush, checking the temperature differences and the range of values, determining my focal point, and making sure the composition is balanced. By studying my subject I create a road map so that when I decide to paint, I can work quickly."

developing as a whole at the same level—like a pyramid. Pyramids aren't built one side at a time, or the top and then the bottom—the foundation is established all the way around." In the final step, the finishing phase, he adds the highlights and details—all with a brush that is roughly the same size as the large one used in the abstract stage. Overall, this first demonstration took just under an hour and a half, and was done entirely outdoors, with the students seated with a clear view of Frick's easel.

The instructor always paints en plein air, whether his subject is a still life or landscape, and he does not rely on reference photos. "My greatest passion is painting outdoors. I am not a studio painter," Frick said. "To paint outdoors is totally different than sitting in a comfortable studio—it is a

## Frick's Materials

### PALETTE

Gamblin, Schmincke, and Classic Artist oil paints in the following colors:

- ivory black
- phthalocyanine blue
- cobalt blue
- cadmium yellow light
- cadmium orange
- titanium white
- cadmium red light
- alizarin crimson
- Venetian red or terra rosa
- yellow ochre
- burnt sienna

### BRUSHES

- long-hair DaVinci, nos. 8 and 12 (for the abstract step)
- short-hair DaVinci, nos. 8 and 12 (for adding details and highlights)
- rigger with a long handle (for the long lines of branches, twigs, fences, posts, etc.)
- Bob Ross background brush for toning his canvas

### MEDIUMS

- turpentine gum
- damar varnish
- linseed oil

### SURFACES

- Unprimed linen and cotton, to which he applies two or three layers of gesso and stretches himself.

A student looked on as Frick worked on a still life en plein air.



great and wonderful challenge, especially because of the rapid changes that can take place." The entire five-day workshop took place outdoors, with Frick prepared to paint under a shelter in case of inclement weather. Over years of teaching he has found that painting on location forces students to respond to changes in the environment and make decisive choices, which makes it easier for them to employ the strong colors and looser brushstrokes that Frick espouses in his work. "They are here because they want to get rid of their tight, tiny brushstrokes," he said firmly. "They want to learn to paint freely, in the style of Sergei Bongart and myself, and responding directly to nature is the best way to do this."

After Frick's first demonstration, students began to work on their own floral still lifes en plein air. As they began to paint, the instructor went around to each easel, watching them work and offering advice. "This gives me the chance to see what level they are on," he explained, "so that during

the rest of the workshop I can respond to each student's needs and give them exercises that target areas of difficulty." Some exercises included a black-and-white study of a subject, to sharpen their eyes and increase the understanding of value; painting a collection of five items in the same color family, enabling students to learn about temperature; and timed studies, which forced them to loosen up.

"Let the brush dance!" Frick said to his students over and over. He had them work on large canvases because, "that way I can get them to use a larger brush, which immediately loosens up their brushstrokes. By working with a bigger brush, they see that it's pointless to start their painting with a small detail such as a wormhole, a flea, or a doorbell; they instead establish bigger shapes right from the beginning." Frick painted at a distance from his canvas and encouraged his students to do the same—because it keeps the composition as a whole in view, enabling them to more easily gauge how these looser, larger brushstrokes are

## Student Critiques



### LEFT

"This piece shows the student's understanding of values, and there's a feeling of depth," Frick commented. "The controlled brushwork underlines the quietness of the remote New Mexican scenery, but the viewer is left wondering what the focus of the painting is. Because both roofs are the same bright color, the two spots are in competition with each other. There should only be one focal point in a painting, and everything else should act as support. I also sense an insecurity in drawing skills here. Many students ignore drawing mistakes because they think they can cover it up later with paint, but the truth is, a drawing mistake will follow you throughout your process."

### BELOW

The instructor focused on the vase in this piece, because painting glass can be the most difficult for students. "Usually they think there is some trick to painting glass that I don't want to reveal to them," he said. "The only trick is this: paint what you see." When



looking at the glass vase of the still life on which this painting is based, one sees what is inside, what shines through, the background color, and the color of the tablecloth. "Painting the water in the glass can be challenging," Frick explained. "My advice is not to paint the glass, vase, and the subject. Instead, paint the largest areas, add some highlight, and move on."



### ABOVE

Frick felt the focal point was clear in this painting, but thought it lacked the final punch to really tie it together. "The abstract and modeling phases that I explain in the beginning of the workshop are quite well done," he noted, "but it seems that the artist lost steam. The accents, the details, and the highlights are not applied with confidence and power. It's important to save some energy for the very end."

## BELOW RIGHT

A student at Frick's recent workshop sponsored by the Fredericksburg Artists' School learned how to paint freer and looser with the help of a large brush.

## Recommended Books

The instructor often recommends his students read the following texts, or at least have some familiarity with the concepts they espouse:

*Sergei Bongart*, by Mary N. Balcomb (Cody Publishing, Seattle, Washington)

"This book shows you where I'm coming from as an artist. Balcomb's writing and the reproductions of Bongart's work bring to life his personality and influence as a painter."

*Sarkis: Paintings, Drawings, and Images in Words*, by Sarkis Antikajian (self-published, Cheshire, Oregon)

"With each page, Sarkis encourages artists to loosen up without abandoning realism. His book can widen your understanding of what it means to paint 'loose.'"

*Hawthorne on Painting*, by Charles Hawthorne (Dover Publications, New York, New York)

"This book is a great collection of easy-to-understand advice and provides good ideas for those moments when you don't know where to go with your painting. I think the strength of the book lies in the simplicity of Hawthorne's lessons."

*Composition of Outdoor Painting*, by Edgar Payne (DeRu's Fine Art Books, Bellflower, California)

If you're looking for different ways to compose your subject, this book is perfect. It shows you how you can simplify your drawings, enabling you to show the relationship between subjects.

*Ann Templeton: Color and Beyond*, by Eugene L. Mendonsa (Fresco Fine Art Publications, Albuquerque, New Mexico)

Readers will be impressed by Ann Templeton's knowledge of all facets of the painting process. It's a great book for those who seek a basic understanding of painting and provides a solid foundation for those who wish to develop as artists.



functioning. "When you finally do jump into the details with a smaller brush," the instructor said, "they will not distract from the general mood of the painting, because that's already been established. I do not seek a response to the fact that I painted accurately; I want a response to the mood I've created in my work."

The second half of the workshop focused on landscapes, and the instructor began with another 24" x 30" demonstration. As with the still life, the same rules of color, value, and temperature applied. Frick first analyzed his subject, becoming a "master of it," so that when he set his brush to his canvas, he was fully aware—and in control of—what he wanted to express. "There should be no hesitation, no wondering 'where should I go next?'" he said. "With outdoor painting, you have to go for it right away, and work quickly to stay in the mood before time goes by and the mood changes." Integral to the success of

this method is a clear understanding of your subject before painting—an understanding that Frick believes can only be developed after years of painting on-site and engaging in a dialogue with nature. "A student who expects to leave a workshop with a bunch of complete, finished paintings has the wrong expectations and attitude," he said. "I have had students who, after a couple of days, are upset—upset with themselves, with their subject, their tools, even the direction of the wind. I always try to remind them that their masterpiece is still light-years away.

"To come to a workshop means you are willing to study," he continued. "So I remind them to lower their expectations, and I try to take away the pressure they put on themselves. I also remind them that I, too, had a lousy start and went through moments of frustration and desperation, and the only way to get through it is with commitment, strength, and discipline." With a focus on emotion and mood, rather than

"When you finally do jump into the details with a smaller brush," the instructor said, "they will not distract from the general mood of the painting, because that's already been established. I do not seek a response to the fact that I painted accurately; I want a response to the mood I've created in my work."

rendering every detail, Frick encouraged his students to take risks and experience their subjects in a new way. Instead of slavishly following every line and curve of a subject, they are shown how to apply bold, confident strokes that evoke an emotional response and mirror their own connection to the subject. Although he acknowledged that students are coming to learn his style, the root of the instructor's method is an emotional connection to the subject, which can't be recreated, but can be taught. "People often ask me the name of my style, and note that Sergei Bongart was considered a Russian realist," Frick said. "This is partly true, but he was also quite an Expressionist, and his paintings always reflected a mood. This is exactly what I try to get my students to do: have the courage to express themselves, and do that as boldly, vigorously, and brilliantly as possible." ■

Naomi Ekperigin is the assistant editor of *Workshop*.



## About the Artist

**Guido Frick** was born in Konstanz, Germany, and worked for years as a journalist, covering major sporting events throughout Europe. In his mid-20s, he was in a car accident that caused hip and leg injuries that left him bedridden. Unable to walk, Frick passed the time with a passion he had nearly forgotten: painting and drawing. Once he was fully recovered, he began taking classes at the Art Academy of Konstanz, under Karel Hödr and Hans Sauerbruch. In America, he studied under Sergei Bongart, where he developed the technique of loose, free brushwork that is now his signature. He has had numerous solo shows throughout the United States and Europe and is represented by several galleries, including Renaté Fine Art Gallery, in Carmel, California; Zantman Gallery, in Sun Valley, Idaho; and Red Bird Gallery, in Seaside, Florida. For more information on Frick, visit his websites at [www.guidofrick.com](http://www.guidofrick.com) and [www.guidofrick.de](http://www.guidofrick.de).

## Frick's Work



**ABOVE**  
**A Real Old Timer**  
 2008, oil, 24 x 30. All artwork  
 in this article collection the artist  
 unless otherwise indicated.

**RIGHT**  
**A Place in the Corner**  
 2007, oil, 30 x 24.  
 Private collection.

**FAR RIGHT**  
**Hidden Teepees**  
 2008, oil, 20 x 24.



**LEFT**  
**On the Way Home**  
 2008, oil, 18 x 18.

**BOTTOM LEFT**  
**Warming Up in  
 the Abajos**  
 2008, oil, 20 x 20.

**BELOW**  
**Fresh Cut**  
 2007, oil, 24 x 20.  
 Private collection.

**BOTTOM RIGHT**  
**Mixed Lilacs**  
 2008, oil, 30 x 30.

