

## **Plein Air Easel Reviews**

*Choosing the right equipment can be one of the most difficult decisions for plein air artists.*

*To help in that decision, quite a few members of the Chestnut Board have taken time to write about the plein air easels they use. In the reviews, you'll find a variety of easels, a variety of opinions often about the same easel(!) and solutions for some of the issues we have with them. We hope you enjoy our list, and we hope it helps in your choice.*

*If you have an easel to write about, simply submit it to me, Shirley Fachilla, at [shirleymaf@gmail.com](mailto:shirleymaf@gmail.com) and I'll fit it to our format and add it to the line-up.*

### **The ArtBox by James Coulter – reviewed by Shirley Fachilla**

This is a plein air easel designed, sold and crafted by plein air painter James Coulter. James offers the complete package of tripod, palette box and “stick.” The stick is the part of the apparatus that holds the painting panel. He also offers three differently sized palette boxes and three differently sized sticks to purchasers.

**Advantages:** good price, lightweight, an all-in-one-purchase, smaller sizes of box and stick will fit in a large school backpack, easy set-up.

**Disadvantages:** larger panels are a bit wobbly on the largest stick, needs some care with set-up when painting on uneven terrain.

You can look and/or buy online at: <http://artboxandpanel.com/>

### **The ArtBox by James Coulter – reviewed by Kevin Menck**

It's the easiest system I've seen to set up. The palette and tripod is very stable; however, the “stick” which holds the painting panel can move and wiggle a bit when painting. There's also an issue for me of not being able to get shade on the palette. The panel and palette are so far apart that you can't use the shade from the panel to block the sun on your palette. With other systems, you can.

**Advantages:** easy set-up, lightweight, palette and tripod very stable.

**Disadvantages:** panels too far from palette to provide shade (umbrella would solve), stick can be wobbly when painting on panel.

You can look and/or buy online at: <http://artboxandpanel.com>

### **The Artbox by James Coulter – reviewed by Dawn Whitelaw**

I bought the smallest box from the selection. I used several coats of Liquin to seal all the surfaces of the box. I have substituted a metal stick for the wooden one that comes with the box (palette box, stick and tripod can be bought separately). Lori Putnam found this metal stick (the Guerrilla Painter Flex Easel ) at Judson's. It's longer and heavier than the wooden stick, holds a panel more securely and lets you work on a larger panel.

**Advantages:** good price, can paint a 16x20 easily, fits in my backpack though I have to carry the tripod and stick separately, can close the box with paint on it, easy and quick set-up (best thing about it), when open, the palette has side panels that can hold additional stuff.

**Disadvantages:** light can shine on the palette when painting into the sun (I use a cardboard shield or extra panel to prevent this from happening, can't adjust the angle of the palette, a bit heavier than the small Open Box M.

You can look and/or buy online at <http://artboxandpanel.com>

You can find the Guerrilla Painter Flex Easel here:

<http://www.judsonsart.com/pleinair/pc/viewPrd.asp?idproduct=1781&idcategory=0>

### **The Easy -L – reviewed by Andrea Jones**

(Andrea has switched to the James Coulter Artbox. She "*loves* it.")

I used to use an Easy L, a medium-large size. I loved that you could store wet panels in it and that it has a way to store variously sized panels. It also has a large mixing surface. After about 3 years, it had begun to fall apart. It was a little wobbly from the start. No one at the company will reply to my emails!

**Advantages:** will store wet panels, will carry and store variously sized panels, large mixing surface.

**Disadvantages:** heavy, maker is unresponsive to issues when emailed.

You can look or buy online at:

<http://www.artworkessentials.com/products/VERSA/Versa.htm>

### **The Easy -L Versa – reviewed by Sherrie Levine**

This review along with Andrea's offers a study in contrasts. *Sherrie loves* her Easy L Versa and has not a single issue. This is rare.

The Easy L Versa is made like the Open Box M, meaning it consists of: 1. a box which serves for both palette and panel-holder and 2. a tripod. It is not necessary to buy the tripod offered by the Easy L site (see the following review by Cathleen Windham); other tripods also work.

You can look or buy online at:

<http://www.artworkessentials.com/products/VERSA/Versa.htm>

### **The Easy -L Lite – reviewed by *Cathleen Windham***

I have used the Easy L Lite for two years. I had a larger version L but downsized to fit everything easily into a backpack. I added glass to the palette bottom for super easy clean-up. There have been no issues with my box as far as quality. It's traveled to Italy, Amsterdam and many road trips without a hitch.

I have found that if I wanted to paint bigger than the box "allows," I can use binder clips to secure a larger canvas.

I bought the box without buying the tripod and instead purchased the Slik Pro II tripod which was recommended by several artists. It has traveled everywhere with the box and is still in excellent repair.

All my gear goes in one backpack, LL Bean's Hiker's soft backpack. I have learned along the way that cheap gear will fail when you need it the most. Buy good gear.

You can look or buy online at: <http://www.artworkessentials.com/products/EASyL-Lite/index.htm>

You can find the Slik Pro II here: [http://www.slik.co.jp/slik\\_com/LEG-PROFESSIONAL\\_II\\_LE.html](http://www.slik.co.jp/slik_com/LEG-PROFESSIONAL_II_LE.html)

You can find a variety of LL Bean backpacks here:

[http://www.llbean.com/llb/shop/1098#/llb/shop/1098?gnattr=AR\\_Test\\_4%3AAR\\_Test\\_4&nav=ln-506845&page=hiking-packs](http://www.llbean.com/llb/shop/1098#/llb/shop/1098?gnattr=AR_Test_4%3AAR_Test_4&nav=ln-506845&page=hiking-packs)

### **First Plein Air Easel – reviewed by Bitsy King**

**Whether you are new to plein air, on a budget, or need time to decide, why spend a fortune?** This is not a "brand" recommendation, but rather a "type". I cannot remember the brand of my first, but it suited me well for many years, until I needed one for travel and bought an Open Box M. I searched online for the least expensive one I could find, as close to the one I had (bought at Griffin's around 40 years ago). This looks pretty much like it.

If you are painting small panels, you can use a "clip board" and change sizes of your panels (or even paint two at a time) without changing your settings

**Advantages:** very inexpensive, lightweight, easy set-up, has center support (for palette)

**Disadvantages:** Unstable in a breeze. [Fachilla note: I don't understand how the "center support for palette" works. If it doesn't work well, this would be a disadvantage. Further Fachilla note: I started plein air with an inexpensive metal easel. I didn't feel guilty about buying it because it was a small investment.]

You can see more about this particular easel at:

<http://www.madisonartshop.com/portable-pleinaresels.html>

### **Full-size French Easel – reviewed by *Jean Gauld-Jaeger***

My full-size French easel is a Mabel; I've had it for 12 years and during that 12 years have used it about twice a week. The screws work loose sometimes, but I keep a Phillips head screwdriver and pliers in the paintbox. The original palette has been replaced with a Turtlewood. It's made to fit the easel and is perfectly balanced. The paintbox holds all the paint I need because I use only a warm/cool of each primary plus black and white. It will also hold an adequate number of brushes. I carry the paintbox on a rolling cart made for that purpose. I rarely take it out to the field; most of the time it travels from studio to workshop.

**Advantages:** holds adequate paint and brushes, holds up to a 30x40 canvas, long-lasting and sturdy

**Disadvantages:** heavy, can need repair due to the screws and wingnuts, set-up takes getting used to.

You can look or buy online at: <http://www.mabefeasel.com/categories/Sketch-Box-Easels/>

You can find the Turtlewood Palette site here: <http://www.turtlewoodpalettes.com/>

### **Half-Box French Easel – reviewed by *Shirley Fachilla***

This is a smaller version of the classic easel of the French Impressionists. It is made of wood with metal screws and wingnuts to adjust the same. It was designed to carry everything needed to plein air paint with the exception of painting panels. In practice, no one can fit everything needed into the half-sized French box storage compartment. I still use my half box when I'm at a painting locale where not much walking is involved.

**Advantages:** very stable even in adverse (as in windy or hilly) conditions, will accept big canvases or small, will accept painting panels or stretched canvas, very adjustable in height and slant of painting surface.

**Disadvantages:** somewhat complicated set-up, its flexibility makes it prone to damage (it is made of wood put together with screws) and it's heavy.

Buy top-of-the-line (such as the Jullian or Mabel brand) if you purchase. Off brands tend to have more equipment-failure problems. You can find it online at any of the major art suppliers like Jerry's Artarama, Dick Blick, etc. Sometimes half boxes can also be found locally at Plaza. One of the many places you can find French easels:  
<http://search.jerrysartarama.com/search?keywords=easels&gclid=CLfH-LmmhrICFQTOAodx0IAIA>

## **The Open Box M – reviewed by *Kevin Menck***

(Kevin's *favorite*.)

I have had it for 10 years and it's still in very good shape after what, at times, has bordered on abuse. It's flat, low profile, lightweight, easy to pack and simple to use. There are two parts only, a tripod and the palette/panel holder. You can keep constant shade on the palette because of the design. It does have a lot of moving parts (lots of parts to adjust in setting up). I have had to replace some brass pieces and have had a spring pop off.

**Advantages:** lightweight, easy to pack, simple to use, can position to give constant shade on the palette

**Disadvantages:** set-up time.

You can look or buy online at: <http://www.openboxm.com/>

## **The Open Box M (8x10 size) – reviewed by *Dawn Whitelaw***

I conditioned the wood palette with several Liquin coats so that I didn't need a plexiglass pane for my mixing surface. I use a strip of wide, clear packing tape across the top of the palette to put my paint on to make clean-up easy. With this set-up, I use the small Gorilla Box solvent container with the screw-on lid. I work as large as 11x14 on this small box.

**Advantages:** fits in a small backpack, the palette can be slanted down so light does not shine on it, the box can be safely closed with paint on the palette, the palette and panel holder are one-piece.

**Disadvantages:** set-up time (when painting several days in a row, the set-up becomes arduous), small palette area, can't do larger painting sizes, expensive.

You can look or buy online at: <http://www.openboxm.com/>

## **The Open Box M (10x12 size) – reviewed by *Kay Keyes Farrar***

I have a large 10x12 Open Box M that I use with a Pelican box. My tripod is heavy and too expensive, can't recommend it. Everything fits in my Kelty backpack with reinforced waist belts. Packed it's about 40 lbs. (Yikes!!!)

I like the Open M that fits into the Pelican box for smaller paintings and when I'm hiking. My backpack goes anywhere.

When I paint larger than a 16x20 outside, I use my French Box easel and studio palette (a 14x18) so I can mix more colors. An advantage of the French easel (full or half) is the ability to rest one's palette on its extended drawer when set-up (seems like a small thing but it's big in convenience).

**Disadvantages:** heavy total set-up (at least in part because of the tripod), limited palette size for a painter who likes to mix all colors at the start.

You can look or buy online at: <http://www.openboxm.com/>

You can find an assortment of Kelty backpacks here: <http://www.kelty.com/c-backpacks.aspx?cid=kelty-PS-keltybackpakcs-06162010&gclid=CLih1t3cj7ICFQTOOnAodi38AgQ>

## **The Open Box M – reviewed by *Jean Gauld-Jaeger***

(Jean *loves* her Open Box M.)

My open box M will accommodate an 11x14 canvas or panel. I bought a Monkey backpack (from the Open Box M company) that holds: the box, two canvases, a bottle of turp, a roll of paper towels, brushes, small container for turp, bungee cords, bug spray, sketch book, sun screen, charcoal sticks, water bottle, tripod and camera. I put my turp in a fuel bottle that I bought at REI; it will not leak! I put the entire thing on my back and have hands free to carry an umbrella or a walking stick. It is very well-balanced and most of the weight rests on the hips instead of the shoulders.

You can look or buy online at: <http://www.openboxm.com/>

## **Soltek – reviewed by Denise Hawkins**

The Soltek weights about 9 pounds and is made of aluminum and alloys. It sets up in about a minute. It has retractable locking tripod legs (this is **not** a separate tripod but a part of the easel itself). The working box and palette are ample in size and can hold solvent and brushes on the palette wings when open.

Denise also carries a backpack for paper towels, bug spray, brushes, sketchbook, some of her paint, etc.

Hint for new owner: wipe legs free of dirt and such before folding up. Keeps it operating smoothly.

**Advantages:** Lightweight, can accommodate a canvas as large as 30 inches, folds flat to (2.5x12.5x19 inches) and so fits in a larger backpack, easy to clean, easy and quick to set-up.

**Disadvantages:** expensive, made to order so there's a wait after purchase, some (**not** Denise!) say tripod legs stretch too wide when extended and don't stay put.

You can look or buy online at: <http://www.openboxm.com/>