

Local painters capture scenes of St. Johns County's national parks as part of plein air event

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DARON.DEAN@STAUGUSTINE.COM

Mary Hubley, a St. Augustine artist and gallery owner, paints on the south lawn of the Castillo de San Marcos during the Find Your Park Plein Air event Saturday morning, April 16, 2016. From St. Augustine Record article.

By [JAKE MARTIN](#)

jake.martin@staugustine.com

It was Henry David Thoreau who said “This world is but a canvas to our imagination,” and it’s in that spirit that artists have taken to St. Johns County’s national parks in search of the right subject, at the right angle, at the right time.

Painters were scattered outside the Castillo de San Marcos and Fort Matanzas on Saturday as part of the Find Your Park Plein Air event, which is the result of a collaboration between the National Park Service and St. Johns Cultural Council.

Plein air, as the French say, is an art form in which the painter creates outside, exposed to the elements, with the subject in view.

Park officials say the event is a way to bring together history, art, culture and enjoyment of the great outdoors to mark National Park Week and the Park Service’s Centennial.

Local artist and gallery owner Mary Hubley, who set up her work station Saturday on the lawn near the Castillo’s ticket office, agreed it’s a fitting way to pay tribute to the area’s picturesque parks.

Hubley said she considers herself a modern Impressionist specializing in landscapes, although she dabbles in other forms as well.

In between entertaining the questions and comments of passing visitors, Hubley absorbed the sights of her subject and made small adjustments to her canvas as it slowly came to life. “For me, lighting is awesome because lighting changes things,” she said, about an hour into her painting for the day.

A subject even as stagnant as the Castillo can change from hour to hour, and even minute to minute.

“I’m getting some great clouds now and in a few minutes those will be gone, which is fine,” Hubley said. “The sky changes all the time, so sometimes I have to remember how the sky looked five minutes ago and just kind of go with how I remember that.”

The most challenging aspect of plein air painting? The weather.

“The most important thing, really, is the day,” she said. “If it rains, you just can’t do this. Your picture will melt. You can get out a big umbrella, but it’s still kind of hard.”

Jolene DuBray, an archives specialist at Flagler College and local painter, found a nook outside the Castillo with a view of its shot furnace, the seawall and the distant masts of El Galeón, docked at the St. Augustine Municipal Marina.

“I like that you can see the ship in the background and the bullet holes in the wall, and the oven,” she said. “It kind of shows the scars of the fort.”

DuBray said she'd likely be splitting her time between the Castillo and Fort Matanzas for the Plein Air event.

She said she began painting at a young age with the help of her grandmother but that she's put a renewed emphasis on improving her craft in recent years.

"Lighting is a big factor, as far as aesthetics go, and just playing with the combination of the different elements to make a strong painting," DuBray said. "That's the trick of it."

There are two components to Find Your Park Plein Air. The first component is the creation of art in plein air at the national parks through Sunday. The second is a juried show to be featured as part of the America's Parks exhibition at the Lightner Museum from June 9 to Aug. 31.

Artist registration closed Thursday. Participating artists will be able to submit up to two pieces created during the plein air event to be juried for inclusion into the show.

The awards for the juried show include one \$1,000 award for Best of Show, two \$500 awards for best of media and two \$250 awards for honorable mention.

For information, call 808-7330 or go to findyourparkpleinair.com