Marc Dalessio explains how he paints landscapes using an adaptation of the sight-size method normally associated with studio work. His method is to paint what he observes in such a way that the subject and painted image are exactly the same scale when viewed from a constant position.

Marc Dalessio's method involves creating an image on canvas or paper so that it is precisely the same as the subject when both are viewed from a measured distance away from the easel. This is achieved by standing 10 feet back from the drawing or painting, which will be the same size as the subject, whether that is a stilllife arrangement, posed figure, or drawing. All decisions about scale, proportion, and value are made from that distance, and then the artist steps forward to execute the artwork.

The value of using the sight-size method is that it trains artists to represent what they actually see rather than what they interpret, and it gives them a way of creating precise drawings and paintings quickly and effectively. The process is so exacting that some artists will wear the same shoes each time they go back to work on a picture so that there isn't even a fraction of an inch difference in their height.

Because of the normal requirements for the sight-size method, it is seldom used when artists work outdoors because the subject will not be static. But the American artist Marc Dalessio found a way to apply a variation of the method to plein air landscape painting when he works near his home in Italy or when traveling. In the text that follows, which is edited from Dalessio’s writing and interviews, he explains that adaptation, as well as other aspects of his artistic processes.
I don’t use a formal system for composing my pictures. In fact, I’m always trying to do something new and avoid repeating myself. I’ve studied the Golden Mean, but I don’t use it very often. I don’t like the 5-to-8 proportions of vases, because I find them too narrow for landscapes. My goal in painting has always been a pure experience of nature, and I find that the 3-to-4 proportions support more accurately mimic human eyesight. Another way my landscape work has become more naturalistic over the years is the size of my paintings. The larger work is also more representative of being present before a scene.

My earlier teachers were influential in getting me interested in traditional painting, but technically and aesthetically they had little or no influence on my current work. My ten years of study and friendship with Charles Cecil is the strongest influence on the technical aspect of my work. At Charles’ studio I was taught a great many things besides that particular method.

I now teach students in Italy who studied in an atelier and are already familiar with the sight-size technique. When I teach in the United States, I take time to demonstrate the concept, and I find that most people paint and draw using a procedure that approximates sight-size even if they don’t realize it. It is just a formalization of what painters do instinctively.
I use Italian steel easel on location because it is portable and durable, and I work with the Silver brushes with the green handle and copper ferrule, as well as with Blick Masterstroke bristle brushes. Rather than fly with my Italian painting panels or canvases, I order a number of different-size substrates from New Traditions. Usually I travel with my own homemade canvases and panels, however, recently I’ve used New Traditions and RayMar artists’ panels because they are lightweight and therefore easy to transport.

For many years I made my own sun-thickened linseed oil, but after the Zecchi store in Florence finally got its sun-thickened linseed oil to the right consistency I started using it. The store’s oil medium is usually “August oil,” meaning the company puts it outside in the very hot summer months, so it thickens very quickly. I’ve also worked with “Spring oil” which takes much longer to thicken and absorbs more oxygen. My medium is 1 part sun-thickened linseed oil mixed with 1 part thinned Canada balsam (cut 1:1 with turpentine). My wife once asked why I only own blue shirts, and I explained that when I paint on canvas in the shade I am likely to be standing in full sunlight (I don’t use an umbrella), and my shirt reflects light on the painting and affects the hues. I learned to only wear blue shirts a few years ago when I put on a favorite orange T-shirt my brother gave me. As soon as I realized the orange was influencing the colors on the canvas, I had to go back to the house to change. I’ve tried wearing black shirts, but if I’m up against a hedge or in an area with very little reflected light, I find the canvas and environment reason)

I have traveled to exotic locations in the winters to paint, as that gives you the last two very productive weeks in which to develop a feel for the subjects. Ironically, my best trips are the ones that started with me looking at the landscape and saying, “My God, did I come all this way for this?” I couldn’t see anything worth painting when I first surveyed potential locations, but I forced myself to squeeze good paintings out of an uninspiring area. I’ve learned that these challenging locations are easier to paint than ones that are filled with exotic and beautiful elements.

I live in the Chianti region of Italy, which is surprisingly unpicturesque despite its fame. Olive trees and vineyards make for very poor compositional elements when seen from a distance, and I believe that’s the reason many great landscape painters of the past avoided the area.

Painting in a pictorially uninspiring place is a bit like training for a marathon race by running in locations that are high in elevation than the site of the competition. One winds up better-conditioned for the race. When I travel from Chianti to places with great compositions everywhere, I am all the more inspired. After 17 years of forcing myself to paint here, I have become very good at seeing beauty just by stepping outside.

The text of this article is based on interviews with the artist, blog posts on his website, www.marciadalsazio.com, and an interview by Larry Griff that was posted on Griff’s website, http://paintingperceptions.com.