

ARTIST PROFILE

DONALD NEFF

Using Plein Air Acrylic Studies

To fulfill a long-standing ambition to paint an expansive view of the Iguassu Falls of South America, Donald Neff made acrylic studies on location and took them back to California to develop a 36 x 72-inch studio oil painting.



Donald Neff using his small acrylic travel kit to paint on the Pampas in South America

Ever since Donald Neff first saw photographs of Iguassu Falls in South America, he'd been determined to visit the aquatic display, located between Argentina and Brazil. He wanted to paint the falls, then do a large studio painting that suggested its monumental nature. The artist finally fulfilled that ambition in January 2012, when he and his wife toured South America with a group of about 20 friends.

Iguassu Falls (*Cataratas do Iguaçu*, Portuguese for "Big Water") is one of the natural wonders of the world. When First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited the location, she said, "This makes poor Niagara look like a kitchen faucet." Tumbling over almost two miles of cliff edges, expanding into 150 to 300 separate falls depending on the season, the falls range in height from 200 to 270 feet.

Neff paints both in oils and acrylics. "Although I generally favor oils," he says, "I take acrylic paints along on international trips because the water-soluble colors are much easier to get through airport security and customs, and they don't make it necessary to secure solvents and mediums. Moreover, the paints dry in a few minutes and make it easy to layer colors and then quickly pack up and leave a location."

The artist's small paint kit consists of about eight to 10 tubes of acrylic colors, several pads of canvas sheets in various sizes (8.5 x 11, 9 x 12-inch), several paintbrushes (brights and a few rounds of various sizes), disposable paper palettes, a plastic palette knife, a small spray bottle, paper towels, a pencil or two, and four or more large paper clamps (very important to keep canvas and palette sheets secured in the wind). Neff improvises when it comes to obtaining water and a disposable cup.

Except for the palette and canvas pads, all these supplies fit into a 9 x 6 x 3-inch travel pouch. When traveling this light, Neff generally doesn't bring an easel, "stay-wet" palettes, or boxes of other equipment because those would only add bulk and weight. He sometimes holds the canvas pad in his hand, or lays it flat if a support is available.

At The Falls

Once he finally arrived at Iguassu Falls, Neff spent several days walking along the trails, over bridges, and down walkways, first on the Argentine side and then on the Brazilian side. He then broke away from the tour group to paint. His objective was to capture the composition, values, and colors as they appeared in nature.

ARTIST DATA

NAME: Donald Neff

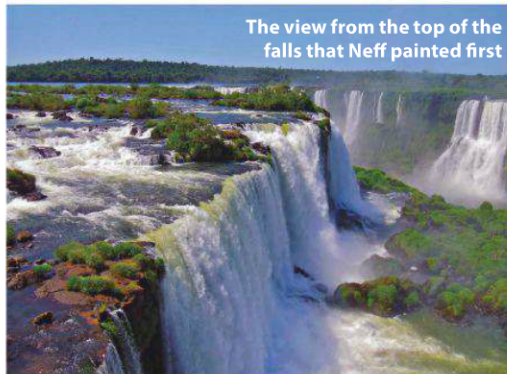
BIRTHDATE: 1950

LOCATION: San Jose, CA

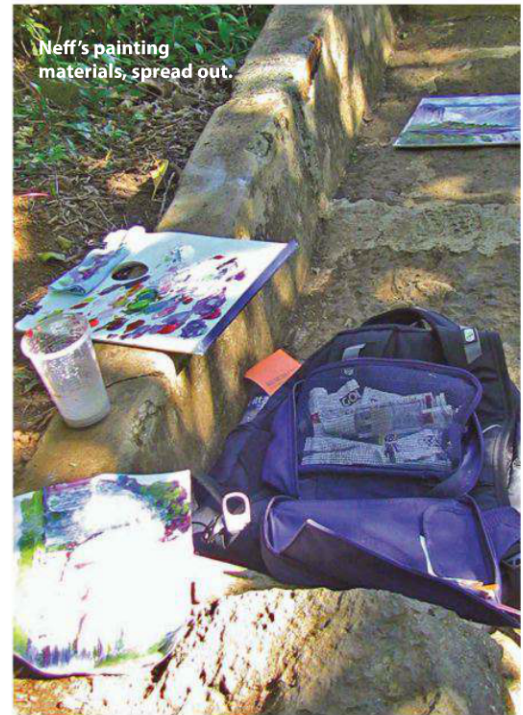
INFLUENCES: "Primarily, any good painting that grabs me, no matter how obscure or famous the artist. Among those are paintings by Hudson River School artists and contemporary Western artists such as William Scott Jennings, Clyde Aspevig, John Cogan, Jim Wilcox, Wilson Hurley, and Marc Hanson, to name a few."

WEBSITE: www.donaldneff.com

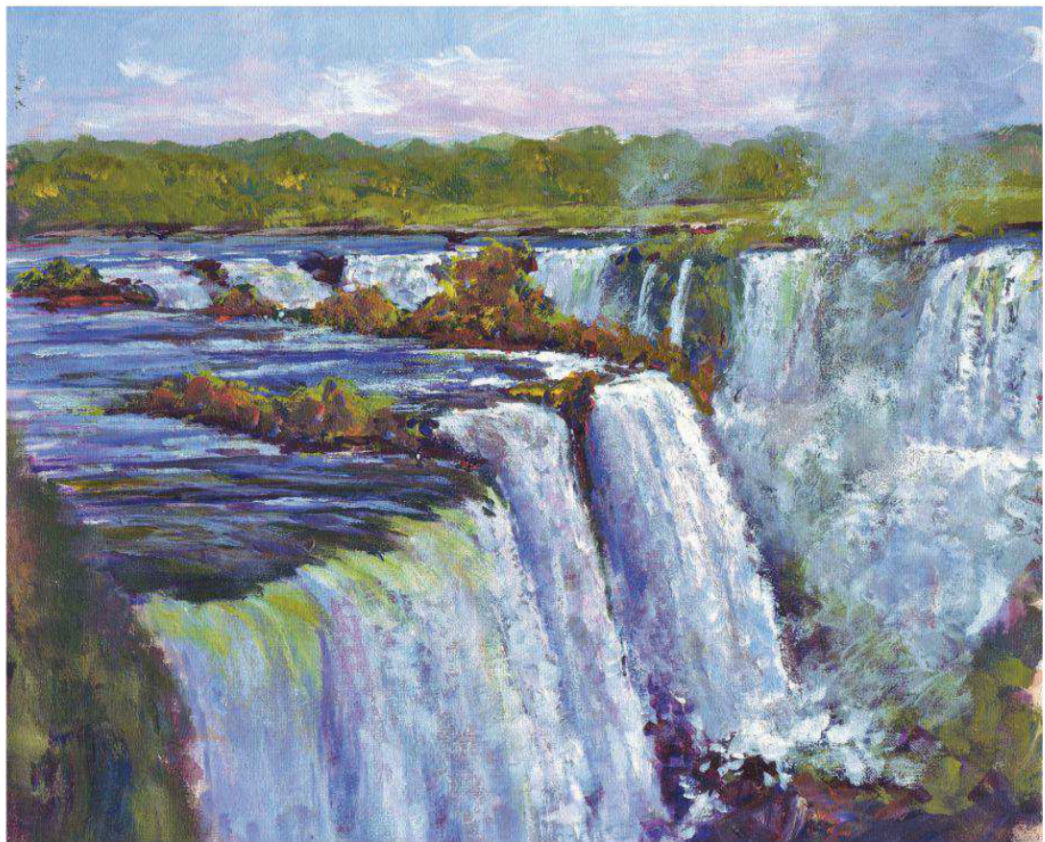
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The view from the top of the falls that Neff painted first



Neff's painting materials, spread out.



Iguassu Falls
Donald Neff
2012, acrylic, 9 x 12 in.
Collection the artist
Plein air
This is the artist's first
study of the falls.

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Garganta do Diablo (The Devil's Throat)

2012, acrylic, 9 x 12 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air

This is the second study Neff did of the falls, from a different vantage point.



Neff's first piece was done at the top of the falls. "When painting water in general, and waterfalls in particular, it's necessary to apply many layers of acrylic color in order to suggest both the depth and reflective surfaces," he explains. "I usually work from the darker values to the lighter ones, and I sometimes glaze darker wash over lighter values. Since acrylic paints dry quickly, it is a little more difficult to get a soft, moving look of falling water than it would be with slower-drying oils, but glazing along edges can yield a convincing illusion of motion."

The palette of acrylic colors Neff uses includes ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, quinacridone red, cadmium red medium, sap green, transparent iron oxide, cadmium orange, yellow ochre (sometimes raw sienna), cadmium yellow medium, and titanium white.

He sometimes adds other colors, including thalo blue and thalo green.

Neff pre-mixes a combination of ultramarine blue and quinacridone red to form a dark purple, and he combines cobalt blue and cadmium red to get a rich gray. These purples and grays can be modified with other colors; for example, yellow ochre can be added to the gray to get a grayish green that is useful for painting distant trees and foliage.

Like any other paints, acrylics are subject to changes in temperature and relative humidity. Since the trip to South America was made during summer months, temperatures were high and it was quite humid, so the paints dried quickly on the palette. "I spent a lot of time just keeping the paint wet and manageable," Neff says. "Many acrylic painters use a 'stay-wet' palette, but those can be bulky on long trips.

"To make acrylic paintings look robust, I have to apply at least three or more layers of paint. The paint usually dries quickly between each layer, so I can build up many glazes or washes to create more of a sense of depth. Acrylics tend to be more transparent and translucent than oils, so this multiple coating technique creates more interaction between the colors, thus adding depth and luminosity to the completed painting."

Once Neff gets close to the final layer of paint application, he usually establishes the final details from the top to the bottom of the canvas, and from the background to the foreground. Ultimately, he establishes a more detailed foreground of objects, set against the background.

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The scene that served as a basis for the large studio painting, along with a 12" x 24" oil study done in three hours in the studio.

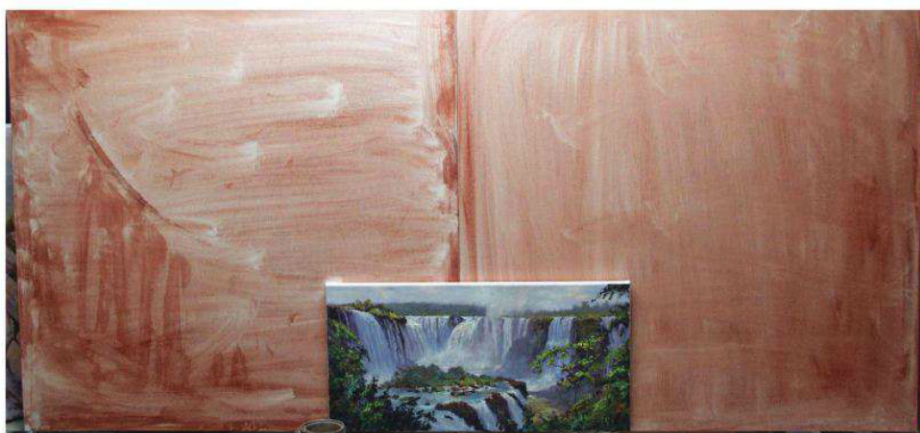
Studio Work

Back in the studio, and before embarking on the development of a large 36 x 72-inch painting, Neff did a small 12 x 24-inch study based on his plein air sketches and photos taken on location. Translating the acrylic studies and photos was a vital step to ensuring the composition, values, color, and other elements of the painting all worked before scaling up to such a large canvas.

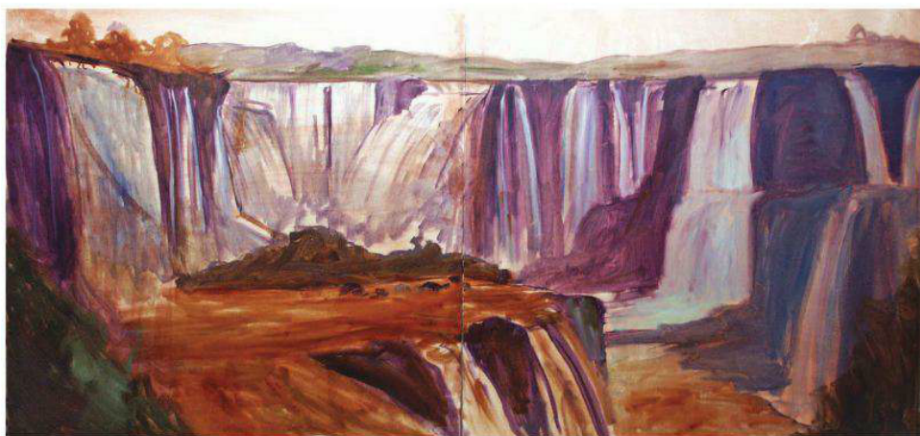
Having resolved all the major issues while creating studies, Neff avoided using any type of grid system to enlarge the image onto the larger canvas. Instead, he relied on rough measurements and approximations. "I just drew in the basic sketch on the large canvas," he says, "and made minor adjustments along the way to fit the size."

As Neff reached the end of the painting, he realized the sky was too light and needed to be darkened to make the distant falls stand out. He also made adjustments throughout the painting by toning down and adding more mist to the distant falls. After much consideration, Neff decided not to paint in the walkway and bridge you see in the original photo. 

M. Stephen Doherty is Editor of *PleinAir* magazine.

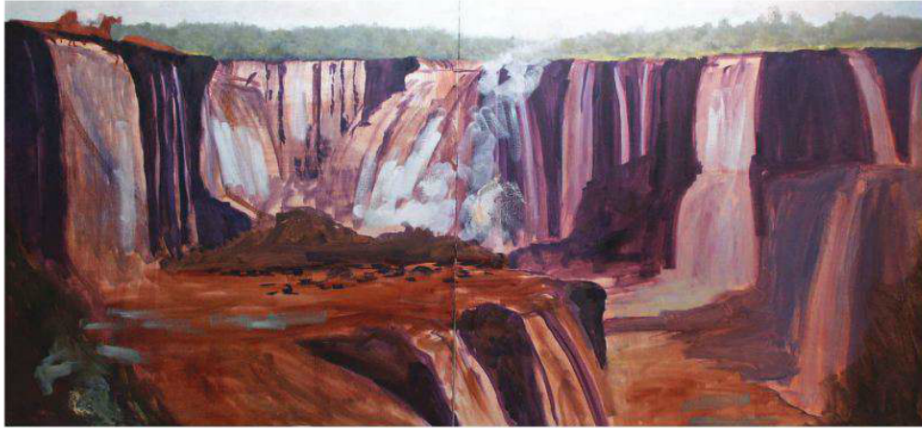


Neff clamped two 36" x 36" stretched canvases together through most of the painting process. He toned the canvas with acrylic transparent iron oxide to establish a warm undertone for the oil painting.

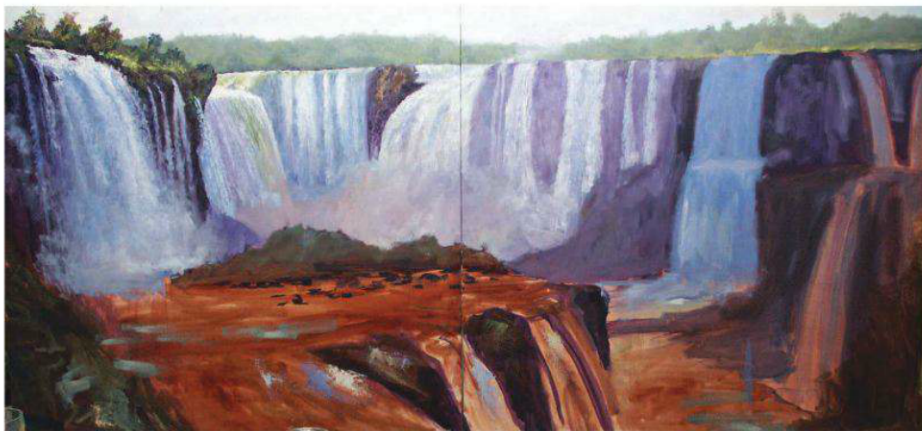


After sketching in the scene, Neff scrubbed in basic forms using thin mixtures of the premixed grays, purples, and transparent iron oxide.

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He continued blocking in and refining the placement of the waterfalls.



The sky and distant trees were painted next, using combinations of cobalt blue and the pre-mixed gray, along with touches of quinacridone red, cadmium red, cadmium orange, yellow ochre, and cadmium yellow.



The distant waterfalls were laid in working from dark to light values.

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After blocking in the middle ground, Neff continued layering and adjusting the wall of water, then blocked in the foliage at the top of the falls.



The painting nears completion as Neff paints the foreground details



Cataratas do Iguaçu

Donald Neff, 2012, oil, diptych, 36 x 72 in.

Collection the artist

Studio