

# Paint it as You Ski it: an Interview with Ski Resort Map Artist James Niehues

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## INTRODUCTION

James Niehues has painted more than 200 panoramic resort maps. His 30-year body of work has changed how mountains are represented, and is familiar to many skiers. Charles Preppernau spoke with the artist to discuss mapping techniques, his new book *The Man Behind the Maps*, and his new Great American Landscapes Project. Mr. Niehues' work can be found at [jamesniehues.com](http://jamesniehues.com).

The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

## INTERVIEW

**Charles Preppernau:** Your maps are well-liked by both resorts and guests. When a resort comes to you because they're not satisfied with their existing map, what sort of things do they say they find lacking in it?

**James Niehues:** The ones that don't have a nice map—that have used computer-generated maps—come to me because it really doesn't show off the resort; it's an accurate *diagram* of how to get down the mountain, but it really doesn't show the skier where they are. If the skier looks at that map and then looks around at their environment, they can't tell where they are on the map.

Whenever I do a map, if it's a difficult mountain, and not just one face but multiple faces, I have to do a lot of stretching and twisting of the mountain to show all the sides in one view. The most important thing about that, is that whenever I finally come up with the final composition, it has to, in my mind and the skier's mind, have relative distances and elevations from point to point. I don't just take a run and stretch it across the page so I can show



Alyeska

the other side, I do some manipulation that will *credibly* show that. It's something that can't be done with a computer; I'm changing all sorts of perspectives and distances, and they aren't related in any way except how the brain interprets them. I think that's the important thing.

**That forced perspective or “unwrapping” the slopes of the mountain is something I’m particularly interested**



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## Breckenridge

**in. How do you introduce that distortion while keeping the mountain recognizable?**

If you look at a satellite map, the ski runs don't look very inviting. They are very narrow because they're very long. You need to show it as it skis, as it exists. I don't have a formula; I reference hundreds of aerial photographs. I'll start at 2,000 feet above and get some full-frame perspectives from different altitudes. I'll go around the mountain and get perspectives from different points of view. Then I'll drop it lower and start picking up the detail. By the time I get all of these together I can reference the small, detailed photographs and relate them to the larger panoramic photos, and with that start manipulating the mountain until it comes out.

On a blank sheet of paper I'd place all the lifts with the links proportional like they should be or very near so. Once I have them in place and can see the connections, I refer to my photographs and put in all the runs in between. That's pretty much the way that I work.

**What sort of techniques have you found, when working with light, that help the reader get a sense of the terrain, especially where it's not receiving direct sunlight?**

If it's not receiving direct sunlight I still put in shadows where it's steeper and maybe highlights, even if the sun doesn't touch it. Just give that lighter area to the heavens as they come up. I also work with reflected light; in the shadows, I work in some reflected light on the snow.

Tree shadows are important too; by the angle of the tree shadow, you can tell if it's steep or shallow. But there are a lot of rises where the shadow would move so much that it confuses people, so I don't stay true to the shadowed terrain of trees but change it enough that they can see there's a change in the terrain surface.

**Do you incorporate atmospheric effects into this as well?**

You know what? Whenever I get tired of painting trees, sometimes I put in a cloud.



Certainly to show the mountain range beyond, I diminish the contrast and detail. To distinguish the height of the mountain, I'll start with the top trees being snow-covered, and as you go down they get greener. Of course, aerial photographs are blue; it's just monochromatic from the air. Hal Shelton had always indicated to me that you paint it as you ski it, not as you work from your aerial photographs, so that helped in my early development.

The atmosphere is a great thing; sometimes I'll bring a whiff of ground fog around the mountain to accentuate something, or if there's an area the client doesn't want people to get out to. A lot of times I like to put in clouds just to show that you rise from below the clouds and get off the lift above them, just to show the feeling of the mountain and its vertical rise.

**You've said, "paint it as it skis." Can you unpack that phrase?**

I haven't skied every mountain, but I've skied a lot of them. When I relate my experience to the aerials that I've taken, I relate that to other mountains and to how I'd be skiing there even if I hadn't. If a run looks wide and you have lots of room to make turns, you want to widen it and narrow it where it gets tighter. But on a satellite view, it might be very hard to pick up where those changes are. So I think it's just an interpretation of the aerial photography.

**In your book, you say you refer to topographic maps quite a bit in this planning phase. When you're looking at a topo map, what are you looking for? To what extent are you looking to translate certain things on that topo map into your panoramic map?**

I'll be looking for rock formations; on a topo map you can see where the terrain is a cliff or not, and what I'm looking for is whether there are any runs around it, or maybe a chute through it, so that I can identify it in the photograph. Then I know I'll have their run in the proper spot. So what I'm looking for is deviations in the terrain, and match them up with the aerial photography so that when I interpret it, I interpret it correctly.

**Have you ever experimented with a map that was looking purely downhill?**

Yeah, and I always thought that would be the way to do it because that's the way the skier's going. The only problem



Keystone



Winter Park / Mary Jane

with it is that the runs are going up-page. It's just hard to relate to it. Plus, what they're really interested in is the base area. All the important ingredients of the resort are in the distance instead of up close. The only one I did was Sunday River, for *Snow Country Magazine*. I thought if





Okemo

there's any one that will work, it would be that one. I really was not happy with the result although it came out to be an interesting illustration.

**Are there unique challenges in drawing summer scenes as opposed to winter scenes?**

Yeah, there are. I work with the airbrush on snowy terrain, so it's a pretty simple process. With my early summer maps, I tried with the airbrush but it was so unrealistic, so I turned to the brush entirely. I didn't feel my brush rendering was as effective as the airbrush, but I did develop it into a pretty nice style. The latest ones are the Blackcomb and Whistler hiking maps. I was really happy with those. It's maybe a sketchier style, but basically, you need to show where there's grass, brush, rock, or dirt, so it does become quite more involved in summer and fall views. In my fall

views, I've always had a problem showing the trees as they are. The Okemo autumn portion is probably my best technique on that.

**You talked in your book about how you modified your brushes to try to speed up the drawing of trees.**

My predecessors used sponges. I tried that and it just didn't work for me. So then I experimented with cutting the bristles of my brush to make two or three trunks instead of just one. I didn't really like that; it was too repetitive and didn't look natural. From that point, I said, "alright, I'm going to have to draw in every trunk." But I've been in constant experimentation with deciduous trees. Looking back on it, I'm happy with all of it but I do feel like later in my career I got a little too involved in individual deciduous trees, instead of groups of trees.



Another element in all of this is that, ever since the 10th painting, I didn't want every mountain to look the same. I wanted to give a mountain an individual look, so that's the reason for the experimentation. I was very lucky in that I had a contract with *Snow Country Magazine* right off the bat after I got into this. I could experiment on those and not have to worry about the client saying, "Wow that doesn't look like your work".

**Did some of your later experiments have better success?**

Yes, to some degree. For deciduous trees, they have rounded tops, so I'd use brushes that were rounded on the top. And for meadows and stuff, I'd use a very large brush to put in wider strokes of color. I really got into re-wetting the forest. I'd put in a pattern of trees with a very wet brush, a very dark color, and make my forest. I wouldn't



Crystal



Sun Peaks



even take my brush off the board. I'd just be up and down, making these triangular shapes. I would change my pigment according to whether it was the light side of the mountain or the dark side of the mountain. And then I would come in and re-wet that. The watercolor would flow in between and you'd get a lot of variations in your color. Then I would put in the highlights and the shadowed side, which would usually be snow; blue and white.

**I'd like to hear your thoughts on how much freedom you think a mapmaker has in distorting a map, and what kind of responsibility they have to the reader.**

I feel that if it's overexaggerated it loses its value immediately because it can be seen and not believed. You have to keep it in the credibility range.

Let me change directions on you a little bit here. I'm working on the Great American Landscape Project. I'm picking out state and national parks and other very popular dynamic areas, and sketching them to the best of my

ability to express the best view there can be of that particular subject.

Let's take Yosemite Valley. The most photographed view in the park is the tunnel view, with Bridal Veil Falls on the right and El Capitan on the left. I've flown that area, and I looked at my aerials and thought "You know, I could show the whole valley and include Yosemite Falls, show more of Half Dome, show Royal Arch, and the spires that are on the backside of Bridal Veil Falls, if I did a little manipulating." In my aerials you can't even see what I have sketched; Yosemite Falls is quite hidden by the Three Brothers. So, what I had to do was diminish the Three Brothers a little bit, and pull around Yosemite Falls so that it shows, and then I thought, "Oh the village is right down there so I'll put in the village". So, I peel away some of those tall trees enough to show the village and roads.

Another was Crater Lake, Oregon. This spring we stopped there and it was fabulous, just really dynamic. So I took all these photographs and came back to this point that had



Yosemite Valley



some features along the shoreline that I was really impressed with. Although, from that point, I could not see Mount Thiessen, because it was hidden by a rim on the other side of the lake. So what I did was bring Mount Thiessen out from hiding. This isn't accurate, but it's accurate to the *experience*. It isn't more than 500 yards down the road that you can see [Thiessen], but I had to do some manipulation to show them together. There are also hiking trails that you can't see in the trees, but I put them in, so someone can say "I was on that trail, that's where I was, and that's the scene I saw." And that's very important, that connection to the viewer.

I'm very excited about this series. You'll find them on [my website](#), scattered around in different states.

**I'd like to finish by asking: if someone came up to you and said they would like to get into painting panoramas like this, what advice would you give them?**

I guess what I would do is kinda what I'm doing with the Great American Landscape project; I would take on a project and use it to promote my availability. What material I haven't flown, I would go on the Internet and see what comes up. From that material, I'd go ahead and put together what you felt would be the best view, if not as a map, then as a portrait.

**Thank you so much, this was a great conversation to have.**

Oh yeah, you bet. I've enjoyed it.



Crater Lake