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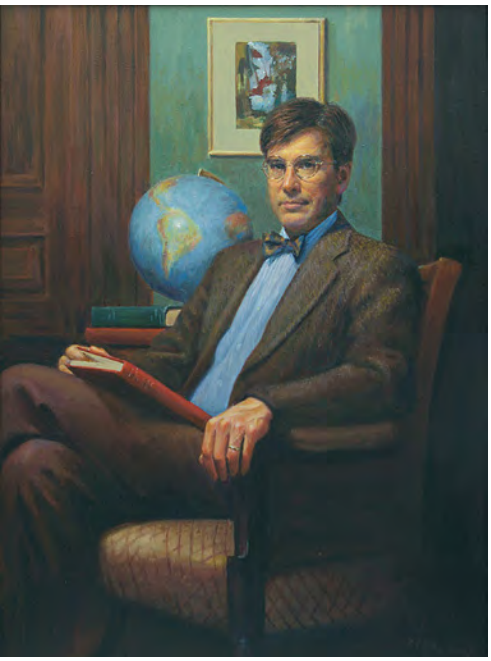
AN ARTIST'S GUIDE TO

composition

Expert Tips, Insights & Strategies
for Strong, Dynamic Design



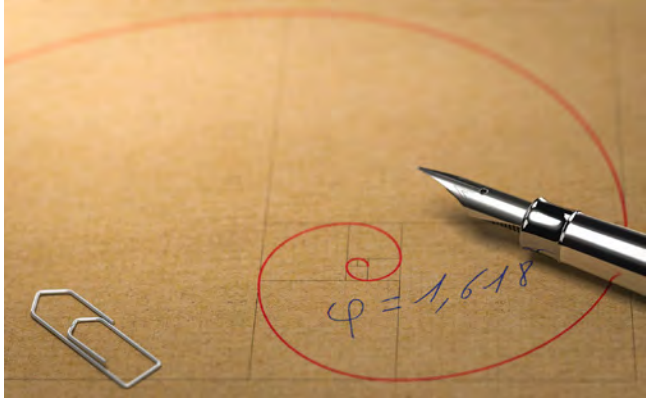
AN ARTISTS GUIDE TO

composition

Presented by *Artists Magazine* & *American Artist*

ON THE COVER: Lily (detail) watercolor, 36x48 by David R. Daniels

"Even in front of nature one must compose."
—EDGAR DEGAS



GOLDEN RATIO: OLIVIER LE MOAL/GETTY IMAGES

Composition Matters

Use these 18 easy fixes to combat common design dilemmas.

BY COURTNEY JORDAN

PLAY THE NUMBERS

The number of objects in your composition may affect your layout strategy:

- **One apple:** An object is never truly alone in a composition. Plan your background and the placement of the horizon line.
- **Two apples:** Pairs are tricky, but keep contrast of shape, color, position and texture in mind, and you'll be winning at twinning.
- **Three apples:** Group elements so they combine as one center of interest—or scatter them to establish emphasis (a pair of apples and a single apple, for example).
- **Four (or more) apples:** Consider a neutral background. Also, follow Paul Cézanne's lead: Vary the positioning of the apples, and add objects like bowls or linens to keep monotony at bay (see *Still Life With Apples*, at right).

Still Life With Apples
by Paul Cézanne
HERMITAGE MUSEUM, SAINT PETERSBURG, RUSSIA

EYE APPEAL

- Every scene needs a center of interest. Create major emphasis with pure color, high contrast of light and dark, or bright highlights.
- Variety keeps the eye engaged. Grab your viewer's attention with the unexpected—a bird in flight, for example, in a scene of rolling hills and lush trees.
- Avoid the bull's-eye. The center of interest needn't be in the middle of your surface. Try the compositional rule of thirds: Imagine lines that divide your picture plane into thirds horizontally and vertically. Then place areas of interest on or near an intersection.
- Don't isolate your points of interest. Instead, think of your surface as a map

Mother About to Wash Her Sleepy Child
by Mary Cassatt
LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART

and plot a course from point to point. Let your major forms lead the eye in and around your canvas.

- Edges that kiss sound romantic, but they tend to flatten a composition and can attract the eye more than your actual center of interest.
- Subtly darken the corners of your composition to keep the viewer's eye within the picture plane.
- Final fix: Trust your creativity! Solutions are at hand when you embrace your own point of view.

PORTRAIT PANACEA

- When staging a portrait, keep gazes, limbs, hands and feet positioned inward (see *Mother About to Wash Her Sleepy Child*, at left. When these point outward or run off the picture plane, the viewer's interest follows.
- Select what you want to emphasize and downplay the rest. If your model's face is the focus, you needn't capture all the clothing detail.

THINK S.O.X.

S: An S-shaped composition is great for landscapes with bodies of water or for figural arrangements with several elements. It's also useful for creating the illusion of expansive space.

O: When you arrange your composition with curves in mind, you may be able to use more of your surface than you'd anticipated. Curves can turn inward or outward, run parallel or cross—just don't let them meet in a circle.

X: When dealing with two or more points of interest, a diagonal line is your friend. Placing objects you want to emphasize diagonally to each other creates balance.

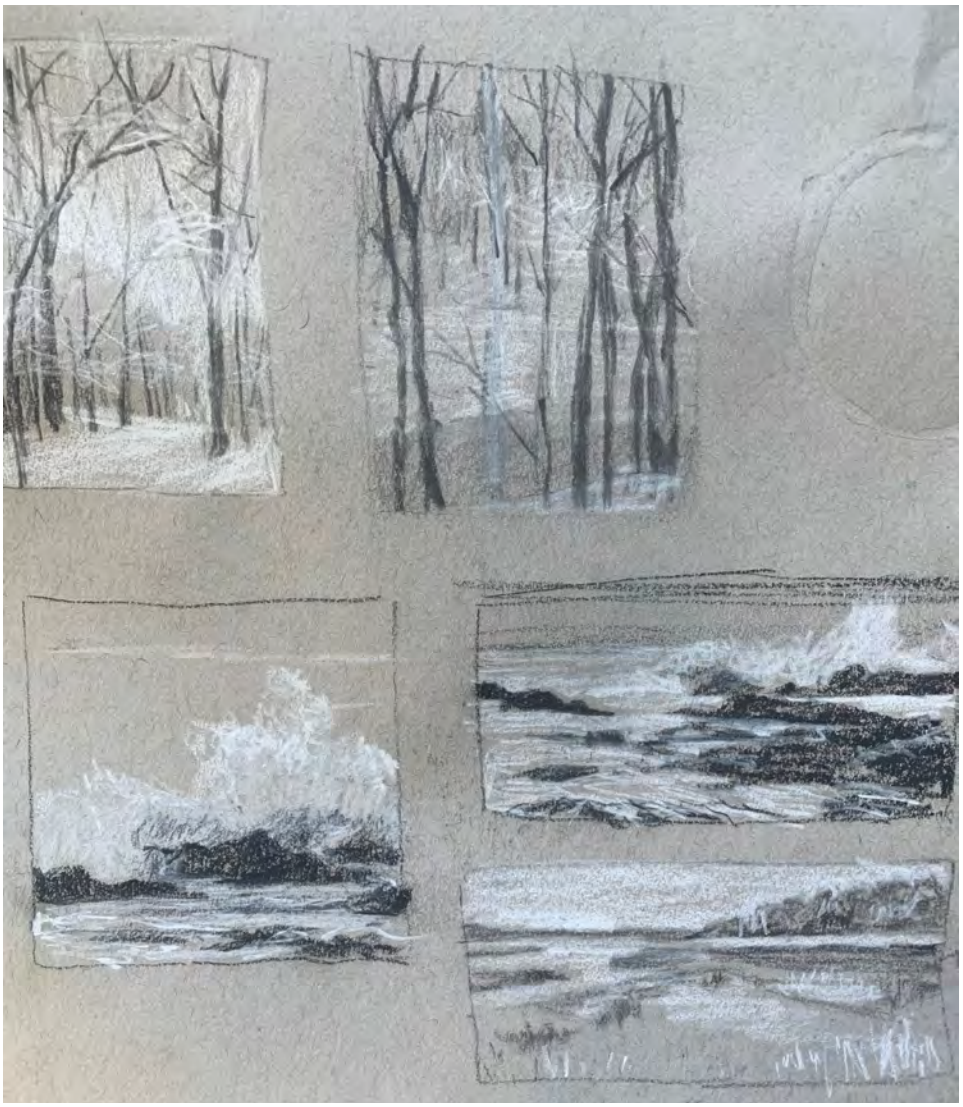
LANDSCAPE LIFELINES

- Avoid duplications in landscapes (like nearly identical trees) by adjusting sizes, angles and positions.
- Complementary colors help keep compositional areas distinct. If you're painting a fiery sunset, give the landscape a blue cast.

An Essential Guide to Thumbnails

Every painting is its own journey with sometimes unexpected and delightful outcomes. To find direction, it's helpful to use thumbnail sketches.

BY JEANNE ROSIER SMITH



I confess that I've had a love-hate relationship with thumbnail sketches throughout my painting life. The more I paint, however, the more I love doing my thumbnails. Done right, they help capture the kernel of inspiration that steers me through the whole painting process, and they also keep me inspired and focused when I inevitably start to lose my way.

If you're a planner, you likely don't need convincing of the value of thumbnails. If you prefer to wander and see what the day brings, then you may need a little persuasion. While I like to be organized, I dislike being held to predictable schedules—itineraries make me nervous. Yet I am a thumbnail convert because, to me, they're not prescriptive and rigid but clarifying and inspiring. Even better, they free me from worry and overthinking. Over time I've begun to use them as a tool to sharpen my creative vision. Like a GPS for my paintings, they help me map out where I really want to go.

Why then, do we resist thumbnails? Because they're hard. Whether working en plein air or from photo references, the thumbnail sketch requires simplifying and winnowing infinite possibilities and perspectives down to concrete proportions, shapes and values. That's a lot for one tiny sketch to do.

Yet thumbnails don't have to be a burdensome hurdle before getting to the fun part. When used well, they help refine

Explore and Strengthen
When I'm beginning a new idea, I'll do a series of thumbnails, just to see what happens. Since they're small and take relatively little time, I can experiment with different shapes and ideas. Looking at a whole page, I can tell immediately which sketches excite me. Spending time on design strengthens my design muscles, allowing me to more easily reject weaker compositions.

your vision and bring your work to the next level. Once you commit to a specific aspect ratio and choose what to include or emphasize, much of the hard work is done.

When you're armed with a strong thumbnail design and painting concept, you'll be free to paint with intuitive flow. There's no one right way to create a thumbnail, but I've found that it helps to answer the hardest questions first:

- What are the big shapes?
- How can I simplify my values?
- Where do I want maximum impact?

SIZE

Thumbnails are small. My rule is to make them no larger than 3 inches on the longest side. Any larger and you risk too much detail.

PROPORTION

The shape must match your painting's shape. The thumbnail is an abstract design for your painting, so it should match the proportions exactly.

VALUES

Simplify to no more than three to five values. One of the biggest benefits to doing a thumbnail sketch is that it helps you judge your values accurately and see where you can merge areas of similar value. This clarifies focal areas, highlights what's important and indicates where details might be lost. Try using white and dark charcoal in a sketchbook with gray or brown pages—getting light and dark values will become much quicker and easier.

SHAPES

As with values, simplify a sketch to include between five and eight shapes. Think of shapes as "dark" or "light" rather than as "things" when creating your thumbnails. Remember that these are sketchy designs rather than detailed miniatures. Abstracting and simplifying shapes will help you see compositional strengths and weaknesses more easily.

IMPACT

Exploring impact is the most important part of the thumbnail. It involves answering the "why" of the painting. What grabs me? What's my visual idea? Why do I want to paint this in the first place? I'll admit, often I don't know the answer to these questions when I start a thumbnail. All I know is there's something that I want to tease out and explore. Thumbnails give me the space to play and explore before investing my time and materials. The exercise of observing and simplifying helps me answer those important questions.

Questions a Thumbnail Can Answer

- Is there anything here?
- Is this just a good photo or might it work as a painting?
- Is this a good composition, or do I just like the colors?
- How might I shift, move or emphasize any elements here to increase the impact?
- What might I eliminate? What distracts from my statement?
- Would this work better in a different shape?
- Does this have a wow factor?

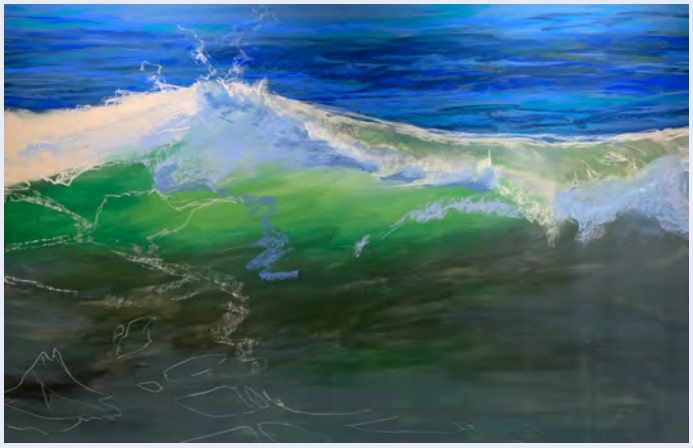
DEMO: USING THUMBNAILS AS GPS

The real power of a thumbnail kicks in partway through the painting journey when I reach that inevitable point where I stop, look around, scratch my head and ask, "Where was I going?"

The painting process involves so many decisions, it's easy to get lost in the weeds. The creative process behind a recent painting tells the story of how a thumbnail sketch can save the day.

1 The photo reference is tightly cropped and blurry. Note that the thumbnail in step 2 simplifies values and heightens drama with exaggerated diagonals. I focused on what caught my eye in the photo, creating interest and impact by pushing the angle and splash along the focal point.

2 A simplified thumbnail helped me to see the big shapes that were needed in my underpainting.



3 At this point the painting was well-developed but lacked the impact I'd envisioned. Then I looked at my thumbnail and realized the problem—it was missing the high-drama swoop-and-dip gesture along the top of the wave. The thumbnail perfectly clarified the pop I needed for my large, full-color painting.

"I love doing my thumbnails. They capture the kernel of inspiration that steers me through the whole painting process, and they keep me inspired and focused when I inevitably start to lose my way."

—JEANNE ROSIER SMITH

4 Exploring my designs through thumbnails leads me from the initial hint of inspiration in my source material to my own vision. If source material alone were enough, then we could all just copy our photos faithfully to produce great art. Thumbnails guide my way toward discovering, or clarifying, inspiration. They help me see what's important among all the information before me. Then they help me find a way to get there.

JEANNE ROSIER SMITH is a popular demonstrator and teacher. She offers workshops around the country and internationally. Learn more at jeannerosiersmith.com.

Ride the Wave
pastel on paper, 38x60

Composition Myths

Design advice can seem contradictory. Learn to decipher the fact from fiction.

BY COURTNEY JORDAN

TOP

In the Slips for the Waterloo Cup
by Lilian Cheviot
1914; oil on canvas, 13x23

RIGHT

Rudolf II of Habsburg as Vertumnus
by Giuseppe Arcimboldo
1590; oil on canvas, 27½x22⅘
SKOKLOSTER CASTLE

Fiction:
REPETITION DOESN'T WORK.

Painting two or more of something isn't a no-no. In fact, it's a great way to make the most of what you have—oranges, colored blocks, bottles or even pets. Just be smart about it. Change the size, position or color treatment of the object/subject (as in the pair of dogs, above).

Fact:
BUSY ISN'T NECESSARILY BAD.

Look no further than a Giuseppe Arcimboldo's veggie-filled canvas (left) to see how delightfully full a painting can be. When there's a variety of size, shape, texture and color, having "more" can be a feast for the eye!

ALL IMAGES FROM WIKIMEDIA

TOP

To Pastures New
by James Guthrie
1883; oil on canvas, 36⅛x60⅓
ABERDEEN ART GALLERY AND MUSEUMS COLLECTION

ABOVE

Van Gogh's Chair
by Vincent van Gogh
1889; oil on canvas, 28¾ x 36¼
NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

Fiction:
KEEP THE EDGES OF YOUR SURFACE UNBROKEN.

Some say a line, stroke or element that breaks the picture plane will direct the eye off and away. Not always. Invite liveliness into your composition by taking marks and elements beyond the edge as long as that suits your intent (see *To Pastures New*, above). Also consider how to pull the viewer back in so there's a balance in the visual rhythm.

Fiction:
THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY TO CREATE DEPTH.

You can use a number of tactics to convey spatial depth:

- Overlap objects.
- Show less texture and definition in faraway objects.
- Make sure that smaller objects in the background are actually smaller.
- Employ warmer, darker colors in the foreground, making them cooler and lighter as they recede.

Fiction:
SIMPLE DESIGNS ARE ONLY FOR BEGINNERS

Single-element compositions often predominate when an artist is learning the ropes, but skilled artists know the power of a simple design. Check out *Van Gogh's Chair*, at left.

Fiction:
NO DESIGN IS NEEDED IN ABSTRACTION.

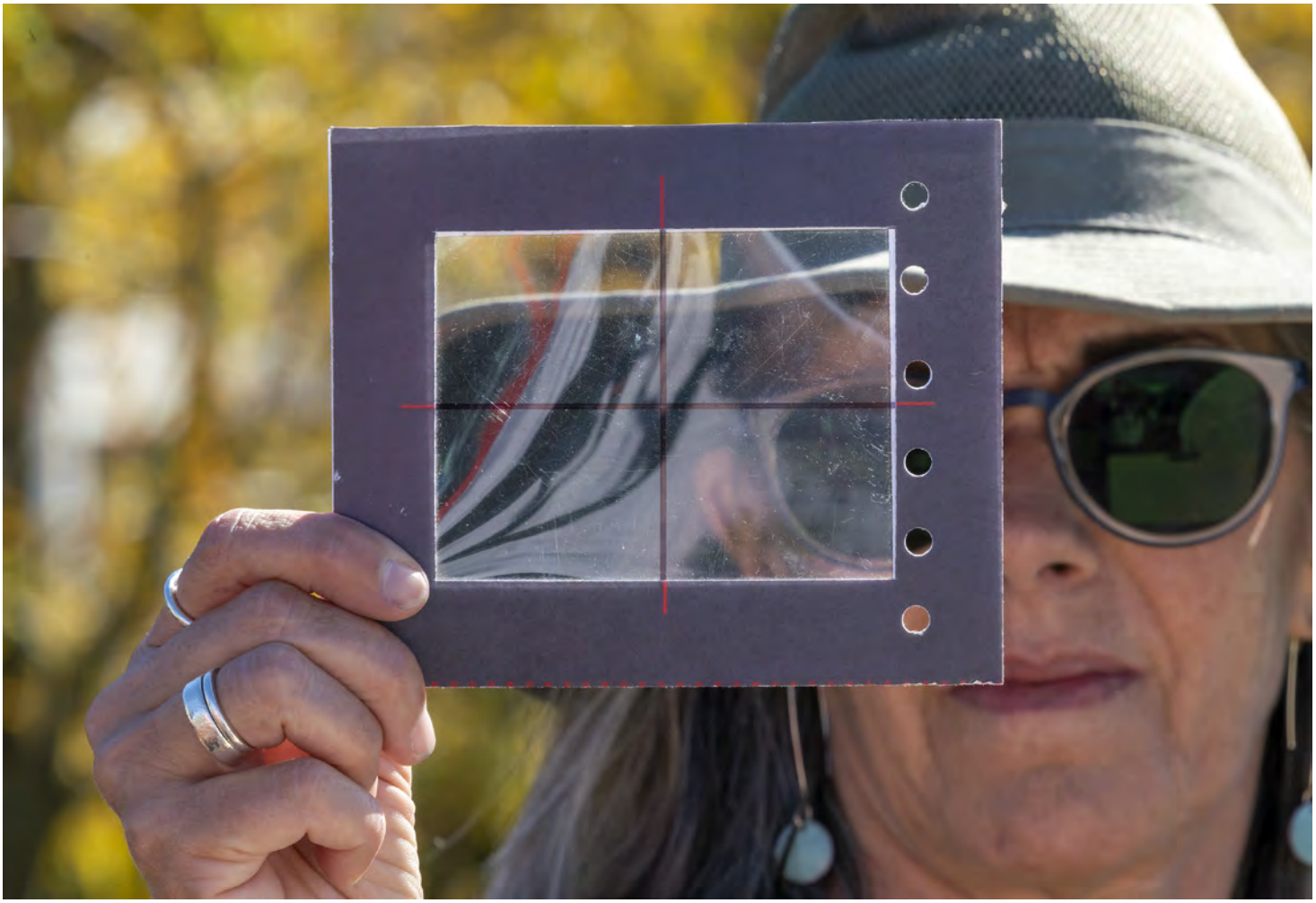
A study of Jackson Pollock's splatters reveals an artist who took great care with where paint would fall, the unification of color and how colors would be layered. Even in abstract explorations, an artist's deliberations and choices matter.

Fact:
YOU CONTROL THE VISUAL PACE.

Subject matter doesn't dictate composition. That's always under the artist's purview. Use design elements and principles to create compositions that range widely in look and feel, from scenes that are meandering and serene to ones that feel fast-paced or even frenzied.

How to Put a Viewfinder to Work

BY MARLA BAGGETTA



My DIY viewfinder is constructed with readily available office supplies.

When painting on location, try this DIY approach to composing a scene and translating a thumbnail to a surface.

I must admit to being a bit of a wimp when it comes to plein air painting. Don't get me wrong—I love it, but I need a little help out there. It can be intimidating: There's the weather, the onlookers, the bugs, all that gear and, of course, the 360 degrees of overwhelming visual field. Sometimes it's enough to send me packing, so I need all the help I can get.

The one tool that I absolutely can't live without is a viewfinder—an apparatus through which to look to compose and frame a scene, whether indoors or outdoors, to help narrow the focus from a whole cone of vision. Over the years, I've tried most of the ready-made viewfinders on the market—big ones, small ones, plastic ones, digital ones—all in an effort to find the one that's going to make

things easier for me out there—and maybe even help me make better paintings.

The problem was that I'd often create a thumbnail sketch that I liked, but I simply wasn't able to translate it to the final piece in a satisfying way. I'd also have a difficult time with more complicated scenes, often making compositional elements too large. Basically, the over-the-counter viewfinder experience just wasn't accurate, which made my painting experience disappointing and frustrating.

MY DIY SOLUTION

After experimenting with many different viewfinders, I've found that I keep coming back to my DIY version. It helps me solve the problem I have with drawing the composition accurately on the final piece. The secret? My viewfinder has guidelines that divide a scene into four equal quadrants, making it easy to establish where objects are situated in a scene. I've also incorporated a six-point value scale on the side to help me judge relative value and view color accurately.

I make my viewfinders using basic materials—card stock, acetate, tape, a Sharpie, a one-hole punch and packing tape—readily available in my office or studio. I size each viewfinder to fit into my sketchbook and to suit my painting surface proportions—usually square or 9x12 inches. If I lose a viewfinder—and I likely will while I'm out and about juggling too much gear—no problem. There are plenty more where that one came from.

Want to make your own viewfinder that offers the same proportions as a 6x8-, 9x12-, 12x16- or 18x24-inch painting surface? Download my free viewfinder template here: bit.ly/diy_viewfinder.

TIP

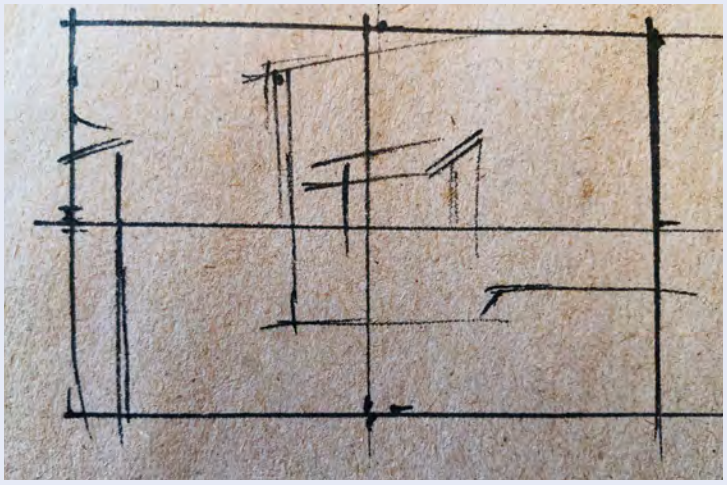
Your viewpoint should be consistent throughout your painting process. With this in mind, make sure that you sketch and paint in the same position; don't sit down to draw and then stand up to paint. One thing that helps is to establish your eye level or horizon and judge how far from the center of your surface it is. This helps with orientation.

MARLA BAGGETTA is a signature member of the Pastel Society of America and a member of the Master Circle with the International Association of Pastel Societies. She conducts workshops throughout the U.S. and internationally and is represented in galleries throughout the U.S. You can find her lessons and online workshops in both pastel and oil at paintinglessonswithmarla.com.

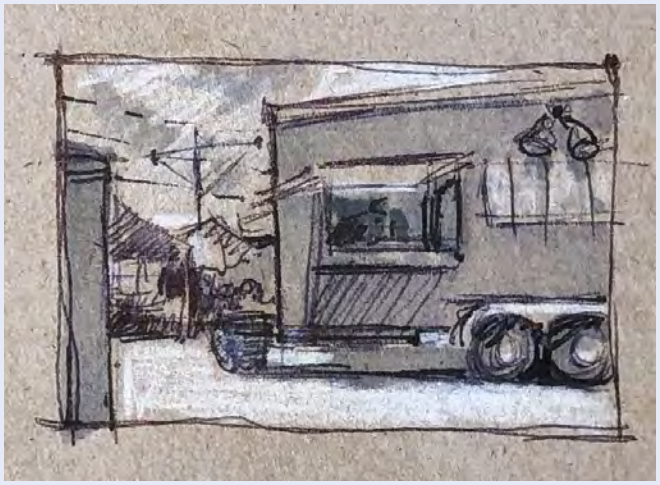
USING A VIEWFINDER

A viewfinder is handy when looking for compositions that divide the space into interesting, unequal shapes and patterns of light and shadow.

1 I look through my DIY viewfinder to determine my composition, holding it close to my eyes for a broad view and at arm's length for a more cropped view. I use the guidelines to help me place elements in the scene. I determine what's in the very center and how that relates to my eye level.

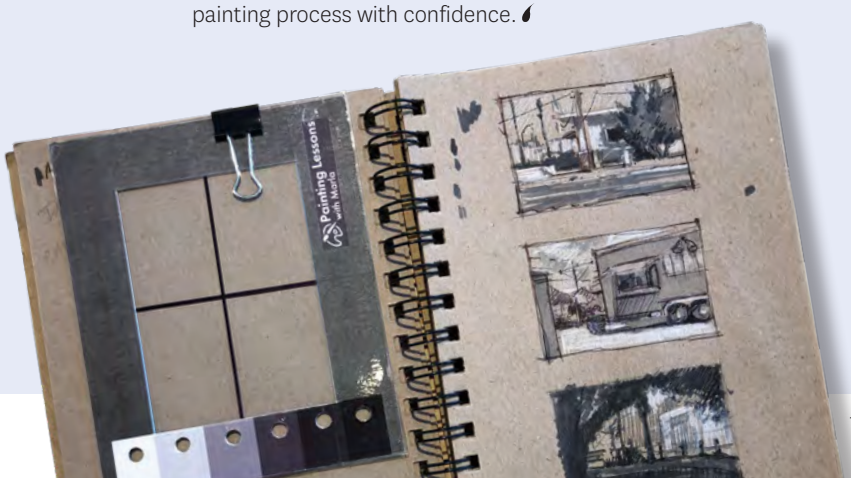


2 While on-site, I create a thumbnail sketch that uses the same proportions, dividing it into four quadrants as seen through the viewfinder.



3 Because my viewfinder has guidelines that demark four quadrants, I can easily determine where the major elements in the scene sit in my composition. I always do a thumbnail sketch. Once I have a sketch I like and think will make a strong composition, I've done most of the work.

4 I scale my sketch accurately to a larger sheet of paper or canvas that has the same proportions as the viewfinder, dividing it into the same four quadrants. Doing this is key to success going forward and enables me to enjoy the painting process with confidence.



Design the Sky

Enhance your landscape compositions using these tips for all things above the horizon.

BY COURTNEY JORDAN

ATMOSPHERIC KNOW-HOW

- Both land and sky get softer, cooler and paler as they recede into the distance, as demonstrated by the J.M.W. Turner painting (at right).
- Clouds cast shadows on land, water and vegetation. Remember to show those shadow shapes.
- Call in your most golden, glowing highlights for the tips of sunlit clouds for an almost gilded look.
- The more moisture in the air, the more reflections. As a result, you'll see more color in the sky and reflected onto nearby elements.
- When painting mist or fog, don't just reach for a thinned-out white. Instead, choose a slightly cooler version of the color of the objects the mist covers.
- An object shrouded in fog loses detail, color saturation and value in proportion to the density of the mist and its distance from you.

ABOVE

Landscape With a River and a Bay in the Background
by J.M.W. Turner
1835–40; oil on canvas, 36⅜x48⅝
LOUVRE MUSEUM, PARIS

J.M.W. LANDSCAPE: COURTESY OF WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

HOMER TRIO

(1) Simplify your skies. (2) Pull out and vary your shapes. (3) Let your surface color shine through. Winslow Homer's *Sunset Fires* does all three.

RIGHT

Sunset Fires
by Winslow Homer
watercolor on paper, 13⁹⁄₁₀x24⅞
WESTMORELAND MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, GREENSBURG, PA.

CLOUD QUARTET

- Fluffy, puffy cumulus clouds often fill a fair-weather sky. Give them flat, shadowed bottoms and rounded "turret" tops.
- Thin, flat, wispy cirrus clouds look like strands of hair and are found at high altitudes. They have the lightest coloring, so reach for untinted white when mixing paints.
- Stratus clouds float lowest. When very close to earth, they appear as mist or fog. When higher, they're flat, layered and of somewhat uniform shape and color (gray and white).
- Dark gray to black nimbus clouds accompany storms and precipitation. They often have choppy, uneven bases.

LAY IT ON THICK

Texture can bring out bright highlights in a colorful sky—just check out the van Gogh at right. Use a palette knife or impasto brushwork for visual heft.

ONE IMPACTFUL LINE

The horizon line can imply an endless stretch of landscape or a vast sky soaring above a slip of the earth. Consider the possibilities as you position this line, but *always* keep it close to parallel to your artwork's bottom and top edges.

- **To make viewers feel they're looking upward,** paint objects above the horizon line.
- **For a bird's eye view,** use a higher horizon line.
- **For an eye-level view,** place the horizon line between the middle of your surface and the top of its lower third.

SUNRISE AND SUNSET

Bombastic sky colors aren't the only way to make an impression. A searing magenta orb in a gray-blue sky is simple but powerful. Just look at Monet's *Impression, Sunrise* (at right).

TOP

Wheat Field With Cypresses
by Vincent van Gogh
1889; oil on canvas, 28⅞ x 36¾
THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

ABOVE

Impression, Sunrise
by Claude Monet
1872; oil on canvas, 19x24⅘
MUSÉE MARMOTTAN MONET, PARIS

Try a New Format

Bruce Peeso prefers to take a long view for his acrylic landscapes.

Full painting

Detail

TOP
After the Storm
acrylic, 8 x 48

BY *AMERICAN ARTIST* STAFF

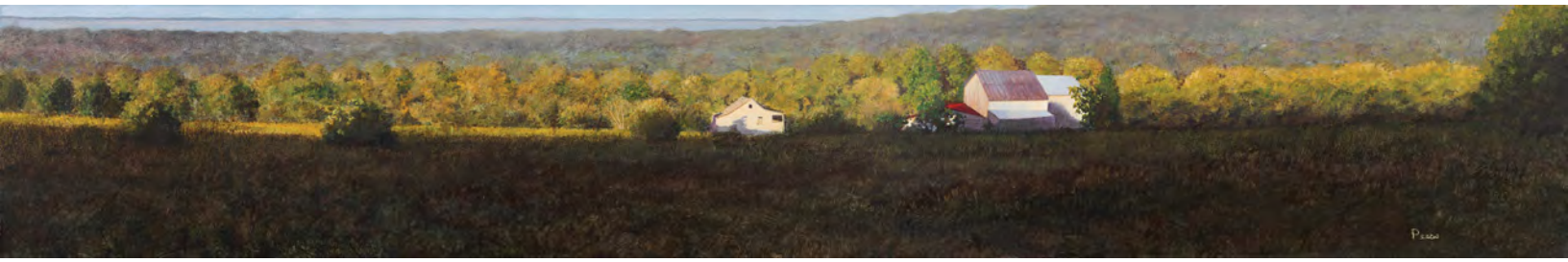
For Massachusetts artist Bruce Peeso, the standard 9x12-, 18x24- or 24x36-inch rectangular surface isn't sufficient for depicting landscapes that inspire him. For more than 10 years, he has used long horizontal or tall vertical formats that he feels best express the peacefulness and vastness of his subject. "The space is really the subject," he says, "not the man-made structures that often appear. Collectors respond to the feeling of the landscape and the connections to their memories."

For the first 20 years of his career, Peeso worked exclusively in oil on hardboard, but in the mid-1990s he started experimenting with acrylic on hardboard and watercolor board, and soon he was hooked. "I became so accustomed to the fast drying time of Golden heavy-body

acrylics and the technique of layer color that I didn't want to go back to oil," he says. As an artist who primarily relies on outdoor shows to sell his work, Peeso has clocked many hours on the road, going from one show to the next. It's on these road trips that he finds his subjects. Although he creates long horizontal pieces, he doesn't take panoramic photographs or make separate compositional studies of each element. "I just start drawing the key elements with graphite pencil on the white gessoed surface, making the lines dark enough so that they remain visible through the first layer of acrylic paint," he says. "I usually draw the horizon line or a line of distant trees that indicates the division between the land and the sky, and then I make the barn, house, rows of corn stalks, or trees that are prominent in the scene.

"When I feel I have enough information to get started, I apply a wash of acrylic color over the entire panel or paper board," he continues. "For example, in the demonstration painting (page 18), I painted the sky with a mixture of titanium white, cobalt blue, and a small amount of raw umber. I indicated the distant fields by applying a wash of cobalt green, yellow ochre, titanium white, quinacridone red light, diarylide yellow, quinacridone burnt orange, and raw umber." The artist thins his acrylics almost to the consistency of watercolor paints, because he likes to build up layers of transparent color. In steps 3 and 4 of his demonstration, it's these thin layers that add a depth to the open field and give the viewer a sense of the scope of the landscape.

BELOW
Ahead of Time
acrylic, 8 x 48



Full painting

Detail

DEMONSTRATION

Step 1

After sealing the surface of a sheet of medium-density fiberboard with Utrecht gesso, Peeso drew the elements of the landscape with a graphite pencil.

Detail

Step 2

The artist then applied washes of acrylic paint to establish the general appearance of the sky and land forms.

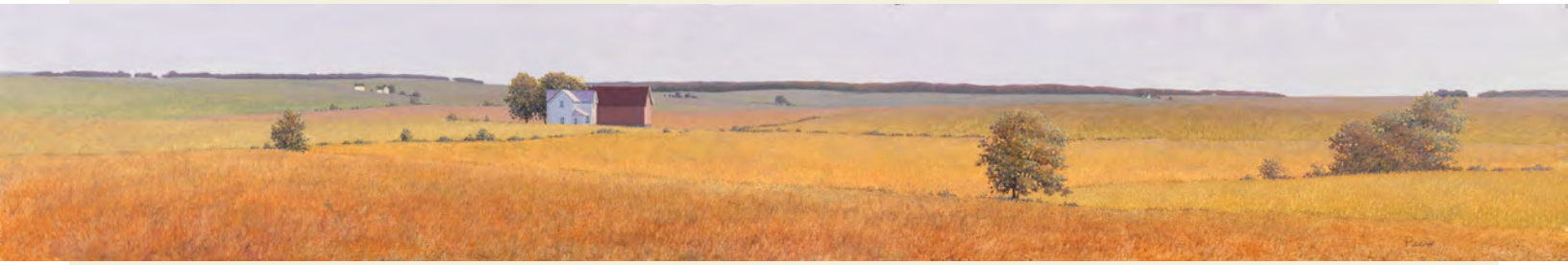
Detail

Step 3

Using a stiff bristle brush, Peeso added texture to the field and layered more washes of acrylic color.

Step 4

The artist painted smooth strokes of color into the distant regions of the landscape and added details to the buildings.



THE COMPLETED DEMONSTRATION:

Demographics
acrylic, 8 x 48

about the artist

BRUCE PEESO has been a professional artist for many years. He and his wife Jude divide their time between a summer home in Massachusetts and a winter residence in Florida. For more information, visit his website at backroadsgallery2.homestead.com

Detail

Focal Point as Anchor


The view of the church.

Artist **William Kalwick** lets a central area of interest drive a composition.

The Completed Demonstration #1

BY *AMERICAN ARTISTS* STAFF

Houston, Texas, artist William Kalwick has been painting in San Miguel Allende, Mexico, for many years, and he regularly leads workshops in the picturesque colonial town. The prominent architecture is not only inspiring but also allows myriad opportunities to work on values, edges, and composition. Spanish colonial buildings and courtyards abound, helping artists create a framework for an entire composition. When rendering buildings in a landscape, composition is of the utmost importance. Accuracy and harmony are key.

The scenes for these demonstrations provide excellent examples of dealing with challenges in perspective. Kalwick advocates the use of plumb lines to ensure accuracy and believes an in-depth study of drawing is crucial to accurately render one's subject. The instructor chose to paint the architecture because it would allow him to discuss the importance of controlling edges. He espouses close observation and an understanding of which edges are hard and which soft before starting to paint. "Put the sharper edges at the focal point, where there's more contrast," he advises. "You can use softer edges toward the outside of the painting."

DEMONSTRATION #1

Step 1
After deciding to make the dome the focal point, Kalwick laid in the general values in the area around it.

Step 2
At this point Kalwick had completed the focal point and blocked in the ruins in the lower part of the composition. He simplified the shapes.

Step 3
Further developing the forms in the bottom half of the composition, Kalwick continually compared the values in that area to those in the focal point.

Step 4
The Completed Demonstration
The completed demonstration suggests depth and perspective.


Step 1


Step 2


Step 3

DEMONSTRATION #2


Step 1


Step 2


Step 3


Step 4

Step 1
To begin, Kalwick made a drawing of the composition, emphasizing the focal point of the tower and dome.

Step 2
The artist completed most of the focal area while the light remained constant. The primary challenge with this scene was the perspective, since his vantage point was from the main square looking down the street.

Step 3
Comparing the rest of the painting to the focal point allowed him to set up an accurate value structure.

Step 4
Kalwick worked outward from the focal point. Because the day was overcast, the values were closer together than they would have been on a sunlit day.

Step 5
The completed demonstration painting suggests the challenges of values and perspective.

about the artist

WILLIAM KALWICK studied at the Art Students League of New York, in Manhattan, and with Hungarian painter Lajos Markos. He is represented by Shoal Creek Galleries, in Austin; The Sylvan Gallery, in Charleston; Wadle Gallery, in Santa Fe; Jack Meier Gallery, in Houston; Wilcox Gallery, in Jackson, Wyoming; Insight Gallery, in Fredericksburg, Texas; and Greenhouse Gallery of Fine Art, in San Antonio. For more on the artist, visit kalwick.com.


Kalwick during a painting demonstration.

KALWICK'S MATERIALS

PALETTE
- viridian
- permanent green light
- ultramarine blue
- burnt sienna
- alizarin crimson
- cadmium red light
- raw sienna
- yellow ochre
- cadmium orange
- cadmium yellow light
- titanium white

BRUSHES
- Robert Simmons Signet filbert bristle brushes, Nos. 6, 7 and 8
- Winsor & Newton University F series flats
- Grumbacher Bristlette 4720F

SURFACE
- toned Masonite or canvas
- acrylic-primed birch panels, 11 x 14

OTHER
- EASyL Pro Easel
- paper towels
- plastic bag
- baby wipes

ABOVE
Lily
watercolor, 36 x 48

10 Steps to Determine Values in Watercolor

Although I am known for using vibrant colors to create what appear to be playful, spontaneous images in my watercolor paintings, the key to the success of these paintings is the value structure of the compositions. Here's how I teach others to use studies to plan effective compositions.

BY DAVID R. DANIELS

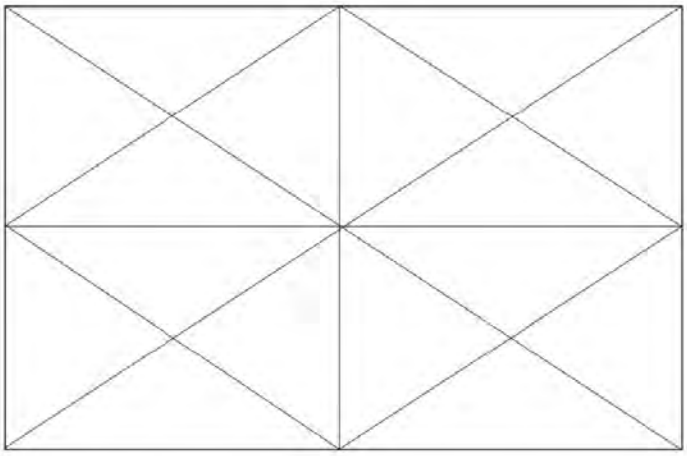
When I first started painting in watercolor, I was like most beginners in that I assumed the medium was all about color. After all, the hallmark of a great watercolor is the way the layers of transparent color and reserved white paper capture the sense of light in the landscape, on a still life arrangement, or on a person's face. The order of importance for me was color first, shape second, and value third.

With experience, I discovered that color only works well if it is composed so that the dark, middle, and light values are planned in advance and if the composition of shapes engages viewers and helps them understand what the picture is all about. I learned the order of priority really needed to be value first, shape second, and color third.

After elevating the importance of value, I came up with a simple way of making proportional value sketches on gray paper using black-and-white watercolors. Once I knew the method was helping me create better paintings, I started teaching it to students by itemizing what materials and techniques would work for them. I've organized this method into 10 specific recommendations I want to pass along to you.

1. You'll need a sheet of your favorite watercolor paper and a piece of gray paper. I use Arches cold-pressed watercolor paper because I develop paintings that are larger than standard-size sheets, but the brand of paper or surface quality you use is less important. The gray papers I use are made for drawing or pastel painting, and I don't mind working with a lower-quality sheet because I'm not going to preserve or exhibit the value sketch. Just make sure the paper you buy is a medium gray, not a light gray or a dark gray, because you'll want it to establish the middle-value range in your sketch.

2. It is essential that your two pieces of paper have the exact same proportions, because when the sheets are proportional, the sketch can be enlarged to the size of the watercolor paper without any need for adjustment. Two sheets that are the same size are already proportional, but if you prefer to make the sketch smaller than the painting, you need a way to ensure that the two sheets correspond. You can figure the proportions out mathematically, or you can perform this simple exercise. Lightly draw a diagonal line between the bottom left and the top right corners of your watercolor paper. Then, place your smaller piece of sketch paper in the lower left corner of the watercolor paper so that its edges are flush with the edges of the watercolor paper. Mark the spot at which the edge of the sketch paper meets your diagonal line. If that spot falls at the exact corner of the sketch paper, then the two pieces are in proportion. If it does not, you can trim your sketch paper on one side so that the point becomes the corner of the sheet, making the two papers proportional.



ABOVE

Value Sketch for Lily
watercolor, 6 x 8

LEFT

Before you begin painting the value sketch or the watercolor painting, draw graphite lines on both sheets of paper to mark and connect the centers of each side, as well as the corners.

3. Draw graphite lines on both sheets of paper according to the diagram shown on page 25. Some artists prefer to draw a grid rather than diagonal lines connecting the corners and middle of the sheets, but I find the combination of the horizontal, vertical, and diagonal divisions to be more helpful in duplicating the gesture drawing for my intended painting. It's important that these lines be drawn on both sheets of paper before you start painting, because they will be obscured by the watercolor paint.

4. Make a graphite contour drawing of you subject, first on the gray paper, then when you are satisfied with the composition, transfer that drawing to the watercolor paper. The grid will be a great help when transferring your image. Here again it is important to establish the outlines of the major shapes before you paint so that the lines are visible when you move from the value sketch to the watercolor painting. The drawing should only be a light indication of the design, not a detailed study of all the elements of your picture.

5. Squeeze out some titanium white (rather than Chinese white) and black (either ivory black or lamp black) watercolor paints on your palette and begin painting

ABOVE

Value Sketch for Parrot
watercolor, 15 x 10

RIGHT

Parrot
watercolor, 60 x 40

directly on the paper with pure black and white, creating a variety of grays directly on the paper by adding water. Use those to paint the relative values in your subject. Many of my students work from photographs, and they sometimes make black-and-white photocopies that automatically identify the values, but I encourage them to go through the process of judging colors in terms of their value because that is an important skill all painters need to develop.

6. Feel free to revise the arrangement of lights, darks, and middle values to make the composition as clear and well-integrated as possible. Titanium white is an opaque pigment, so it is easy to make values lighter, and a strong black or purple will allow you to darken a value by changing the mixture on your palette. If things get too wet on the surface of the paper, let the sketch dry so that it will be easier to make changes. The point is to arrive at an effective composition, not to create a showpiece.

7. When you are ready to paint with a full palette of watercolors, keep the value

ABOVE

Nasturtiums
watercolor, 36 x 48

LEFT

Value Sketch for Nasturtiums
watercolor, 6 x 8

sketch and your other source material—photographs or live subjects—close to you while you are painting. You'll probably find that the value sketch is far more important than a photograph because it will show you how to simplify the design and make the best use of the colors. If you use a masking agent to preserve white shapes on the watercolor paper, as I often do, you need to apply it before you begin painting. The whitest areas of your value sketch are always places for the possible use of a masking agent.

8. As you are painting, you should feel completely free to change the colors from what you see in the photograph or the actual setup. Remember, it is more important to get the value correct than to match the color you observe. In fact, you can completely change the colors so long as you balance the values to match what is in your sketch.

9. The procedures you follow for painting are flexible. I prefer to paint some of the dark shapes in the design and then build up the layers of transparent color, because that helps me define the range of lights and darks. However, there is nothing wrong with following the more traditional method of gradually building the painting from light-to-dark values and from transparent-to-opaque pigments.

10. After you've become practiced at doing preparatory value studies for your watercolors, you may find that you can automatically visualize the composition of light, medium, and dark values without actually painting them on gray paper. It's perfectly fine to discontinue the preliminary steps if you have achieved the desired goal of being able to see value relationships immediately.

"Remember, it's more important to get the value correct than to match the color you observe."

STUDENT PAINTINGS

FAR LEFT

Flower Pots
by Lorraine Remmelin
watercolor, 22 x 30

LEFT

Value Sketch for Flower Pots
by Lorraine Remmelin
watercolor, 5½ x 7½

FAR LEFT

Cats
by Karin Weibert
watercolor, 22 x 30

LEFT

Value Sketch for Cats
by Karin Weibert
watercolor, 5½ x 7½

About the Artist

DAVID R. DANIELS earned an M.A. from Central Michigan University, in Mount Pleasant, and taught in the Michigan public schools before becoming a full-time professional artist. He now teaches at Montgomery College, in Maryland; at the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, DC; and privately in his Silver Spring, Maryland, studio. His paintings have been included in dozens of group and solo exhibitions, as well as in books and magazines. For more information, visit his website at mrwatercolor.com.

LEFT

Value Sketch for Aquarium
watercolor, 8 x 6.

BELOW

Aquarium
watercolor, 48 x 36

Using Rhythm & Movement *to Create* Harmonious Landscapes

Laura Lynn Lewis designs her landscapes with the same attention to rhythm and movement that composers use to write music, allowing her to create visually harmonious and aesthetically pleasing paintings.

BY JANA FOWLER

Red Row
oil, 36 x 48

LIVING IN WEST TEXAS affords Laura Lynn Lewis significant opportunities to observe rhythm in nature. The flat horizon may be uninspiring to some, but this wide-open space provides the perfect backdrop for showcasing the amazing variations of earth and sky that decorate the high plains. Few vertical elements exist—as they might in other places—to obscure the rhythmic patterns of bluffs stripped by erosion, ripples in cirrus clouds, cows in a field, or swirls and cracks in the clay of a dry river bed. Continually observing these visual elements in the landscape around her, Lewis has developed a keen eye for rhythmic patterns in nature, and she now composes her paintings with purposeful attention paid to shapes and designs that create visual harmony.

"I guess my interest in rhythm as a component of visual expression comes from my musical training in piano and guitar," the artist says. "Songwriting has been a continuing avocation throughout my life, and I have taken music lessons on and off from my childhood through adulthood." Lewis first considered musical composition as it relates to composing in paint when a friend commented that one of Lewis' landscapes displayed a "marvelous sense of rhythm." Lewis set out to understand this visual element that was appearing unintentionally in her paintings and started deliberately incorporating this into the drifting clouds, waving grasses, and shadowed ravines of her landscapes.

LEWIS' MATERIALS PALETTE

Gamblin, Holbein, or Winsor & Newton oils in the following colors:

- titanium-zinc white
- chromatic black
- phthalo blue
- ultramarine blue
- cobalt blue
- dioxazine purple
- alizarin crimson
- cadmium red light
- transparent earth red
- Indian yellow
- transparent earth yellow
- yellow ochre
- cadmium yellow light

Mediums

- Winsor & Newton Oil Painting Medium
- Winsor & Newton Liquin

Bar-G
oil, 36 x 48

Matter of Survival
oil, 48 x 36

Lewis quickly learned that rhythm in music is an orderly alteration of strong and weak elements in the flow of sound and silence. Changes in volume, tone, and tempo lend life and movement to a musical passage, and a syncopated rhythm has more energy and interest than a monotonous, unchanging beat has. Also, a composer may slow or stop the rhythm completely to give an audience time to reflect or to prepare for something different. Likewise, varied rhythmic patterns in art create visual intrigue and invite viewer involvement, and a series of nonuniform artistic elements is visually stronger than identical repeating elements.

An artist can alter mood and movement by varying color intensity and contrast, and negative space can be used to halt viewers' eyes and draw them into an image.

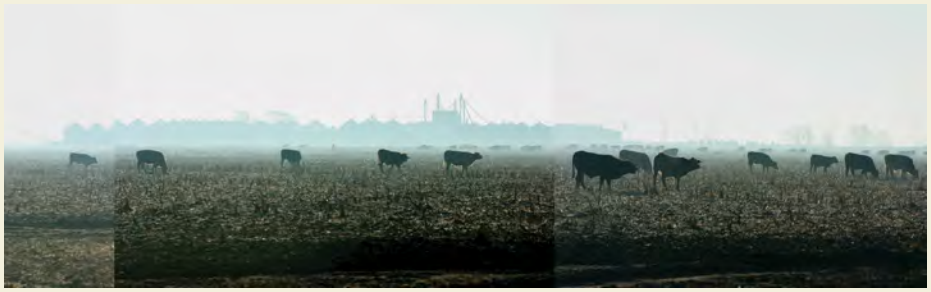
From her earliest art instruction, Lewis remembers teachers emphasizing that if an element in a drawing repeats, the sizes and/or shapes should be varied—be they the sizes within a group, the size of the groups themselves, or the space between the shapes or groups. The rhythm of the repeating elements, Lewis says, serves to unify the design and lead the viewer's eyes through the composition. With this in mind, Lewis approaches

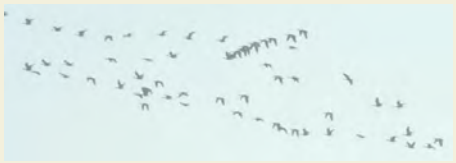
Continued on page 37.

Rio Puerco
oil, 30 x 36

DEMONSTRATION: COWS AND GEESE

DESIGNING THE COMPOSITION





Step 1

Inspired by the rhythmic elements seen in the positioning of the cattle, the shape of the grain storage, the thickness of the atmosphere, and the texture of the stubble in the field, Lewis combined three photos to attain a horizontal format that defined the space. At this point, the composition is weak: the sky is blank, and the foreground is boring.

Step 2

To add depth and interest to the sky, Lewis took two photos of geese on the same morning and layered them into the sky (see Step 4), with one placed so the geese appear more distant and the other placed so the geese appear closer. The "meter" of the geese is fast, and the "sounds" are light and crisp.

Step 3

The artist next added more cattle to further define the vacuous foreground, moving the new layer to the right and left to find a rhythmical tension between the foreground and middle-ground cows, determine the placement of the focal point, and balance the scene.

Step 4

THE COMPLETED COMPOSITION

The resulting composition features tiny repeating shapes in the geese and various larger shapes in the cattle, anchored by the long, flat image of the grain storage, which offers its own rhythmic interest in the cone-shaped peaks on the roof.

Step 5

To convey a hazy atmosphere, Lewis began with an underpainting applied darker at the top of the canvas and lighter at the horizon. The darker red under the cattle will add interest to their flat shapes.

Step 6

Once the underpainting was dry, the artist applied a blue gradient (medium fading to light in value) to the sky, partially wiping it with a rag so the underlying contrasting color would show through. In this step, the geese are almost obscured, but they will be restated in a later step. This technique incorporates the geese into the fabric of the paint layers so they do not appear to be pasted onto the painting. The cattle were then blackened with a translucent mixture (phthalo blue, alizarin crimson, and Indian yellow) so the warm underpainting could come through. The foreground underpainting was then intensified to provide the desired contrast with the layers of detail that would follow.

Step 7

Lewis began creating the texture in the foreground by painting dark detail, allowing the underpainting to peak through. She created the illusion that the cows were back-lit by leaving a halo of underpainting around them.

Step 8

Next, a blue-gray glaze was applied over the grain storage and distant field, completing the morning haze.

Step 9

In the final steps, the artist added the detail of back-lit stubble. Diagonal rows enhance the illusion of distance and add another element of rhythm, undergirding the syncopated beats of the cows, birds, and roofs with the regular beat of the stubble. Shadows were added near the cattle, and a few of the nearest cows were further defined. The geese were then restated in a light blue-gray so they did not contrast too sharply with the sky.

ABOVE, THE COMPLETED PAINTING:

Cows and Geese
oil, 24 x 48

RIGHT

Lewis created visual tension when designing *Cows and Geese* through the close placement of cattle in the foreground, middle ground, and distance. In this diagram, the artist emphasized the rhythmic placement of elements in the composition.

Continued from page 33.

the composition of each new painting by asking if there's a way to adjust or rearrange elements to make the image more interesting. "For example, *Rio Puerco* (page 33) derives strength from several competing counter-rhythms," Lewis explains. "The two layers of distant hills interact rhythmically and are offset by the zigzags of the dry creek and the strong verticals of the foreground."

In two-dimensional design, Lewis notes, tension can be created by placing elements close together in one part of an image and balancing them with negative space in another location. "In *Cows and Geese* [see demonstration on pages 34–36], I was looking for the right tension when I slid the row of cows back and forth," the artist says. "New groupings were formed, and the composition began to gel. If I had not kept the cows in separate groupings, I would have divided the front group into subgroups and experimented further with different spacing between them."

In West Texas, Lewis seldom finds a landscape and skyscape together that are interesting and compositionally successful. More often, she has to collect content from various locations, as in *Cows and Geese*. "Sometimes I have to think in terms of what a composition needs, instead of what is found at a particular place," Lewis admits. "I work from photographs of landscapes that interest me, taking numerous shots of foreground material—bunches of grass, cacti, interesting rocks—so that in the studio I will have elements to add to the composition. I am not good at painting from memory or imagination, so collecting imagery from the same locale with the same light is helpful. Foreground elements are useful in creating the sensation of walking right into the scene.

"After deciding on a landscape, I find a skyscape to finish the composition," Lewis continues. "Like many artists, I keep a collection of sky photographs. I categorize them several ways, but I find it most useful to group according to light (side lighting, back lighting, sun down, sun overhead), since uniform light is important in representational painting. Sometimes I have to horizontally flip an image so the light comes from the proper direction. If the image no longer works compositionally, I keep looking. After selecting the right skyscape, I make color adjustments to unify the composition."

Lewis is fortunate to have had great teachers throughout her training that have influenced her understanding of design and composition and helped her create stronger images. "I was privileged enough to take private art lessons from sculptor Glenna Goodacre," the artist says. "She taught me portraiture, and now as a landscape painter, I think often of her refrain, 'The lights against the darks bring out the form.' Another memory that stands out in my art education is of a value-study project in a workshop taught by Paul Milosevich. We painted the same image in high key, low key, and then a full range of values. One of the strengths of my images, I believe, is the full range of values from very dark to very light."

An *American Artist* article titled "The Grass Is Always Greener" [by Christopher Willard, February 2003] inspired Lewis to mix all varieties of green in her palette. "I have especially appreciated the addition of Indian yellow to my list," the artist says. "Its translucency with strong tinting power allows me to mix strong greens that are very dark in value. Indian yellow varies a lot depending

Monster Mash
oil, 24 x 37

on the manufacturer. For this color, I prefer Gamblin of the brands I have tried. Generally I use Gamblin, Winsor & Newton, and Holbein brands."

Lewis continues to hone her painting skills and is always looking for opportunities to grow as an artist. "I have been fortunate to have my sister serve as my art critic," Lewis says. "As a painting nears completion, her constructive criticism and valuable feedback give me a fresh perspective and help push me beyond my desire to immediately move on to the next painting. Her words are not always easy for me to receive, but because I know they are helping me to improve and grow, I welcome them."

Paintings with strong rhythmic elements might not literally set the viewers' feet to tapping or fingers to snapping, but they will certainly keep viewers looking and may even make them wonder what it was about the composition that caught their attention. That is why Lewis keeps her eyes peeled for the rhythms reflected in nature and adapts them into her own interpretations of the wide-open landscapes of West Texas.

Jana Fowler is a freelance writer who resides in Dallas.

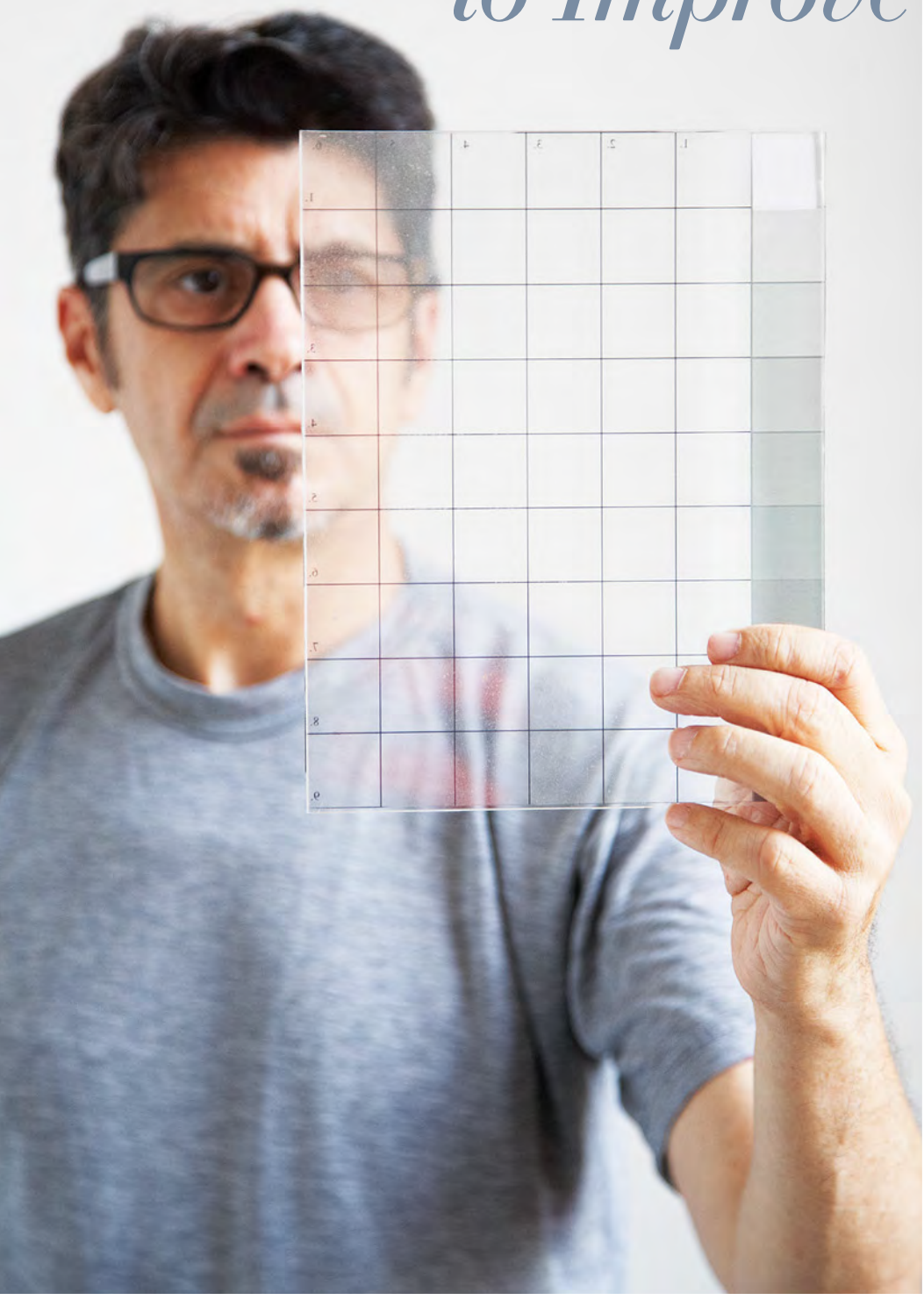
About the Artist

LAURA LYNN LEWIS first studied art at the University of Texas at Austin and at Texas Tech University, in Lubbock. Before beginning to paint seriously in 2001, she worked in the medical field, first as the program director for a respiratory therapy program at South Plains College, in Levelland, Texas, and later as a neuro-diagnostic technician. She made the switch to painting after having success entering her work into local juried shows and shortly thereafter began studying art more seriously in workshops. She has won awards from the Midland Arts Association, the Red River Valley National Juried Show, and the Lubbock Arts Festival and has had several solo exhibitions at galleries throughout Texas. The artist is represented by The Mason Gallery, in Mason; Frame Mart Gallery, in Lubbock; and Kings Keepsakes, in Plainview, all in Texas. For more information on Lewis, visit her website at lauralynnlewis.com.

TOP
Night Riders
oil, 24 x 60

ABOVE
Llano River at Castell
oil, 29 x 48

How to Use Measurement Tools *to Improve Accuracy*



Artist **Rob Silverman** shows his workshop students how to use tools such as grids, a viewfinder and value charts to check the accuracy of their artwork.

BY M. STEPHEN DOHERTY

ROB SILVERMAN WAS LOOKING FOR A BETTER WAY to draw full figures and portraits so that the proportion, scale, and placement of subjects would be more exact. The New York artist first tried the standard methods of holding up a pencil to take visual measurements and check the vertical and horizontal axes, but it was hard to focus on the subject and pencil at the same time, and the measurements changed depending on the distance of the pencil from his eyes. He then tried using a knitting needle with marks drawn with a Sharpie pen at measured intervals, but that too was unreliable. Finally, he drew grid lines on a sheet of clear acetate and looked through that at his subject. "The acetate was a big improvement over the pencil and

At a workshop in Nyack, New York, Rob Silverman taught students to use various visual aids—such as this sheet of gridded acetate and value chart—to help paint the figure.

knitting needle, but I need an additional reference point to use in evaluating the subject of my drawing or painting," he explained to a group of students attending a workshop at the Edward Hopper House Art Center, in Nyack, New York.

Silverman found the ultimate answer to his challenge when he started using a gridded sheet of acetate on which he drew squares based on the size of a model's head. "It occurred to me that I needed a unit of measurement, as well as the grid, and the person's head was the logical unit on which to base the evaluations," he remembers. "I made drawings both of the divisions of the head and of the full figure and had those drawings copied onto sheets of acetate. Finally, I had a way of comparing the individual features of my subject to the standard proportional relationships within the human body. That is, I could easily determine how the portrait subject or the model varied from the norm."

Silverman began using these transparent grids and found they helped him quickly create accurate drawings. "It was a liberating experience because I could trust that the drawings were accurate, and it allowed me to become more involved in developing an expressive painting," he recalls. "Instead of constantly worrying about whether I had captured a likeness of the portrait subject or drawn the total figure accurately, I could use the grid to measure the placement of the features and be confident they were well stated."

Silverman began sharing his discoveries with students who worked with him privately in his Brooklyn studio, and then he offered a two-day workshop at the Edward Hopper House Art Center. "I have been a member of the national historic landmark for a number of years and have exhibited in group shows presented in the galleries of Edward Hopper's childhood home," he

Silverman showed students how to make a charcoal drawing using various tools to establish the change in values that would convey the illusion of three-dimensional form.

explained. “I received a brochure about a fundraising campaign being conducted to maintain the buildings and support the educational programs, and I offered to teach a workshop and allow the art center to use all the proceeds to support those valuable community efforts.”

The Hopper House was owned by the family of Edward Hopper (1882–1967) beginning in the 1870s. The artist and his sister, Marion, lived in the home overlooking the Hudson River until Edward, his wife Jo, and Marion died in the 1960s. The building fell into disrepair, but in 1971 the Edward Hopper Landmark Preservation Foundation was established, and a nonprofit organization raised money to restore the home and open it as a community cultural center and gallery space. Today it functions as a resource for people interested in the great artist and as a gallery in which art exhibitions are presented.

The first visual aid that Silverman gave to workshop participants was a ViewCatcher, a gray-colored viewfinder created by an artist that has a sliding panel that quickly changes the shape of the opening, thus helping to isolate the vertical, horizontal, or square format for a painting. After adjusting the door to conform to the edge of the canvas shape, the artist can turn to view the sitter and judge the optimal size and placement of the sitter’s head to establish a pleasing composition before beginning to develop any details. “The ViewCatcher is a handy planning tool for determining what elements of a portrait, still life, or landscape you might want to include in a painting,” Silverman explained. “Once

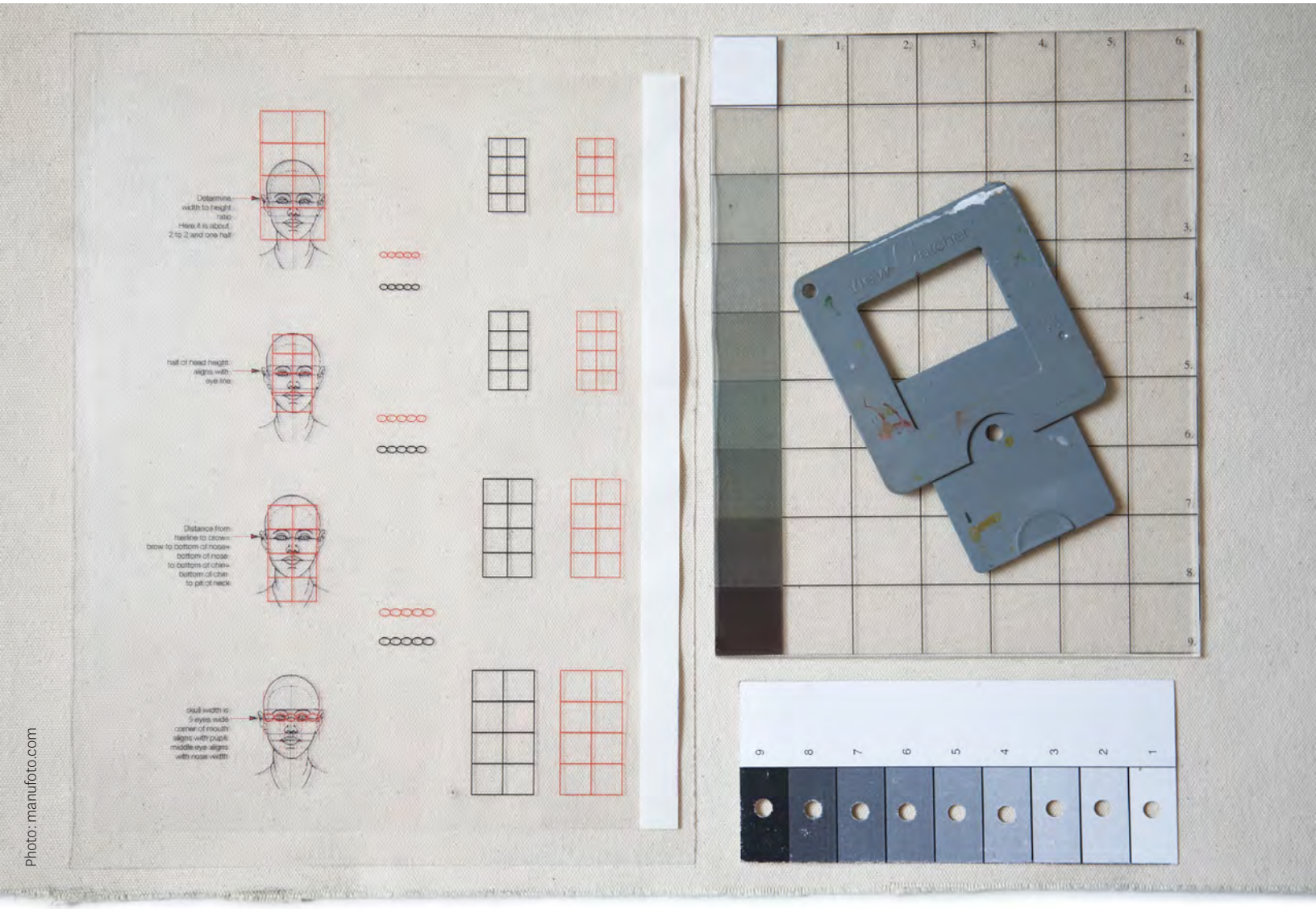


Photo: manufoto.com

Among the tools that Silverman introduced to students were sheets of acetate that help an artist measure a model’s head (left) and a ViewCatcher (right).

you have invested time in developing a painting, you are less inclined to make changes for the sake of improving the composition. It's better to be confident that you have a good composition at the beginning. "You can roughly indicate a rectangle describing the 'envelope' that incorporates the boundaries of the top of the head, the chin, and left and right edges."

The next measurement tool Silverman introduced was a sheet of acetate on which he had drawn two rows of four equal-size boxes. To fine-tune the shape of the rectangle, he lined up the width of the grid (two boxes wide) with the width of the head to judge how much greater than two boxes the height was compared to the width. "The shape of the head is an often overlooked characteristic feature," he said. "Before placing the features on the head, one should make sure the overall shape accurately reflects that of the subject. The point is to evaluate the parts of the head against a standard unit of measure. It's always easier to judge relationships when you can compare them to something. In this case, that 'something' is the grid lines.

"You can use the same tool to evaluate the line of the model's eyes as compared to the generic halfway point," Silverman added. "That next generic relationship places a line at the sitter's hairline, another line one-third of the way down from the hairline to the brow ridge, from the brow ridge to the bottom of the nose, and another third from there to the bottom of the chin. Obviously each person will have slightly different proportions, but you can gauge those differences by comparing them to the generic positions.

"The grids also help in judging how the model's features line up with each other," Silverman continued. "For example, the distance between the pupils of the eyes is usually the same as

The instructor offered suggestions to Mario Tucci, a professional artist who participated in the workshop.

the width of the mouth, so you can follow the lines of the grid to determine how a portrait subject's features compare to that standard. You can quickly tell if the mouth is wider or narrower than that. Similarly, the ears usually align with the top of the eyebrows and bottom of the nose, and the grid helps you determine if the person you are drawing has ears that are smaller or larger than the standard. The grid can also help in evaluating the alignment of head with the shoulders, the shoulders with the knees, et cetera, and it can help in making an objective evaluation of any foreshortening if the model is seated or lying down."

Silverman addressed a number of other issues related to portrait painting during his two-day class. For example, he held sheets of colored paper against the model's chin to show how reflected light can change the appearance of a model's face.

"Our perception of values and colors is influenced by the light focused on the person we are painting," he explained. "As the light changes direction, intensity, and color, the image of the person we are painting will change."

For students who had little experience painting, Silverman suggested that they make charcoal drawings so that they would better understand how to use the gridded acetate to measure the model's features. "It takes some practice to become comfortable with this approach, and if you want to first work through a few sketches before you become involved in painting, that would be perfectly fine," he said.

The instructor used a mannequin head to introduce the importance of values. He held the head at various distances and angles up to the spotlight and demonstrated how the light-and-shadow pattern conveyed the illusion of form. He then introduced a third tool, a value scale. It is printed with a series of nine boxes, each with a hole punched out, that gradually change from dark to light. By comparing one's drawing of shadow shapes to those of the model, one can accurately convey the illusion of light on form.

Silverman also recommended that students first paint a representation of the model using a limited palette of colors

The instructor pointed to landmarks on the model's head that could be plotted in a drawing using his gridded acetate guide.

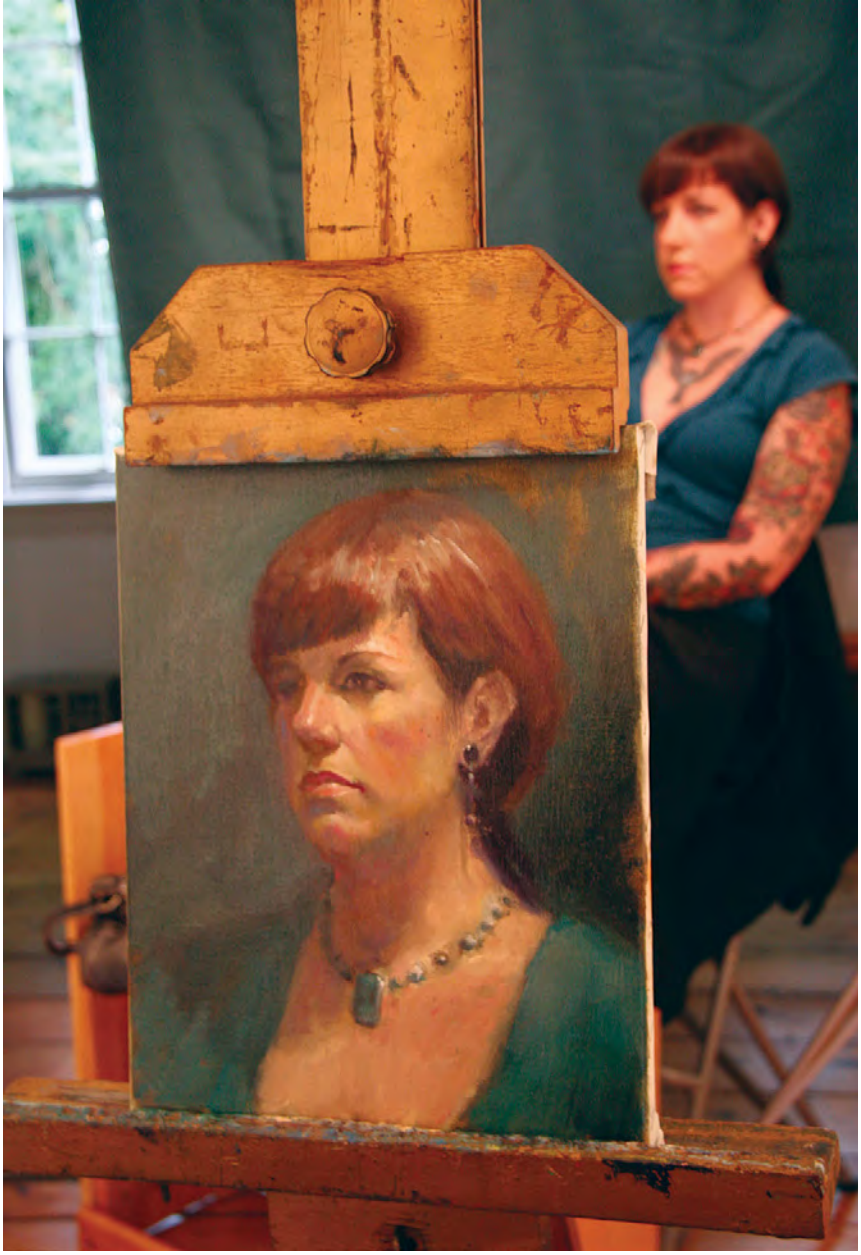
on small pieces of cardboard. "It's easier to deal with shapes and values when you eliminate the issue of color," the instructor explained as students prepared to paint the model. "I would suggest that you first develop sketches on sheets of cardboard that are toned to match the dark-green background color behind her. If you go through the simplified exercises of blocking in the dark-est and lightest values on that gray-green rectangle, you'll have a better idea of how to approach the portrait on canvas."

To help clarify his instruction, Silverman did several charcoal drawings and value studies for the students, and he worked on a painting on canvas to illustrate how he begins a portrait by developing a grisaille, or gray painting. "I used the gridded acetate as well as the value scale to complete the initial painting, and then I was confident I had all of Jessica's features in the right proportion and value relationships before I expanded the palette of oil colors," he explained.

By the time the Hopper House workshop concluded on Sunday afternoon, Silverman had demonstrated and explained a number of key points about painting a portrait using measurement tools, and the workshop participants left feeling they could continue to improve their skills. "Rob was extremely generous in providing handouts, a ViewCatcher, copies of his acetate grids, and written instructions," said Mario Tucci, a fellow instructor who monitored the workshop.

About the Artist

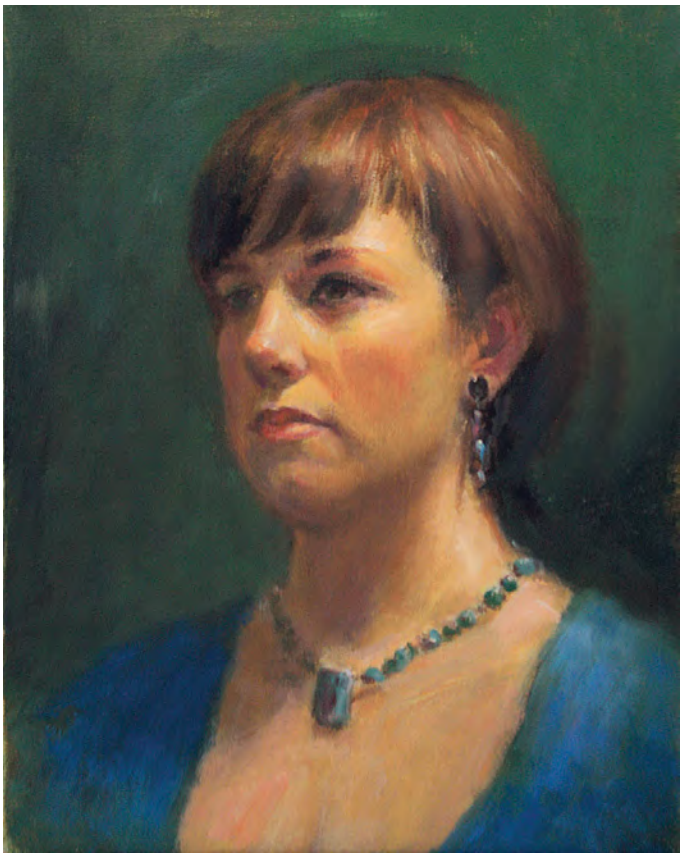
ROB SILVERMAN earned a B.A. from the School of Visual Arts, in New York City, and later studied with Harvey Dinner-stein, Burton Silverman, Nelson Shanks, and David A. Leffel. He is an associate member of Allied Artists of America, the Connecticut Society of Portrait Artists, and the Portrait Society of America. His paintings have been included in exhibitions organized by Crosby Street Gallery and Spring Studio Gallery, the Salmagundi Club, and the National Arts Club, all in New York City. He recently began teaching at the Long Island Academy of Fine Art. For more information, visit his website at silvermanportraits.com.



TOP
A comparison of Silverman's developing portrait and the model.

ABOVE
The Edward Hopper House Art Center, where the two-day workshop took place.

SILVERMAN'S WORK



ABOVE LEFT

John
oil, 28 x 22

ABOVE RIGHT

Jessica
oil, 14 x 11

ABOVE

Ana With Flowers
oil, 31 x 23

LEFT

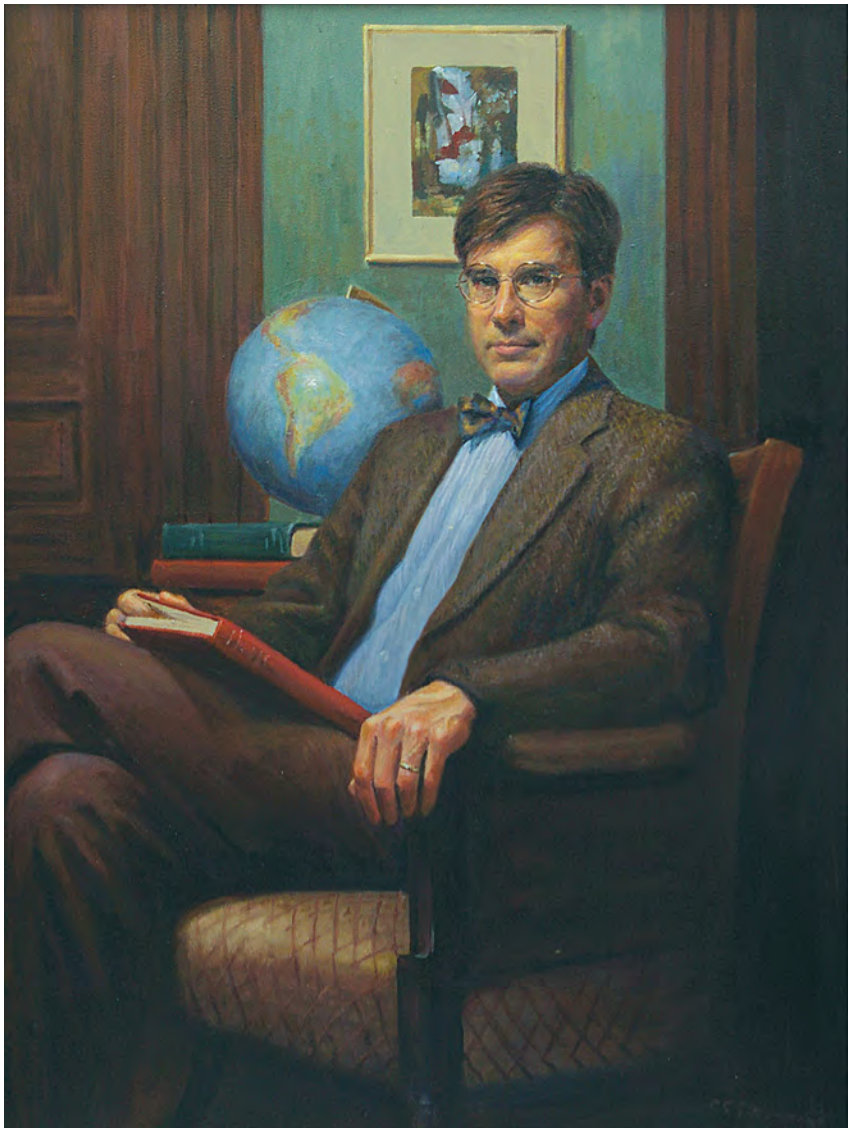
Julie
oil, 14 x 11

RIGHT

David Alquist
oil, 36 x 24

BELOW

Bud
charcoal, 13 x 9½

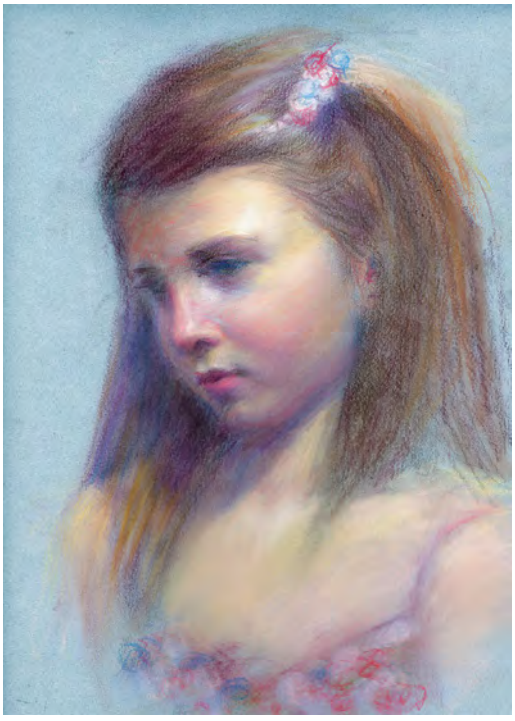


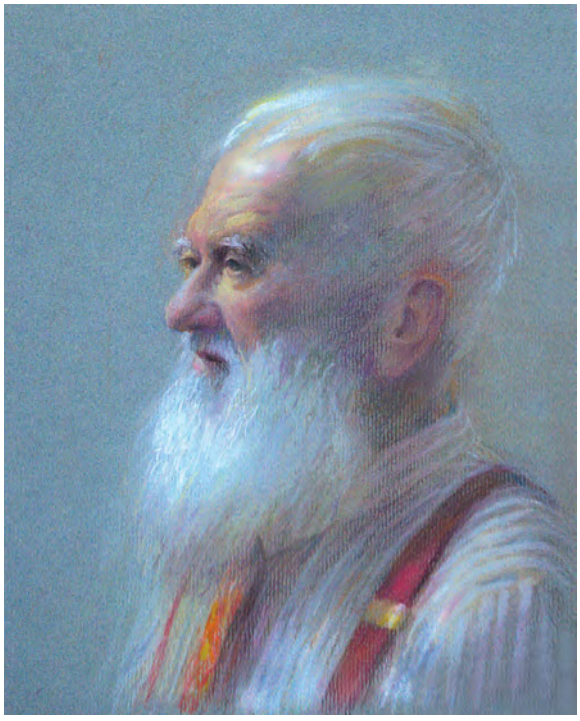
RIGHT

Isabella Sketch
pastel, 11 x 8½

FAR RIGHT

Tram
pastel, 11 x 9





10 Composition Tips

BY JOHN CRUMP

Over the years, I've continually refined my approach to landscape painting and design. This is a list of 10 of the most important lessons I've learned for better compositions.

1. Choose a canvas that suits the shape and layout of your subject. It can be easier to fit a subject into a square panel, but I find a panoramic shape to be more exciting. A vertical panel can work well with the right subject.

2. Generally, a central horizon that divides a panel equally can be a problem (although there are exceptions). Try something outside the norm. A low horizon with a big, stormy sky is always exciting. Alternatively, try a high horizon with a low focal point and a foreground with strong lights and darks.

3. Don't forget to include a point of interest (focal point). You don't want viewers wondering what your painting is about as their eyes wander around the canvas.

4. As you begin sketching your composition on your painting surface (I use a brush with thin paint), remember that your main area of interest needs to be the leading actor. All other areas should work around that focal point. You may have other areas of interest, but they mustn't battle for supremacy with the main star.

5. There are many ways to lead your viewers into your painting. This can be done with a careful layout of the main areas on the canvas or with the patterns of lights and darks or even with the strength of the colors that you use in and around your focal point.

6. Almost invariably, the shapes and strength of the lights and shadows are important.

7. I like a degree of imbalance that pushes the design/layout norms—but not to the extent that it annoys me later. After you've sketched your layout, have a coffee and study the design carefully. Does it look too predictable or too extreme? Finish your coffee, make the corrections, then start painting.

8. Don't force yourself to paint subjects you don't like. Painting is hard enough, so why make it harder.

9. Emile Gruppé (1896–1978) said that design is the No. 1 element, so get books on composition and apply the wisdom you find in them to your efforts.

10. Good paintings are a product of practice. Work hard (at least one painting a week), study other painters and enjoy your progress.

JOHN CRUMP (johncrump.co.nz) is a New Zealand artist and a popular workshop instructor.

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