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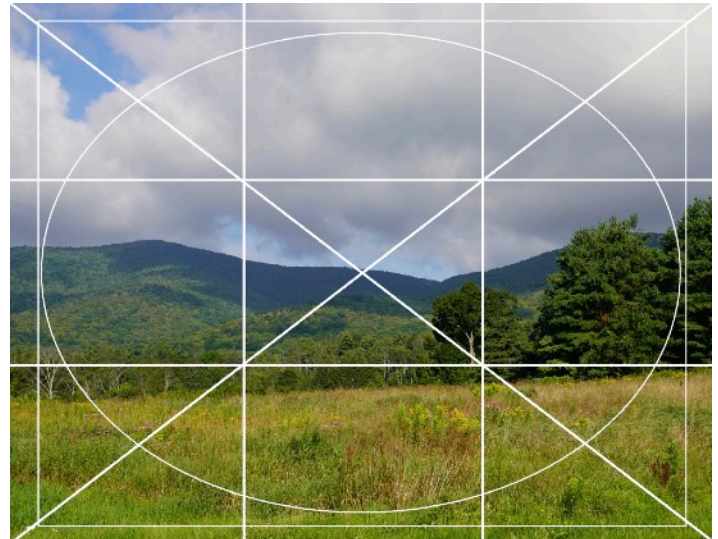


COMPOSITION

Of the five components of a painting—composition, value relationships, color contrasts, edge contrasts, and details—composition is by far the most important. When looking at a painting, it's what we first notice and last remember. And while a great composition won't guarantee a masterpiece, a poor composition will *always* guarantee a failure. Yes, it really is that simple.

During 20 years of offering workshops, I found no subject more challenging to teach than composition, in part because it's inseparably tied to so many other aspects of painting: foundation value relationships, drawing skills, focal points, an ability to see 2-D shapes of value rather than 3-D things in color, understanding the role of contrast, etc. Even as I become more competent in creating compositions in my own paintings, it continues to remain a slippery topic to teach to others.

The subject of the next several newsletters will be composition. In this newsletter, I'll introduce some general concepts and related topics that pertain to composing a painting and will then address the first of the three steps that I use when composing a painting.



PaintTube Videos



Interested in my paintings process? In *“Dynamic Landscapes”* and *“Poetic Landscapes”* I describe it in detail. If you're interested in learning more about values—what they are, how to identify them, and how to use them in your paintings, check out the video, *“Mastering Values.”*

For more information and to order the videos, click [HERE](#).

If you've been enjoying these newsletters and are able and willing to make a donation, any contribution would be appreciated. If you've just begun receiving them, feel free to peruse them first.

To make a donation, click [HERE](#).

To the many of you who've already contributed~ *Thank you!*



A.I.D = Ask, Identify, Design

Composing a painting in three steps.

Here are three simple, logical steps that will help you compose a painting. Use the mnemonic “**AID**” to help you remember the steps:

Ask: What is my intention for the painting? What will be its message?

Identify: Identify the elements in the scene that carry the message of the painting. These will be the most important elements in the composition.

Design: Design those elements within the frame of the canvas so as to lead the eye to the area that conveys the message.

This newsletter will address the first step: determining the source of inspiration, the message, the intention, the ***point of the painting***.



Vladimir Kirillov: *Grace of February*

There's no question what Kirillov's intention was for this painting—few painters have captured so beautifully the effects of light on snow. The visual appearance of a painting can be complex or simple but its *message* should always be simple and clear.

1. ASK: What's the general intention?

Asking is a two-part process. The first step is to be clear about your overall approach to the painting. In the September-October 2022 newsletter, I proposed five categories of roles painters play: the **Storyteller**, the **Reporter**, the **Poet**, the **Virtuoso**, and the **Designer**. Below is a summary:

The Storyteller:

The Storyteller focuses on the literal meaning of the objects in a painting—on its narrative. The figures here aren't just graphic elements in the painting. They're people who tell a story within the context of a specific time and place. In story paintings, the landscape is often a mere backdrop in front of which the narrative, the story, unfolds.



Jean-François Millet *The Angelus*

The Reporter:

The primary interest of the Reporter is to capture, as honestly and clearly as possible, what is seen. For the reporter, the artist is an Eye that examines and records. In this painting, Rodgers emphasizes the appearance and the textures of fur, skin, cloth, and ribbon.



Gretchen Rodgers: *The New Hat*

The Poet:

The Poet expresses his or her feelings that arise in reaction to the landscape, feelings usually expressed through mood. The Poet often works with large shapes, soft atmospheres, muted color, and deep space. Many of paintings of the Poet are inventions, created without any reference whatsoever. The Tonalists are Poets.



Dwight William Tryon: *Twilight: November*

The Virtuoso:

For the Virtuoso, the emphasis is less on *what* is painted than on *how* it is painted. The point of the painting is how skillfully the paint is applied to the surface. The quality of the brushstrokes used to portray an object is as important as the ability of the artists to create the illusion of the object.



Richard Schmid: *Joy*

The Designer:

The Designer concentrates on the shapes of the composition, with an emphasis on clear, usually hard-edged outlines and flat graphic shapes. Great attention is paid to how shapes create a pattern within the frame. It's all about the design.



John Carlson: *Winter Landscape*

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT. Deciding on the role you'll play when painting isn't a mere intellectual exercise. You can't compose a painting without first knowing what you want to say in it. Because each role leads to a different focus for the painting, it's important to determine which role you prefer. Deepening your understanding of why you paint in general helps you determine the message of specific paintings, while also helping you identify the skills you need to become better painters in your style. For instance, if you want to capture a mood in a painting, which usually involves a muted palette, low-key values, and "mystery" (whatever that is), you need to pay attention to your values relationships and edges contrasts. But if you want to play the Storyteller, concentrate on your drawing of forms – make sure a building or figure reads clearly and realistically. Storytellers *describe* while Poets *suggest*. They require different skills.

[For more in-depth description of these 5 types, see the Nov-Dec. 2022 newsletter.]

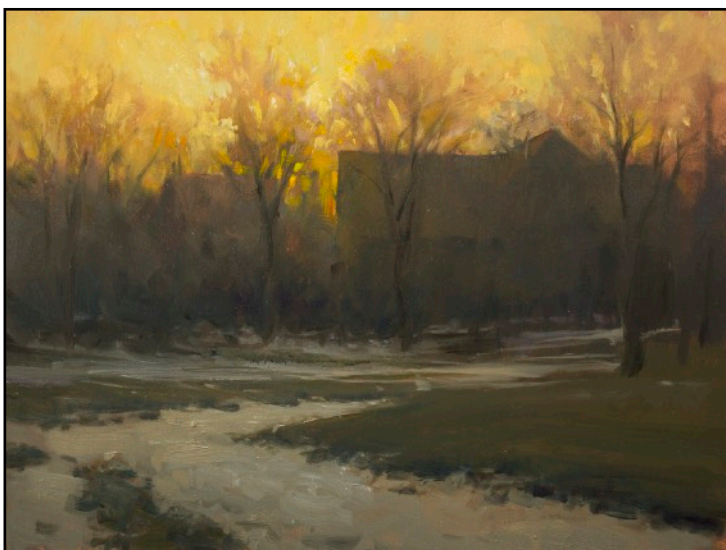
Two Paintings – Two Approaches

Here's a concrete example of how our preferred role as a painter affects how we create specific paintings. Both of these paintings include old factories, yet they couldn't be more different.



Charles Sheeler: *River Rouge Plant* (1932)

Sheeler was primarily a **Designer**. In many of his paintings, the emphasis is on the relationships between nearly abstracted, flat shapes. In this painting, the factory is clearly described, replete with details that were unique to that factory in a specific place and time.



At left is an painting of mine from 2016, also of an old factory. But as a Tonalist (a **Poet** painter), my subject is the mood. The factory is dramatically simplified into a simple shape that is suggestive rather than descriptive. There are no details in the building. The emphasis in the painting is on the sky and foreground. And to preserve the interest in those two areas, the factory had to be dramatically simplified. This painting *isn't* about a factory.

2. ASK: What's the specific message?

The first question and its answer reveal our overall preferences as painters. This second question targets the unique scene we're considering. What is it about *this* scene that inspires us? Deciding on the message reveals to us not only the focal point of the painting but a focus that constantly reminds us of what is essential to the painting and, by extension, what isn't.

In the four examples below, each message is unambiguous, a result of intelligently and sensitively choosing what to include in the painting and what to leave out.



Clockwise from top left:

John Singer Sargent: *Yoho Falls*

Dennis Miller Bunker:
Wild Asters

Joaquin Sorolla y Bastida:
Setting Out to Sea

Gustav Klimt: *Beech Grove*

The Golden Rule of Composition

"All of the rules of composition which are of a practical value to a painter are negative rather than positive, and can best be expressed in a series of 'don'ts.' The first and by far the most important of these is, 'don't try to say two things on one canvas.' Any motive that is worth painting must have a central point of interest. Concentrate on that and sacrifice everything else to it. If there chance to be another attractive feature in the same subject, ruthlessly suppress it, in order that the one thing which you have to say may be said strongly."

—excerpted from Birge Harrison's, Landscape Painting. (Published 1910)

One Painting ~ One Message

Occasionally, we find a scene in which everything grabs our eye and inspires us. It is overwhelmingly beautiful and we want to paint it all. Paintings and transcendental experiences are two different things. If the thought “I want to paint it all” arises, consider it a red flag. The photo below is a good example. The sky, land, and reflection are equally attractive to the eye. Who wouldn't want to paint this entire scene? It won't work. If a scene offers separate, equally attractive sections, paint multiple paintings rather than trying to fit it all in one painting.



In the scene above, the sky, the band of trees and reeds, and the reflected sky are equally attractive. It's the fact that they're **equally** attractive that makes it both seductive and dangerous. Copying this as is would result in three focal areas and a failed painting. We have two choices: to make one of the three elements more prominent and simplify the other two, or to make three separate paintings. In my experience, the latter choice is usually the best, to zoom in on one area and make it the unambiguous message of the painting. Below are three possibilities. How to crop photos (or a plein air scene) will be addressed in a subsequent newsletter.



Emphasis on the sky/tree line



. . . on the trees and reed. . .



. . . on the reflected sky.

The Message Determines the Role

Most painters stick to a single role – they're Reporters, Poets, Storytellers, etc. It's a "style." But skillful painters can switch roles when the message of a painting demands it. They can assume any role depending on the message and subject matter.



This photo was shot from an Amtrak train speeding from Albany, New York, to New York City. (One of the most beautiful train rides in America, especially during a winter dawn.) The instant I shot it, I knew there was a good painting here. It's a classic Tonalist scene and a painting for the **Poet**, which means concentrating on clear value contrasts, soft edges, and muted color. It's all about suggestion.



A photo taken while out plein air painting. The color and pattern of flowers was too beautiful to resist. I wanted to simply capture what I was seeing, a job for the **Reporter**. That required focusing on color mixing while accurately drawing what I was seeing.



A photo of the skyline of Yonkers, just north of New York City. To paint this, I would need to bring out my drawing skills to accurately describe the forms of the buildings and then arrange them in a pleasing pattern, simplifying the shapes where needed and deciding which were the crucial details. That's a job for the **Designer**, or perhaps the **Storyteller**.

The clearer your message and intention, the easier it will be to compose the painting. If you don't know what you want to say, your confusion will be the message, which will be reflected in the composition of the painting and will guarantee it fails.

Below are three photos that were used for reference for recent studio paintings. They inspired me. You might find them boring. In the next newsletter, I'll go into detail regarding the specific elements I look for in a scene and what triggers inspiration.

As you develop your compositional skills, it becomes easier to identify scenes that will lead to successful paintings—that will convey a single, clear message, and those that won't.



The Engineer and The Poet

Many non-artists assume a painting appears spontaneously and effortlessly, the result of a wild, uncontrolled moment of inspiration. They couldn't be more wrong. Paintings don't magically and instantaneously appear. Painting is a *process* with a beginning and an end. And it's even more mistaken to assume that the painting process involves only the right brain of the Artist: the creative, spontaneous, and intuitive part of us. Equally important is the left brain of the Engineer: analytical, logical, and deductive. A painting that is all Artist will explode with emotion but it's usually so unstructured and poorly executed that it's unintelligible. A painting that is all Engineer may be technically brilliant but it's almost always soulless: all surface and no depth. Great paintings are always the result of a dance between left and right brain, between the Artist and the Engineer. But during the painting process, this two partner dance isn't always equal. Allow the right brain to dominate when choosing a scene. Then shift to the mind of the Engineer when beginning to structure the composition. All three steps of composing a painting require inspiration *and* analysis, a constant dialogue between the Artist and the Engineer.

The artist's intention vs. the viewer's interpretation

In *A Theory of Everything*, American philosopher Ken Wilber states that every work of art exists in four contexts: the artist's intention, the viewer's response, the place of the work in art history, and its monetary value in the marketplace. Each context is equally valid. Even though you're the artist, your intention for the painting isn't the only interpretation of the work. For example, I've created paintings in which my intention was to evoke a mood but they were purchased because the buyer was familiar with the location, which evoked fond memories, or because the painting matched the color of the decor. Is that wrong? Concentrate on your reason for creating the painting—pour your soul into it—and then let it go. Be content that it connects with another human being and don't get hung up on the reason for that connection.

Regardless of the role you play or your intention, the painting has to work.

Your intention and the message of your painting will be clear only if the painting works as a *painting*. It must have a good composition, value structure, color contrasts, etc. Once you've decided upon the message of your painting, it's time to move on to creating a painting with a composition that can successfully express it. We'll begin addressing that in the next newsletter.

Words of Wisdom

The object isn't to make art, it's to be in that wonderful state which makes art inevitable.

Art is, after all, only a trace—like a footprint which shows that one has walked bravely and in great happiness.

— Robert Henri

*Stay well,
Be creative,
and Happy Painting!*

