

Improve Your Composition by Planning the Value Structure and More

1. Know the Value Distribution in Landscape Painting

When painting a landscape, it's very important for a successful painting composition to create believable mid-tones, darks and lights.

With clear value definition the viewer will be able to know what is in light and what is in shade, what is darker and what is lighter. If the value is wrong most anyone will pick up very quickly that something is amiss, even we don't know WHAT is wrong we will know that something is.

Value Distribution in Landscapes, in order from lightest to darkest:

- 1 **Sky** is almost always the lightest value planes
2. **Horizontal planes** are the next lightest.. for example the ground/grassy field
3. **Slanted planes** such as the side of a hill, slanted roof top etc
4. **Upright planes** are usually the darkest. A tree trunk, side of a building..

2. The Color of Light Affects the Color of Everything

On a sunny day, the light of the sun is warm and bright and makes colors warmer and more intense. The sunlight does not only make things lighter, it makes them yellower too.

For example when painting grass in the foreground that is sunlit, the color must be painted lighter and warmer. On the same note, if the sunlight is red or blueish, every object in the scene will have some of that color reflected on it. Overcast days all colors are duller and shifts in value are less noticeable and less contrast in value.

Tip: Mix the color of light into everything for more uniform and harmonious in color. Do this in a subtle way or your colors will appear muddy or muted because you are adding compliments and that desaturates color.

3. Atmospheric Perspective Influences Both Colors and Values

In landscapes, some objects often are very far away and therefore there is more air/atmosphere between us and the object. This will affect both the value and the color.

Air contains humidity and floating particles, which create a filter that influences how we see the intensity and the value of colors.

The farther away things are, the grayer, less contrasty they appear and color goes through a prismatic shift. Notice I will be talking about the primary colors here. (red blue yellow). First the Yellow drops out then the reds and finally we are left with blues. Not to say these colors may be completely absent in a distant item but substantially reduced depending on how the atmosphere you are viewing them through.

You can see this clearly when you drive on a highway. Bushes and trees that are closer to you are crisper/ have more value contrast. Those closer to the horizon are grayer and lighter. This effect is called atmospheric perspective.

4. Include in The Painting Only What Works

Looking at a landscape, it can be quite overwhelming to choose how to crop the image to paint.

Many important decisions are taken the moment you start drawing your subject on the canvas.

What is the focal point?

What size canvas works well with this scene?

What proportion fits your subject?

Where do I place the focal point on the canvas? Think composition.

What element do I include and (even more important) *what things am I leaving out?*

SIMPLIFY. Eliminate distractions. If the item is not part of what you are trying to say either remove it or possibly reduce its value range or mute the color so it's not distracting.

You can even leave out entire buildings, or move them to a different area in the painting, all for the sake of a successful composition.

Keep the Light Consistent

(Light and shadow consistency throughout the painting is crucial)

When moving an object from one spot to another in a landscape, or including an element from a different photo reference, make sure the light is compatible as far as direction and color of light.

5. Simplify Busy Elements (there's that word again.. S-I-M-P-L-I-F-Y..)

Sometimes a scene is really beautiful but it may be too busy. It's the artist's job to simplify.

Simplify by grouping shapes together.

Connect values together by eliminating small and unimportant lighter or darker shapes. To maintain color variety, keep changing slightly but keep it in the same value family. For Example a tree may be simplified into 3 values and to keep it interesting the color temperature shifts can change in that value pattern just keep the values and colors close. **Stand back and look at your painting periodically.** Are there big shapes that when you squint or are across the room that hold together big shapes? If they do your well on your way. This could be and I strongly suggest is worked out in quick studies before you ever touch a brush to your canvas. Sometimes you will want to use your reference as it is however it might not be your best solution. I cannot over stress this!

Don't worry about details and small defining strokes until the very end if at all. Add them only if really needed to render the object, otherwise trust the viewer's eye to interpret the item.

Not everything that is present in a scene needs to be included in a painting. Some things are a distraction to the viewer, other things are disruptive for the composition of the painting.

The idea is to create a painting that captures the viewer attention, guiding the eye throughout the composition, using lines, value contrast, and color.

A bright, very light or dark object positioned at the edge of the scene can attract the viewer's eye and keep it there, stopping the flow of the composition.

Bushes and trees in “wrong” positions” – feel free to move vegetation around and edit the shape to keep it interesting. Avoid to make trees or are all the same shape. Electric poles, street signs, parked cars, etc. – When painting a cityscape, feel free to edit out some of the non-essential elements that don't help to make the scene recognizable, or that detract from the flow of the painting.

Maybe you leave them in! What are you trying to say in your painting?

6. Play with color

In some cases, it's OK to include everything, but some things demand to be edited in color and value.

It's good for the focal point of a painting to have high contrast and strong definition, but other elements should play a secondary role.

If it's all painted in the same sharpness (value contrast, hard edges and no soft or.. all soft) it will likely appear confusing.