

FASST demo 11/24/14 **Composition: Holding Your Painting Together**

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A painting can be, should be, more than simply a picture of something. With a few rules of thumb, composition doesn't have to be complex or difficult, and it can be a major step towards making a "picture of..." into a work of art.

Balance – in its many forms – brings unity.

BALANCE OF LINE

Symmetrical, or Classical, balance

Divide your canvas in two, vertically, and in three, horizontally. Keep the elements of the painting equal from side to side of the vertical guideline, and placed evenly along either horizontal axis.

Asymmetrical, or "Steelyard," balance

In the same way that a heavier weight on a bar scale equals a smaller weight and a longer bar on the opposite side, a painting with the primary visual interest on one side can be balanced with a secondary visual interest at a further remove from the primary.

Simple: Rule of three

Divide your canvas into thirds both ways – the four intersections are your visual "hotspots," or dynamic points. Place your major and minor points of interest at two of these points. Place your horizon, or stabilizing ground element, along one of the horizontal lines.

More complex: Golden Mean

On a rectangular canvas, connect two opposing corners with a diagonal. From this diagonal, connect one of the remaining corners to the diagonal with a line that is perpendicular (90°) to the diagonal. Through the point where the diagonal and the perpendicular meet, draw a vertical and a horizontal. This is the framework on which to build your composition, the primary vertical element aligned with the vertical guideline and the horizon, or stabilizing ground element, with the horizontal guide. You can also use the same method to subdivide the resulting rectangles, for the most visually unified arrangements.

BALANCE OF MASS AND VALUE

Larger masses and darker values have more visual weight than do smaller and lighter. Use larger, lighter masses to equal the weight of smaller, darker masses, and vice versa. This equivalence works in both symmetrical and asymmetrical compositions.

BALANCE BY OPPOSING ELEMENTS

The movement of the eye through a composition can make elements balance. As the eye is drawn to a primary focal point, it can be led to a countering point for balance. One way to do this is via *color trails*, using the same color in both primary and counter focal point elements, and, if needed, by leading lines and subtle spots of the same color between the two points. Or, the elements can be connected with a more defined *transitional line* – such as a horizon, a table edge, or an element edge, leading from one opposing element to the other.

BALANCE BY SCALE OF VISUAL ATTRACTION

The more any element in your painting tends to attract the eye, the more visual weight it possesses. This attraction can be controlled in many ways.

High Attracting Elements

Bright/warm colors, relative to other colors in the painting

Color atypical of the surrounding colors

Large masses

Elements in the visual “hot spots”

Visual detail

Perceived action

Human faces

Low attracting elements comprise the opposite characteristics – muted colors, colors much like those surrounding them, smaller masses, elements out of the “hot spot” zones, elements with little visual detail, and still elements – BUT any of these low-attracting elements can be modified in attraction by high-attracting characteristics, such as brightly colored small elements, highly detailed muted elements, etc.

Attraction rules of thumb

- Every picture is a collection of units or items
- Every unit has a value, relative to the others
- The value of a unit depends on its visual attraction: its attraction varies according to size, placement, value, color, contrast with its surroundings, and visual detail
- Every part of a picture has some attraction
- A unit in the foreground has less weight than the same one in the distance.

ENTRANCE AND (NO) EXIT

Give your viewer’s eye a way “into” your painting, and lead it around the painting as you wish it to go. Do not lead the eye directly to an exit, or even to an exit at all.

Leading the eye in with color and value

Allow one “odd” corner in your painting: make three corners cool and one warm, or three corners dark and one light. Make this “path” lead directly to a compositional element that leads farther in – a pathway, a beam of light, a crease or fold, a diagonal edge. Then be sure there are elements acting as “bumpers” in the other corners, as though the eye were the ball in a pinball machine: lines and edges (or color trails) that lead back into the painting, darker areas, forms which point back toward the primary focal point of the composition. Darker values impede. Lighter values invite. Lighter values in the “distance” invite the viewer farther into the painting.

Leading the eye out through the painting

The way out should be contained within the painting, ideally somewhere near either a focal hot spot or the center – an open window, a doorway, mountains, or even the backdrop of a still life.

BOOKS I'VE FOUND HELPFUL

[*available from or through Broome County Public Library or Your Home Public Library]

***Problem Solving for Oil Painters**

Kreutz, Gregg

Shelf #: Q751.45 KREUTZ

Tips, tricks, and down-to-earth practical advice.

***Mastering color: the essentials of color illustrated with oils**

McMurry, Vicki

Shelf #: 751.45 MCMU

Not crazy about the author's work, but some great advice on composition and color usage.

Pictorial Composition: An Introduction

Henry Rankin Poore

Classical compositional plans, with examples from the Masters.

Carlson's Guide to Landscape Painting

John E. Carlson

A classic, and not just for landscape painters. Compositional and technical/technique advice from a master.

