

## **Composition: The Critical Element: #1**

**“A well composed painting is half done.”** *Pierre Bonnard*

It is a harsh fact that no matter how good an artist's brushstroke and other techniques are concerned if the composition is weak then the painting will be weak.

I have mentioned that value change is vital to catch and hold interest. However the second part to this is composition.

Composition is perhaps instinctive to an artist. Over time you react to a good composition. You are drawn to it and importantly will recognise it as a great composition. This is the moment to commit the scene to memory – sketch it or take a photo if possible. I am sure that most of us have been attracted to a scene. Perhaps in the country or in a town we are visiting and by having a fresh outlook we are aware of certain scenes that catch our eye. By being conscious of our surroundings we react and look at ordinary scenes with a keen interest. Why? Most often I suggest it is because of a natural composition that is pleasing to the eye. The curve of a pavement leading to a group of people? A receding row of street lights taking our eye to a sunlit building?

Composition is also an academic exercise – we can learn guidelines that help, but they will only become second nature by constant work and dedication to the task.

### **What to include and what to leave out?**

Nature is wonderful – I can spend hours observing landscapes, but these scenes are also chaotic! There is far too much going on in the average landscape to include it all in a painting. Our job as artists is to render an idea. An interpretation of a scene distilled to essential shapes to convey this idea with impact. If this process requires a change to the scene by moving a tree for instance to better convey the idea then do so. It is a matter of degree – too much change suggests the composition was not viable and needs to be reconsidered.

### **Use a Viewfinder:**

I usually have a cardboard viewfinder with me, but it is easy enough to use your hands to “frame” a scene. A camera is handy of course! When I do have a basic cardboard viewfinder it helps to isolate the desired view and gets the mind working. From this point you will want to sketch the scene using light and dark values to emphasise the essential elements. This is a good start to a successful work!

### **Mind Games!**

While framing a scene you are consciously looking at details that can be left out or moved to aid composition. Nothing too drastic or else you may have a poor scene to begin with. Not every tree must be in a particular place however.

Look for **compositional elements**, which can include:

### 1. The Golden Section:



- the figure has been placed in the golden section.
- the figure is moving towards the picture centre – eye remains in the picture.

The golden section is that natural division of space that is pleasing to the eye. There are scientific explanations for this phenomenon which I will not go into here. The concept is often referred to as the rule of thirds which, although not strictly correct, gives an idea of what we are talking about. A division of the picture that is roughly one third or two thirds into the picture plane.

This is a starting point. It is also a guideline, but a reliable one. It follows that one should in most cases avoid placing the subject of the painting squarely in the middle of the picture. This applies to other divisions such as horizon lines. It is more pleasing to have a dominant part upon which one's eye can settle.

The idea is to use the space provided by dividing it and placing the main subject in a pleasing position within those divisions. Sounds complicated, but is easily understood when paging through art books and looking at the works of master artists.

#### **Keep the eye in the picture!**

It is not enough to put your subject in the golden section. We must also keep the eye away from the corners and edges of the picture. In the above example the figure is walking into the picture and towards the viewer. The figure is not placed close to the left frame thereby taking the eye rapidly out of the picture.

***Instalment #2 next week: Common Composition Errors and how to correct them:***