

Composition: Part 2

Common Errors & Tips to Strengthen Composition:

Composition is one of those areas that seem to be filled with rules. I do not want anyone to paint according to rules. Painting must be enjoyed without angst over rules. So let's talk about compositional guidelines – use them or don't use them, but try to have a reason that works for you.

I like to think of a good composition giving my painting strength while a poor composition will weaken a painting. A painting must have impact and much of this comes from good composition!

Foreground:

Often the foreground comes last in the artist's approach and being satisfied with the main subject in the middle ground somewhere, leaves the foreground undeveloped. Instead look at the foreground as an opportunity to take the eye into the painting. Make use of **perspective lines**, for example, in paths, roads, fence posts, rocks to take the eye into the space. If there is no physical marker present then you may have to look even closer to accentuate textures, colours and values to carry the eye forward. Shadows are excellent for carrying the eye forward to a sunlit portion. Also look at texture and saturated colour in the foreground. Remember that you should also use a larger brush in the foreground and leave the smaller brushstrokes for the middle and background.

Edges:

The four edges of the picture plane should be avoided in most cases. Objects that attract the eye should be kept away from the edge as they drag the viewer's attention out of the picture. It is surprising just how powerful edges and corners can be. Take care when approaching them!

Variety Creates Rhythm:

We like to look at interesting arrangements that have a natural rhythm. That is why, for example three has a better rhythm than two. To add to this problem we sometimes make the shapes the same size and they are equally spaced from each other. However this creates negative energy as there is no flow for the eye to follow. Our eye veers back and forth between these objects. The solution is to vary sizes, for example, trees receding into the distance. If the trees are next to each other then make one dominant in size. Also vary the shapes of the trees, colour and value to create variety.

Spacing:

Following upon the variety idea it is helpful to have receding objects overlap each other to create a more natural flow. Avoid for example, bush–space-bush-space. Rather have them overlap to create a natural rhythm.

Diagonals

I like diagonals. They give energy to a composition where horizontal planes can be too quiet.

Diagonal lines can be seen in the shape of a hill leading from left to right, for example, pulling the eye into the painting before the main focus area. Sometimes a diagonal is suggested by the arrangement of trees or you can see it in a furrow across a field. There are many ways to bring diagonals into a painting, but you may have to balance it out with a vertical to slow the eye down again. Generally diagonals add energy and flow while horizontals and verticals bring calm. Use them all to good effect.

