

# How to Paint

## Course Guidebook

Professor Ricky Allman  
University of Missouri–Kansas City



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Mr. Allman's paintings often appear as landscapes, cityscapes, and psychological landscapes. Utilizing the geographic features from his childhood in the Rocky Mountains, modernist architecture, and gestural abstraction in his work, he presents an indefinite future—a

complicated and frenetic world of colliding forms often in the moment of origination.

Mr. Allman's work has been exhibited internationally in Denmark, England, France, Belgium, Scotland, Morocco, Paraguay, and New Zealand. In the United States, his work has been exhibited in New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, and other cities. Mr. Allman's work has been featured in numerous publications, including the *Los Angeles Times*, *Vice*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Kansas City Star*, *Juxtapoz* magazine, and *Wallpaper\** magazine.

Mr. Allman is the recipient of a UMKC Trustees Faculty Scholar Award, a UMKC Faculty Research Grant, a University of Missouri System Research Board grant, a Charlotte Street Visual Artist Award, and a Studios Inc residency. ●

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## HOW TO PAINT

**H**umans and Neanderthals started painting at least 50,000 years ago. Millions of hands have created millions of paintings since then, and painting remains and thrives as one of the most powerful and popular forms of self-expression. Its power is mysterious but undeniable, and this course hopes to help you feel that power.

This course begins by building foundational skills one on top of the other. The first seven lessons cover fundamentals such as the types of tools you need, color mixing, value, volume, and composition. Once those have been covered, the course looks at a few specific techniques and approaches to make a painting.

Next, the course moves on to strategies for creating convincing details. It provides guidance on how to approach some of the more common subjects you may encounter, such as water, mountains, architecture, portraits, and more.

The final three lessons discuss creative strategies to help you have fun with the new skills you're learning. This course's goal is to make you feel confident and comfortable painting whatever it is you wish to paint, expressing yourself and your ideas in whatever style that speaks to you. ●

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

**T**his guidebook is intended as a companion to the video lessons, which include full demonstrations of each lesson's concepts. The guidebook lessons contain highlights of each lesson's concepts, helpful exercises, and lists of artists whose work may be instructional and inspirational for you. ●

## SUPPLY LIST



### Brushes

- Sable (or synthetic) brushes for softer, smoother strokes.
- Bristle brushes for thick, textured strokes.
- Large house-painting or regular brush for gesso and background work.
- Large, medium, and small flat brushes.
- Large, medium, and small round brushes.
- Fine-detail brush(es).

### Paints (Oil and Acrylic)

- Use acrylic paint in tubes for thick-bodied paint that retains its shape.
- For thinner acrylic paint, use fluid in bottles with higher pigment concentration.

- Oil paint is thick and usually only comes in tubes.
- Below is a list of recommended colors for both oil and acrylic work, but feel free to add all additional colors you like:
  - Carbon black.
  - Titanium white.
  - Cadmium red medium.
  - Cadmium yellow medium.
  - Cadmium orange.
  - Phthalo blue.
  - Sap green.
  - Burnt umber.

### **Miscellaneous Acrylic Supplies**

- Water cups. Use at least two, one for white and one for color. Larger cups that have a wide top and are stable are the best.
- Spray bottle with water to keep acrylics open (wet).
- Rags to clean brushes.
- Gesso. If you paint on unprimed canvas or panel, you will need to apply a few coats of gesso first. Canvas or panel surfaces that come pre-primed are ready to paint on, but you can sometimes add additional gesso for a richer surface.

### **Miscellaneous Oil Supplies**

- Odorless mineral spirits.
- Linseed oil.
- Liquin.
- Containers with lids for each.
- Rubber gloves.

## Painting Surfaces

- Stretched canvas in cotton duck or linen.
- Wood panels. (Masonite, multi-density fiberboard, and birch are common, but any wood can be painted on. Use wood that is at least a quarter of an inch thick to avoid warping.)
- The size of your surface is up to you, but this course's instructor prefers 16 by 20 inches or larger.

## Palettes

- This course recommends a palette at least 12 inches or larger to give you room to mix paints.
- Plastic and paper palettes are good for acrylic.
- Wood and paper palettes are good for oil.

## Sketching Supplies

- A sketchbook that is 10 inches by 12 inches or a similar size.
- A handful of pencils to help plan your compositions.

## Optional Supplies

- Palette knife.
- Easel.
- Clamp lights or other lamps to brighten your work area or light your subject.
- Fan brushes, filbert brushes, bright brushes, and any other brush that looks useful.
- Painter's tape for masking.
- Ruler.
- Sandpaper.
- Acrylic mediums, including gloss gel, matte gel, modeling (or molding) paste, pumice stone, absorbent ground, and polymer medium. Add any other gel mediums that look interesting to you.



01

THE PAINTER'S TOOLKIT

**T**his lesson kicks off the course by discussing how to set yourself up for success as a painter. It covers the following topics:

- Materials.
- Choosing a workspace.
- General shopping tips.
- Shopping for brushes.
- Shopping for paint.
- An exercise to help you develop comfort handling a brush.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

Also take a look at the full supply list, located at the front of this book. This lesson covers some of the materials in that list, providing details on their uses.

## Materials

You don't need expensive paints and brushes to make great art. You can paint on almost any surface you find, including wood, glass, plastic, metal, canvas, or even strange objects you find at a thrift store.

This course focuses on panel and canvas surfaces. As you move through the exercises, experiment with different tools and materials. Find the best ones for you and your style of working. This course will provide advice along the way, but finding your own preferences will free you up to focus on being creative.

## Choosing a Workspace

You don't need an elaborate studio to create a great painting, but you should keep certain factors in mind as you choose your workspace.

An easel is certainly an option, but not necessary. This course's instructor, for example, uses an easel in the video lessons, but he prefers working on the wall in his studio. You just need a sturdy spot to hang or place your canvas. Make sure it is a location you can sit or stand in front of, whichever is most comfortable for you.

You'll also want to choose a space with plenty of light. The more light you have in your studio, the more clearly you'll be able to see your colors. If you don't have a window nearby, a few clamp lights that you can position toward your canvas will do the job. Do keep in mind that artificial lights vary in color, and that will influence how your painting looks.

Also keep flooring in mind. Even if you are careful with your brushstrokes, a dropped brush or palette can stain a floor. Either choose a space with a floor that can be stained, or invest in a drop cloth or tarp.

## **General Shopping Tips**

Once you have your space set up, it's time to do some materials shopping. This can be an overwhelming and expensive experience, but it doesn't have to be. You can find almost everything you need to get started at your local craft store. There is no need to go for the high-end material first. Start simply and see what works for you.

## **Shopping for Brushes**

There are two basic types of paintbrushes: bristle brushes, with thicker hairs that create more textural strokes, and sable brushes, which have finer hairs and make smoother marks. Both types come in natural and synthetic varieties. Synthetic brushes are cheaper, and they're good for both oils and acrylics.

You'll want to get a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Flat brushes are good for straight lines, hard edges, geometric shapes, architecture,



and perspective. Round brushes are good for curvilinear lines, incorporated in clouds, trees, organic shapes, movement, and water.

If you can't commit to either flat or round brushes, Filbert brushes are a mix between the two. They are pinched flat like flat brushes, but have a rounded top.

A good beginner's kit of synthetic brushes should include a variety of rounds and flats in a range of sizes. That will work well getting started.

Two other brush varieties to keep in mind are bright brushes and fan brushes. Bright brushes have short bristles for dabbing paint. Fan brushes are fun for blending, so if you need very soft transitions, you might consider one of these.

There are many other types of brushes, so if you see something that looks interesting to you, give it a try. However, you can make a great painting with a single, cheap brush. In fact, some of the most interesting marks aren't made with brushes. You can use your hand, a credit card, or a plastic bag, among other implements. Try experimenting with the different marks you can make.

## **Shopping for Paint**

Deciding on oil paint, acrylic paint, or watercolor paint depends on what you want to achieve. Acrylic paint is very versatile. Oil paint provides rich, luscious, oily texture and smooth blends. For this course, the instructor recommends getting a set of acrylics in a reasonable color range, and the guidebook also includes a list of oils you'll need for oil projects later in the course.

Watercolor is a different kind of paint than oil or acrylic. Painting with watercolor involves a different approach, different surfaces, and different techniques. Watercolor deserves its own in-depth study, and this course focuses on acrylic and oil paint. However, the course does look at some ways to achieve convincing watercolor effects with acrylic paint.

## **Exercise: Brush Handling and Mark Making**

This lesson's exercise focuses on techniques for handling your brushes and making marks. Follow the steps below to complete it.

1. Prepare a large surface, preferably one you can stand in front of.
2. Practice making large circles with a large brush, using sweeping movements from the shoulder.

3. Practice making medium circles with a medium brush, moving from the elbow.
4. Practice making small circles with a small brush, using the wrist.
5. Repeat the exercise while making horizontal and vertical lines and moving from the shoulder, then the elbow, and then the wrist.

Here are some tips for the exercise:

- Move quickly for more accuracy.
- Practice the motion a few times in front of the canvas before applying the brush.
- Practice this exercise regularly to build muscle memory and confidence.

## **Relevant Artists**

Cecily Brown

Cy Twombly

Joan Mitchell

Jackson Pollock

Mark Rothko



02

**GETTING STARTED: SURFACES  
AND BRUSHWORK**

**T**his lesson covers several topics to help pave the way for successful painting. Those topics are:

- Surfaces.
- Brushwork.
- Blending.
- An exercise involving tree silhouettes to help you learn to work with your brushes.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## Surfaces

When it comes to surfaces, you can paint on almost anything. Good options include wood panels, canvas, and linen.

Panels are hard and can take some roughing up. This course recommends panels that are at least a quarter of an inch thick; thinner ones may warp and bend. The downside of panels is that they become heavy at larger sizes.

Canvas is made of cotton and comes in different thickness measured by weight. Eight, 10, and 12 ounces are common sizes. They are also sold in different textures, from smooth to rough.

Some people prefer the give and stretch of painting made on a stretched canvas, and it can be an especially nice surface when performing soft blending. Many professional artists like to stretch their own canvases, but that's not necessary when you're first learning how to paint. Pre-stretched canvases are readily available at your nearby art store, and they are mass produced in factories, making them cheap.

Though more expensive, linen canvases are great for oil paints. Linen is more durable and has a smooth texture.

When you bring a factory-made canvas home, you'll notice that it is quite stiff and brilliantly white. This is because it has been treated with an application of gesso. Traditionally, gesso is made with chalk, white pigment, and rabbit-skin glue. There are modern water-based substitutes for rabbit-skin glue, but most people now use modern acrylic gesso for oil and acrylic paintings.

Gesso is critical for oil painting because the rabbit-skin glue serves as a barrier between the fibers of the canvas and the oil paint, which contains linolenic acid that will gradually decay the canvas over time. Acrylic paint is not acidic like oil paint is, but you should still use gesso in general. If you don't, the paint will soak right into the canvas and lose its body and vibrancy.

## Brushwork

Much of successful painting relies on your dexterity with a brush. Below are some tips to keep in mind about brushwork:

- Use the best brush for the types of marks you're making. Flat brushes are useful for angles, edges, and geometric marks.
- Round brushes are great for curvilinear lines for use in organic shapes and marks.
- Pulling the paint, rather than stabbing or pushing, with the brush will give you smoother, more predictable results.

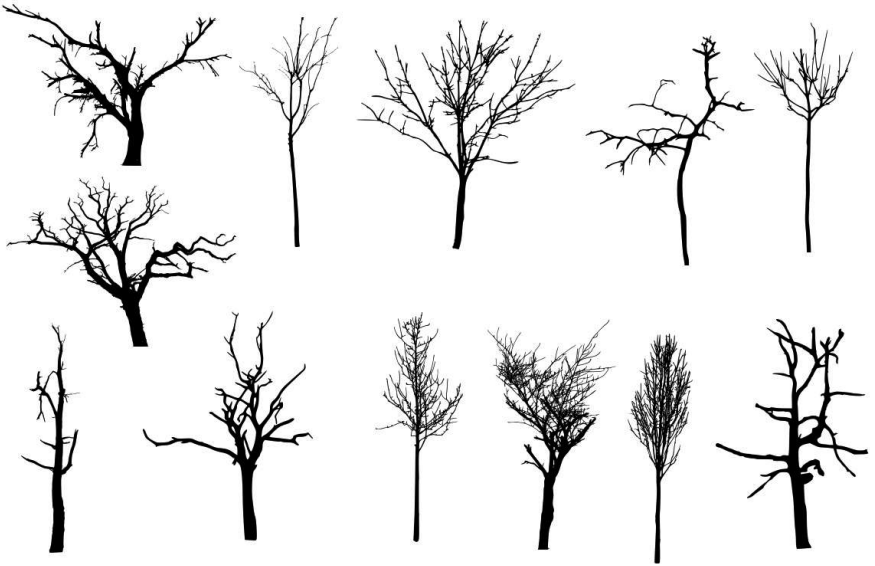
## Exercise: Tree Silhouettes

Using a reference image of tree silhouettes, practice choosing and manipulating your brushes while painting trees. (A reference is provided on the following page, or you can choose your own.)

Experiment with color mixing as you create a gradient background color with a large brush.

Use flat brushes for lines and angles, and round brushes for softer shapes. Try turning and twisting your brush as it moves across the canvas to capture the organic shape of branches. Start with the basic structural elements, moving into more detail with smaller brushes.

## Provided Reference





## Relevant Artists

Inka Essenhigh

John Currin

Philip Guston



03

**FUNDAMENTALS:  
ESTABLISHING VALUE**

**V**alue is a color or hue's darkness or lightness. While understanding color is critical, when it comes to painting, understanding value is more important than color. Value is essential to the way the brain constructs meaning. This lesson covers the subject of value, discussing topics such as:

- Perceiving value.
- An exercise involving gray scales.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## **Perceiving Value**

Color is beautiful, seductive, and often quite loud. According to neurobiologist Margaret Livingstone, the human brain actually has two separate processes for understanding value and understanding color. When a color is very bright or intense, it disrupts the ability to see value.

As a painter, you'll want to have a solid knowledge of value before you begin to work with color. That starts with seeing value in the things you want to paint, which takes practice. Here are some steps you can take in everyday life to work on your ability to perceive value:

- Pay attention to the subtlety of light and shadow that exists all around you. Pay attention to how dark one shadow is next to another.
- Pick a particular shadow and pay attention to its edge. Is it a sharp, crisp, clean edge, or is it fuzzy, blurry, and gradually getting lighter?

- Pay attention to where lights are coming from. What part of an object is closest to the light source?
- Pay attention to the shape of highlights reflected on an object. Can you tell which light source they are reflecting?

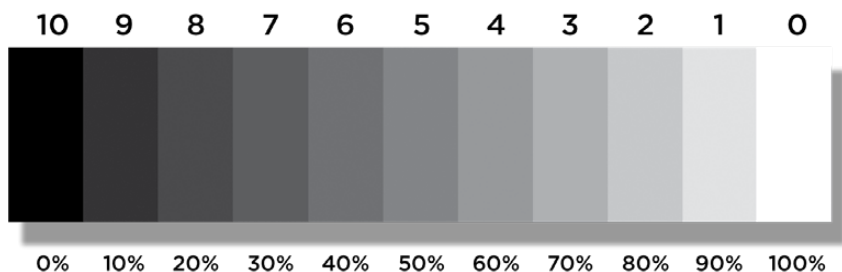
Another way to see values is with a smartphone's camera and photo-editing tools. You can quickly take a picture of something and then desaturate it, changing it to more black and white. This will allow you to instantly see the value differences.

### Exercise: Gray Scales

Gray scales are another helpful tool for understanding value as well as your paint. Most gray scales have 10 steps, though some have more.

Try making a 10-step gray scale of your own, with an equal, 10-percent change between each step. One side will be completely white, the other will be completely black, and in between will be different steps between the two. Different pigments and different brands have different strengths, so it's important to get to know the paints you have. Below is an example of a 10-step gray scale.

#### Gray Scale



Once you get the hang of black and white, try different colors, again using 10 steps from white to the darkest possible version of that color. Leave black out for now. Put color-value scales next to your gray scales to compare for accuracy.

## **Relevant Artists**

Adrian Ghenie

Johannes Vermeer

Tomoo Gokita



04

**FUNDAMENTALS:  
BUILDING VOLUME**

**T**his lesson breaks down and demystifies how to paint something to look three-dimensional—that is, building volume. Sections in this lesson include:

- Understanding light.
- Understanding shadows.
- Practice tips.
- An exercise involving a three-dimensional study.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## **Understanding Light**

To create three-dimensionality, it's important to understand how light hits an object, moves across its surface, and then falls off. The first thing you need to figure out is where your light source is coming from, its angle, and how bright it is. The shape of your light source is also going to affect the highlight.

On a reflective surface, you can see the shape and sometimes the color temperature of the light source, whether it's a window, a lamp, or direct light from the Sun. Knowing your light source will tell you how to paint it.

With a single light source, it is helpful to generalize your object to a light side and a dark side. All objects affected by a single light source will have their light sides on the same side.

## **Understanding Shadows**

There are two basic types of shadows. A shadow on an object is called a form shadow. The shadow cast onto the floor or other objects by an object blocking the light is called a cast shadow.



Remember that shadows are only created by the absence of light. Wherever a source of light is blocked, there will be a shadow.

A form shadow will have a core shadow at its darkest section. A dark middle tone surrounds the core shadow. If an object is on a table, light may bounce off the table and hit the bottom of the object, producing reflected light.

The cast shadow is at its darkest and sharpest nearest the subject. The farther away the shadow is from the subject, the more ambient light begins to lighten the shadow and blur its edge.

It is important to understand the direction of your light source to understand the shadow. If your light source is directly above (such as at high noon), you will have very short shadows. A light source from the side (such as at sunrise and sunset) will give you very long

shadows. Typically, a light source will be at an angle somewhere between overhead and sideways.

Light from below casts shadows upwards onto walls and ceiling. This can often create the most interesting and unexpected shadows.

## **Practice Tips**

Below are some general tips to keep in mind when practicing with light and shadow:

- Round objects have the most complicated highlights and shadows. Geometric objects with flat planes are simpler.
- The plane closest to the light source will be the brightest plane. Each plane will have its own value, with the plane farthest away from the light source being the darkest.
- As you start developing your volume and dimension skills, try using an environment where you can control the light source. Most objects you encounter out in the world will have more than one light source, which creates complicated scenarios. If you can use controlled, dramatic lighting, you will have an easier time starting out. A dark room with a single lamp or flashlight can create deep, dark shadows, which will help clearly define your subjects in three dimensions.

## **Exercise: Three-Dimensional Study**

Set up a simple still life with geometric forms from the craft store, or use a photographic reference of geometric forms. Make sure the forms are lit so that they create a variety of form and cast shadows. Side lighting is best.

After applying your background color, paint a light sketch of your composition on your surface. Paint in the dark values first. Note that the dark values will always be on the side facing away from the light.

Paint in the major light values. Choose a shade that is light relative to the dark values but not at the lightest end of the value scale. You'll want to have lighter options for highlights later.

Paint in the shadows, noting that the darkest value is directly under the object. Add mid-tones to both the forms and the shadows. Add highlights, paying careful attention to reflected lights on the forms.

A helpful tip is this: Define the edges of your objects through value contrasts, not through outlining. Outlining will flatten any three-dimensionality in your painting.

## **Relevant Artists**

John Singer Sargeant

Justin Mortimer

Peter Paul Rubens

Tilo Baumgartel

A top-down view of a paint palette with various colors and brushes. The palette is filled with numerous small circular wells of paint in shades of blue, yellow, red, orange, and brown. Several brushes with red handles are visible, some resting in the paint wells. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a wooden table, with some paint splatters and smudges. The overall composition is vibrant and artistic.

05

**FUNDAMENTALS: BASICS  
OF COLOR THEORY**

**C**olor theory is a deep and interesting topic that could more than fill a course of its own. This lesson focuses on color theory at a very practical level. The more comfortable you are with color and the more experience you have, the more you can explore complex color ideas. This lesson covers:

- The color wheel.
- Color terminology.
- Lightening and darkening colors.
- Hue and mixing colors.
- Exercises involving color scales and a color wheel.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## The Color Wheel

On a typical color wheel, the primary colors are red, yellow, and blue. In paint colors, those are usually referred to as cadmium red medium, cadmium yellow, and ultramarine blue. Those are the closest paint colors to the spectrum hue.

It's a myth that you can mix every color with the primary colors, but you can mix a large number of them. It's important to start with very small dabs of color to see how they mix. As soon as you start mixing them together, you'll get a sense of which one is stronger and which one is weaker. Take a mental note as you continue to mix the desired color.

Most people are familiar with secondary colors. Mixing blue and yellow produces green. Mixing red and yellow produces orange. Mixing red and blue creates purple.

## Color Wheel



Secondary colors can in turn be used to create tertiary colors. With a 12-step color wheel, it is easy to keep track of these most basic colors. Above is a color wheel to show you the relationship between primary, secondary, and tertiary colors.

## Color Terminology

This lesson now turns to other color terms you should be familiar with, starting with analogous and complementary colors. Analogous colors are colors close together on the color wheel. These colors have a natural harmony, as they are similar colors.

Complementary colors are on opposite sides of the color wheel from each other. These are color opposites. You'll notice many complementary combinations used by advertising and sports teams. Complementary colors are bold, with strong contrast.

In addition, color can be described with three attributes:

- Value describes how light or dark the color is. In other words, value is how close a color is to white or black.
- Hue refers to the color's spot around the color wheel. Hue can also relate to how warm or cool a color is.
- Saturation refers to how strong or dull a color is.

Thinking about these attributes can help you when mixing color. When trying to match a color, first decide its hue and its closest match on the color wheel. Then, think about how light it is. Do you need to add white to make its value

Keep in mind that some paint tubes are labeled with their level of opacity. If something is very low opacity, it is more transparent and will not have much tinting strength.

A paint's brand, its type of pigment, and its ingredients can also affect how it mixes. The more you use your paints, the less guesswork there will be, but there will always be some element of guesswork.

a little lighter, or do you need to add blue, black, or its complement to make it darker?

## Lightening and Darkening Colors

Most of the time, adding white is what you need to do to lighten a color. Be careful not to overuse white throughout your painting, though: It can leave your colors looking chalky, dry, and dull. Sometimes yellow will work to lighten a color, particularly orange or green.

When making a color darker, adding black will do the job. As with using white, you need to be careful not to use too much: It can dull your colors and make your colors look flat and less interesting. However, you do have more options. When it comes to darkening, paint is subtractive: The more colors you mix, the darker it gets.

Another consideration is a color's temperature. Ask yourself: Do you need to make it a little warmer with some red, yellow, or orange? Alternatively, do you need to make it a little cooler by mixing in some blue, green, or purple?

## Exercises: Color Scales and a Color Wheel

1. Create value scales by adding white to various colors. Create the same scales by adding yellow and note the differences in warmth and hue.
2. Create value scales by adding black to various colors. Create the same scales by adding dark brown and note the differences in warmth and hue.
3. Create a 12-step color wheel. Start with the primary colors. Then, paint in the secondary colors. Finally, paint in the tertiary colors. Note which colors are complementary or analogous.

4. Try your hand at mixing paints to match a specific color. This is easier said than done, so be patient with yourself.

## **Relevant Artists**

Jen Stark

Jenny Morgan

Nicole Eisenman

A photograph of two artists in a studio. One artist in the foreground is wearing a light-colored shirt and is painting a canvas with a brush. Another artist in the background is wearing a blue shirt and is also painting. The scene is brightly lit, and the focus is on the hands and brushes of the artists. The background is slightly blurred, showing other easels and art supplies.

**06**

**FUNDAMENTALS: CREATING  
COLOR PALETTES**

**G**aining control over your colors is a critical step, especially when you are painting from life and trying to replicate the precise colors you see. This lesson provides some tips to help you create color palettes. Topics in this lesson include:

- Selecting colors.
- Finding inspiration for your color palettes.
- Deciding on ratios of colors.
- An exercise that involves choosing a four-color palette for a painting.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## Selecting Colors

Get in the habit of finding color combinations that you like together. Groups of three, four, or five colors provide plenty of variety for a great palette for a painting. This course recommends keeping your color palette limited. Many of the greatest paintings throughout history don't necessarily use a huge variety of colors. They may be exploring a wide variety of nuance in the value, saturation, and temperature of their colors, but usually, they employ a core group of four to five colors.

A limited palette can look sophisticated and refined, and it will also be more coherent. On the other hand, a painting attempting to use too many colors can appear chaotic, messy, or incomprehensible. (Note that this isn't a hardline rule, but a general guideline. Some excellent paintings make good use of chaotic colors.)



## Finding Inspiration for Your Color Palettes

There are many great places to find inspiration for your color palettes. One is in what you wear. Look at the colors you are wearing right now and your wardrobe in general. These are the color-palette decisions you are making every day. If you like these colors on your body, chances are that you'll like them on your painting.

Nature has been the biggest inspiration for artist's color palettes. Sunset and sunrise are excellent times to find inspiring color. Advertisements can also be an excellent resource for thoughtful and effective color palettes. All great advertisements have had their color palettes thoughtfully developed by experienced eyes. Movies, TV shows, fashion, and interior design are also fantastic areas to find color inspiration.

Color combinations that inspire you and move you are a great choice to use in your paintings. Do not limit yourself to local color—that is, the color of objects as they appear in real life. Remember, in real life, the color of an object is highly dependent on the light surrounding it.

## Deciding on Ratios of Colors

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Once you know the palette you want to use in your painting, you also have to decide on the ratio of the colors you use. When deciding on your ratios, it's helpful to think about the dominant color you want. Sometimes, this will be your background color, or perhaps it will be the color of your main subject. Usually, you will have one color that is used a bit more than the rest.

Keep in mind that color competes for visual attention and can be overwhelming if not used thoughtfully. Too much variety of color in one place can be visual cacophony. Sometimes, that's exactly what you want; however, it can be helpful to restrict the areas in your painting where you want color the most.

One method is to constrain intense color, perhaps to a specific area or an action within your painting. Another method is to scatter color throughout your painting, but only in small bits at a time.

## Exercise: Picking a Four-Color Palette

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Use the provided photograph or one of your choosing as a simple black-and-white reference for a painting. Next, choose a four-color palette that appeals to you to create your painting. Do not let yourself be limited by local color, and try to experiment.

Decide on your color ratios. Ask yourself: Which color do you want to dominate? Which do you want to use bring out smaller details and surprising highlights? Pay special attention to the effects that variations in the value, hue, saturation, and ratio of your four colors have on the mood and impact of your painting.

## **Provided Reference**



## **Relevant Artists**

Dana Schutz

Mickalene Thomas

Pierre Bonnard

The background is a close-up, blue-tinted photograph of a camera lens. The lens elements are visible, showing a series of curved glass surfaces. A prominent white brushstroke, resembling a paintbrush or a stylized graphic element, sweeps across the lower right portion of the image, partially overlapping the lens and the text below.

**07**

**FUNDAMENTALS:  
COMPOSITIONAL CHOICES**

**T**here are countless different ways to compose a painting. This lesson looks at some different strategies and topics relevant to composition, including:

- Central composition.
- The use of hierarchy.
- The golden ratio and rule of thirds.
- The use of the edge of the canvas.
- The use of dynamics, or changes.
- The use of lines.
- Preparation for composition.
- An exercise involving a still-life setup and sketch.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## **Central Composition**

The easiest way to compose a painting is to drop your subject right in the center. This can be boring, but it can also work. If you want to see a great example of the power of central composition, check out the works of Giorgio Morandi. A central composition implies stillness, order, calm, and predictability. If these are the attributes you are seeking, central composition can be a good tool.

## **Hierarchy**

Hierarchy is another useful tool. One of the most straightforward and effective compositional strategies is to make the most important subject the largest, the next most important the next largest, and so on.

Where you place your subjects in the implied space of your painting is another important way to think about hierarchy in your composition. Subjects in front will appear more important than subjects in the back.

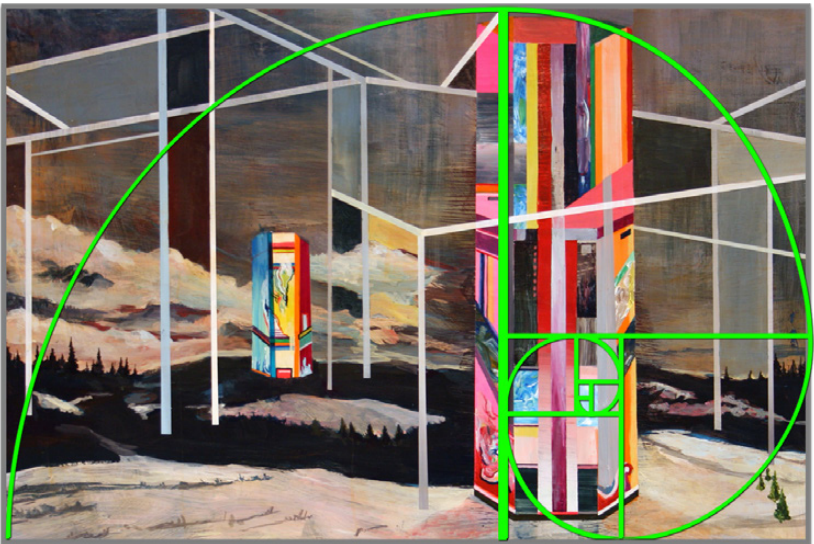
Sometimes a lack of hierarchy can be powerful as well. Jackson Pollock and many of the abstract expressionists used an all-over composition, meaning there is no clear hierarchy.

## The Golden Ratio and Rule of Thirds

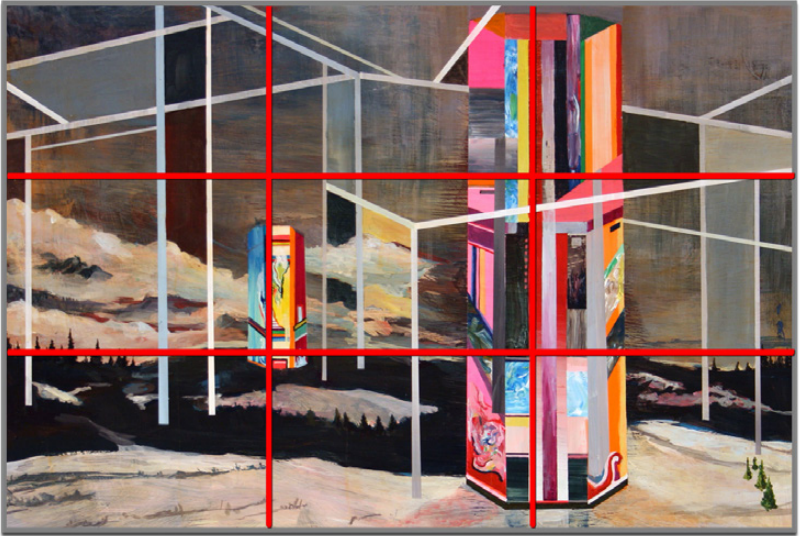
Another set of techniques—the golden ratio and rule of thirds—involve dividing your compositional space and then arranging your composition around certain mathematical proportions that are considered most pleasing to the human eye.

This approach has advantages: It is often stable, more dynamic than a centered composition, and make it easy to balance your subjects.

### Golden Ratio



## Rule of Thirds



However, it's not the right answer for every picture, and it can become a crutch when approaching a composition.

## The Edge of the Canvas

One easily over looked but critical element to your composition is the edge of your canvas, where your painting ends. Think about ways to engage the edges of your canvas. One strategy is to have elements leave the edge and then come back in. This produces an interesting and unexpected element.

## Dynamics

Dynamics are an important factor to consider with your composition. Dynamics, to put it simply, are changes. In a painting, dynamics can be changes in color, contrast, form, composition, or any other element. A dynamic composition has movement from front to back,

up and down, side to side, and so on. It guides the eye to engage with the entire painting instead of resting on one point.

## Lines

When it comes to guiding the eye, another important element to think about is angled lines, horizontal lines, and vertical lines. Angled lines guide the eye forward or back in space. Horizontal and vertical lines, on the other hand, emphasize the X-axis and Y-axis of the painting.

If you are interested in a calm, steady, and flat composition, place your subject in the center with nothing going off the edge. Use horizontal and vertical lines. For a dynamic space with movement, depth and realism, consider using strong angles and a hierarchy of important subjects.

## Preparation for Composition

Drawing and sketching before painting is an excellent, low-pressure way to work through and figure out a composition for your painting. When creating a preparatory sketch, draw a box on your paper that has the same height-to-width ratio as your canvas. If your canvas is relatively wider or taller than your paper's dimensions, you may end up with empty space that you didn't account for.

Once you have a drawing or sketch using the same ratio as your canvas, then block in the essential elements. On your canvas, block in the top of your canvas, the bottom, and the left and right side. The most common approach is to start in the middle and work your way out.

Whether you're working from a photo, still life, or your imagination, you should never take your composition for granted. Your goal is not to perfectly match your reference; rather, your goal is to make an engaging composition that people want to look at.

Get in the habit of comparing and contrasting the elements in your paintings to make sure you stay in control. Ask yourself: How tall is it compared to how wide? What is the distance of this object to another object? Where do the bottoms of your subjects line up with each other?

## **Exercise: Still-Life Setup and Sketch**

Set up a still-life scene considering some of the elements of composition: hierarchy, balance, stability or instability, leading lines, and so on. You can choose traditional still-life objects, like fruit and flowers, or explore items that have personal meaning for you. Try to include a variety of shapes and textures.

Experiment with lighting your still life. Ask yourself: What do different lighting angles add to the composition? Do they add interesting shadows or highlights?

Using a pencil and paper, sketch out the basic elements of your still life from at least three angles: below, above, and from the side. These should be rough compositional sketches.

Consider all of your sketches and choose which view appeals to you most. Transfer your sketch to your prepared painting surface. You will use the sketch and the still life arrangement to complete the exercise in Lesson 11.

## **Relevant Artists**

Al Held

Giorgio Morandi

Julie Mehretu

Sara Sze



08

**PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER:  
A SIMPLE LANDSCAPE**

**P**revious lessons in this course have covered some basic techniques regarding brushes and paints, color and composition, and light and volume. Lesson 8's video provides a four-step roadmap to put all of those into play as you create a full creative piece. This guidebook chapter provides:

- A supply list to help you follow the video lesson.
- An exercise that mimics the steps of the video lesson's demonstration.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## Supply List

The video lesson involves the following supplies:

- A hardboard panel prepared with four coats of gesso. Sand between each layer to create a smooth surface, which should provide a rich painting area.
- Small, medium, and large sets of flat brushes and large brushes.
- A palette knife.
- Two cups of water—one for white paint and one for other colors. Add more cups if you want to keep your colors separate.
- A palette with the colors laid out from light to dark. A warmer and cooler version of your favorite colors should suffice.
- A black-and-white photocopy of a picture of your subject for reference. The video lesson uses a photo of mountains.

## Exercise: Painting a Simple Landscape

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1. Choose a simple landscape reference, or use the one provided on the following page. A clean, simple landscape works best at this stage.
2. Choose your background color. If your palette is mainly cool, perhaps go for something warm. If your palette is mainly warm, try something cool.
3. Sketch out your composition, making sure that your reference is proportional to your painting surface.
4. Block in major values.
5. Lay in mid-tones with medium brushes.
6. Refine the skyline and structural elements. Pay special attention to lights, shadows, and reflections.
7. Add details with your smaller brushes. Incorporate textural elements like leaves, brush, grass, and so on.

This is a helpful tip for the exercise: Avoid uniformity in your colors and values. For example, not every leaf is the same shade of green. Consider adding surprise color choices to the small details to catch and guide the viewer's eye.

## Provided Reference



## Relevant Artists

Georgia O'Keefe

Hyunmee Lee

Rackstraw Downes



09

**CREATING LINEAR  
PERSPECTIVE**

**T**his lesson tackles linear perspective, which is essential for capturing space and scale when portraying architecture. Topics covered in this lesson include:

- Eye level.
- One- and two-point perspective.
- Vanishing points.
- Sighting.
- Vertical lines.
- An exercise involving architectural space.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## **Eye Level**

This lesson's first piece of advice is to know your eye level and always refer to it. Your eye level (also called the horizon line) is simply how many inches or centimeters your eyes are from the ground. Regardless of which way your eyeballs are pointed or your head is tilted, all angles will be based off of your eye level.

Examples of specific eye levels include looking up from the ground or floating above the space. Your eye level will determine the angles at which everything else in your space is portrayed. The farther something is from your eye level, the steeper its angle will be. The closer something is to your eye level, the more horizontal the angle will be.

## **One- and Two-Point Perspective**

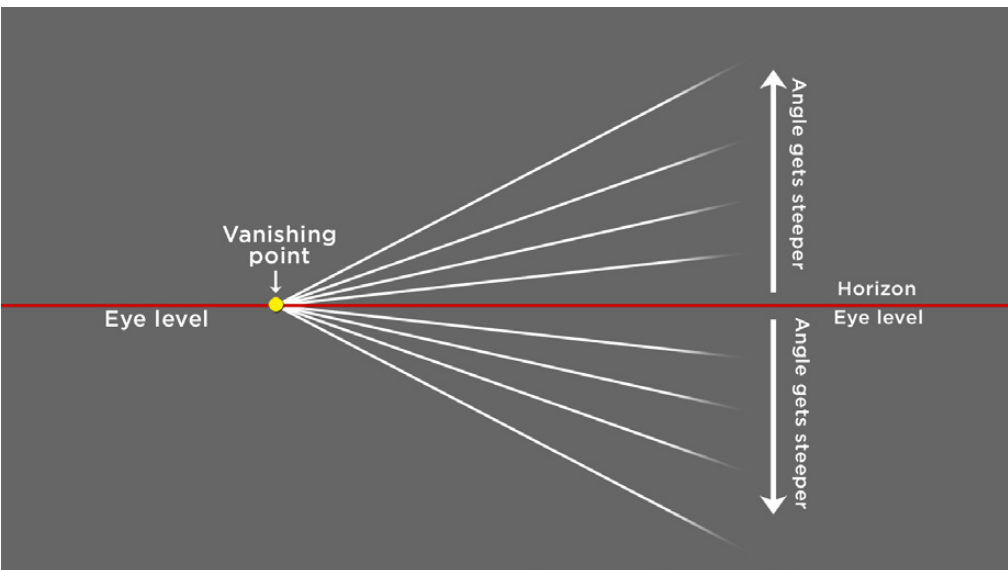
You'll also need to establish whether you have a one- or two-point perspective. If you are looking straight on at an object and can only see the front, and you can't see either side, that is a one-point

perspective. Facing straight at a wall with your gaze perpendicular to the wall also produces a one-point perspective.

If you're looking at the corner of an object so that you can see the right side and the left side, this is a two-point perspective. If you're in a room and you are looking at the corner, this will also produce a two-point perspective.

## Vanishing Points

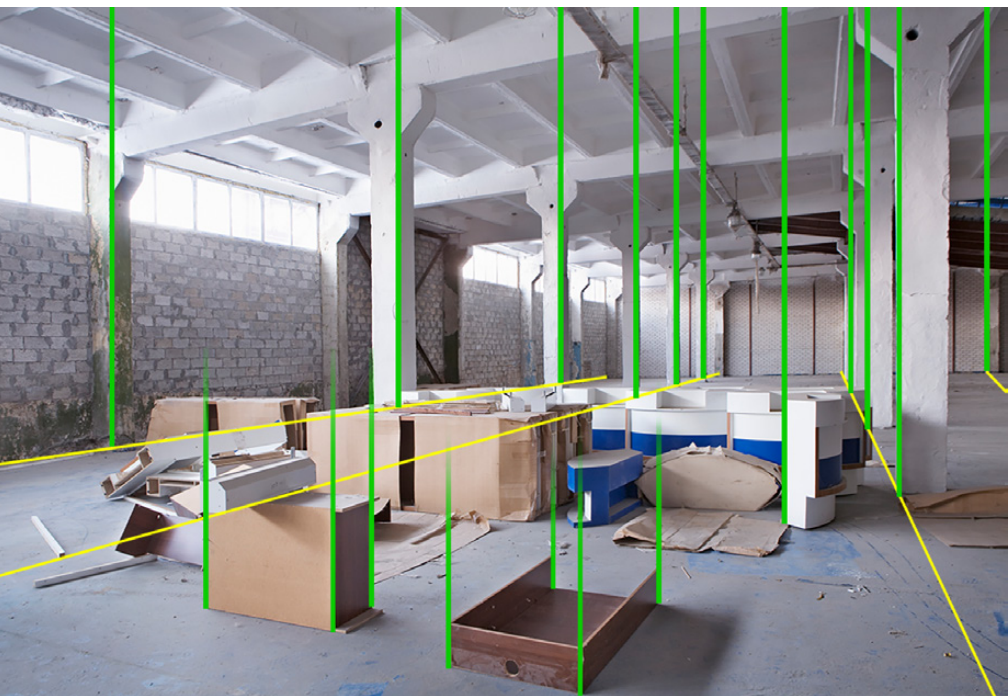
Vanishing points can be very useful, so it's important to understand what they are and how to use them. A vanishing point is always located on your horizon, which is at eye level. Objects on the same plane or parallel to it will share the same vanishing point. Objects that are not parallel will create their own vanishing point, still on your eye level. Vanishing points and vanishing lines are critical to establishing linear perspective.



## Sighting

Once you know your eye level and horizon, you have the baseline from which to establish the angles of all of the other elements of space as they relate to that baseline. Don't worry about exact geometric calculation, because you'll be doing this by sight. Ask yourself: What is the angle of the object to the horizon line?

If you don't trust your eyes, a physical trick can help. Stand in front of the angle you are painting with your canvas directly in front of you. Hold up a pencil along the angle, and then bring your pencil straight down. That is the angle it should be. (To see this in action, refer to the video lesson.)



## Vertical Lines

When working with one- and two-point perspective, everything that is supposed to be straight up and down will stay vertical. Examples of objects with such lines include doorways, the place where two walls meet, pillars, and refrigerators. Even if you don't have a straightedge tool or ruler handy, you can compare your vertical lines to the edge of your canvas.

## Exercise: Architectural Space

Practice establishing eye level and using vanishing points by sketching boxes at eye level, above eye level, and below eye level.

When you feel comfortable with linear perspective, choose an architectural reference that has clean linear elements. There is also one provided on the following page. Before you sketch, establish the perspective of your composition. Is it one-point or two-point? Where is your eye level? Where is your horizon? Where is the vanishing point? Is there more than one?

Use a straight-edge tool to sketch in your major linear elements, using vanishing points and sighting. Check your parallels against the vertical edge of your painting surface. As you paint, use value differences to establish and highlight the linear perspective that you mapped out in the sketching stage.

## Provided Reference



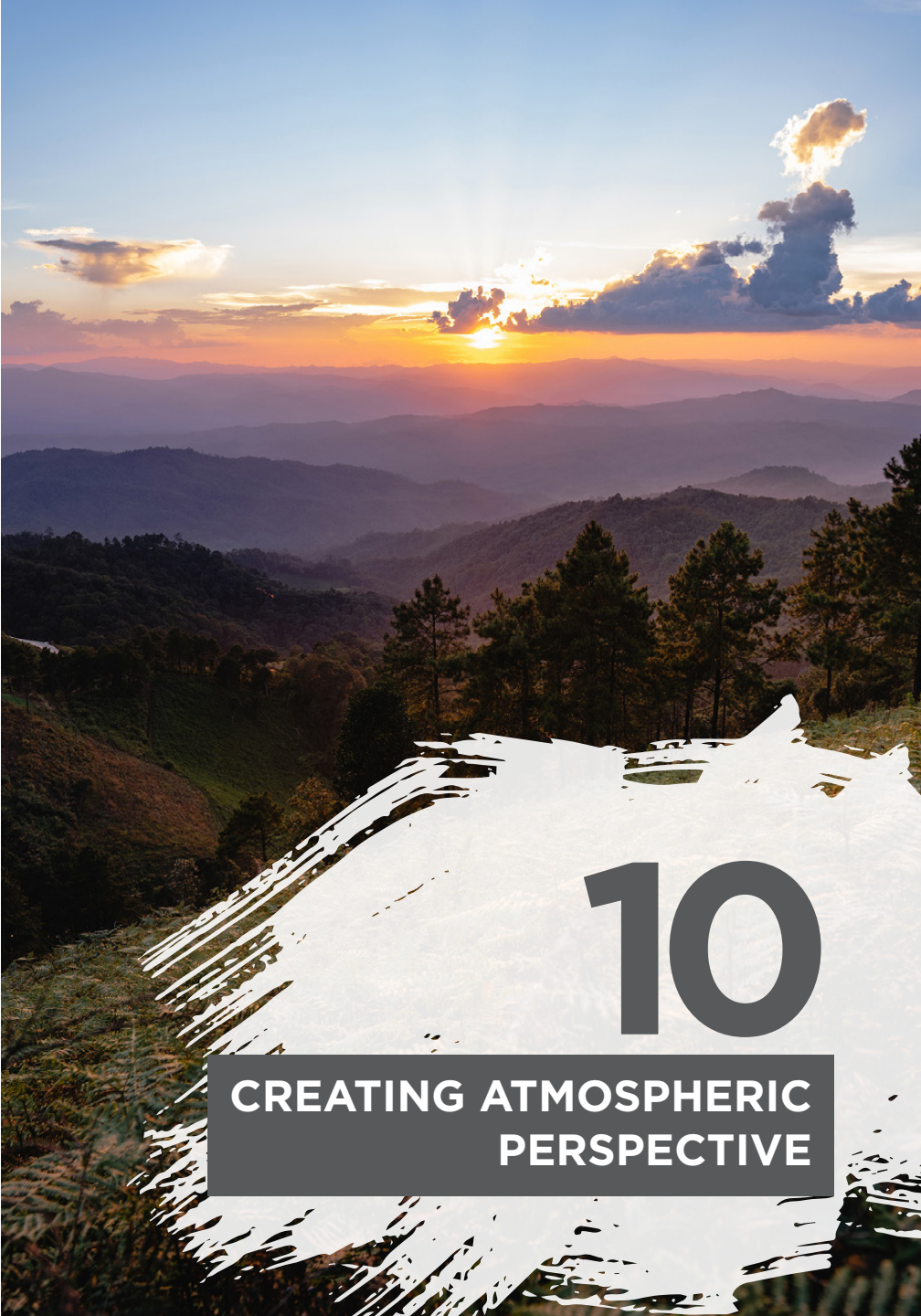
## Relevant Artists

Benjamin Edwards

Corinne Wasmuht

David Schnell

Francesca DiMattio



10

**CREATING ATMOSPHERIC  
PERSPECTIVE**

**T**his lesson looks at how to render faraway objects. The lesson also looks at the importance of using close and middle-distance objects to create contrast. Topics discussed in the lesson include:

- General tips on atmospheric perspective.
- An exercise to help you work on your atmospheric-perspective technique.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## **General Tips on Atmospheric Perspective**

A large part of painting is creating the illusion that a flat canvas is a window into a three-dimensional world. Many times, this involves painting a fairly shallow space using highlight and shadow, such as in a still life or a portrait.

However, not all paintings involve small spaces. Take, for example, painting a mountain landscape. Faraway mountains may appear smoky and hazy due to the influence of atmosphere. How hazy they appear depends on a number of factors, including pollution, smog, haze, and humidity. However, a few general rules are true, no matter what the conditions are:

- The farther away something is, the softer and lighter it will appear.
- Faraway objects will also appear more blue/gray.
- As something like a mountain gets farther away, it will be appear closer and closer to the color of the sky. That is because the sky—or the atmosphere—is in front of the mountain.

## Exercise: Atmospheric Perspective

Scenes with layers of mountains and hills are great practice for atmospheric perspective. Use the provided reference or choose your own featuring those elements, and then create a painting.

In general, elements in the distance are lighter and cooler than elements in the foreground. Use differences in value and hue to build a sense of depth and space.

If desired, use a wash of white mixed with water to reinforce the hazy sense of atmosphere in your distant elements. Make sure all of your layers are completely dry before you do this.

Add detail to the foreground elements to heighten the contrast between near space and far space.

## Provided Reference



## **Relevant Artists**

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Albert Bierstadt

J. M. W. Turner

Kim Keever

Lisa Yuskavage



11

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER:  
A STILL LIFE

**S**till-life painting is one of the best ways to hone your skills by painting from observation. It can also be a great template to try out your ideas on. To get you started with still-life painting, this lesson covers topics such as:

- Still-life paintings as metaphors.
- Colors and value.
- Details and viewing distances.
- An exercise to help you with still-life paintings, picking up from the end of Lesson 7's exercise.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## **Still-Life Paintings as Metaphors**

Still-life setups can be highly metaphorical. They don't have to be, but if you're going to be painting an object that looks interesting, you might as well give it an interesting meaning too.

Any object you pick is going to have different associations. When you paint it, the object is going to make people try to think about what it represents. Consider the potential variety of meanings people might see in your object. Ask yourself: Is it communicating the message you want to communicate?

## **Colors and Value**

When planning colors in a still-life painting, it might be tempting to paint the main color as the background color. Instead, try picking something on the other side of the color wheel. A complementary color will hopefully sit behind and shine through to give the overall colors more depth and richness.

For the rest of the painting, keep these questions in mind: Is the light you have in mind warm and yellow or orange? Alternatively, is it cool and bluish or green, or a different type of light entirely? It is OK to change your mind about a color. With care, you can paint over the old color.

Color is quite flexible: You can get a wide range of colors to work. It is more critical to correctly reflect value—that is, how light or dark an area is. Try breaking your painting down into medium-size areas and paying attention to the value shapes within those areas. Painting a handful of simple geometric shapes—such as triangles, ovals, and rectangles—is less daunting than painting an entire flower, nose, or bottle.

## **Details and Viewing Distance**

Details are a feature with which you can have fun. Try using a wide variety of colors and marks, which can give the painting more energy, movement, or sparkle. To keep such details from becoming a distraction, try to stay within the value and size of the area you're painting.

Think about how your painting will look from a variety of viewing distances. Some works are meant to be seen from a specific distance, but it is possible to make a painting that is noticeable from different distances.

Ask yourself: How does the painting look from afar? From across the room, is it noticeable, or is it washed out? You can approach your painting with the goal of making it eye-catching to viewers from far away while having more details that become apparent as viewers approach. It can be rewarding for viewers to discover more information as they move closer to the painting.

## **Exercise: Still-Life Painting, Continued**

Return to the sketched canvas and still-life setup you created in Lesson 7. Make sure the still-life tableau is optimally lit for the mood you are seeking. Do you want strong shadows or a scene with less dramatic contrast?

Position yourself at the same angle from which you selected your composition in Lesson 7. Using your skills from the previous lessons, block in major dark, light, and medium values.

Think compositionally while making your color and detail choices. Focus your efforts on where you want to direct the viewers' attention.

You can be strictly representational in this exercise, but if you feel inspired to take certain elements in different directions as you paint, do so.

### **Relevant Artists**

Amy Bennett

Cindy Wright

Jonathan Chapline

Robert Minervini



**12**

**WORKING WITH OILS**



Oil paint can be used to produce a traditionally luscious, oily, and luminous painting. Oil's greatest strength and challenge is that it dries slowly, making it ideal for gradual blends and soft transitions. Oil paint is a beautiful and challenging medium, and it is the focus of this lecture, which includes the following contents:

- Safety tips for oil paint.
- Materials for oil painting.
- General tips for oil painting.
- An exercise related to oil painting.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## **Safety Tips for Oil Paint**

Before you using oil paint, it's important to take some steps to protect your health. Oil paint is somewhat toxic. Mineral spirits—used as a thinning agent and for cleaning brushes—are also toxic. Both oil paint and mineral spirits are both highly flammable.

Make sure you have good ventilation. Open a window if you can. Avoid eating near your paints, as your food will act like a sponge and absorb harmful chemicals.

Always keep a lid on your mineral spirits—they evaporate quickly and can head for your lungs. Avoid too much contact with your skin. Latex gloves can be helpful to keep your skin safe.

Don't merely bunch up your paint rags and throw them away. They are volatile and combustible. Linseed oil heats up as it dries, or oxidizes. It takes very little to set it off. Hang your rags up to air them out, or get a metal bin with a lid for when you're ready to throw them away.

Once your mineral spirits are used up, don't pour them in the garbage or down the drain. Collect what you use in a larger container, and when it's full, take it to a hazardous-waste disposal site.

Don't smoke or have an open flame anywhere near your paints and supplies.

## Materials for Oil Painting

When it comes to oil paints, linseed oil is the most commonly used. Linseed, also called flaxseed oil, is a hardening oil. Linseed oil becomes heavier as it dries. Adding more linseed oil to your paint will help to improve its flow and viscosity, and will also increase its drying time. However, it is yellow, so it will be noticeable if you add too much to white or very light colors.

Stand oil is linseed oil that has been heated up to a certain temperature to alter its drying properties. Stand oil will dry more flexibly than regular linseed oil. It's more concentrated, so you can use less. It is more translucent than linseed oil and can also level out your brush strokes, giving your painting a glossier appearance.

Oil paint comes out of the tube quite thick. A common practice is to thin it down to lower its viscosity and produce more coverage. For your thinning agent and to clean your brushes, you need mineral spirits. Mineral spirits are derived from petroleum.

Mixing mineral spirits with your paint will make them much thinner, dry more quickly, and leave them looking dryer on your canvas.

## General Tips for Oil Painting

When you start painting, use very thin layers. This will help your layers to dry faster, but more importantly, this will prevent cracking. Oil paint can take weeks, months, or even years to fully dry depending on how thick it is. You don't want to trap a thick layer of wet paint



under a thin layer that's already dry. Use more mineral spirits for your first few layers and gradually reduce the amount for each layer.

Liquin also comes in handy. It will speed up the drying time of your paint, and it dries transparently, so it won't affect your paint color.

As you work, you will notice that oil painting has a slower pace that makes for a very different painting experience than acrylics. Pay attention to how this affects your creative process: Where does your artistic mind go when you are forced to slow down?

### **Exercise: Still Life with Oils**

Using your own reference or the one provided, create a simple still-life painting using oil paint. Practice safety precautions. Provide good ventilation, and store and dispose of materials properly.

Experiment with adding mediums to your oil paints, such as linseed oil, mineral spirits, stand oil, and liquin.

Allow for ample drying time between layers. This can often take three to four days. Notice how oil's slow drying time allows for softer blending.

## Provided Reference



## Relevant Artists

Allison Schulnik

Peter Doig

Richard Patterson



13

TRADITIONAL OIL  
TECHNIQUES: GRISAILLE

**T**his lesson covers a technique called grisaille, which has been used by oil painters for centuries. Topics discussed in this lecture include:

- Background on grisaille.
- An exercise involving traditional grisaille work.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## **Background on Grisaille**

Grisaille painting is an underpainting technique using a range of grays from black to white to establish values as a foundation. Think of the underpainting as a black-and-white photo. Adding color to the painting is somewhat like hand coloring a black-and-white photo.

A traditional grisaille painting shows how critical value is to the painting process. The term *grisaille* comes from the French word for *gray*, meaning the whole painting is painted in shades of gray. Many artists also use brown, which is called brunaille. An artist using all green would produce a painting in the verdaille style.

A grisaille can be made as a standalone, monochromatic painting. It can be done as a study for a larger work, or it can form an underpainting for glazing layers of color, which is the technique covered in the video lesson.

Even though grisaille has traditionally been used with oil painting, it can also be applied to acrylic painting.

## **Exercise: Traditional Grisaille Work**

The exercise takes advantage of oil's lustrous properties by establishing value in the underpainting stage and then using translucent layers of

colors to create a rich, luminous piece. Keep in mind that this exercise will take several days, perhaps even weeks, to complete. Use the provided reference or one of your choosing, and use the necessary safety precautions for oil painting.

Start with a warm background and sketch in your composition. Using a palette of mainly black and white and your knowledge of mixing value scales, block in your dark values with a large brush. Add major light values with a large brush. Using a medium brush, add the mid-tones. Add details with a smaller brush and tighten up the values if needed. Notice the blending that happens with oils.

Allow the underpainting to dry completely (over the course of several days). Apply your color glazes using paint mixed with stand oil and/or linseed oil to create a slightly translucent medium. The underpainted values should show through the color.

### **Provided Reference**



## Relevant Artists

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Michaël Borremans

Paco Pomet

Shi Xinning

A close-up photograph of various acrylic paint tubes and a palette. In the foreground, a yellow tube is being squeezed, with paint being applied to a white palette. In the background, there is a red tube, a white cap, and a small white cup containing green paint. The background is a warm, orange-brown color.

**14**

**WORKING WITH ACRYLICS**

**T**his lesson looks at the qualities of acrylic paint. Topics in this lesson include:

- The properties of acrylic paint.
- Ways to manipulate acrylic paint.
- An exercise to help you work with acrylic paint, which will continue in Lesson 15.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## **The Properties of Acrylic Paint**

Acrylic paint is a synthetic improvement from oil paint in that it is nontoxic, flexible, durable, bright, and versatile. When it dries, it is waterproof and will not rot, discolor, or crack. The downside is that it is harder to blend. Additionally, it can look like plastic, but there are dozens of mediums you can mix with acrylic paint to make it look like oil, watercolor, or a wide variety of other surface textures and appearances.

Acrylic is a great choice for the amateur painter because it doesn't carry the safety concerns that oil paint does. The paint itself is not acidic, and there is no need for mineral spirits to thin the paint and clean. However, you should put as much care into the storage and disposal of your acrylic materials as you do with your oil materials.

Because of its synthetic ingredients, acrylic paint behaves somewhat differently than oil paint. Its fast drying time can be frustrating when trying to blend. However, there are ways around that, such as adding slow-drying and glazing mediums to your paint that will keep your paint wet and able to be blended for longer.

A spray bottle is absolutely necessary with acrylics. Within 15 minutes or less, a skin will start to develop over your paints as they start drying out. Every 10 minutes or so, give them a quick spray to keep them going.

## **Manipulating Acrylic Paint**

This lesson now turns to a few basic, useful mediums that you can use to alter the appearance of acrylic paint.

Gel medium is a standard medium for acrylic paint. Essentially, it is clear acrylic paint. It comes in matte, satin, and gloss varieties, and it gives more body to your paint. You can use it under your paint, mixed in with your paint, or on top of your paint. However, if you put a large amount of it on top, it could cause yellowing if you don't prepare your surface properly. Gesso isn't enough to prevent yellowing, so you need to use sizing on your canvas to create a barrier.

Mixing in clear gel with your paint will increase its transparency. If you want to paint a semi-transparent glaze to layer your colors, mixing your paint with gel medium is a nice way to reduce your opacity. Using water is fine as well, but it will give your paint a thinner and drier appearance. Using gel medium will help keep your surface more rich and thick.

If you find that your paint is drying too quickly and that you need some more blending time, slow-drying mediums may be helpful. Be careful, however, as some may slow your drying time by too much.

Acrylic paint makes it easy to mask off areas with a stencil or tape. This is especially useful for straight lines, geometric shapes, architecture, stripes, or anything else that needs a crisp edge. This course recommends blue painter's tape for masking, as it won't leave

any sticky residue and is fairly gentle with surfaces. Unless your surface is very smooth, some paint may bleed under the edge of the tape. Because of this, seal the edge of the tape with a thin layer of gel medium to ensure a clean edge.

## **Exercise: Acrylic Experimentation, Part 1**

This exercise begins an exploration of more advanced acrylic techniques. The same painting will continue in the next lesson's exercise.

Use the provided reference (on the following page) or choose your own. It should have strong linear perspective. Experiment with adding texture to your background. Apply layers of color washes and use rags or sanding (if you're painting on panel) to add additional interest.

After the background is established, use painter's tape to mark off your major linear elements. Remember the rules of linear perspective as you establish your figures. Sighting can be particularly useful. Seal the edges of the tape thoroughly with gel medium and allow it to dry.

Painting inside the tape, block in the major and medium values of your linear figures. Carefully remove tape to reveal your edges.

Add general values to the rest of your canvas. Return to your painting for Lesson 15's exercise.

## Provided Reference

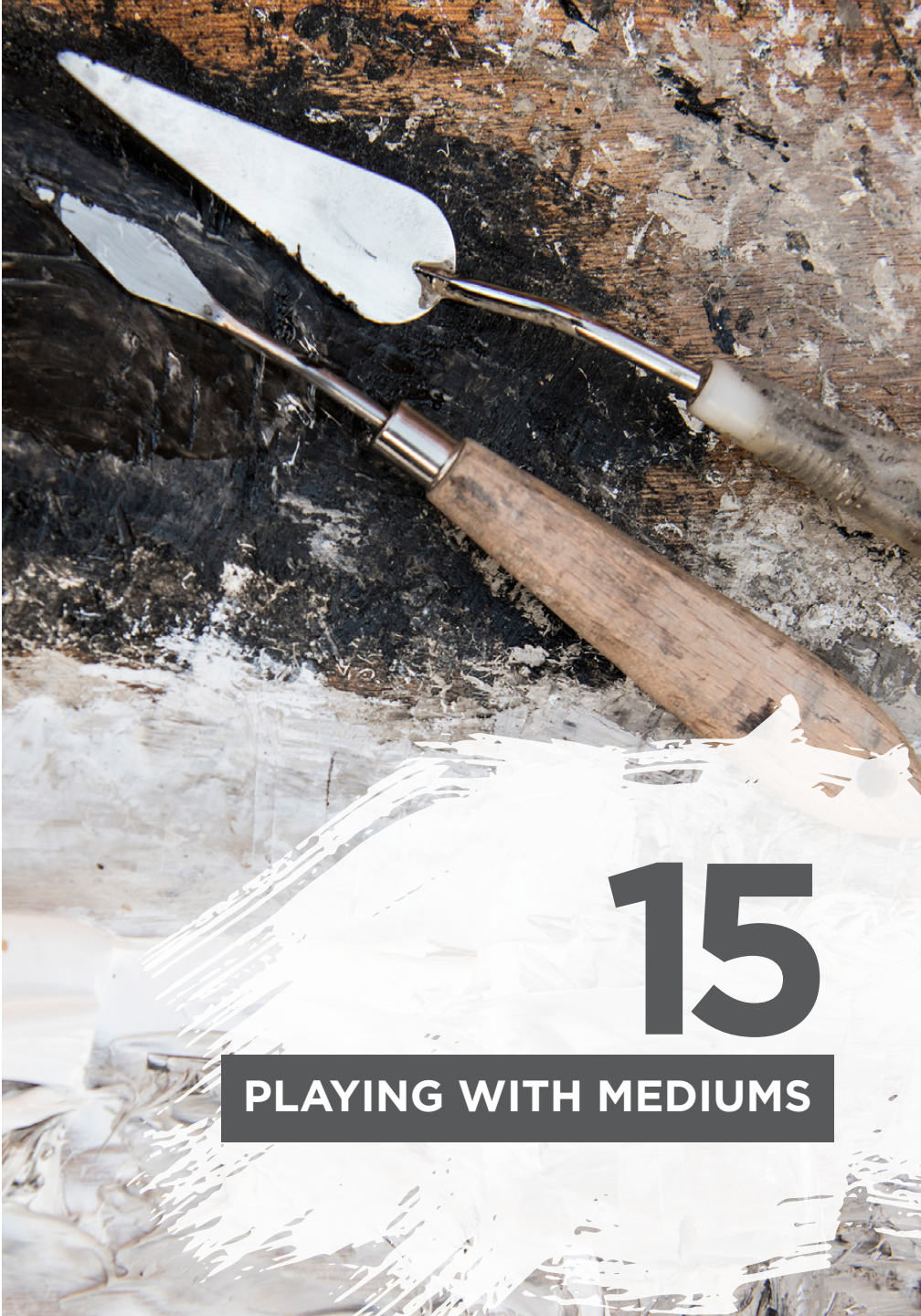


## Relevant Artists

Allison Zuckerman

I Nyoman Masriadi

Kerry James Marshall



# 15

PLAYING WITH MEDIUMS

**T**his lesson continues the course's discussion of acrylic paint. Specifically, it focuses more in depth on how you can use different mediums to alter the behavior of acrylic paint. Topics in this lesson include:

- Ways to use acrylic mediums.
- Using slow-drying medium.
- Using absorbent ground.
- Using gloss gel.
- Using modeling paste.
- Using pumice stone.
- An exercise that continues Lesson 14's exercise's experimentation with acrylics.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## Ways to Use Acrylic Mediums

There are three basic ways acrylic mediums can be used. The first is as a ground to be placed on your canvas, such as clear gesso, absorbent ground, pumice stone, gel medium, and many others.

The second way is to mix them with your acrylics. If you want your paint to have more body, more translucency, or more grittiness, there are a wide variety of options you can mix in.

The third way to use acrylic mediums is on top of your painting. Examples of this include adding a varnish effect, a haze effect, or a frosted window.

## Using Slow-Drying Mediums

The most common complaint about acrylic paint is that it is difficult to blend while it quickly dries. If you want to achieve smooth, gradual transitions and gradients, you'll want to use a slow-drying medium. Examples include retarder or open mediums, which can keep the paint open and able to be blended for longer. Be careful not to use too much, as it may take very long to dry. This course recommends not exceeding a 1:1 ratio.

## Using Absorbent Ground

Using an absorbent ground medium as the base of your painting can help you achieve a convincing watercolor appearance. Watering your acrylic paint down to be very thin is the best way to utilize this effect.

Absorbent ground has extra absorbing properties, such as chalk or marble dust. If you put it on too thin, you probably won't notice much. However, be careful, and apply several thin layers. Applying one thick layer may lead to cracking. Once your absorbent ground surface is dry, you will have a great surface to paint on.

## Using Gloss Gel

There are a number of mediums that you can mix into your paint to give it a glossier sheen. You can paint gloss over the top like a varnish. When using a gloss gel medium, keep in mind that brush marks left in the gel will reduce its sheen.

If you are looking for more gloss, glossy polymers and resins can provide a glossier, industrial sheen. These polymers tend to be self-leveling, meaning the brush strokes will even out as it dries, giving it a smoother and therefore shinier surface.

## Using Modeling Paste

Modeling paste is a semitransparent medium designed to let you build up thickness and texture. It comes in two varieties. Light molding paste has air in it. This variety is much lighter in weight and has a slightly uneven texture. Regular molding paste is heavier and smoother.

If you want a very thick, textured surface to work on, regular molding paste is a great choice. If you are using a large amount of paste, or if your painting is large and you are worried about it getting too heavy, then light modeling paste is recommended.

Another use for modeling paste is on the surface. It dries with a frosty, semitransparent look, making it a perfect choice to create the appearance of frosted glass.

## Using Pumice Stone

Pumice stone is an interesting medium. When mixed in with your paint, it can give a thick, gritty, opaque look. On its own, pumice stone gives a gray, concrete-like surface. It dries roughly, and sandpaper can be used to smooth it down, which makes painting on it much easier.

## Exercise: Acrylic Experimentation, Part 2

Before continuing with the painting you began in Lesson 14's exercise, play around with various mediums and get to know how they behave. Consider which ones might be useful for your current project.

Experiment with interesting mediums as you finish the painting. Would pumice be useful? Molding paste? Gloss medium?

## Relevant Artists

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Martin Kobe

Takashi Murakami

Tauba Auerbach



**16**

**PAINTING WATER  
AND CLOUDS**

**N**atural subjects can be very tricky because they are so familiar, yet each one is unique: No two clouds or rivers are the same. This lesson aims to help you paint convincing natural subjects while also giving you the ability to bend them to your imagination. Topics in this lesson include:

- Painting clouds and liquid water.
- An exercise involving water and clouds.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## Painting Clouds and Liquid Water

Clouds and liquid water are challenging subjects because they are ephemeral and ethereal. Sometimes they are transparent and sometimes they are opaque, but they are usually a combination of both. Additionally, they don't stay put. Clouds are constantly moving and changing shape. Rivers and oceans are also in a constant state of flux.

Here are some tips to keep in mind when painting clouds:

- Focus on the values of the highlights and shadows, and the direction from which the cloud is being lit. Usually, clouds are lit from above by the Sun.
- After you determine where the cloud is being lit from, you can start to see where the cloud has volume. Ask yourself: Do you see rounded, three-dimensional forms, or is it stretched thin and somewhat transparent? Is it thick and bulbous, with each round fluff having its own light side and dark side?
- Clouds are usually white, although fuller ones can become gray. Once the Sun starts to get low in the sky, you'll start to

see warm oranges, reds, and purples reflected on the clouds.

Here are some tips to keep in mind when painting liquid water:

- In its liquid form, water can take different appearances. Sometimes, water appears completely invisible; sometimes, it's green and murky; and sometimes, it's deep, dark blue and opaque. There is no single way to paint water.
- Look for darker and lighter areas of the water. Pay attention to see if there is a gradient in between the two areas.
- Think of waves and ripples as three-dimensional hills. They will have a light side and a dark side.
- When it comes to highlights, be careful not to overuse white. Reserve pure white for the brightest highlights and use lighter blues for the other highlights.

## **Exercise: Water and Clouds Study**

Use the provided reference (on the following page) or choose your own—one that presents an interesting but straightforward treatment of clouds and water. Consider a warm background color to complement the cooler tones of sky and water.

Sketch in major elements of horizon, clouds, and reflection. Don't get too detailed at this point.

Avoid pure whites, as those rarely occur in nature. Think in terms of value.

Using a medium brush and dark value, paint in the shadow side of the ridges in the water. Don't be too homogenous with your brush strokes.

Add highlights to the ripples using a medium value. Don't go too light.

Use a medium flat brush to define the wispy edges of your clouds. Add shadows to the clouds using a medium value.

Add cloud reflections, noting that reflections are generally darker in value than what they are reflecting. Finally, add details as desired with fine brushes.

## Provided Reference



## Relevant Artists

Gordon Cheung

Vija Clemens

Will Cotton



17

**PAINTING TREES AND BARK**

**T**his lesson focuses on painting trees, their bark, and leaves. It provides strategies to simplify the process and hopefully make painting these natural subjects a bit more accessible. Topics in this lesson include:

- An overview on painting trees.
- Painting tree trunks.
- Painting branches.
- Painting leaves.
- Painting bark.
- Painting details.
- Painting smaller plants.
- An exercise to help you paint trees.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## Overview on Painting Trees

Trees provide a wonderful opportunity for expression in your paintings because they offer such variety and uniqueness of form. Trees have different shapes, different bark, different colors, and different types of branches. You can take advantage of this variety to create natural compositions that convey whatever meaning or mood you choose.

To learn how to paint a tree, try working from a reference photo. Block in the major areas first, and then focus on the tree's different parts.

## Painting Tree Trunks

Tree trunks are mostly round. Pay attention to volume, even though you will eventually be doing some detail. Start with the shape.

Remember that trees almost always start out thick and gradually get narrower the farther they get from the base. The same applies to the trunk as well as each branch.

## **Painting Branches**

Branch styles vary from tree to tree. Some branches start low on the trunk, while some don't start until the top. Also keep in mind that many trees in towns and cities have been pruned to achieve a specific look.

It is helpful to find some good examples of the type of tree you are trying to paint. Looking at many different examples of the same type of tree will help you narrow down the core similarities that each tree shares. There will be unique features on each tree, but pay attention to the features they all have in common.

## **Painting Leaves**

When it comes to leaves, focus on the overall shape that they make. If you treat large bunches of leaves and branches as a single object with a light side, a dark side, and some texture, the process becomes easier.

Use a variety of greens, yellows, and blues for rich, full trees. Depending on the light or time of the year, you might need some warm tones in the leaves as well.

Once the shapes of your leaves are blocked in, you can add some specifics. Rather than trying to paint every single leaf, get an idea of the contour the leaves have and suggest that around the edges. Depending on how close the tree is, you might suggest a few specific leaf shapes.

## **Painting Bark**

When you begin working on the tree's bark, first establish the form. One approach is to paint a strong light side, a strong dark side, and some mid-tones.

Look for any big bumps or knots in the tree. Treat these as individual forms as well, with a light side and a dark side.

## **Painting Details**

Once the structure of the tree is complete, add some detail. Gray is very useful for this step, but you can also sneak in some other colors for the details. Pay attention to the types of shapes the bark makes. For example, it might have round patch marks or long rectangular marks. Draw in some of these shapes every now and then to suggest that this is happening all over the tree.

## **Painting Smaller Plants**

If you follow the same principles as you do for leaves and trees, most plants shouldn't be too difficult. Find the overall shape of the plant, looking at the width of the stalks compared to its leaves or flowers. Look at the general angles and curves, and get familiar with the features of the plant. Block in the major values and mid-tones, work in some of the specifics and details associated with this plant, and let the viewers mind fill in the rest of the details.

## **Exercise: Woodland Study**

Choose a reference that presents a variety of trees at various distances. Consider using several references to create your own composition. Two are provided at the end of this exercise.

Using a flat brush, establish the structural elements of your trees. Twisting the brush and varying the pressure can create a more organic shape.

Add finer details to your trees, remembering to choose values based on your light source and direction, and to vary the colors slightly to capture the natural diversity of hue. Keep in mind that you are

suggesting the general characteristics of the leaves and needles, not trying to portray every one individually.

Use atmospheric perspective to convey space. Focus your attention to detail on the foreground.

Consider using paint pens to fill in the minute details of bark and branches.

## Provided Reference





## **Relevant Artists**

Albrecht Dürer

Julie Heffernan

Paul Wackers



**18**

**PAINTING ROCKS  
AND MOUNTAINS**

The previous two lessons covered painting water, clouds, trees, and bark. This lesson concludes the natural-world section of the course by covering the following topics:

- Painting rocks.
- Painting hills.
- Painting mountains.
- A helpful exercise for painting a rocky landscape.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## Painting Rocks

Rocks can be more complicated than they seem. The closer you look at one, the more detail you can see. It isn't possible to capture 100 percent of a rock's detail and history in a painting, but you can try to do it justice.

An average rock is gray or brownish in appearance. Usually, this is due to the dozens of colors and textures speckled throughout. Instead of reaching for black, white, and brown, chromatic grays can be useful for capturing the color of a rock. Chromatic grays are produced when you use colors to make gray rather than black and white.

Theoretically, when you mix two complementary colors together, gray should be produced somewhere. If you can't get gray out of your colors, feel free to add some black or white to help the process along. Chromatic grays can be used to block in the light side and dark side of the rock. After that, block in the middle tones.

As for the shape of the rock, consider whether it is round, jagged, or somewhere in between. A flat brush is useful for sharp-edged rocks, while a round brush works for smoother rocks. When the bulk of your

rock is painted, a small detail brush can be used for finishing touches like blotches and streaks.

## Painting Hills

For the purposes of painting, hills have many similarities to rocks, although they tend to be softer, rounder, and sometimes covered in grass or other vegetation.

When painting hills, utilize atmospheric perspective. Don't paint every hill with the exact same color and value; otherwise, they will all look like they are on the same plane and will flatten out.

Start by establishing your light source. Block in your areas of light and shadow, and then the mid-tones. Paint the closer hills a bit more vividly, with more detail and higher contrast overall. Make hills that are farther away lighter, with less saturation and detail. Let some of the atmosphere be seen in front of those hills.

## Painting Mountains

For painting, mountains are an incredibly useful spatial tool to suggest a massive scale or miles and miles of space. Seen from above, mountain ranges often look like rivers, with a main body meandering across the landscape, with veins or ridges branching off either side of the main range. Each branch also branches off to smaller ridges as the mountain gets closer and closer to level ground.

From below, they look quite different. Viewers can't see the overall structure, but they can see the ridgeline at the top and a few ridges coming down off the face. Below are some tips for painting a mountain from a straightforward perspective.

- Paint the ridgeline along the horizon first. Newer mountains, like the Tetons, will be more sharp and jagged. Older mountains, which have been worn away, will be more round and smooth.

- After painting the main ridge, block in the side ridges coming down. Each one will have a light side and a dark side. The sharper the ridge, the higher the contrast between light and dark. A rounded ridge will have a gradual shadow that fades to light.
- Once you have the shape, form, and volume of the mountains, you can start to focus on the details. Ask yourself: Is there a timberline? Do you see forest on the bottom? How much detail can you actually see from your point of view? If you make trees too large or defined, it will make your mountain look much smaller than it actually is. Use a small brush for detail.
- Keep lighting in mind. Mountains at midday are very difficult to paint because the full light source erases all the defining shadows. Late afternoon and early evening are easier times to depict.

## **Exercise: A Rocky Landscape**

Use the provided reference (on the following page) or choose one of your own that provides an interesting variety of rocks. Instead of using black and white or reaching for the tube of gray paint, practice mixing chromatic grays from various colors.

Considering the light source, use various values of chromatic grays to establish shadows and highlights. Look carefully at your reference and at real rocks to note the variety of colors they contain. Rarely is a rock purely gray. Feel free to use some vivid colors in the details to convey that variety.

## Provided Reference



## Relevant Artists

Albert Bierstadt

Jon Godly

Leslie Shows



19

PAINTING LIGHT

**L**ight is an incredibly important consideration when painting: The more you know about your light source, the more you can understand shadows. The more you understand that relationship, the better you can capture it in paint. This lesson gives some pointers on the topic of light, including:

- Four questions to ask yourself about light sources in your paintings.
- An exercise involving painting firelight.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## Four Questions

There are four main questions you should ask about your light source before you start painting.

1. What is your light source? It could be the Sun, a lamp, a TV, a flashlight, a mirror reflecting light, a fire, car headlights, or endless other options. Often, light comes from a combination of multiple sources.
2. How bright is the light? Brightness is relative to the overall light level of the environment. A 60-watt bulb outside on a sunny day is weak. In a windowless room at midnight, it will look quite bright.
3. What color is the light? Most light sources are white, white/yellow, or white/blue. However, they can be any color in the spectrum.

4. What direction is the light coming from? This is the most critical question when it comes to understanding shadows. Shadows emerge on the opposite side of the light source. Ironically, it is often the shadow that can tell you the most about your light source.

## Exercise: Painting Fire

Use the provided reference (on the following page) or one of your choosing that depicts flame, such as a candle. Keep the composition simple, allowing you to focus your energies on capturing the firelight.

Establish a dark background, but do add some subtle variety of color and texture.

As you add your values, note how the intensity and color of light vary within the flame and its surrounding glow. Use strong white for the brightest part. Gradually decrease the intensity and increase the warmth as you move out.

In capturing the light's effect on nearby objects, consider the direction of the light and its diminishing intensity as the distance increases. Use value distinctions to capture the shadows and highlight.

Look for areas of intense color within the flame, such as blue and violet areas at the base.

## **Provided Reference**

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## **Relevant Artists**

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Robin Francesca Williams

Serban Savu

Stephanie Pierce

A close-up photograph of a glass of whiskey on a bar. The glass is partially filled with a golden-brown liquid and sits on a wooden coaster. In the background, another glass is visible, and the scene is lit with warm, bokeh-style lights. A large, white, brushstroke-style graphic element is overlaid on the bottom right of the image, containing the number '20' and the text 'PAINTING GLASS'.

**20**

**PAINTING GLASS**

**M**any artists avoid painting glass, thinking it's too difficult or advanced for them to approach. Though glass is a unique subject, it is a paintable one. This lesson offers some advice for painting glass, covering such topics as:

- General tips.
- A glass-painting exercise.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## General Tips

Try focusing on glass as merely a visual object full of highlights and shadows, which are the two biggest concerns. When you're trying to paint clear glass, don't paint the glass itself. Paint whatever is behind it first. Then, since it is a clear object, figure out where highlights are. There may be some shadows and reflections of what's around happening, but for the most part, you are looking at the highlights on the object.

When creating highlights, be conservative with your use of pure white. Save it for the brightest spots. Mixing in yellow, pink, green, or blue will allow you to modulate the strength and quality of your highlights.

Once you've painted all the highlights, focus on the shadows. When most of the work is done, revisit the painting. At that stage, you can add some more bright, spectacular highlights.

Sometimes when painting glass, less is more. You don't want to overdo it. Remember, part of painting glass is not painting glass,

just as part of seeing glass is not seeing glass. Let it be invisible and let the highlights stand for themselves, and you will start to paint convincing glass.

Being a painter changes the way you start to see the world around you. Let it change the way you see glass, too. As you encounter glass in your daily travels, take a moment to consider what you're seeing. Ask yourself: How do you know it is glass? Where are the highlights and reflections? The more you train your eye to see this way, the less likely you are to be intimidated by glass when you sit down to paint.

### **Exercise: Glass Study**

Use the provided reference (on the following page) or choose one of your own that depicts glass. Keep the composition as simple as possible to maintain your focus on capturing the glass. Sketch in your basic composition.

Next, look carefully at your reference. Notice that you are actually seeing highlights and reflections, which you should focus on capturing in your painting. Consider how the curvature of the glass distorts and perhaps skews the color of the items behind it.

Spend some time with a small brush capturing the small moments of color throughout the glass. Clear glass can be intensely colorful in spots depending on its surroundings. Additionally, use a very fine brush to capture the small but strong highlights that give the glass its shape.

## Provided Reference



## Relevant Artists

Jia Aili

Richard Estes

Robert Minervini

Willem Claesz Heda



21

PAINTING PEOPLE

**A** painted portrait captures truths about both the subject and the painter in one image. Every person should have the opportunity to be the subject of a painted portrait, and every painter should be familiar with portraiture. Many artists are intimidated by painting people, but the magic is in the foundations. This lesson covers some of those foundations, with topics such as:

- Finding a subject.
- Proportions.
- Painting skin.
- Painting hair, wrinkles, and freckles.
- An exercise to help you with portraiture.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## **Finding a Subject**

If you don't have a willing subject handy, a good place to start might be a self-portrait. Try taking a photo of yourself as a reference photo for a self-portrait. This is one area where the advent of photography has been a boon for portrait artists.

Photography can also make it easier to find a subject that isn't you. Other people are typically far more willing to pose for a quick photo or two than they are to sit in one position for hours on end. Then, you can use their photo as a reference for a portrait.

You can also use photos of famous people or preexisting photos of people you know for reference.

## Proportions

Having a formula to help you understand where the features are will help you make your subject look human. Keep in mind that every face is different, and the likeness of a person is usually going to be found in the areas where your model's features differ from the formula. However, these general guidelines can help you get a handle on the proportions of a human face:

- The head is usually an oval that is slightly smaller at the bottom than the top. Find the center Y-axis and X-axis.
- The eyes will usually be halfway up. The head is generally five eye-widths wide.
- Halfway down from the eyes to the chin is the bottom of the nose.
- The lips meet halfway down from the bottom of the nose to the chin.
- The width of the nose usually lines up with the corners of the eyes.
- The corners of the mouth usually line up with the middle of the eyes.
- For the ears, start just above the eye level and then go down somewhere between the nose and the lips.
- The hairline comes down in front of the ears, and its sides are visible from the front.

## Painting Skin

A common issue when painting skin color is using too much of the same color. Look for the variety. For example, the skin might be redder around the nose or the ears. It might be a little lighter on the cheekbones.

Finding the variety in a person's skin tone is helpful for avoiding painting a mannequin-like portrait. Mannequins have the exact same shade of paint all over. Details in subtle color, light, and shadow will make your painting come alive.

When painting highlights and shadows, avoid using black and white from the tube. Shadows are often cool, so try adding blue into the skin tone to achieve those. For warmer highlights, try adding a bit of yellow.

Also keep in mind that skin is made up of multiple translucent layers on top of each other. It is loose in some areas and pulled tight in others. Human skin is naturally oily and sometimes shiny, so a subtle highlight on the nose, lips, or eyes can be a nice touch.

## **Painting Hair, Wrinkles, and Freckles**

Painting hair can be tricky. This course recommends thinking of your subject's hair as if it were a single object. It is a three-dimensional object in space; therefore, it has a light side and a dark side. If it has waves or curls, each wave or curl is going to create a highlight and a shadow. Pay close attention to the hairline near the ears and how close is it to the eyes, and measure the forehead so that you don't put the hairline too far up.

Save the small details, such as wrinkles and freckles, until the end. Be careful not to make wrinkles too dark. If you paint them black, it is going to make your model look much older. Wrinkles will be a slightly darker version of the skin tone, and they should not be too thick. The same goes for freckles and other details.

## **Exercise: Portraiture**

Use the provided reference (on the following page) or select your own for painting a portrait. You can try your hand at painting from life, but it may be less frustrating for you and the subject if you use a photographic reference instead.

After establishing your background, sketch in your subject. Remember the general rules of facial proportion covered in this lesson. Also keep in mind that those rules are guidelines. Every face is different, and you may need to adjust your measurements.

Block in your major values first, then your medium values. Your painting may look alarming at this point, but establishing your values is crucial to the ultimate success of your painting.

When selecting your colors for the portrait, think more in value than hue. Also consider using paint pens to capture minute details, like stray hairs.

### **Provided Reference**



### **Relevant Artists**

Christian Rex van Minnen

John Currin

Rebecca Morgan



22

**GETTING CREATIVE:  
COMPOSITION**

**T**he modern world is full of information and imagery, replete with rich traditions to draw from and new frontiers to explore. This lesson provides some tips for drawing inspiration from the imagery surrounding us and techniques painters can use to make their work sing creatively. Topics in this lesson include:

- Sampling imagery.
- Combining mediums and techniques.
- A creative exercise.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## Sampling Imagery

Sampling your favorite imagery from a wide variety of sources is a great strategy for finding your voice as an artist. New ideas are born when you find what inspires you and combine it with something else inspiring.

Note that one possible danger of the combination strategy is that you might unintentionally engage in cultural appropriation. It is fine to be inspired by images and ideas outside of your own culture, but it is unwise and unethical to claim those images, loaded with meanings unique to that culture, as your own.

Look through your own history, place, and past to find your authentic voice. If you do not, there is very little chance that it will be authentic at all, and you may find yourself stealing authenticity from others.

With that warning in place, here is a strategy for collecting references: Create a folder on your computer for potentially useful or interesting references. Whenever you see a picture on the internet with nice light, texture, composition, or another eye-catching element, save it

to your folder. Sometimes, if you're stumped for ideas, browsing this folder may spark your imagination.

## **Combining Mediums and Techniques**

Another way to express your creative vision is to combine different types of media. For example, you can combine pencil drawing with abstract expressionism and hard-edge geometry. You can combine spray paint with a thick texture medium and fabric. There is an unlimited number of ways one can combine, layer, contrast, and integrate a wide variety of styles, mediums, and techniques.

Try keeping a few experimental canvases on hand that can act as a surface on which to practice new ideas. Having a practice painting in your studio where you are free to try out new ideas and techniques will allow you to play with paint without pressure.

## **Exercise: Creativity**

Create a composition that reflects you and your artistic aims. Consider moving away from representation and experimenting with abstraction. Collect a variety of references to help you along, but be mindful of cultural appropriation.

Combine any or all of the techniques you've learned so far to create your composition. How do you want to direct the viewers' eyes? What emotions are you trying to convey? Are you going to use a limited palette or a broad one? Are there linear or atmospheric elements? Do you want to use tape, sanding, washes, or a variety of mediums?

## **Relevant Artists**

Bridget Riley

Matthias Weischer

Neo Rauch



23

GETTING CREATIVE:  
SURFACE AND TEXTURE

**T**he classic easel, canvas, and brush form the typical painting setup, but painting can be much more than that. This lesson aims to stretch your creative horizon by expanding your definition of painting. It introduces new tools and new techniques, covering topics such as:

- Painting on wood.
- Painting with a palette knife.
- Collages.
- An exercise that will help you experiment creatively with the figure-ground relationship.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## Painting on Wood

Creating a dynamic surface with a variety of textures and sheens can open up your work and give viewers a more interesting experience. One option for that is using a wood surface, especially a piece of wood with an interesting grain pattern. You can apply sizing to the wood to keep the color of the wood from leaching up into the paint. From there, you can add transparent gesso or gel medium. Note that transparent gesso is gritty; medium-grit sandpaper can be used to smooth it out.

Wood panels look particularly good with a strong graphic painting sitting on the surface. Try painting something with hard edges using tape.

You can also use the wood grain as inspiration for your mark making. Paint the individual lines different colors, or give them volume by adding a highlight and shadow.

If you only want a specific object to reflect the wood grain, mask off everything but that object. Paint everything around it. When you pull off the tape, you will have an interesting figure-ground relationship.

If you want to give your object some volume, you can add light and shadow to it. Mask off a light side and a dark side, and paint accordingly.

Keep in mind that wood isn't the only surface you can experiment with. Glass, stone, and countless other options are available for the adventurous artist.

## Painting with a Palette Knife

Along with getting rid of the canvas, you can also experiment with getting rid of the brush. One way to do that is by painting with a palette knife, using a technique called impasto. Impasto involves applying the paint so thickly that it stands up from the surface and creates three-dimensional texture.

Many art teachers warn that impasto painting with a palette knife is kitschy and overdone. However, contemporary artists like Allison Schulnik and Kim Dorland make bold impasto paintings that are extremely expressive and lush.

The palette knife—and even the paint tube itself—can be used like drawing tools. The palette knife is extremely versatile. It can produce flat marks, scratch marks, smears, and other interesting features. As with any technique, though, don't overdo it. Using the same stroke over and over will produce a boring painting.

## Collages

A way to add even more dimension to your painting is through the use of collage. Fabric or interesting pieces of paper can be great additions. For adhesives, consider using water-based collage glues or gel medium. Once you glue fabric and/or paper onto your canvas,

wait for it to dry. Then, you can paint on it, sand it, or do whatever else you wish.

## **Exercise: Figure-Ground Experiment**

Choose an interesting surface to paint on and experiment with allowing that surface to act as a figure in your composition. Use painter's tape to block off the figure and paint the negative space around it. Remember to seal the tape edges well to avoid bleeding.

Consider adding additional textural elements like fabric, feathers, or other material. A gel medium can be effective as a glue.

## **Relevant Artists**

Alison Elizabeth Taylor

Toyin Ojih Odutola

Trenton Doyle Hancock

An abstract 3D composition of rectangular blocks in various shades of orange and white. The blocks are arranged in a way that creates a sense of depth and perspective. A prominent white brushstroke with a textured, painterly appearance sweeps across the lower right portion of the image, partially overlapping the blocks and the text below.

24

**GETTING CREATIVE:  
SPACE AND DIMENSION**

**T**his lesson concludes the course by discussing ways to manipulate space in your paintings. The illusion of space in a painting gives the artist ultimate freedom from the confines of actual space. Topics discussed in the lesson include:

- A spatially interesting painting by M. C. Escher.
- Tips for manipulating space.
- An exercise to help you practice manipulating space.
- Relevant artists whose work demonstrates some of the lesson's concepts.

## **M. C. Escher**

One of the great space manipulators is the artist M. C. Escher. He possesses an ability to render a completely convincing realistic space through black, white, light, and shadow. He also brings backgrounds to the front, foregrounds to the back, and applies vertical manipulations. For a great example of his work, check out the painting *Waterfall*.

## **Tips for Manipulating Space**

There are several tricks you can employ in your own work to manipulate space. For example, scale is a great tool. Try making large things small and small things large. You can also make close objects appear far away and vice versa.

Also try using multiple perspectives in the same painting. For example, you can paint two objects in different perspective in different parts of the painting, and then use a line to connect them.

## Exercise: Impossible Space

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Now that you've learned the tricks for capturing representational space, start manipulating perspective to explore impossible space. Break the rules. Allow shapes to take on impossible angles. Put objects in unexpected places. Play with shadows. Get adventurous with colors. In this case, not even the sky is the limit. Most of all, have fun.

## Relevant Artists

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Grant Miller

M. C. Escher

Mark Bradford

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