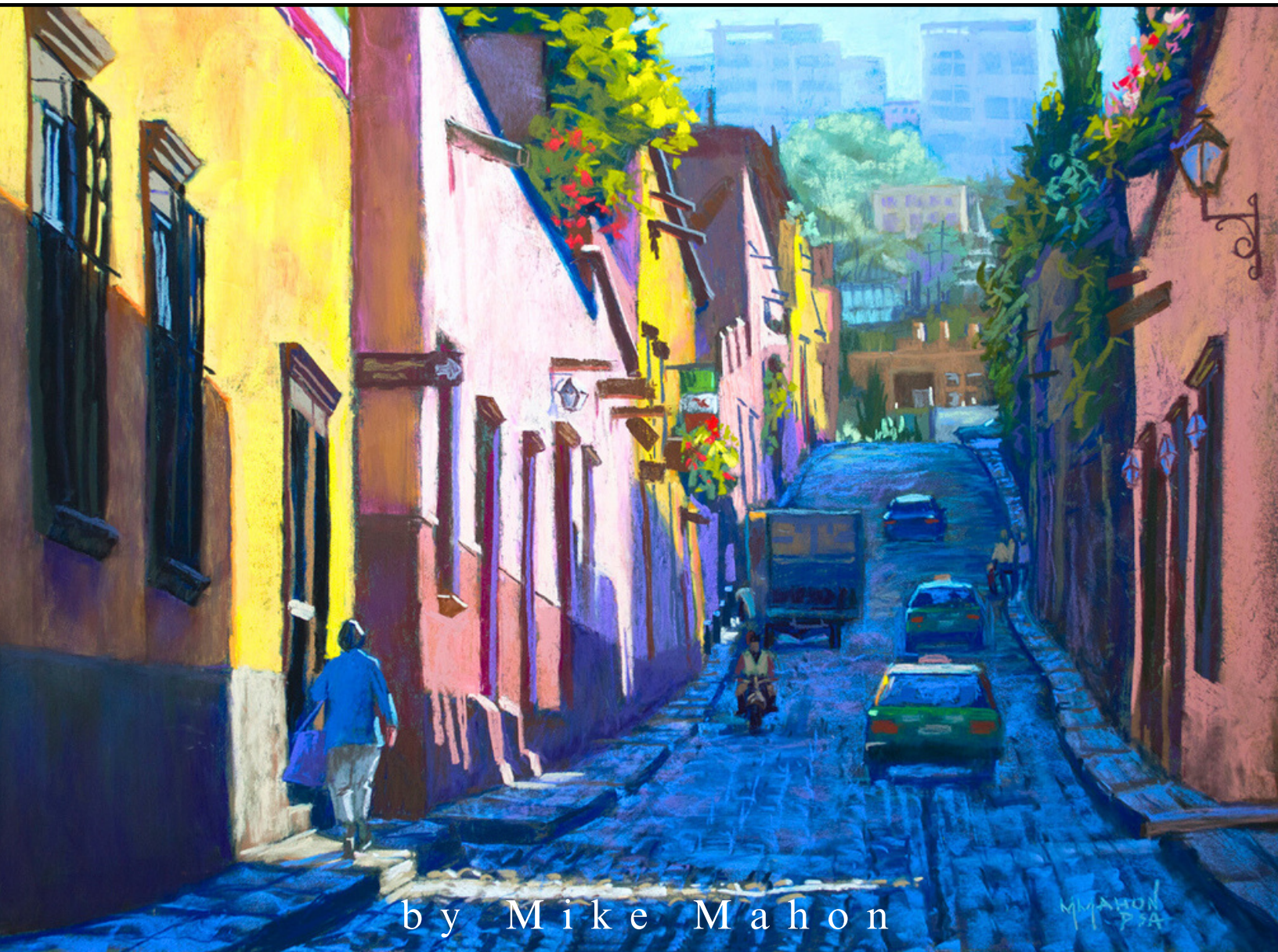


Art Principles

Control Your Painting Process &
Conquer Your Fear of Failure



by Mike Mahon

Learn to Paint Better, Faster, and with Confidence

Dedication:

To my intelligent and beautiful wife, Cynthia, without whom this book and my art career would not exist. She is a better artist than I, as is so evident in her poetry and her life of aesthetic excellence as a mother, homemaker, interior designer, project manager, and Christian example.

Copyright and Permissions

All copyrights in this work are held by Mike Mahon Art. As a Mike Mahon Art customer, you are permitted to print one (1) hard copy only of the work for your own personal use. Such printing may be done by a commercial printer and permission is hereby given to commercial printers to print the work for the purposes set forth herein.

Copyright © 2024+ Mike Mahon Art – All rights reserved.

Limits of Liability / Disclaimer of Warranty

The authors and publisher of this book and the accompanying materials have used their best efforts in preparing this material. The authors and publisher make no representation or warranties with respect to the accuracy, applicability, fitness, or completeness of the contents of this book. They disclaim any warranties (expressed or implied), merchantability, or fitness for any particular purpose. The authors and publishers shall in no event be held liable for any loss or other damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages. The authors and publisher do not warrant the performance, effectiveness or applicability of any sites listed in this book. All links are for information purposes only and are not warranted for content, accuracy or any other implied or explicit purpose.

This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint of use of this material is prohibited.

Book Cover by Mike Mahon
Illustrations and Photography by Mike Mahon
First Edition 2024

Permissions:

Exerpt from Douglas Henderson, douglashenderson.com, used by permission.

"Nature's Studio" painting by Barbara Clark, used by permission.

"Tangerine Morning with Mauves" painting by Michelle Chrisman, used by permission.

Gray Scale & Value Finder image, used by permission from: The Color Wheel Company, PO Box 130, Philomath, OR 97370

Edited by Cynthia Mahon; M. Wade Mahon, Phd.

Visit the author's website at <http://www.mmahon.com> or these other links:

<https://www.patreon.com/MikeMahonFineArtist>

<https://www.youtube.com/c/MikeMahonFineArtist1>



TABLE OF CONTENTS

This Table of Contents is clickable.

To return to the Table of Contents click on Copyright line at the bottom of any page.

Table of Contents.....	3
Author's Introduction.....	6
About This Book.....	8
Chapter 1 Foundational Principles.....	9
Why Aesthetic Categories?.....	10
Why Have a Set UP?.....	12
How the Divine SETUP is used to rate a photograph or scene.....	14
Chapter 2 P+O=Success.....	15
The Great Irony.....	16
Preparation.....	17
Opportunity.....	20
Chapter 3 From Thought Process to Painting Process.....	21
Learning the Ropes.....	22
Frustration.....	22
Limitations are Your Friends.....	23
The Search.....	24
Confirmation.....	25
Chapter 4 The Pursuit of Excellence.....	26
All artists are self-taught.....	27
A painting is like building a house.....	28
Painting is like fighting a battle.....	29
Uncertainty is our greatest enemy!.....	29
Categories of the Artist's Mind.....	30
Skill and Knowledge.....	31
Summary of My Approach.....	32
Chapter 5 DiVine SETUP.....	33
1 Design/Drawing.....	35
Avoid competing centers of interest.....	36
Your job is to direct the viewer's eye.....	37
Psychological Center of Interest.....	37
Center of Interest Painting.....	38
If the center of interest works, everything works.....	40



TABLE OF CONTENTS

MAHON

Design Variations.....	41
Static Design.....	41
Dynamic Design.....	42
Cruciform Design.....	43
Spiral Design.....	44
Asymetric Design.....	45
Geometric Design.....	46
Design Considerations.....	47
The Edges of the Canvas.....	47
Golden Ratio, or Fibonacci Ratio.....	48
The Rule of Thirds Can Solve 80% of Your Design Problems.....	49
Examples of the Rule of Thirds.....	50
2 Values – Second only to design.....	52
Value Perception – Dynamic Range.....	52
Gray Scale & Value Finder Tool.....	54
How to use the Gray Scale Tool.....	55
Values are Relative.....	56
Determining the Key of a Painting.....	60
Chip Off the Old Block and the 80% Rule.....	61
Abstract Design is the basis of all good representational art.....	61
Organizing Your Palette.....	62
Photography – Plein Air.....	63
Value of Plein Air (Outdoor) Painting.....	63
Light & Shadow.....	64
3 Shapes - The great organizational tool of the visual arts.....	67
Organize and Simplify.....	67
Avoid Monotony, Monotony, Monotony, Monotony.....	68
Six Shapes or Less.....	69
4 Edges – Critical to directing eye movement and creating atmosphere.....	70
The Edge is where two values meet.....	70
Edge Control.....	71
“I Got Rhythm, Who Could Ask for Anything More?”.....	72
Edges for Atmosphere & Finish.....	73
When is a painting finished?.....	73



TABLE OF CONTENTS

MAHON

5 Temperature (Color) – Control color and create balance.....	74
The Artist’s Wheel of Fortune.....	76
The Great Seducer.....	77
Color Mixing Tips.....	78
6 Unity – Every painting is its own universe.....	79
If it doesn’t hang together it will not hang at all.....	80
Reinforcement.....	80
Lines of Reference.....	81
Tell One Story.....	82
7 Perspective – Cheat creatively.....	83
Linear and Aerial Perspective.....	83
Hang it All!...From the Eye Level.....	84
Up! Up! And Away in my Beautiful Aerial Perspective.....	87
What Overpowers all other Principles of Perspective?.....	88
Chapter 6 Considerations Before Painting.....	89
Chapter 7 Step-by-Step Painting Procedure.....	93
Follow these seven steps for consistent and confident painting.....	94
Step One – Tone Canvas.....	95
Step Two – Sketch.....	96
Step Three – Darkest Darks and Secondary Darks.....	97
Step Four – Lightest Lights and Secondary Lights.....	98
Step Five – Underpainting.....	99
Step Six – Center of Interest.....	100
Step Seven – Final Treatment.....	101
Pastel Demonstration.....	103
Chapter 8 Conquering Fears – An Artist’s Journey.....	106
Two Obstacles.....	107
Confronting Fear and Self Doubt.....	108
Forced, Kicking, and Screaming.....	109
Epilogue “Bridging the Gap”.....	110
Testimonials.....	111
Join Me on Patreon.....	116
Notes	117

Author's Introduction

I have written this book to encourage artists to overcome their most common road blocks, fear of failure, lack of confidence, and insecurity. I will describe how I overcame these enemies by coming to an understanding of myself, and especially how I came to understand art fundamentals and how to apply them in a useful prioritized order.

I have been a professional artist for over fifty years and have been teaching art workshops for over twenty of those years. I've won Best of Show awards and First Place awards in many regional and national shows. I have been a cartoon animator, commercial artist, professional photographer, blah, blah, and blah.

I am proud of those things, and enjoyed doing them very much, but they are only the by-products of the training I received from my gifted instructors. I had to go through many struggles before receiving recognition. I spent years in insecurity and frustration with no expectations that I would ever be a credible fine artist.

The main thing you need to know about me is that I'm lazy! I always have been. You might think that my admission of being lazy, indolent, slothful, idle, etc. would reveal a great character flaw, but I am trying to be honest with my fellow artists.

Although you may not be as lazy as I am, I'll bet you have struggled with challenges such as — lack of preparation, disorganization, fuzzy thinking, and an inconsistent painting procedure. My bad behaviors undermined my artistic expression for a long time. They caused me to be fearful and discouraged by making my painting attempts a lot more work than they needed to be.



"The main thing you need to know about me is that I'm lazy! I always have been."

— Mike Mahon

"I choose a lazy person to do a hard job because a lazy person will find an easy way to do it."

-Bill Gates

Author's Introduction

If you agree with Agatha Christie, that “laziness” can help you think of ways to save yourself from the trouble of too much work, your solution should be to get to work at “being lazy”, the way I have.

If you have been trying to learn how to paint by trial and error (the most unproductive approach), and have worked under many instructors with conflicting advice, you will only ingrain bad habits and severely limit the height to which you can rise as an artist.

The first part of this book will teach you the way I have learned to work smarter. I will teach you my actual thought processes as I approach painting, whether in landscape or portraiture.

***“I don’t think
necessity is the
mother of
invention.***

***Invention... arises
directly from
idleness, possibly
also from laziness,
to save oneself
trouble.”***

-Agatha Christie

***There is no mystery to
becoming a good
artist, but your thinking
may need to change
first. You need to begin
thinking in Aesthetic
Categories.***

– Mike Mahon



"Fan Dancer" from life by Mike Mahon

Author's Introduction

About This Book

This book is a compilation and expansion of material that I developed over a period of more than twenty years as a workbook for my students and workshop participants. The original material was prepared for my three-day and five-day painting workshops so that my students would have a common understanding of the principles, fundamentals and vocabulary that I would be presenting. This saved a great deal of valuable time at the workshops. It helped beginners and experienced artists alike to be introduced to an artistic language and mindset, and it created new aesthetic categories that are necessary for artistic expression.

Have you ever had the experience of being exposed to an interesting new word and soon after, began hearing that word everywhere? You realize that the word had been there all along but it was just not on your radar. You had no category in your mind established to receive it. One purpose of this book is to establish artistic categories that make it possible for you to absorb knowledge and skills. Without these skills you will have a hard time understanding why you continue to lack confidence and are not growing as an artist.

I will use the terms “principles” and “fundamentals” interchangeably in this book

I hope you will enjoy this introduction to a feast of artistic principles that are concisely expressed and full of many delicious examples and illustrations. It can be consumed either in a few sittings or nibbled one morsel at a time. It is my hope that you will be encouraged to devour its nutrients with no fear of indigestion.





CHAPTER 1

Foundational Principles

“The greater part of all mischief in the world arises from the fact that men do not sufficiently understand their own aims. They have undertaken to build a tower, and spend no more labor on the foundation than necessary to erect a hut.”

– Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Foundational Principles

Why Aesthetic Categories?

The word “aesthetic” refers to universal principles of beauty, especially in relationship to visual art. Music, literature, dance, drama, and visual arts all use aesthetic principles. Music follows the aesthetic rules of rhythm and tone, repetition and timing, producing a beautiful melody to our ears. You wouldn’t think of sitting down to a piano to play without knowing the rules. And if you wanted to improve on the beauty of the piece, you would use aesthetic elements to help you.

In the same way, effective paintings are produced by using visual categories that are elements of what we see.

The seven art principles that I teach in my workshops are not new. They are the basic truths of good art that have been known and used by great artists for centuries.

“I have distilled seven essential art principles or fundamentals that must be understood and applied in a prioritized order for successful painting.”

–Mike Mahon



"Puerto Villarta Stroll" by Mike Mahon

**“Reason is the organ of truth,
Imagination is the organ of meaning.”**

–C. S. Lewis

After reading Chapter 5 of this book, go to the following links to see my videos on Aesthetic Categories :

[Part 1](#)

[Part 2](#)

[Part 3](#)

Foundational Principles

These Aesthetic Categories are clearly definable and can be consistently used in all paintings, regardless of your preferred style (impressionism, abstraction, realism, etc.). They not only serve as objective tools to analyze the overall quality of an image, but most importantly they serve to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your painting by an objective standard. You will no longer be left alone with just your subjective feelings to analyze a problematic image. You will be able to objectively rate each scene or photo you have chosen to use as your reference. Using my rating system will help you discover the best possible images to paint and keep you from wasting your time with photos or scenes that don't have the best elements in them.

My system for using these categories will be carefully presented in this book as your guide to more effective paintings. This unique system will guide you in choosing what to paint, how to maintain control of the painting process, and how to critique your work or the work of others. You will learn to paint better, faster, and with confidence.

"Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist."

–Pablo Picasso



"The Blue Door" by Mike Mahon

"With a systematic approach you will no longer be left alone with just your subjective feelings to analyze a problematic image."

–Mike Mahon

Foundational Principles

Why have a Set Up?

Each time you paint, you need to remember to follow the logical order of the aesthetic elements I have been telling you about. I have capitalized the first letters of each aesthetic element to give you a mnemonic device (memory aid) so that you can remember the order of my painting process.

It is important to ingrain the steps so that you can apply them quickly and in the correct order. Knowing them well will train you to love the process for itself, instead of being focused too early in the painting on how you expect to finish each painting.

I find that one of the greatest roadblocks to a successful painting is the frustration caused by feeling out of control and constantly lost. When you become discouraged, you are soon distracted from the main reason you decided to paint that particular image.

My step-by-step analytical process will give you tools to craft your painting with confidence and to be able to back-track and correct any problems. The key to enjoying the painting process is knowing that you are the master of your painting and not its servant! As you gain control of the painting process you will learn to paint better, faster and with confidence. Your enthusiasm will grow with each new painting, increasing the volume and quality of your work.

While a significant portion of this book is dedicated to mastering the essential principles of art, I'll also share some of my personal struggles, which I hope you can relate to. By sharing my story, I aim to encourage you to rise above your failures and embrace the incredible journey of a fine artist. So, grab your paintbrush, unleash your inner artist, and let's embark on this marvelous adventure together!

“I think it’s important to remember that making art is a process. It is never finished. The occupation itself is one of process, exploration, and experimentation. It is one of questioning and examining.”

— Mel Robson

Foundational Principles

You will be given a lot of valuable information in this book, but I'm going to cheat and give you the most important lesson of this book right now!

Using my memory aid, "DiVine **SETUP**" memorize the following seven principles:

Design/Drawing
Values
Shapes
Edges
Temperature
Unity
Perspective

***"Great things are done
by a series of small
things brought
together."***

– Vincent van Gogh

Just committing these principles to memory will put you light years ahead of where you were before you picked up this book. You will be conversant in the basic principles of art and able to rattle them off to that curious lay person who asks you, "How do you know what good art is, anyway?" You can now answer, "Good art, whether representational or abstract, is the successful management of these seven principles." Just having these art fundamentals firmly established in your mind, at your beck and call, you now have the foundation that will make you a better artist!

Acquainting you with my DiVine **SETUP** principles is just the beginning. How to apply them is what separates an apprentice from a master artist. The next page demonstrates how these principles are used in analyzing images to produce a better painting.

Foundational Principles

How the DiVine SETUP is used to rate a photograph or scene

You should rate a photograph, scene, or painting by analyzing each aesthetic category (principle) alone without considering any of the other categories. You must determine if the image has qualities that match or closely match the ideal characteristics of each principle. If four or five of the categories have good scores, the image is a good candidate for a successful painting. Fewer than four good scores might be problematic, depending on your skills and experience. With experience you will be able to instinctively judge a good image. If you have difficulty appraising images as to whether you should paint them, using this approach can quickly improve your artistic judgment.

For example, I have rated this scene as follows:

Design: The photo has competing centers of interest and trees on left compete with house on right..... ☐ -

Values: Good value structure; good wide range from dark to light..... ☒ +

Shapes: The fence posts are distracting..... ☐ -

Edges: Good hard and soft edges..... ☒ +

Temperature: Good asymmetrical balance of cools and warms..... ☒ +

Unity: Good foreground, middle ground, and background interlocking, and good overall cool temperature..... ☒ +

Perspective: Good perspective clues, good overlap, and good aerial perspective..... ☒ +

The photo of this scene is rated as positive, overall. It has only two negative categories, Design and Shapes. I merely need to reposition the problem shapes and improve the design by subordinating or eliminating one of the centers of interest, as demonstrated in the final painting “Taos Roof Tops”. Repositioning the fence post shapes also increases the sense of perspective and leads the eye to the center of interest.



Reference Photo



"Taos Roof Tops" by Mike Mahon

DIVINE SETUP

1

Design/Drawing

The chief consideration in determining the success of a painting

2

Values

Second only to design, control of values determines the quality of a painting.

3

Shapes

The great organizational tool of the visual arts

4

Edges

Critical to directing eye movement and creating atmosphere

5

Temperature

Control color and create balance by mastering temperature.

6

Unity

Every painting is its own universe.

7

Perspective

Creative cheating to depict three dimensions on a two dimensional surface

1

Design/Drawing

The chief consideration in determining the success of a painting

- Drawing and Design are two sides of the same coin. Virtually everything that can be said about the importance of design applies to drawing as well. However, the study of drawing is beyond the scope of this book.
- Design is the primary element I am using in this book to determine the success of a painting.
- No matter how good other elements are or how well-executed even the drawing is, if the design is weak, the painting will be weak.
- Determine the primary center of interest, or focal point, and work out from there.

Paintings that are in great museums are those that have great design. There are many paintings that didn't get into those museums that were just as good in every other way, but design is most often the deciding factor. If it's not a good design, no matter how good a painter you are, your painting will be weak. In music, although the execution of any performance must be of high quality, it is primarily the great composers who are remembered. No matter how well you accomplish everything else in your painting, the *design* must be deliberate and effective.

The kind of painting that I do is representational/center of interest painting. I find a focal point, the main center of interest, and I work out from there. Everything else in the painting relates to that area.

Many artists like to rush forward thinking that their pure 'emotions' are more important on the paper than good proportions... eventually having to return into clumsy areas and correct, correct, correct. That's when the freshness disappears.

— Harley Brown



Mike in his Santa Fe, NM, studio.

All artists are willing to suffer for their work. But why are so few prepared to learn to draw?

— Banksy (Robin Cunningham)

Drawing video links: [Drawing with Angles](#) [Pastel Portrait Demo](#)

1

Design/Drawing

The chief consideration in determining the success of a painting

Avoid competing centers of interest.

Design should tell only “one story” in terms of the colors, values, subject matter, shapes, etc. If you have more stories to tell, do more paintings. More than one basic story per painting is confusing for the viewer.

Here's an example:

Early in my career, I entered a painting into a show judged by Scott Christensen. I asked him if he would give me a critique of my painting. He said the only problem with it was that it had two equal centers of interest.

He said, "It has this big red triangle and it has a woman in yellow, both equally powerful elements. Which one is the story about?" I had never known a judge who would make helpful comments! It was very valuable to have a show judge explain why something in a painting didn't work. Many times a judge will say, "It just didn't move me" or some unspecific twaddle like that which doesn't help artists improve their painting. Seemingly minor considerations often make all the difference at higher levels of competition.



“Wash Daze” by Mike Mahon



“Wash Daze” with secondary center of interest subdued

Look what happens when I subdue the red triangle in the image on the right by cooling and graying it down. It's still there but it no longer “jumps” forward, and now there's only one story. It's all about the woman. She appears to move forward creating a greater sense of perspective and atmosphere. It's ok to have multiple secondary centers of interest but only one should dominate. Like a good play, there is one major character. Everyone else is a supporting actor. I'll use this same painting to discuss Unity, principle #6 later.

1

Design/Drawing

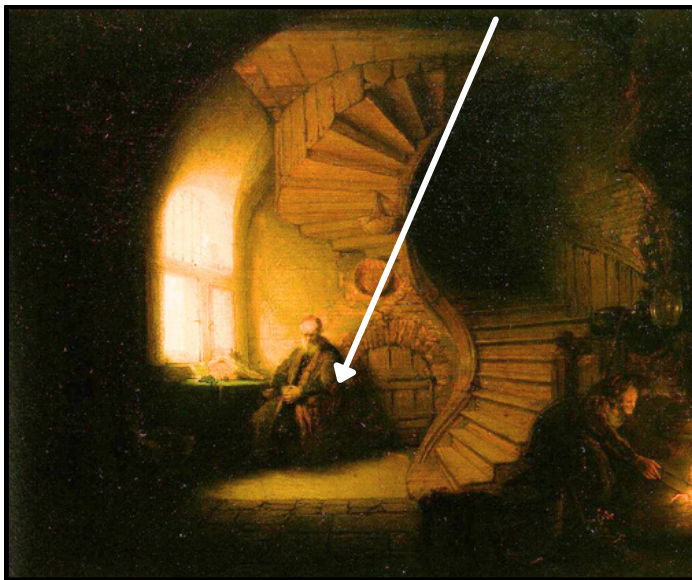
The chief consideration in determining the success of a painting

Your job is to direct the viewer's eye.

Below is a Rembrandt painting, "The Philosopher". Look at the way he directs you through that painting with those stairs. Isn't that incredible? You follow the spiral staircase all the way to the center of interest. He's put The Philosopher in the area with lightest lights and darkest darks. The brightest colors are emphasized right there. Your eyes are led right to it.

At first you don't even notice his secondary center of interest which is another little guy sitting in the lower right, stoking the fire. If he had emphasized both men, he would have created two competing areas.

Psychological Center of Interest



"The Philosopher" by Rembrandt

One aspect, other than the visual qualities I've discussed, is the impact of the human form or face in a painting. This human impact can overpower everything else and becomes a psychological center of interest. The human form will almost always draw the interest of the viewer first. The advertising world knows and exploits this. Obviously, the center of interest in this painting is the face and figure of the "The Philosopher".

"As I see it, our job as designers is to find as many varied routes for the eye to follow through the compositions as possible."

—Peter Folkes

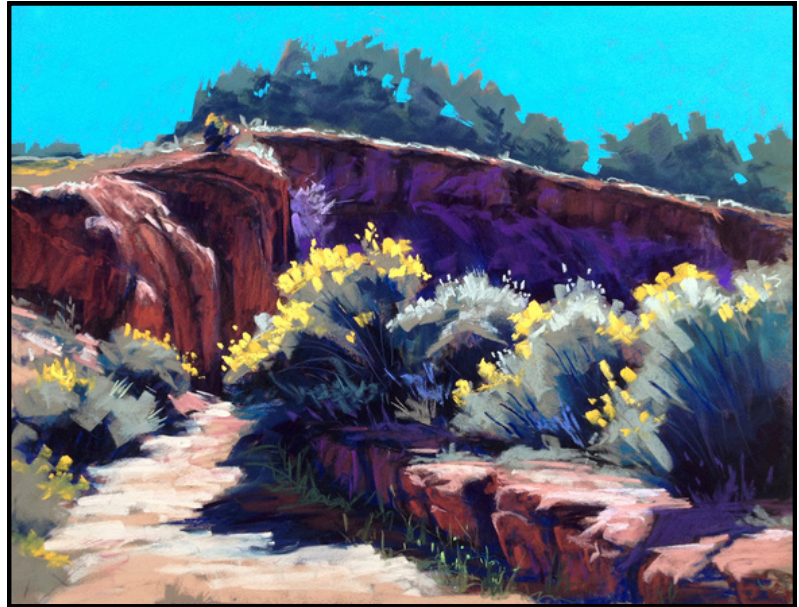
1

Design/Drawing

The chief consideration in determining the success of a painting

Center of Interest Painting

To enhance your focal point or center of interest, concentrate on building the most contrast in that area and use lines of reference to direct the viewer's eye. The center of interest can be placed almost anywhere if the extraneous detail is not overpowering and serves to support and not distract.



"Chamisa Arroyo" by Mike Mahon

Elements of the image soften and become more suggestive as they recede from the center of interest.

The following contrasts should be at or near the area of your center of interest:

- Lightest lights and the darkest darks
- The center of interest has greatest mass of lights and is surrounded by darkest darks in this image.
- The warmest warms and the coolest cools
- The contrast of complementary colors works especially well here with yellow & purple juxtaposed. (Complementary colors are opposite each other on the color wheel.)
- Hardest and softest edges
- Brightest and dullest colors
- Greatest detail, preferably next to a simpler area for contrast



Lines of reference should move the viewer toward the center of interest.

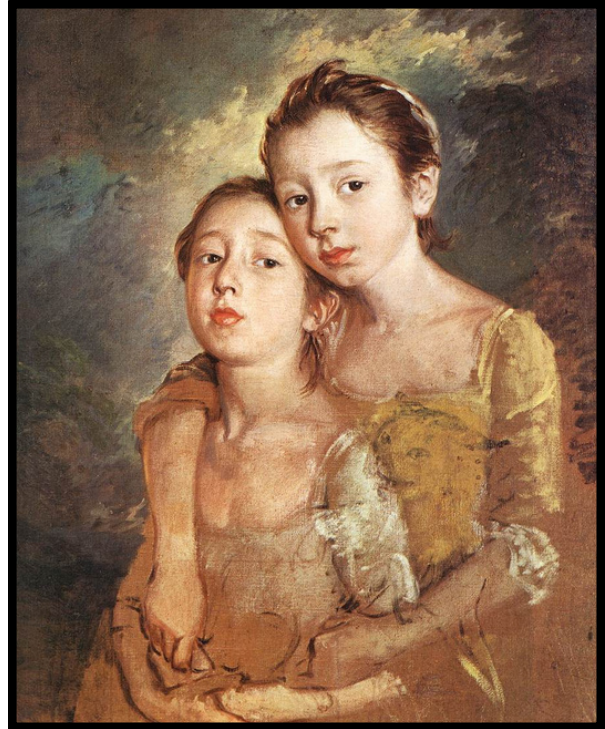
1

Design/Drawing

The chief consideration in determining the success of a painting

The *psychological center of interest* in this painting by Gainsborough is the grouping of the two faces. Notice how every other kind of contrast is at or near the center of interest:

- The darkest darks of the painting are the girls' eyes, hair, and the cast shadow area between their heads.
- The lightest area is next to and around those same eyes and hair.
- The warmest warms of the painting are their pink lips.
- The greatest detail is in the faces, and the largest areas of simplicity are the light areas of the faces, and necks that surround the facial features.



"The Artists Daughters with Cat" by T. Gainsborough



As you move further and further away from this center of interest, you will see how much the detail drops off

and the brushstrokes become very subtle and less distinct. The hands are just simple little brushstrokes. They're almost like gesture drawings, still accurate but with no detail. This isn't a painting about the hands of these little girls. You are not distracted from their faces by overly detailed hands or the sketchy outline of a cat.

Think how much time is saved by not over-working less important areas of the painting. Perhaps the most important benefit is that more room is left for the viewers' imaginations.

"Art is not what you see, but what you make others see."

—Edgar Degas