

Landscapes in Watercolor

TOPIC: Introductory thoughts on Landscape Painting Composition

When most people think of landscape painting, they think of a broad vista, with a definite foreground, middle ground and background. Typically, painters use the approximately 2:3 rectangular format of ready-made watercolor sheets, placed horizontally, because that is the traditional format for landscape. When using photographs for reference, they typically are horizontal in format because that format captures more “land” in a landscape. However, you have control over what format you choose to use. Because of other decisions you will make, including what to leave in and take out, emphasize or simplify/de-emphasize, enlarge, etc. the best format may not always be the 2:3 rectangle. Think outside the box - and the ‘box’ isn’t always the same size or shape! You might try a long, thin horizontal rectangle, or a tall, thin vertical format, or a square or round format. Regardless of style or format the *formal considerations* of landscape painting are largely the same:



Southwest Landscape, watercolor by Gerry Peirce

- What **editing of your subject** will you need to do? You may need to add or delete objects, move them, and/or change the scale of the objects in your chosen scene in order to make a better painting.
- What will you **emphasize**? Is the sky more important than the land forms on the particular day you are out painting? If so, devote more space on your paper to sky than you do land. Is the “sense of place” so important that you need to include specific objects or landmarks?
- How will you **arrange the elements** you’ve chosen to use? Consider negative and positive space, balance, shape, proportion, direction(movement), etc.
- What **point of view** will you take? This could range from an extreme close-up to an all-encompassing distant view, and from a “bird’s eye” view to a “worm’s eye” or something in between. Generally, the more distant and all-encompassing the viewpoint, the less detail you need, so if detail isn’t your “thing”, you may want to stick to the long view.
- What **palette of colors** will you use, all transparent, all opaque or a mix of both? *Why* will you select that particular group of colors?
- What **value pattern** will you use? Your value pattern should help provide unity and movement through the painting, and create focus where the greatest contrast of values occurs.

SCALE:

Scale has to do with how large or small the various parts of your painting are, relative to each other and to the picture area. Scale affects dominance, and also gives important clues about your intent as the artist (the “why” of the painting). Scale lets your viewer know which things you have decided are more important, and which less.

Both Peirce’s painting (above) and mine (right and below) take an eye-level point of view, but Peirce’s takes that view a LONG way into the distance. By reducing the scale of the land forms relative to the sky and to our own position, we emphasize their “smallness” (and ours) in relation to the sky. We might more appropriately call these paintings “sky scapes”. Movement becomes very important here; first to move your eye across/through the land forms and into the sky, and second, to provide interest in the dominant sky area. Would either of these paintings be as entertaining visually if the sky was a cloudless clear blue?



Spring at Picacho, watercolor by Ellen Fountain

Notice how the focus changes here with scale changes. Here the emphasis is on the foreground/middleground instead of the background (sky).

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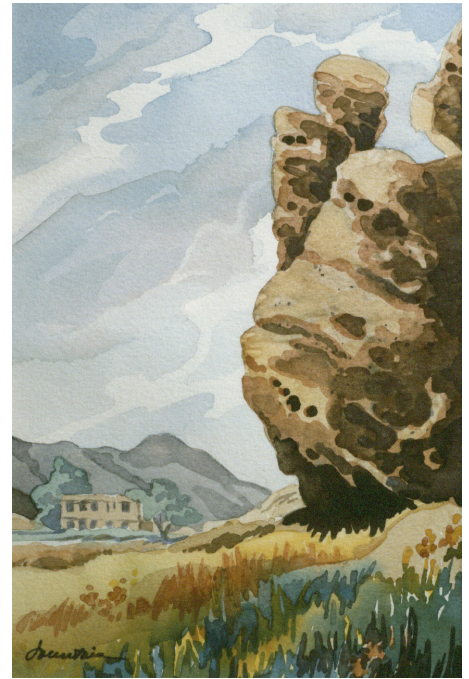
Decide if you want to **report** or **interpret** your subject matter.

This decision is based on whether you want to paint a particular view, landmark or specific place that people in the area would recognize easily. If your goal is to report, then accuracy matters, especially if your subject involves architecture or monuments.

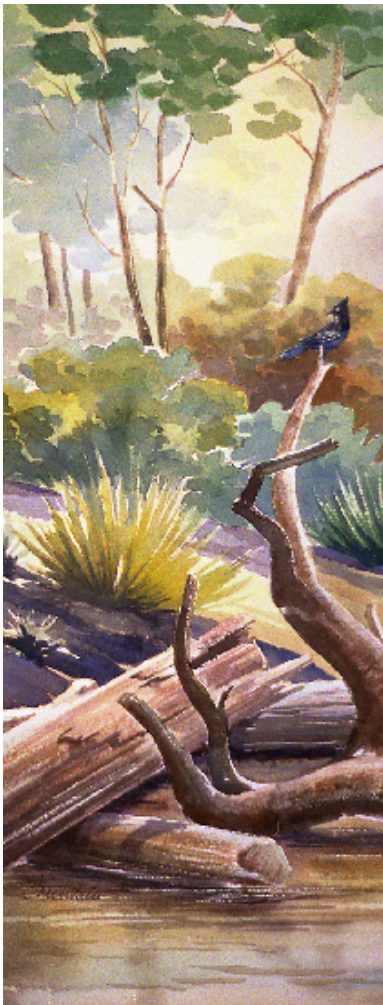
However, you can also paint recognizable places in a more personal way, or what I call interpretive reporting. The landmark will still be identifiable, but you'll put your own interpretation on it through your choice of colors and painting style, which can range from photographic to loose and impressionistic.



Two interpretive versions of San Xavier Mission, one titled San Xavier-Spring, and the other titled San Xavier-Winter. Both part of my Southwest Series, they were created with simplified flat and wet-in-wet washes that when dry were glazed with handcut stencils to create the trees and other vegetation and suggest clouds.



Bradford House Ruins-Ken Caryl Ranch, Colorado watercolor by Ellen Fountain. Image size 11 x 7.5 inches. Although this ranch house ruin is recognizable, I focused on the more interesting rock formation in the foreground.



If your goal is only to interpret, or capture your feelings or impressions about your subject rather than the specific details, then that gives you more “wiggle room” in terms of color, texture, shape, value etc. and what parts of the scene you leave out, move around, or emphasize.

The photo (right) was my inspiration for the finished watercolor, *Blue Jay*, shown at left.

I did not care if I accurately represented this scene taken in the White Mountains of northern Arizona, but I liked the fallen, interwoven logs, deciding that the highest point would make a perfect perch for one of the blue jays commonly observed in the area and give me a focal point for the painting.

Blue Jay, watercolor by Ellen Fountain private collection

