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Spacial Emphasis in Reference Photos

Many watercolor painters use reference photos and/or sketches to work from when they are gathering information about a subject they want to paint. I'm no exception. I have thousands of slides and prints I have taken over the years that provide inspiration for subject matter, and jog my memories of a particular place and time. I learned over the years to always err on the side of more rather than less when taking reference photos and doing sketches. That way, I always have plenty of information when I actually get ready to do a final drawing in preparation to paint. And, it also allows me to decide later whether I want to give emphasis to the foreground, middleground or background. So, when I take photos, I take a wide, faraway view, a closer but still wide view, and then I zoom in, walk around, and take detail photos of more intimate parts of my subject. In my sketchbook, I will also do quick sketches, details of the subject or parts of it, with color notations, and write notes on what I was attracted to about the particular scene.



Emphasis: Background

This is a farm in Northern Arizona. In this view, the feeling here is isolation. Note the distance from the road and the single mailbox. If I decided to paint this, I would probably tip the road up a bit so we could see it curving behind the mailbox, and then show it (much smaller) going up that distant hill to the farm buildings.

Whether you choose to emphasize foreground, middleground or background is influenced by your feelings about the subject, and what you want to convey to your viewer. Instances where you might choose to emphasize the background would be subjects where you wanted to establish a sense of grandeur, a sense of scale (the smallness of man in nature), or simply to play up the depth of field.

Emphasis: Middleground

Let's go back to our farm, and see what a middle ground emphasis might look like. Here I've moved in closer to the farm, and now in the middleground, we see some cattle. We still have the rustic farm buildings, and old machinery, but the cows add a "living" element to the scene and make this view a little less lonely feeling.

Emphasizing the middleground is probably the most common choice among landscape painters, with background emphasis a close second. They are not the only choices, however. Often when you wander around your chosen subject for a while, you will discover a more uncommon view of it, or a person or animal will come into view giving you that "perfect" something to make a great watercolor.





Emphasis: foreground

Here's one possibility for emphasizing some part of this farm scene relatively closeup. This old flatbed truck was parked just off the road in the field. You can see it just to the right of center in the first farm photo. Nicely rusted, it could make an interesting painting.



Emphasis: intimate foreground

Don't overlook the little things! Spotting movement on the porch of the farm, I discovered tin cans with small seedlings in them. A little visitor had found that the moist dirt was a perfect spot to cool off on a hot summer day. Patience and a telephoto lens got me a reference photo that would make a charming watercolor painting!

I took these photos in Puerto Peñasco, Sonora, Mexico. A ship had wrecked in the Gulf of California, and its remains were washed up on the beach. This point of view establishes a sense of scale, and the desolateness of the place, but it's hard to tell from this distance that it's a wrecked ship.

Moving in on the subject and emphasizing the middle ground will make a better watercolor. We still get the distant shoreline for scale purposes, but now we can tell what we're looking at. The waves in the foreground form visual lines that point us toward the shipwreck, as does the line between water and land in the distance.

In short, analyze your subject, decide what you want to say about it, and then choose your spacial emphasis to help you say visually what you have in mind. Take another look at your reference photos and see if they offer any new ideas. Happy painting!

