



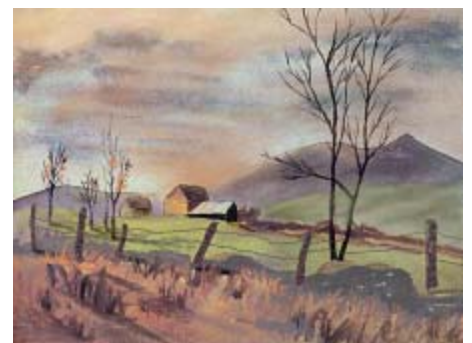
Ideally, you will have done a value sketch before you start painting. That can help you make decisions about emphasis, movement, focus and value before ever putting paint to paper. I learned the importance of doing these small value studies the hard way, by doing a lot of really poor paintings when I first started out, and then trying to figure out what went wrong after the fact.



Shown at top left is one of my first watercolors. Not much is working in this painting - the yellow tree is placed poorly and yet is the dominant color in the painting. The entire painting suffers from too little paint (especially by today's standards for watercolor where paintings are much more color saturated). Although you can sense the wash running diagonally from lower right to behind the yellow tree, it's not very clear. Your eye jumps from the foreground prickly pear to the yellow tree to the small cluster of trees in the background, and has to do a visual leap between each one.

What could be done to improve this painting besides throwing it out and starting over again? Sometimes that's the only recourse, but my philosophy has always been that once I'm to that point in a painting, I have nothing to lose by experimenting, sometimes taking drastic measures, to see if I can make a bad painting better.

If you have computer skills, pull the image into your image editing program (like PhotoShop), make a new adjustment layer, and then after selecting a shape with the lasso tool, adjust its value and/or color. Keep fooling with this shape until you get enough contrast of value/color to move your eye through the painting, connect element visually and subdue those parts that need it by decreasing contrast in those areas of the painting. You could also accomplish this same process by getting a piece of matte acetate and laying it over your watercolor and test painting a wash shape to see how it looks. Even if the drastic measures don't succeed in making a masterpiece, you will have learned something about the painting process, and that you can make corrections to watercolor. There is always more than one solution. Look at this painting that a student did in a Tom Lynch workshop. The first image is the student's work. The middle image is the correction Tom made to the student's painting (he used a cool wash pretty much all over the painting to give it a rainy day feel. That works to tone down the strong dark band in the original painting that cut the painting horizontally, but it isn't the only solution. My corrections (scrubbing out color from that dark band, heightening sky color, anchoring the distant mountain with a similar green value) works equally well, but retains more of the feel of the student's original.





When a Painting Doesn't Work

Look carefully at your plan before you start painting and continue to look carefully at your painting as you work and at completion. Look at it in a nearly dark room to see if your value structure is reading. Check that each part of the painting is working well, and if not, either crop it or repaint it until the whole painting is unified.

This is a 20 year old painting of mine that I now know does not hang together. It feels like two separate paintings (see the cropped images below).



What could I do to fix this besides cropping it and throwing out the left half of the painting? I need to run the dark of the foreground prickly pears behind the lighter corner of the whiter window shape and connect this dark with the dark area in the upper left corner of the painting. I will need to be careful to keep this dark neutralized so that it doesn't compete with the bird and flowers, and doesn't contrast too greatly with the white frame shape in the center of the painting. The darker value would also help anchor the more stylized prickly pear on the left side of the painting.



This is another painting from the same time period, using a variation on the imagery that focuses on the new growth on the prickly pear. While this painting feels more unified to me, there are still some tweaks I would make if I could get it back from the owner. Using a graduated wash, I'd lower the contrast at the corners of the white frame shape where it abuts the darker values. That small tweak would help keep the focus squarely on the close up of the prickly pear, which is where I want it. I'd also break up that large white area a little more by repeating the stylized plant in that area.



Strategies for Unity

Unity is what we hope to have achieved when we lay down our paintbrush and declare a painting “finished”. Unity is achieved when all the parts of the painting work successfully. The major shapes, color and value patterns — what I call the bones or underlying structure of the painting — make the most important contribution to unity. The little stuff — brushwork, pigment qualities, textural effects, degree of realism and detail — are all things that people enjoy up close, but they aren't what grabs people's attention from across the room and makes them want to take that closer look.

The elements and principles of design are all related, but most of the time, that complexity can be reduced by limiting your choices to one or two elements and/or principles. In Frank Benson's *Geese in Flight*, he lets repetition (the geese) dominate, but gives us enough variety in the bird's shapes, color, value and detail to avoid monotony. He's kept his colors subdued. Finally, note how many places he uses a V shape in his composition. That repetition also contributes to the unity of the painting.



In Judy Pollard's painting, *Tulips*, (below), the underlying structure of circles (in the barrel top, the general mass of the flowers and in the slightly lopsided ring formed by the tulip blossoms), helps unify this painting. She also used value contrast, and color intensity contrast to focus our attention particularly on the more yellow-orange tulip at the lower left. Note how much grayer the reds and oranges are in the other blossoms, particularly the ones near the edges, and how neutralized the rest of her colors are.



Think of the art elements and art principles as blocks you use to build your painting - you can pick and choose which of them to choose and emphasize depending on the needs of the painting and what you want to say about your subject. In Judy's painting, I think she emphasizes color, with contrast/variety and rhythm/ repetition/pattern. What do you think?

- | | |
|---------|---------------------------|
| color | proportion/scale |
| line | dominance/subordination |
| texture | rhythm/repetition/pattern |
| value | movement/direction |
| shape | contrast/variety |
| space | balance |

It doesn't mean there aren't other elements and principles at work, just that some things are given more importance than others, and that is what ultimately creates unity. Without some conscious deci-