



Simply Watercolours

Composition, Part 2 - The Focal Point

According to the Tate Modern:

“Although in a general sense any piece of music or writing, painting or sculpture, can be referred to as a composition, the term usually refers to the arrangement of elements within a work of art. An artist arranges the different elements of an artwork so as to bring them into a relationship satisfactory to them and, it is hoped, the viewer. In the classical tradition, triangular or pyramidal compositions were used because they created a sense of balance and harmony by arranging the figures into a stable overall geometric structure. This can be seen for example in the roughly conical grouping of the animals in George Stubbs’s *Mares and Foals*.

The idea of composition as the adjustment of the relationships of the elements of the work within the border of the canvas, remained unchallenged through the upheavals of the early modern movements such as cubism and abstract art.

Then in the late 1940s the American abstract expressionist painter, Jackson Pollock, introduced what came to be called all-over composition, and the traditional concept became known as relational composition. However, Pollock still generally seems to be composing within the canvas. But at the same time, the abstract expressionist Barnett Newman began making paintings in which large blocks of colour ran from top to bottom of the canvas. These were relational to the extent that the proportions of the colours were adjusted against each other, but they were compositionally radical in that the blocks of colour simply ran off the top and bottom edges of the canvas, which Newman deliberately left unframed. It was Frank Stella in the late 1950s who achieved a composition that was both all over and broke out of the boundaries of the canvas.”

A dictionary definition of ‘Composition’:

“The nature of something's ingredients or constituents; the way in which a whole or mixture is made up.”

Synonyms of ‘Composition’

Configuration, structure, construction, conformation, formation, form, framework, arrangement, organization, layout”

What do we know about composition in a painting? How do we work out the focal point, make it interesting, make people feel excited about looking at it.

A tall thin rectangle tends to lead the eye upwards whereas horizontal rectangles are more relaxing. The formats can be exploited to emphasise your subject.

In figurative art the format and focal point must be compatible or the painting won't work.

You should have at least one focal point in your painting. It is the point that first draws you in then allows the eye to travel around the rest of the painting. I think we all know that it is not a good idea to make your focal point right in the centre of the painting slightly off works best to catch the eye. You can also draw in horizontal thirds for you landscape painting. You can even do both!

The classical way of creating a satisfying composition is to divide an image into vertical thirds in your mind or on your paper, using a view finder can help you can always put the marks on the finder in pencil. Then put the main focal point on one of the dividing lines.

This works for both portrait and landscape. The focal point can be slightly off a line, there are no rules really, you can compose your painting as you wish but try this way first!

Your horizon line though should not be bang slap in the middle your eyes will rest there and the painting will be less exciting or interesting.

Now we come to the balance of your painting. Now you have your focal point you need to make sure your painting is balanced. A small busy area can be compensated by a large simple one.

As a rule, upright and level objects are stable and diagonal objects create movement.

You can also use colour to create calm and tension, a lovely pastel landscape can be interrupted by an aggressive bright red or black, and an unequal tension can be created just by using bold primary colours on a soft background.

Your whole composition will work if thought through before, placement, balance, the space in between (negative space) and colour. But I also think it is very important for you to create the painting that you want not necessarily what the rule book says.

Look at Matisse's (red room painting) everything is balanced, everything you see in it makes your eye move from one point to the other. Where is the focal Point (my eyes always go straight to the woman's face and black hair then travel out from there).

At this point it would be good to thumb through some art books at the library or go on line. some of my favourite artists are Wolf Kahn, Matisse, Mogdaliano, Hoffman, Pollock, Diebenkorn, Van Gogh, Monet who is my absolute favourite. Oh, there are so many others. Elizabeth Blackadder is another. So, find several artists you really love and learn from them.