

ARTISTS' MASTER SERIES

COMPOSITION & NARRATIVE

- GREG RUTKOWSKI
- DEVIN ELLE KURTZ
- NATHAN FOWKES
- JOSHUA CLARE
- DOM LAY

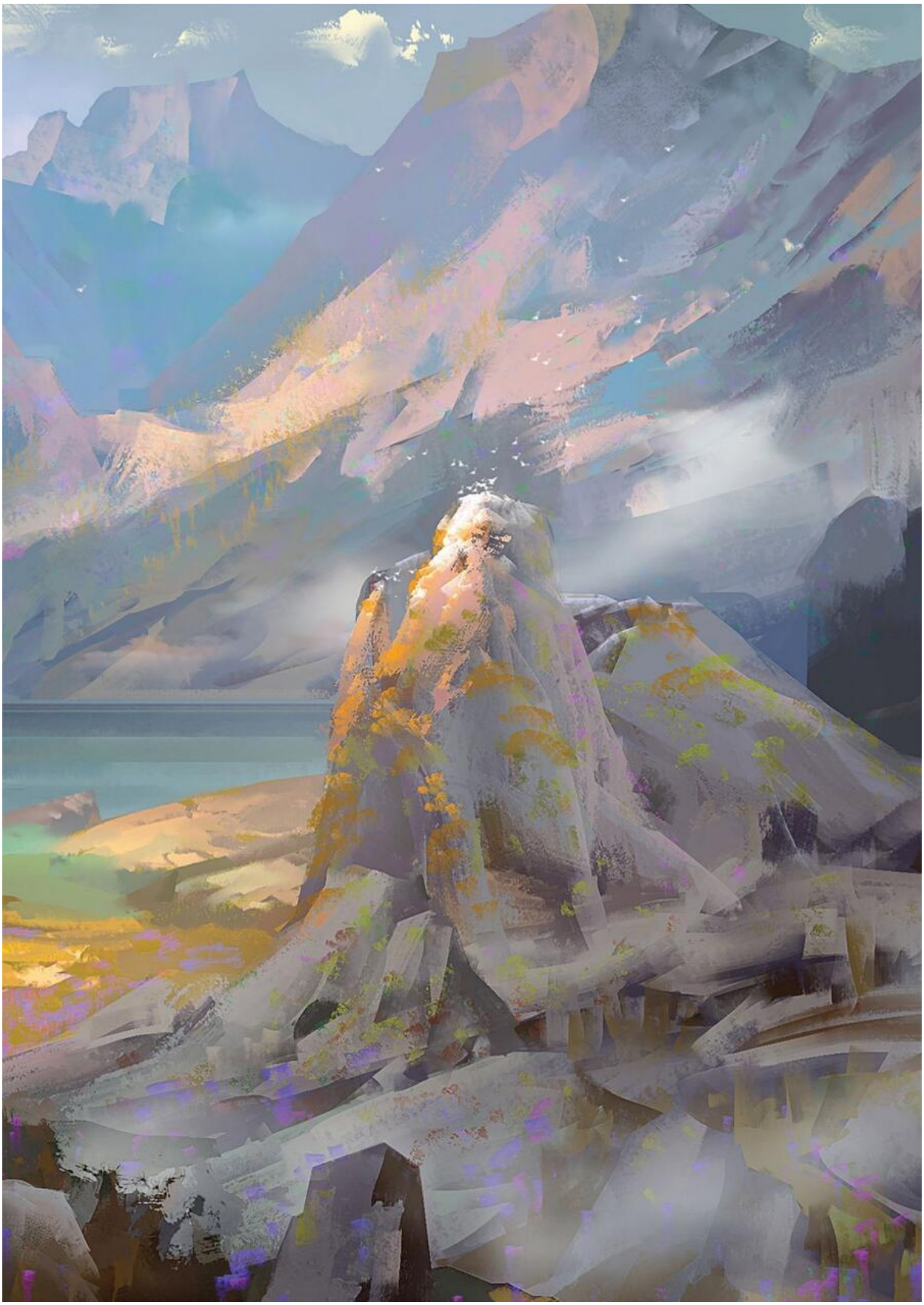


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3dtotalPublishing

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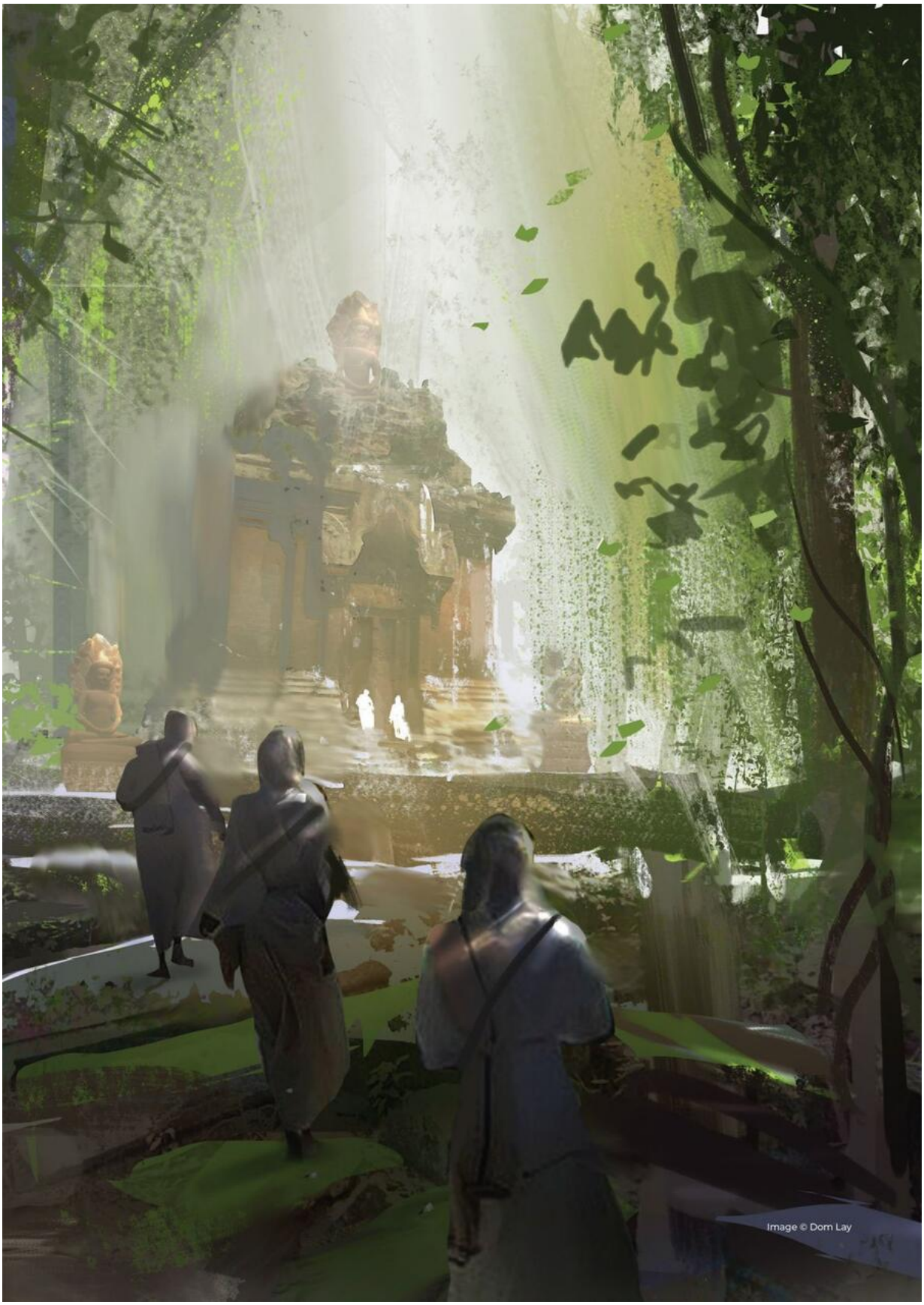

Image © Dom Lay


Image © Joshua Clare

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Welcome to *Artists' Master Series: Composition & Narrative*. This book contains three main sections: the theory chapters, the tutorials, and the gallery.

We recommend starting by reading through Greg Rutkowski's detailed chapters on **Composition** (pages 8 to 57) and **Narrative** (pages 58 to 89) to grow your knowledge and understanding of these core topics.

The first chapter introduces the theory of composition and its use in art, as well as other media, before looking back through history to explore how it has been used in a variety of imagery, from cave paintings to modern-day digital masterpieces. It will then tackle compositional rules and laws, including the golden ratio, Fibonacci spiral, and rule of thirds, plus other elements of composition, such as shape, proximity and scale, rhythm and movement, perspective, texture, and contrast. Later sections unpack the use of color, value, and light in composition, before discussing further types of composition, such as landscape, portrait, and still life. Once you have a good grasp of these, the chapter closes by examining how, and why, artists may break the laws of composition.

The second chapter introduces narrative and storytelling in art, before discussing how artwork has been used to tell a story throughout history. It looks at the use of storytelling in single-image illustration, as well as storyboarding, then explores the many different ways to build narrative in a painting. The section on building narrative techniques examines the role of foreshadowing, setting, point of view, symbolism and metaphor, involving the viewer, personifying an animal character, exaggeration, humor, ambiguity, and simplicity and complexity in telling a story through imagery. It finishes by examining how composition can be used to add to the narrative, including the use of a focal point.

While the four **Tutorials** by Devin Elle Kurtz (page 92), Nathan Fowkes (page 132), Joshua Clare (page 164), and Dom Lay (page 196) can be treated as stand-alone projects, you will benefit from reading the knowledge and terminology shared in the introductory chapters of the book before attempting them. Each tutorial artist has an individual style and creative background, with their own approach to using composition and narrative in their artwork. Follow along to see how they apply their knowledge of composition and narrative in practice.

Finally, the **Gallery** (pages 234 to 275) showcases the portfolios of the four tutorial artists, plus six additional professionals, each of whom shares valuable insights into their use of composition and narrative in their artwork.

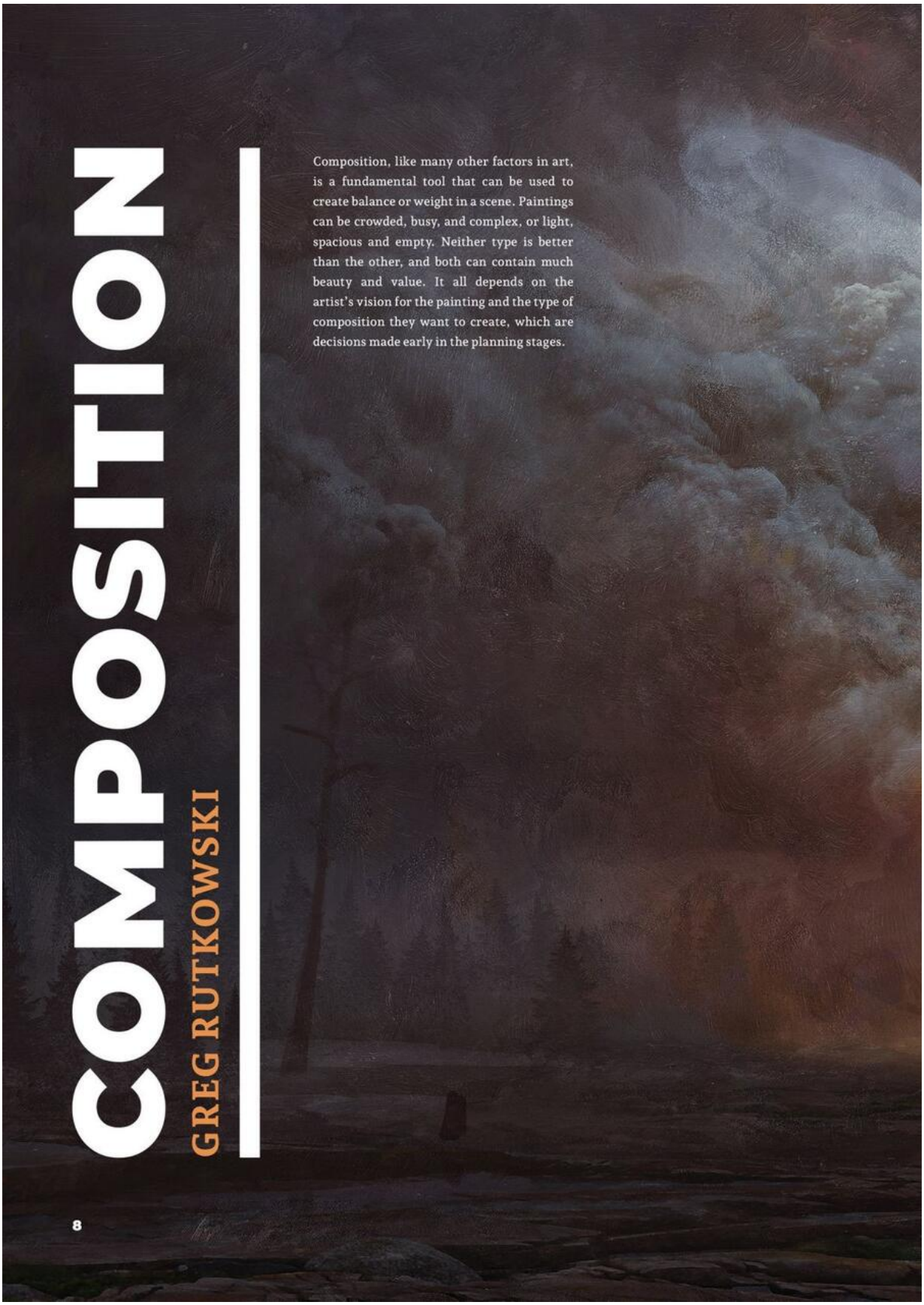



ARTIST TIPS
Throughout the book, look out for these useful colored boxes, where artists share pro tips and bonus advice.
Image © Devin Elle Kurtz

COMPOSITION

GREG RUTKOWSKI

Composition, like many other factors in art, is a fundamental tool that can be used to create balance or weight in a scene. Paintings can be crowded, busy, and complex, or light, spacious and empty. Neither type is better than the other, and both can contain much beauty and value. It all depends on the artist's vision for the painting and the type of composition they want to create, which are decisions made early in the planning stages.





WHAT IS COMPOSITION?

To put it simply, composition is the placement of figures, shapes, lines, and objects in a specific order. It occurs in painting, sculpture, music, and film. For instance, a musician builds a song by recording different instruments and vocals and placing the music in an order that sounds the best to them. Similarly, a photographer tries to capture the best shot by changing the view (01). These are both examples of composition.

Composition occurs in other parts of life, too. A child will try to place colorful blocks in a way that looks appealing to them. My grandma used to gather flowers, grass, and herbs and arrange them in a bouquet.

Composition is inseparable from creation at any skill level. As children, most of us followed specific rules that we copied from our parents, or from something we saw on television or in a book. You will often see children starting their artistic adventure with a simple drawing like a sun as a yellow circle, with lines that symbolize rays. Children usually place the sun in the upper corner of the image and fill the rest of the space with a small house or clouds and people **(02)**. This is one of the earliest composition patterns that we learn as a young human being. Image **03** is another example of a child's approach to composition, with layered landscape elements.



01 This is a photo from a trip to Austria. As you can see, the first shot has some compositional issues (marked in red). The second photo is cropped and you can see how much more readable and calm the shot is.



02 My six-year-old daughter, Gaia, created this drawing. Sun, clouds, and grass are depicted in a very symbolic way.



03 This is another drawing by my daughter. Children have a specific way of building landscapes in terms of composition.

Whenever you try to build or create something, you are subconsciously working on the composition. Usually, it affects the early stages of work. The initial lines or shapes that you draw on the canvas are your first idea of how the artwork will look in further steps. Before you dive deep into the details, first you must draw a draft that will contain the most important parts of the painting. Once you lock in your initial idea for the composition, you can go further and start working on the rest of the painting **(04)**.

A. For this painting, I started building the composition by adding large shapes of colors to mark the most important parts in the correct color as a quick guideline for further steps.

B. I then began introducing smaller shapes to indicate more variety in the landscape. I used bolder colors and shapes, slowly building the image toward the final stage.

C. The last phase of the painting shows more details, with different shapes and brushstroke directions creating a more organic and realistic look.

As you can see, you can't really paint or draw without thinking about where to put your pen or brush; from the very first dot or line, you are working on the composition, no matter the level of skill. The more you're aware of the structure of the composition, and the compositional tools available to you, the more control you will have over your future projects.



04 The development of even a simple landscape painting involves considering the composition.

Image 04c, *Untitled* © Greg Rutkowski

COMPOSITION IN HISTORY

Looking back through the history of art, humans began drawing more like children do today, following a simplified arrangement of forms, and developed into using more intricate compositions.

Still, from the very beginning, composition was essential to artistic creation – for example, humans making cave paintings had to plan where to put handprints on a cave wall **(05)**. In the modern day, artists work hard on numerous compositional sketches using modern technologies, such as 2D and 3D software or photography **(06)**.

As thousands of years of history unfolded, we worked hard on our artistic development, each time trying to capture life, history, or imagination, achieving slightly better results over the years.



05 *Hands at the Cuevas de las Manos upon Río Pinturas*, near the town of Perito Moreno in Santa Cruz Province, Argentina. The art in the cave is dated between 7300 BC and 700 AD.



06 I created this painting in the old masters' painterly style, using digital software to imitate real paint and traditional brushstrokes. While its composition may seem simple at first glance, complexity isn't limited to composition; it can also relate to the way an artwork is painted. The complexity of this piece is due to the combination of digital software, custom brushes, knowledge, and the experience required to create it.

Image 05, *Hands at the Cuevas de las Manos upon Río Pinturas*, photographed by Mariano Cecowskil, 2005, available on Wikimedia Commons under the CC BY-SA 3.0 license | Image 06, *Study 56* © Greg Rutkowski



Even across just a few centuries, we can see how much composition has changed, comparing the simple, flat paintings of the fourteenth century **(07)** to images with more perspective and clearly defined focal points in the fifteenth century **(08)**, to paintings with even further depth and complexity of layout in the seventeenth century **(09)**. Another two hundred years later and there existed paintings depicting battles with every detail reflecting a symbolic meaning, such as this example painted by Jan Matejko in 1878 **(10)**.

07 *The Calling of the Apostles Peter and Andrew* (1308–1311) by Duccio di Buoninsegna.



08 *The Adoration of the Magi* (c. 1450) by Giovanni di Paolo.



09 *The Fall of Phaeton* (c. 1604/1605, probably reworked c. 1606/1608) by Sir Peter Paul Rubens.



10 *The Battle of Grunwald* (1878) by Jan Matejko.

Image 10, *The Battle of Grunwald* (1878) by Jan Matejko. Displayed in the National Museum in Warsaw. Photo by Adrian Grycuk, available on Wikimedia Commons under the CC BY-SA 3.0 license



11a My first attempt at this painting in 2016. As you can see, I initially considered a vertical composition with the focus set on the dragon.

You can immediately tell how much progress has been made by artists throughout the ages, particularly considering different technical limitations and advancements. In the Middle Ages and later eras, people were able to paint and draw using natural handmade tools, such as charcoal sticks, brushes, and pastels. With progress in the art industry, an increasing number of tools became more widely available, which pushed techniques further, enabling new styles and execution. With advancements in tools and a deeper understanding of mathematics (learn more about this on page 16), artists started experimenting with bolder compositions. Later in art history, we then see artists breaking composition rules (see page 54).

But no other era has had such a big influence on technique as the digital era. Today you can easily change the proportions of a painting, flip the digital canvas in any direction, and return to your previous work, all in one click. Artists couldn't afford to carry out such experiments in older times, because such amendments were expensive and time consuming. Today you can change anything and everything, make dozens of copies of your painting, and decide which one you like best **(11)**. This creates numerous different opportunities for finding new solutions and techniques, and all you have to pay is your electricity bill.

Of course, this doesn't mean we're better than the "old masters" who devoted their whole lives to art, learning and creating work much more slowly than us today. It simply means that we can produce a lot more with less cost and in less time. This provides us with the opportunity to try various compositions in different software to push the progress much further than before.



11b Using Adobe Photoshop to expand the canvas and add more content, creating a much more interesting composition.

Image 11, *Dragon Valley* © Greg Rutkowski

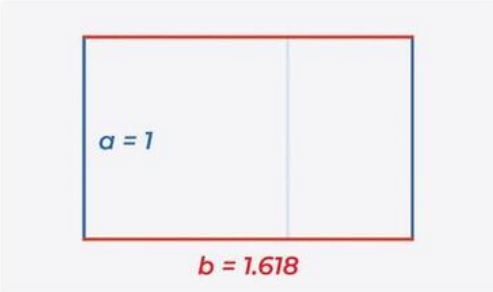
GOLDEN RATIO

The golden ratio (also known as divine proportion or divine section) is the ratio of a special rectangle where the longer side is 1.618033988875 times the length of the shorter side (12). We can translate the golden ratio into a line split into a long and short section (13), where the total length of the line divided by (a) is the same ratio as (a) divided by (b) – both resulting in 1.618.

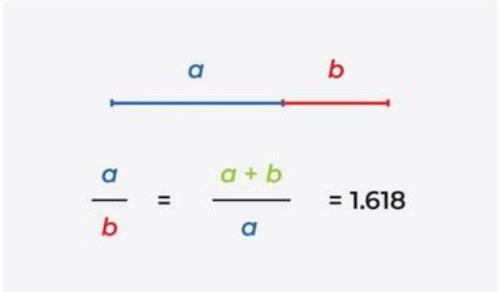
The golden ratio is one of the keys to creating a perfectly balanced composition. We can find the closest example of its divinity in human anatomy. If we measure a hand and count it as 1, the forearm will have a length of a hand multiplied by 1.618033988875 (signified by the Greek letter phi) **(14)**. This ratio can be used in many other parts of the body, such as the fingers **(15)**. Somehow nature uses this number to grow its organisms in a very specific way.

The golden ratio can also be translated into art. Using these proportions, we can get surprisingly good results. Divine section was first used in ancient architecture, for example Phidias (500 BC–432 BC), a Greek sculptor and mathematician, studied phi and applied it to the design of sculptures for the Parthenon.

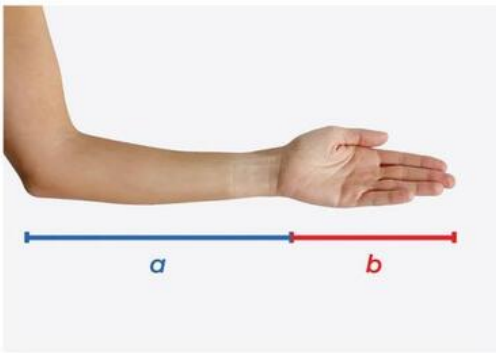
Leonardo da Vinci's use of the golden ratio is perhaps the most famous. He focused his anatomical drawings around divine proportion. His drawings show us how far his analysis went into the proportions of the human body **(16)**. This discovery pushed artistic knowledge of human anatomy to another level. Many years after da Vinci's art, we still use it as a reference.



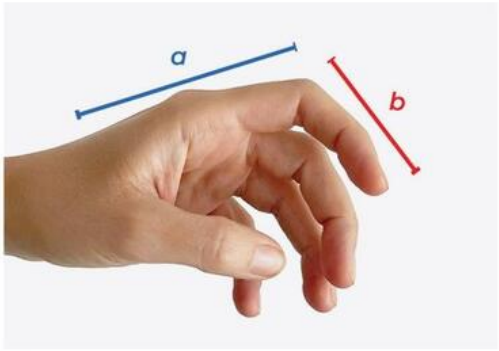
12 This is an example of a golden rectangle, where the longer sides are 1.618 times longer than the shorter ones. The gray line shows that a golden rectangle can be made from a square and a smaller golden rectangle.



13 Similar to the rectangle in image 12, you can see the golden ratio on a simple line. Using the 1.618 ratio, we can divide a line into two parts, where one part is longer (a) and one shorter (b), in the same proportions as the rectangle. The total length of the line (a + b) is 1.618 times longer than (a) alone.



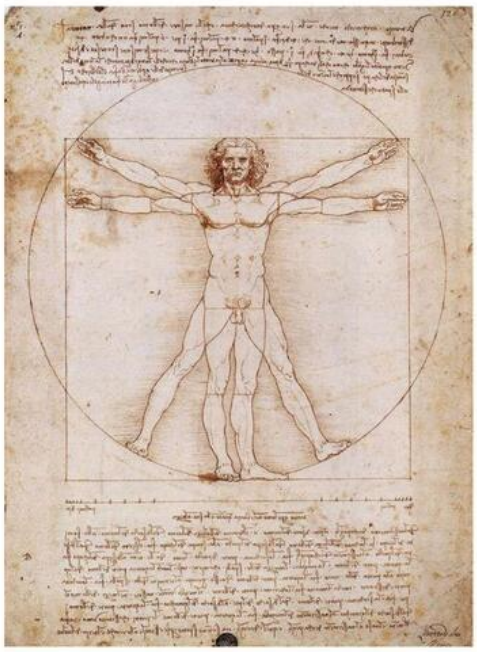
14 We can translate knowledge about the golden ratio to the human body. This example shows divine proportion on the human forearm and hand.



15 Very similar division can be seen on different parts of the body.

The golden ratio is one of the fundamentals that every artist should be familiar with. It helps us to solve many questions when creating art, such as where to place an object. Any distance between objects in a painting can be set by positioning them according to golden ratio proportions.

For example, a tree in a simple landscape scene will be much more pleasant to look at if the golden ratio is used to set the distance between the tree and the canvas edge. You could also use those 1.618 proportions in the tree shape. Image **17** also shows how the placement of the subject can be matched to golden division, with the character positioned on the line that divides the frame into squares that are 1.618 times the size of each other. Of course, you don't have to measure it exactly. It's more about keeping this ratio in mind so you can judge if something is within those proportions or not. You can even use the golden rectangle as a guide for the framing of your painting.



16 *Vitruvian Man* (1492) by Leonardo da Vinci. You can see how da Vinci drew a human silhouette in a perfect circle and marked division lines according to the golden ratio.



17 Demonstrating the use of the golden ratio in my own work.

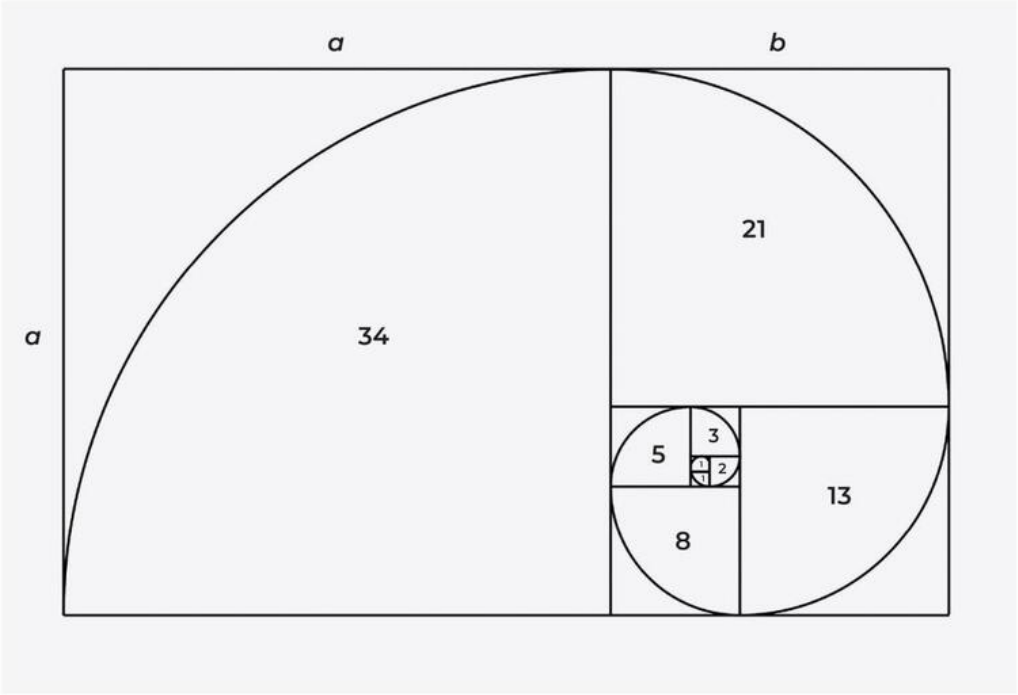
Image 17, *Winter Journey* © Greg Rutkowski

FIBONACCI SPIRAL

The Fibonacci spiral is a continuation of the golden ratio. It is a visual representation of the Fibonacci sequence, which is a series of specific numbers: 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34... Each number is created by adding the previous two numbers together. Many sources claim the sequence was first discovered, or "invented," by Italian mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci, who was born around AD 1170.

The Fibonacci spiral sits inside the golden rectangle. It's drawn inside squares by connecting the corners of boxes whose sides are the length of ascending numbers in the Fibonacci sequence (that is, 1 × 1, 2 × 2, 3 × 3, 5 × 5, 8 × 8, and so on) **(18)**. The squares fit together perfectly because the ratio between the numbers in the Fibonacci sequence is very close to the golden ratio.

Although the mathematical explanation can sound complicated, you can simply visualize the Fibonacci spiral as guidance for your composition. The golden rectangle can be used as a simple layout that will bring your painting better proportion; the Fibonacci spiral takes the golden division further and lures the attention of the observer to your painting's focal point. In painting **19** you can see how I used the Fibonacci spiral to create flow that draws attention to a focal point, which is the character in this example.



18 A Fibonacci spiral drawn in the golden rectangle, with a diagonal bend in each square forming the spiral.

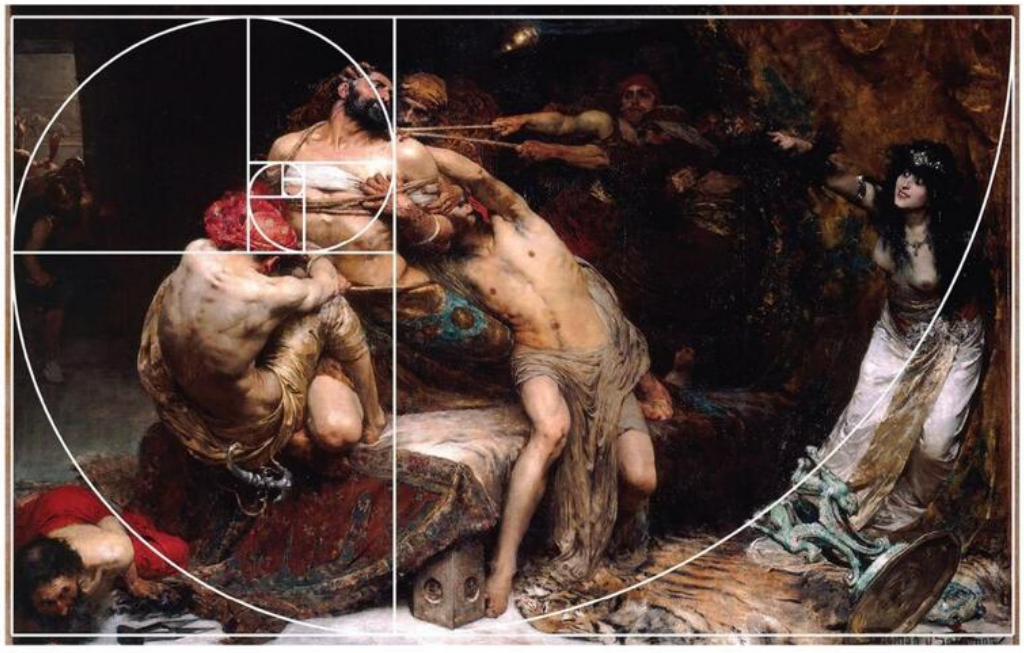


19 An example of the Fibonacci spiral used in my own work.

Image 19, *Morning Lights* © Greg Rutkowski



20 *The Adoration of the Kings* (1500–1599) by Raphael.



21 *Samson* (1887) by Solomon J. Solomon.



22 East Facade of the Parthenon and the Temple of Rome and Augustus on March 5, 2020, photographed by George E. Koronaios.

The Fibonacci spiral has been used over many centuries as guidance for artists **(20 & 21)**. It has been used in various fields such as architecture, sculpture, paintings, and engineering. Although the Fibonacci sequence was discovered in AD 1170, the first noticeable pattern was used in 495–429 BC, in the Parthenon in ancient Athens **(22)**. Humans tend to follow the divinity of natural forms, and as the Fibonacci spiral can be observed on things like snail shells and sunflowers, these might have been objects of analysis in ancient times.

As with the golden ratio, the Fibonacci spiral is a fundamental technique that always works and can help you to build a classical scene using classical techniques.

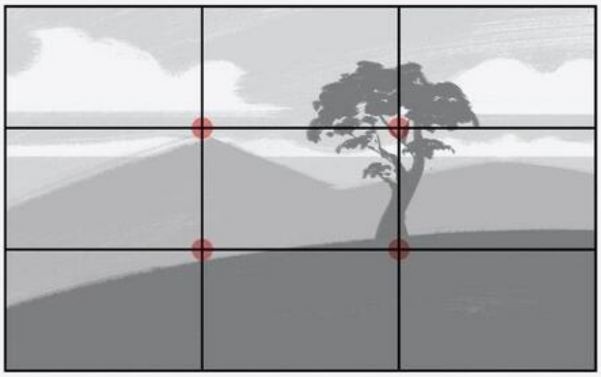
RULE OF THIRDS

The rule of thirds is a composition guideline widely used by painters, photographers, filmmakers, and designers. The idea is that it creates a more balanced and pleasing composition, with the additional empty space helping to focus the viewer's eye on the subject of the image.

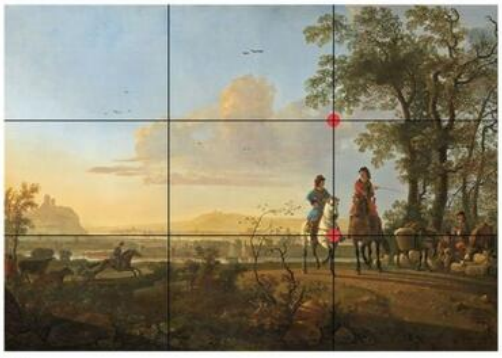
The rule of thirds places your subject in the left or right third of an image, leaving the other two thirds more open **(23)**. It was first written down in 1797 by John Thomas Smith in his book *Remarks on Rural Scenery*. Of course, many artists used this technique, whether consciously or not, before John Thomas Smith's book **(24)**.

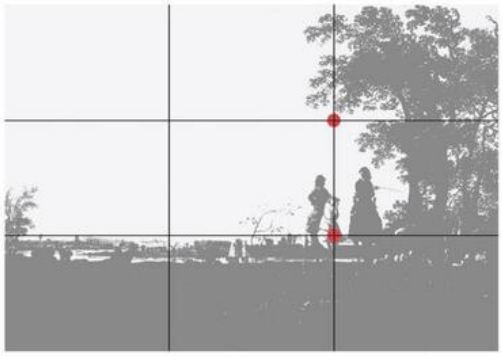
For simplicity, you can prepare a grid made from nine rectangles and place your subject on the intersection of the lines. For example, in image **25**, the rule of thirds focuses on three intersections: the head of the dragon, the battle crowd in the background, and the castle gate. These are the most crucial parts of the painting that carry the information and catch the viewer's attention.

Image **26** shows the use of a whole line on a rule of thirds grid, not just an intersection. The main ship's masts are aligned to the left-hand line; the ship is placed in the middle of one third of the image, with other ships filling the opposite third, balancing the composition.



23 Here, the tree appears on the intersections of one third of the image, and the mountain in the middle ground lines up with the intersection on the opposite third of the image, creating balance. You can also see that the foreground, middle ground, and background roughly line up with the horizontal thirds.

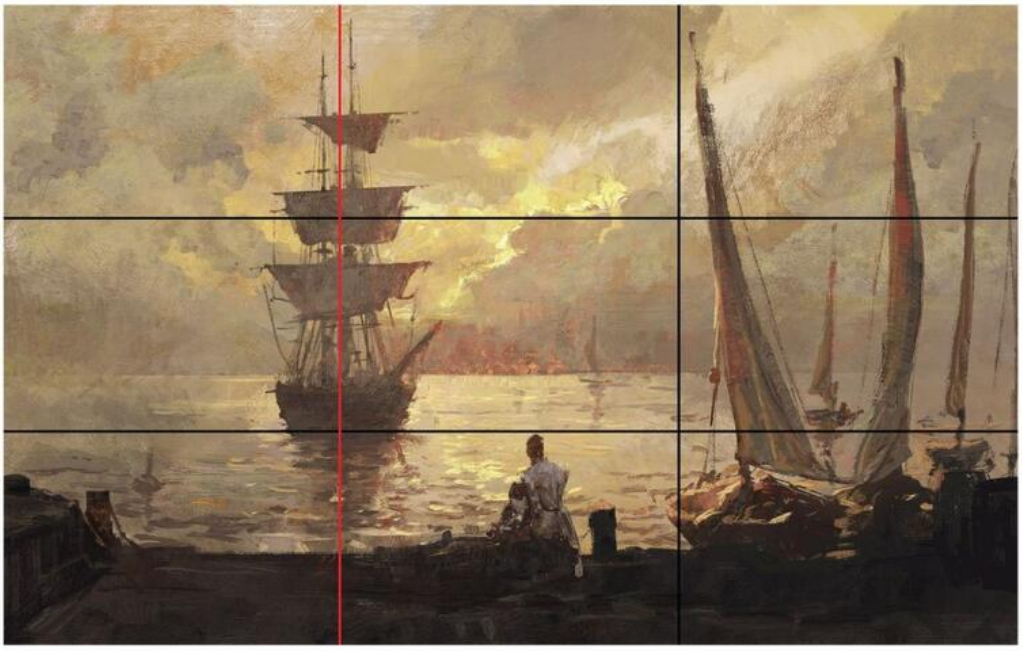




24 *Horsemen and Herdsmen with Cattle* (1655/1660) by Aelbert Cuyp. In this image you can see how a seventeenth-century artist used the rule of thirds to balance their painting. I've desaturated and separated certain values to highlight this more clearly.



25 The rule of thirds shown in my own painting, with the crucial parts on the intersecting lines.



26 The main focus of this painting is placed on a vertical line of the "rule of thirds" grid.

Image 25, *Castle Defense* © Greg Rutkowski | Image 26, *Untitled* © Greg Rutkowski

OTHER ELEMENTS OF COMPOSITION

Composition is more fluid than you may first realize. In addition to the golden ratio, Fibonacci spiral, and rule of thirds, we can use other elements such as shape, scale, rhythm, perspective, texture, and contrast to influence composition.

SHAPE

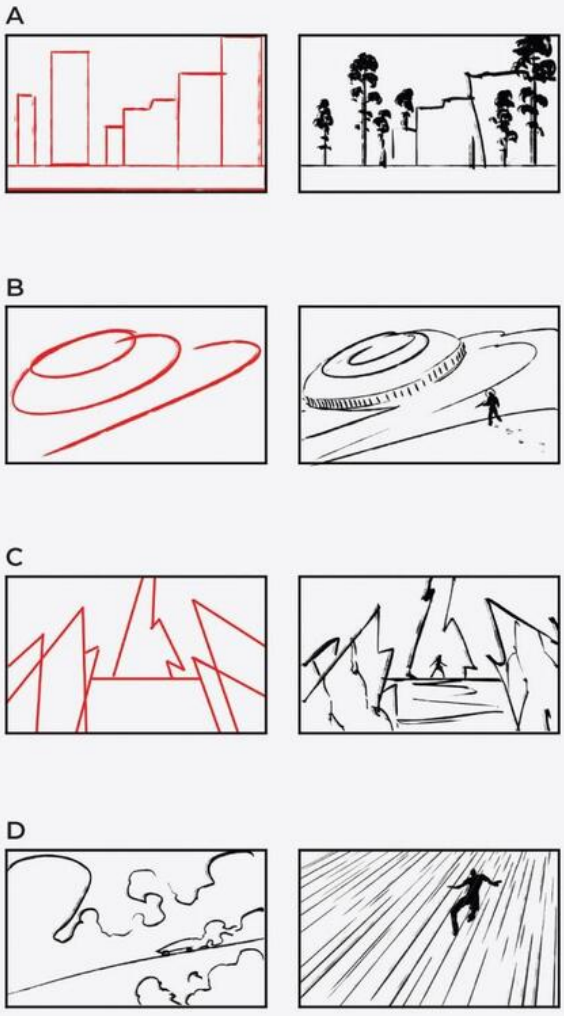
Shape is one of the most noticeable factors that changes a composition. The human eye is used to looking at the variety of the shapes around it. By building your composition in a particular way, you can use shape to add information and mood to the scene, as well as draw the viewer's attention to a particular area. For example, if you want to build an intense atmosphere, a dynamic composition with bolder and rougher shapes is preferable to using calm and round forms. Looking at image **27**:

A. Trees and rock formations constitute rectangular shapes, creating a calm and steady shot.

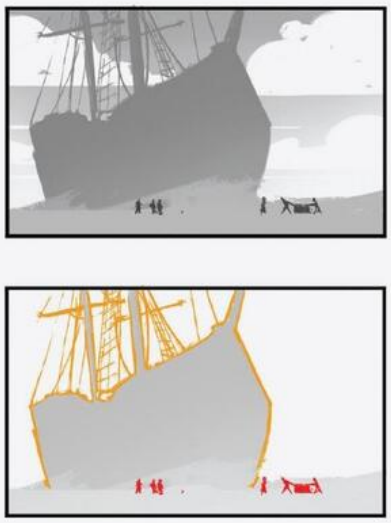
B. Diagonal and circular shapes present the focal point as a round and simple form.

C. Geometrical and triangular rocks lure the attention to the main subject and create tension.

D. Different uses of random lines and shapes help create a solid composition.



27 A few simple examples of how you can use shape to impact composition.



28 Scale and proximity are another useful compositional tool.

PROXIMITY & SCALE

Very often, scale is used to portray the true size of something monumental, such as mountains, sea, and buildings. Adding a small silhouette of a person or animals can help demonstrate the differences in size.

Proximity helps the artist to build the scale or importance of particular parts of the painting by managing the intensity or value of the foreground, middle ground, and background. Many landscape artists have used proximity in their paintings in a similar way, marking the subject or focal point.

For example, in image **28**, smaller foreground characters are used to show the size and importance of the ship in the background. Simple shapes indicate the ship in lighter tones, which creates an illusion of distance and separates the background from the foreground characters.



29 *Sea Serpent* by Devin Elle Kurtz (see tutorial on page 92). This painting is a perfect example of using proximity in the composition. Foreground elements are darker and create a contrast with the background objects, which are affected by aerial perspective to emphasize the scale and the distance between the photographer in the foreground and dragons in the background.

Image 29, *Sea Serpent* © Devin Elle Kurtz

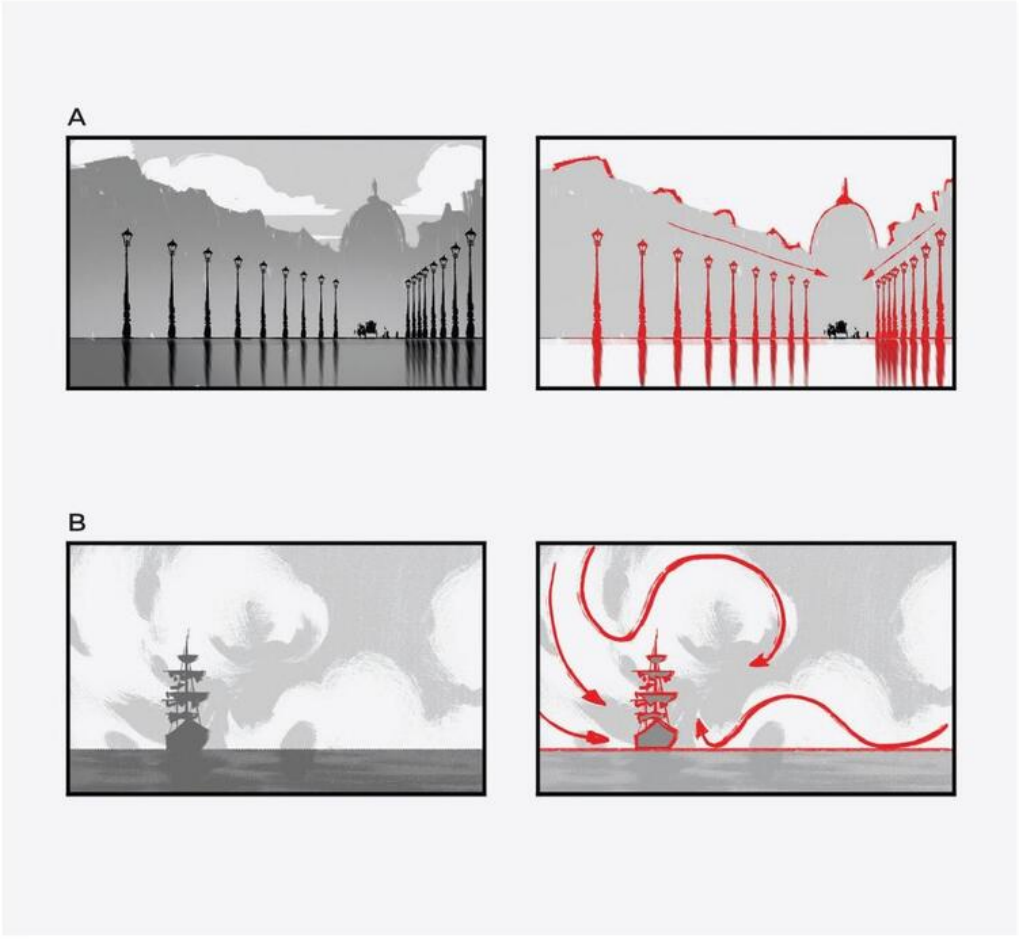
RHYTHM & MOVEMENT

In composition, using rhythm and movement means placing similar shapes, such as objects or brushstrokes, to create flow and lead the eye in a particular direction. Very often it lures the viewer to the focal point (but not always). For example, in figure **30**:

A. Lanterns and perspective create rhythm that directs the eye to the central building where there is a vanishing point.

B. This sketch is all about the flow of brushstrokes and creative freedom. There is a specific rhythm and direction to the clouds that draws focus to the ship.

Rhythm and movement can also be used to create tension and atmosphere. Vincent van Gogh's paintings are a good example of this. He built his compositions using directional brushstrokes, creating unusual atmospheres **(31)**. You can spot a similar compositional approach in Claude Monet's art **(32)** and many of Edvard Munch's paintings **(33)**.



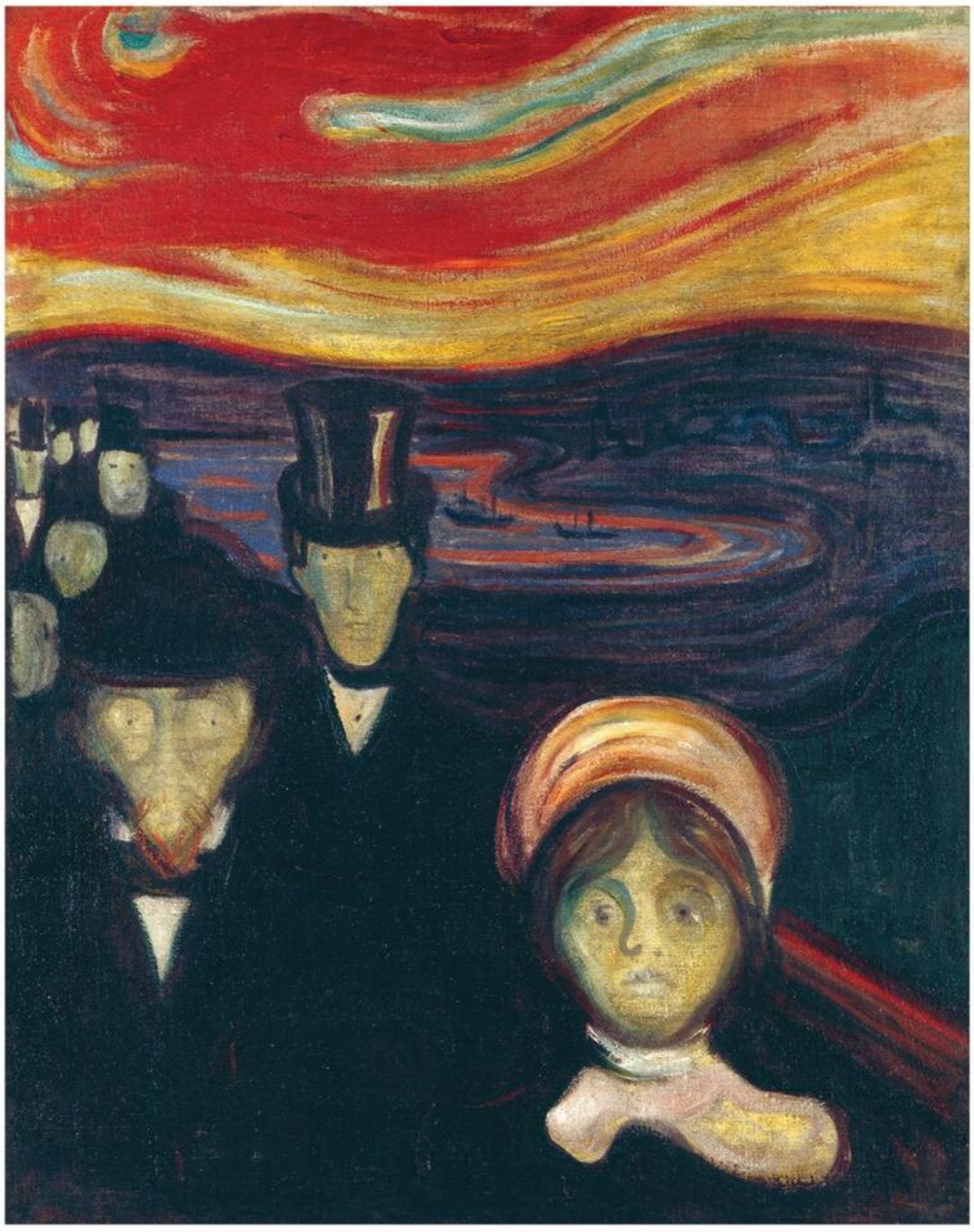
30 Use of rhythm and movement to direct the eye and create focal points.



31 *The Starry Night* (1889) by Vincent van Gogh. Van Gogh used impasto to emphasize rhythm and flow.



32 *The Houses of Parliament, Sunset* (1903) by Claude Monet. This painting shows how Monet used brushstrokes to imitate the movement of waves.



33 *Anxiety* (1894) by Edvard Munch.

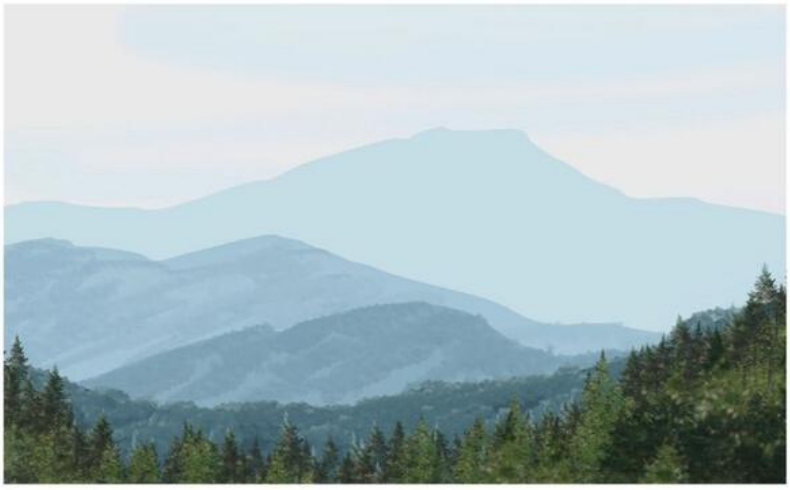
PERSPECTIVE

Perspective can be used as a composition tool in many ways. One important type is aerial perspective, also known as atmospheric perspective. This is an atmospheric effect where the objects that are closer to the viewer appear to have more contrast, details, and saturation. Objects that are further away appear to have less contrast, fewer details, and less saturation, creating an illusion of depth. Fog or smog are similar to aerial perspective, but use less saturation.

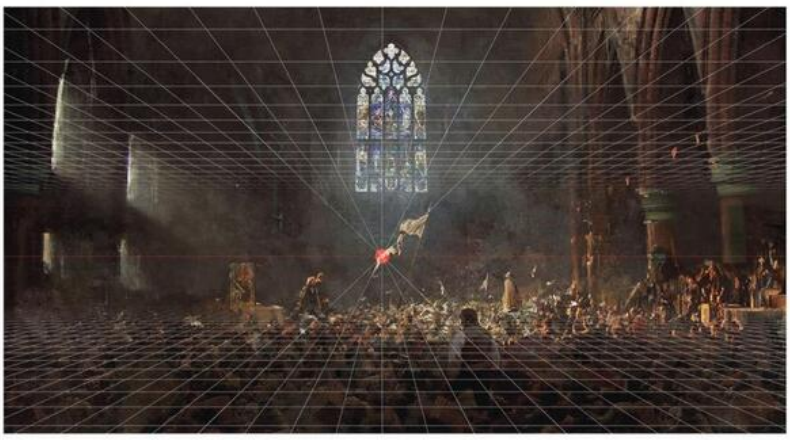
Aerial perspective divides a scene into planes, adding a depth **(34)**.

Another use of perspective as a composition tool can be found in linear perspective, which is the use of parallel lines disappearing toward one or more vanishing points. Because of its simplicity, linear perspective is a great tool to establish a wider and more complex composition. One vanishing point is perfect where there is one focal point in the center of a composition **(35)**. Two-point and three-point perspective can also be used. These are useful in creating architectural scenes where you can clearly see the division between vanishing points and all the lines that come together to create more depth in the scene.

Both linear and aerial perspective can be used at the same time to add even more depth and realism to a painting.



34 This example shows how aerial perspective divides an image into planes.



35 Here I've applied a linear perspective layer to show how simple perspective can help you build bigger, more complex scenes.

Image 34 © Greg Rutkowski | Image 35, *Revolution* © Greg Rutkowski

TEXTURE

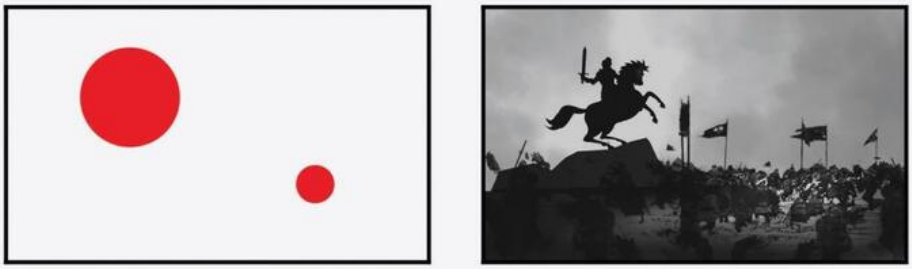
Texture can be another useful tool to help build composition. Depending on your initial idea for the painting, textured surfaces or objects can be an interesting and important part of the composition (**36**) or it can build a focal point in a certain area (**37**). Texture can also be used in relation to rhythm and movement, as you saw in the examples on page 26.

VALUE & LIGHT

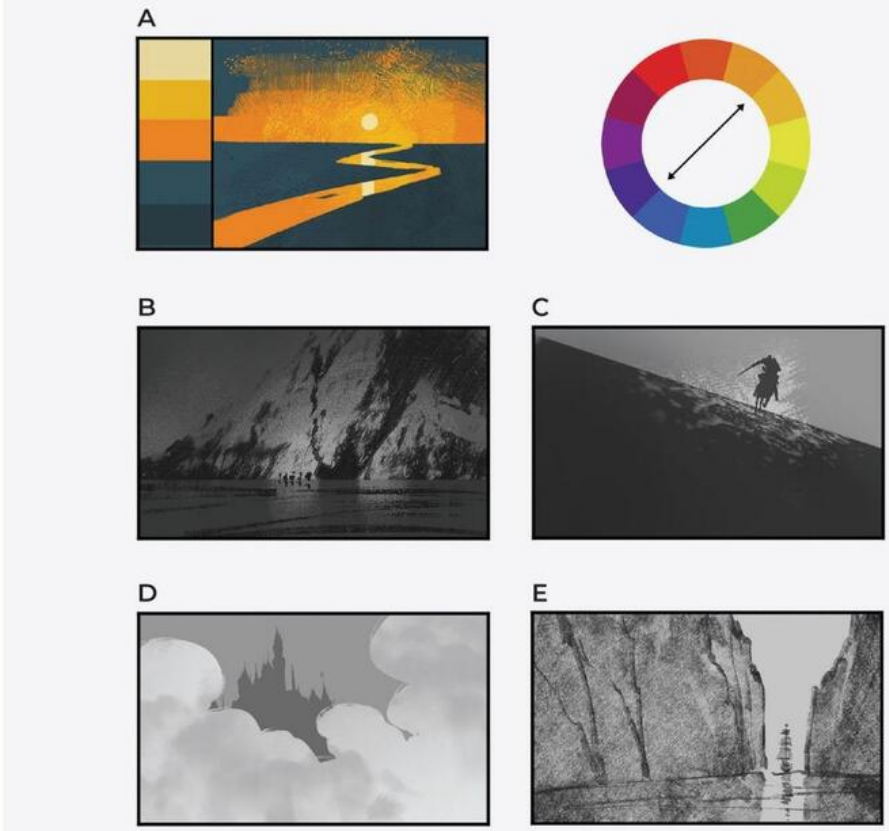
Texture is strictly connected to value and light. Without light, you wouldn't be able to tell what type of surface you are looking at. In terms of value, each surface has a texture and brightness. Value is an outcome of the existing lighting setup and texture is an outcome of light and value in the particular scene. So, each time you decide to use texture as a tool in a composition, also think about light and value while creating it.



36 This example shows how texture can affect composition. Adding more complexity in texture to the central area in the painting creates a focal point.



37 This example shows how the big, high-contrast shape of the knight on the left catches the viewer's attention at first glance. However, adding a more textured area on the right (marked as a smaller red circle) creates a second point of interest that also draws attention.



38 Examples of contrast being used in different compositions.

CONTRAST

You can bring focus to a certain part of a painting by increasing the contrast in that area of the composition. Contrast can occur in forms such as color, value, texture, shape, and size **(38)**:

A. This example shows how color can contrast with another color, bringing attention to the contrasting area. This example uses colors on the opposite side of the color wheel.

B. In this example, the use of higher contrast values in one area defines that place as a focal point.

C. Increasing the use of texture in one area can catch the attention of the viewer.

D. Changing the shape from circular and round to straight and sharp also works to create a focal point.

E. This example shows how large masses are just a background feature while the smaller size of the ship attracts the most attention.

COLOR

Color has always been one of the most important elements in painting. With the right lighting setup, it can create unbelievable changes in mood. Subtle transitions between tones can add beautiful and calm vibes, while harsher colors with bigger contrast can change the mood of the painting drastically.

For example, images **39** and **40** are by the same artist. Claude Monet painted the same topic from a very similar angle but at two different times of day, with two different color palettes. What you notice immediately is how the mood differs in the two paintings.

Throughout art history, color has also been used symbolically. One of the greatest examples of using color symbolism is Paul Gauguin's *Vision after the Sermon* **(41)**. Gauguin used red as a dominant color to represent danger and violence in the fight between Jacob and the angel.

As well as being used for mood and symbolism, color can also modify or build composition. It is important to remember that color can help you to create a good, balanced composition or destroy the balance and bring chaos to the image. For example, in image **42**:

A. The first example maintains a good balance between value, saturation (chroma), and hue.

B. The second example is less pleasing to the eye and creates distraction by pushing the background forward.



39 *Rouen Cathedral. Facade (Sunset)* (1892)
by Claude Monet.



40 *Rouen Cathedral* (1893)
by Claude Monet.



41 *Vision after the Sermon* (1888) by Paul Gauguin.





42 These two examples show how much difference can be achieved by only changing hue and saturation.





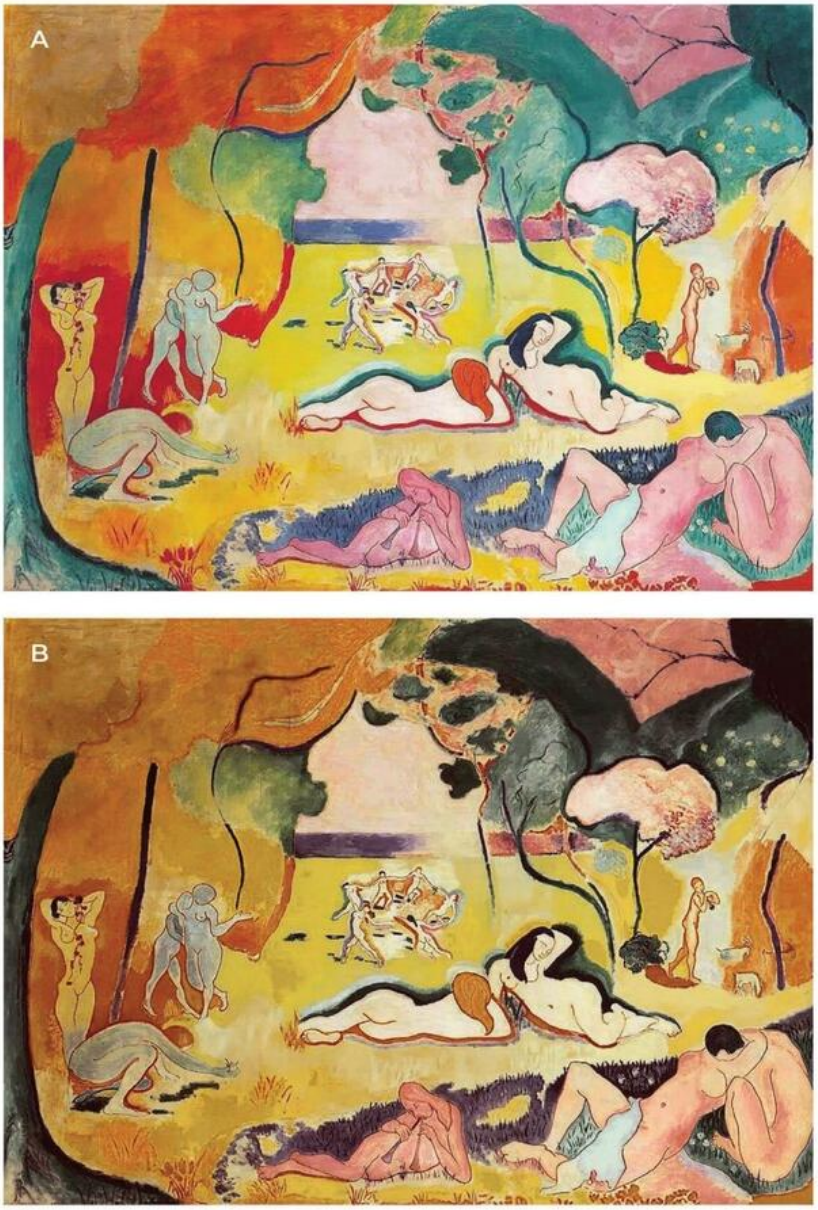
43 In the first image you can see that everything looks flat in terms of color. Nothing stands out, therefore the focal point is not that obvious. Adding a flare of orange to the torchlight and casting light on the tree in the second image lures our attention to the focal point.

Whenever you start painting your focal point, think about color relations. Using color, you can either dim less important parts of the image and bring to the front major objects, or exaggerate the mood and meaning of specific parts by adding more vibrancy and saturation in those areas. Color can be used as a guide for our attention, leading us to the focal point. Lighting a torch in a dark forest will attract the attention of the viewer instantly; a lightning strike during a storm will also draw attention with its brightness and sharpness against dark clouds. The same goes for the use of vibrant color or a different tone in your painting. Each time you decide to use bold and distinctive colors, consider the attention you will bring to that area **(43)**.

Color is also used to balance the weight of forms. Darker and colder tones will create a much heavier look for the subject and leave space for lighter, warmer, and more vibrant colors.

Sometimes color can be used to break the rules. Very often it is the form of expression on the painting, especially when artists want to deliver something really unique. It is very noticeable in the fauvism style, where painters mostly used strong and vivid colors, often breaking the more conservative rules held by other art styles, as seen in image **44a**.

Image 43 by Greg Rutkowski



44 *Le bonheur de vivre* (1905–1906) by Henri Matisse (version B altered). This example shows how color can affect composition. Image A contains a wide variety of bold colors. In image B, I tweak the colors to give the painting a more unified color palette. While the color expression is much more visible and vibrant in the original painting, it risks becoming a distraction from the subjects. Despite the central composition, the focal point seems unclear. My altered version shows how calm, unified colors can add more readability to the composition.

VALUE

In art, value is a measurement of grayscale ranging from white to black (45) – basically, how dark or light on a grayscale range something is. Using a simple gradient from white to black, you can easily find every value on a painting and check if its brightness is the same as or similar to other objects (46).

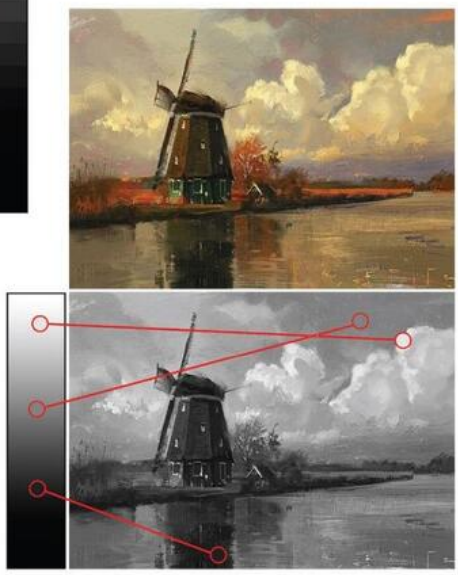
A value check is one of the most demanding challenges during the process of painting. This is because whenever you are about to use a color, add a light, or decide the surface material of an object, you simultaneously have to determine how bright or dark the object is going to be without losing balance.

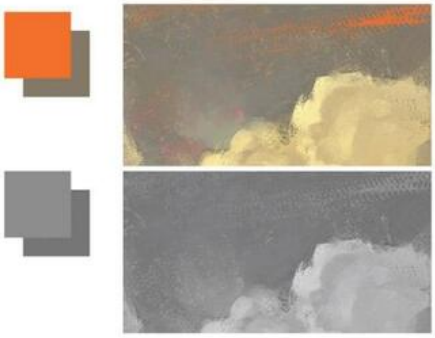
For example, in image **47** you can see how the orange brushstroke is visible due to its vivid color, but if you check its grayscale value, it does not stand out from the background. Darkening the value makes it stand out much further from the background, highlighting how much difference a single brushstroke can make in a painting **(48)**.



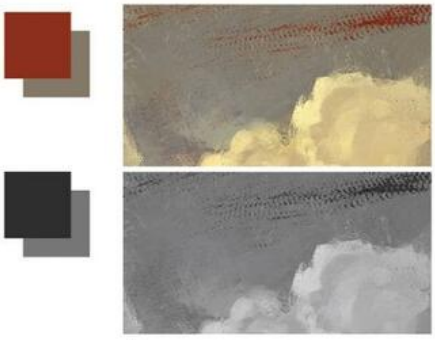
45 A grayscale range image divided into visible tones.

46 This example shows how much value information you can get by desaturating the painting and picking just a few tones to check the variety of value.





47 This is a small section of the previous painting, showing the difference between the color version and the black-and-white version. Note how the orange brushstroke is visible with its vivid color, but when checking the value it does not stand out from the background.



48 Darkening the value of the brushstroke helps it stand out further.

Image 46, *Study 20* © Greg Rutkowski

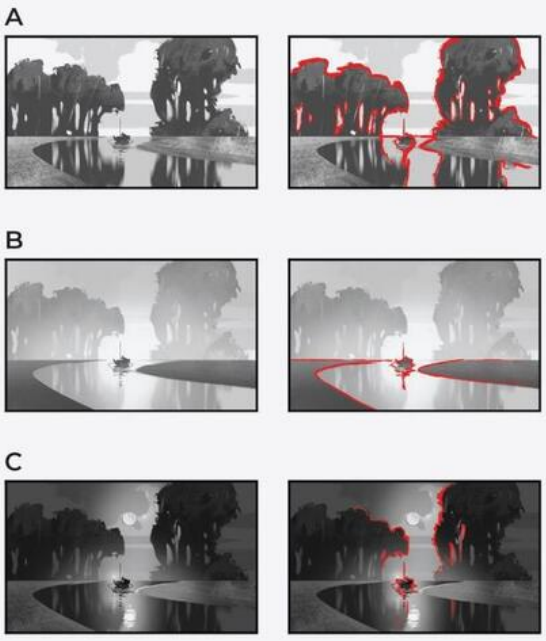
When it comes to composition, value plays a really important role. A flat-looking image that uses similar values across the composition is great for depicting a calm scene. This is because it won't distract the eye as much as an image with higher contrast and more exaggerated values. Alternatively, increasing the value range, using both really bright tones and really dark tones, can help make a painting more dynamic. It can also help to bring focus to certain areas. Looking at figure **(49)**:

A. This is a perfect example of a high-contrast sunny scene where there are many shapes in different values, which creates a landscape without any specific focal point.

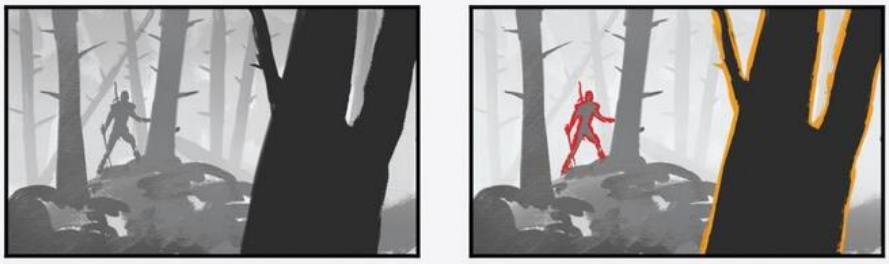
B. Using fog to decrease the contrast in the background brings the boat closer to the viewer and highlights the subject as the focal point.

C. This sketch shows a mix of both techniques, but with contrast focused on the central part of the sketch, adding dark atmosphere to the subject.

As well as helping you to show some important elements hidden in the brighter areas, value can also help you mask less important parts in the dark spots **(50)**.



49 This series of images shows how you can change the focal point area by adjusting the range of values from soft to hard contrasts.



50 Using value balance can lead the eye to a focal point somewhere between the background and the foreground. This technique is very often used in forest scenes where there are several planes and the subject is somewhere in the middle.



51 This quick painting shows how dark and cold tones add weight to overall reception.

Image 51, *Study 23* © Greg Rutkowski



52 By establishing a warm and bright color palette and pushing values toward the middle range and whites, this painting is much lighter in reception.

Value is also a weight-measurement tool in composition. You can create a painting filled with darker values that will evoke a heavy feeling **(51)** or you can make a painting really light in reception by using bright values and soft transitions **(52)**.



53 *Massacre of the Innocents* (1611–1612) by Peter Paul Rubens is an example of a darker-themed painting using darker values that match the topic.

It's important to consider the impact you want your painting to have. If you're planning to paint a sad theme, it's always good to choose darker values, limiting use of the bright side of the grayscale range **(53)**. When painting a positive theme or aiming for a softer, lighter approach, such as a summer scene that depicts a happy moment, it's wise to make use of brighter tones **(54)**.

It's very easy to disturb the balance and the composition using values. If you don't pay attention to values, your composition can be misleading for the viewer. Even if you want to paint a darker scene, it's helpful to spread the value range as much as possible, focusing mainly in a particular range of values, but reaching the extremes in a small percentage **(55)**.



54 *After Bathing* (1915) by Joaquín Sorolla shows how bright values handling positive topics create a very different appearance.



55 *Moonlit Landscape with Bridge* (1648/1650) by Aert van der Neer is a good example of choosing dark values overall, but at the same time you can notice extremes from the range, such as the bright moon and its reflection in the water.





56 This example demonstrates that you have to be consistent with scene lighting. Painting one object too brightly can disturb the whole painting.

Finally, in relation to value and light, some factors are strictly connected because one is an outcome of the other. For instance, you can't paint an object with pure white paint in a night scene without a strong light source, because the object's value changes according to the lighting setup. This would make the painting unbelievable **(56)**. That said, this is the "rule" for a realistic approach. In many different art styles, such as cubism, fauvism, or even abstract, you can see that value can be a totally separate factor. But that's a specific convention that can be used without any rules and it can be based on artists' creative freedom.

Image 56, *Fisherman's Boy* © Greg Rutkowski

LIGHT

Color and light are two of the most important factors in creating a painting. Light is a key element that decides what color you will use and what value the object or scene will have (57). While artists had varied approaches to style across the different art periods, light was the key, especially in impressionism and realism. Today there is a whole variety of ways to use light in illustration, painting, concept art, and drawing. But how does the light affect composition?

Lighting setup can build a composition, from a simple sunny landscape with harsh shadow and strong sunlight **(58)**, to a complex indoor scene with numerous light sources that fill the scene with diffused or harsh light **(59)**. While creating a painting or drawing, we have to keep in mind that light can help direct the viewer to the focal point.

There are a few different types of light that will help you to build a successful composition and create a pleasing focal point.



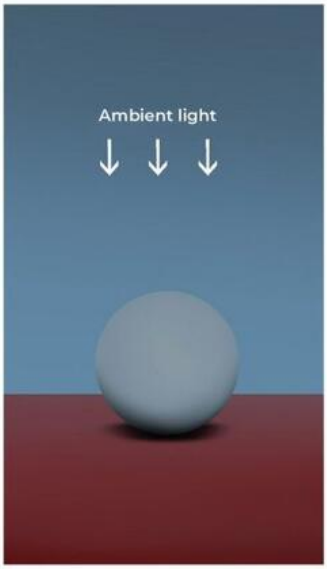
57 Here are three examples of one white ball lit by different lighting scenarios.



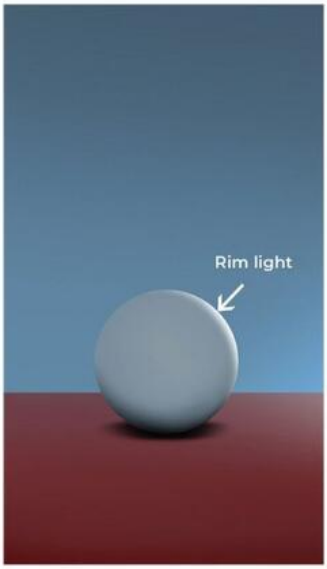
58 This quick sketch shows how simple yet efficient sunlight can be.



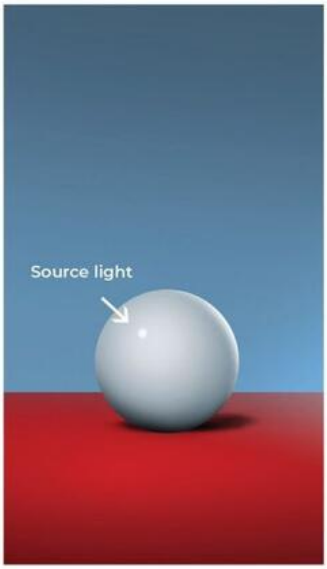
59 This example shows how an indoor scene can have a different type of lighting setup.



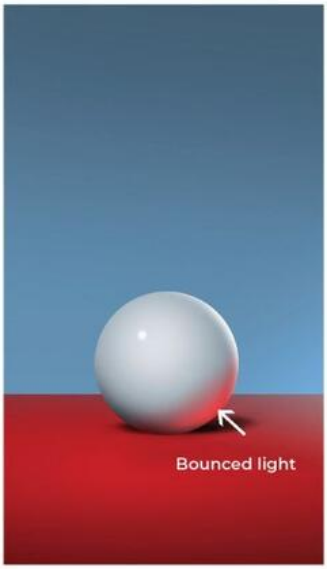
60 In this first stage of the lighting setup we can only see an ambient light, which affects most of the scene.



61 In this next stage, you can clearly see a small rim light that makes the shape of the ball more visible.



62 The third stage includes a source light. It hits the ball and the ground, adding more color and brightness.



63 The final stage includes the bounced light that is produced by the source light hitting the ground.

AMBIENT LIGHT

Ambient light is a background light or an environment light. In a bigger picture, it's the light that is cast by sources other than the source light. For instance, blue sky casts blue light that affects shadows on a sunny day **(60)**.

RIM LIGHT

Rim light is the light that is visible as a thin line, usually used as a contour light **(61)**.

SOURCE LIGHT

The source light is the main light that produces the strongest and most visible light in a scene **(62)**.

BOUNCED LIGHT

Source light often generates bounced light, which can help mark the silhouette of the subject. This type of light is usually seen as a soft, diffused light that bounces off surfaces to give the slight color of the material that it's bouncing off **(63)**.

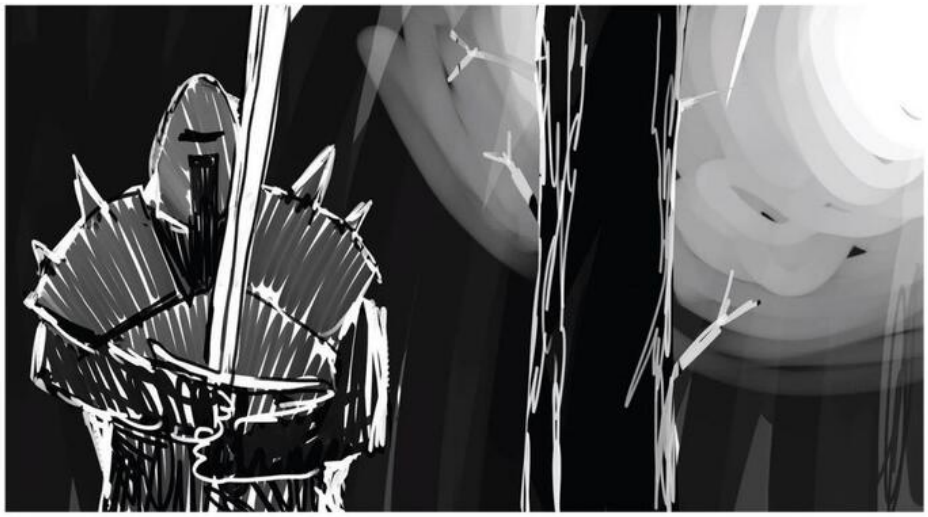
All of these types of light can be used to help your composition, but if you don't pay attention to the structure of the lighting setup, you risk creating unpredictable outcomes. In most cases this can ruin not just a light effect, but also the value and color of the whole painting.

Beginners often don't pay enough attention to the direction of the source light, which results in objects being lit randomly from different sides, causing real chaos in a scene **(64)**. What is also common among beginner painters is the use of strong light that generates strong values, almost without tones in between black and white, causing unreadability and lack of space in the composition **(65)**. If you don't manage light appropriately in your artwork, objects can become lost or background elements can jump forward, creating unreadable or confusing compositions.

When you use the light in a proper way – using rim light to mark the shape, ambient light to enrich the value of the scene, and bounced light to add more vibrancy – you can create a scene that is easy to read and clearly directs the viewer's gaze **(66, 67)**.



64 This simple drawing imitates typical lighting mistakes made by beginners.



65 This example demonstrates how beginners often struggle with limited value and overly strong light.



66 The sketch on the left represents flat lighting, with no special attention on the focal point in terms of lighting. Adding more dramatic and dynamic lighting makes the knight much more visible, making the focal point clearer for the viewer.



67 An example of the various types of lighting enhancing a scene.

Image 67, *Dragon's Breath* © Greg Rutkowski

TYPES OF COMPOSITION

LANDSCAPE COMPOSITION

Landscape composition is a very broad topic, encompassing simple landscapes as well as highly complex scenes including battles, crowd scenes, and architectural aspects. To be able to understand a landscape composition, you have to understand several important factors.

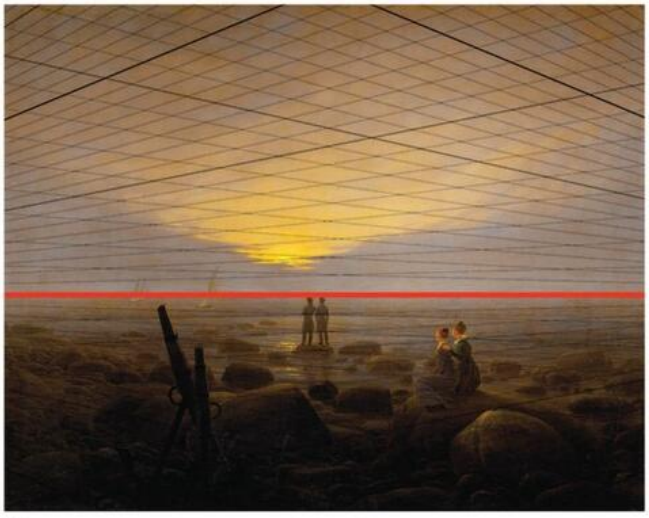
The horizon line is one of the first factors that is marked on a landscape sketch, in the form of a simple horizontal line drawn across the image **(68)**. It's important to remember that the horizon line is always at eye level. In open space, it's the line where land touches the sky.

The horizon line is also a base for your perspective and is often the place where vanishing points are located. (The exception is in three-point and additional-point perspectives, where at least one vanishing point is located outside the horizon line). As you saw on page 29, a vanishing point is the point where all perspective lines come together, creating a perspective net that helps the artist build the composition and draw or paint objects correctly in space. Determining where the vanishing points are is an important step in building a composition.

Another important factor in landscape painting is choosing a focal point **(69)**. An artist may decide to depict an old tree, a grazing animal, or interesting shapes of clouds or mountains. When choosing a focal point for a landscape painting, the artist will purposefully seek out distinctive shapes or subjects that could create a point of interest in the scene.

In landscape painting, "framing" is the viewpoint of a particular part of the scene, creating visual order that corresponds with the artist's vision and idea **(70)**. In *plein air* painting, artists use framing to capture the best landscape scene by focusing the canvas frame on a particular viewpoint. To choose the best framing for a landscape painting, try to maintain the balance while also capturing a visually interesting scene. The composition shouldn't be too crowded, but neither should it be too empty. Avoid placing an object right in the center of the scene or right next to the border of the frame. It can be helpful to use the rule of thirds to balance your subjects in relation to the frame.

With developments in photography, there are now plenty of options for framing, including wide-angle and fish-eye views.



68 *Moonrise over the Sea* (c. 1821) by Caspar David Friedrich, with horizon line and perspective net overlaid.

FURTHER READING

Take a look at *Composition of Outdoor Painting* written by American painter Edgar Alwin Payne. This book contains some sample arrangements of landscapes.



69 *What freedom!* (1903) by Ilya Repin is an example of elements in the landscape leading the eye to a focal point.



70 *Arabian Port* by Nathan Fowkes is an example of successful framing in a landscape scene. (See tutorial on page 132.)

Image 70, *Arabian Port* © Nathan Fowkes

PORTRAIT COMPOSITION

Good portrait composition, either in photography or painting, should focus mainly on the subject. The person that is being portrayed is key, along with the artist's vision. If you are painting a portrait, your focus should be on facial features, angle, and capturing the best lighting scenario. However, all these elements must be placed in a balanced composition using either the golden ratio, the Fibonacci spiral, or the rule of thirds **(71)**. That said, in high-fashion photography there are often bolder planning decisions where rules are broken or exaggerated, creating weird forms or shapes to match the vision of the artist.

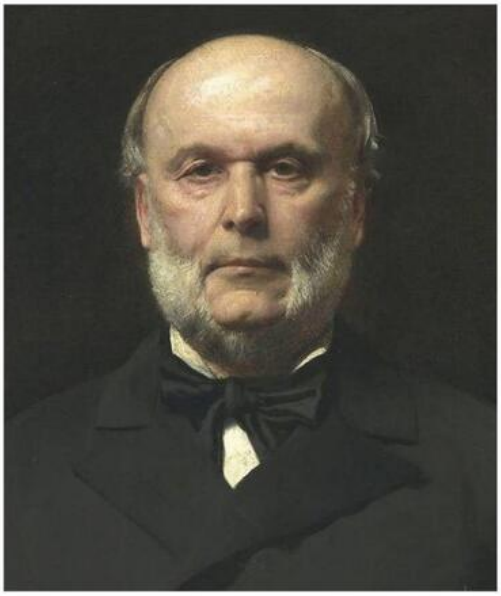
When it comes to the angle or view of the subject, there are a few types of face angles that you can use, depending on what you want to show:

- Full face **(72)** – a front-facing angle where all of the face aspects are visible.
- Three-quarter face **(73)** – an angle where three-quarters of the face is visible. The face is angled slightly to the side, rather than pointed toward the viewer, so one side of the face is more visible than the other.
- Two-third face **(74)** – similar to the three-quarter angle but pushed further to the side, so the surface of one side of the face is even bigger.
- Profile face **(75)** – the face from the side.

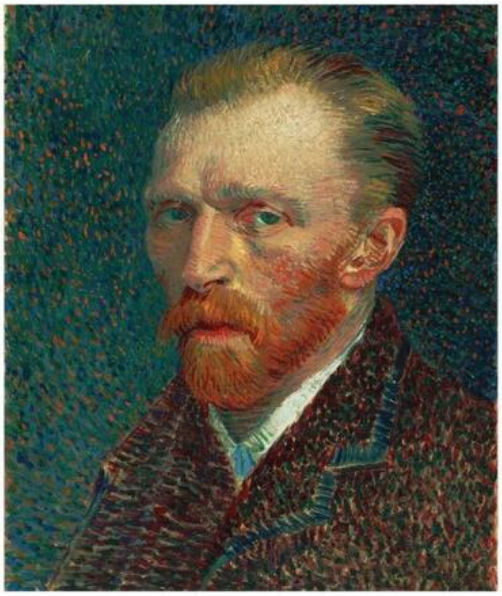


71 This fifteenth-century portrait shows a noticeable usage of rule of thirds.

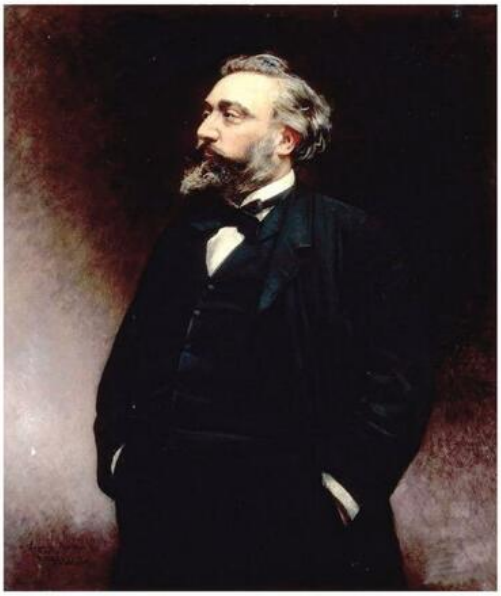
Image 71, *Matteo Olivieri (?)* (1430s)



72 *Portrait of Jules Grévy* (1880) by Léon Bonnat;
an example of a full-face composition.



73 *Self-portrait* (spring 1887) by Vincent van Gogh.
This painting shows a three-quarter face angle.



74 *Portrait of Léon Gambetta* (1888) by Léon Bonnat
showing a two-third face angle.



75 *Edmond Maître* (1869) by Frédéric Bazille;
an example of a portrait subject in profile.



76 The close framing of *Madonna* (1920) by Anders Zorn captures the intimacy of mother and child.



77 *Benjamin and Eleanor Ridgely Laming* (1788) by Charles Willson Peale is a perfect example of a portrait with more than one subject in a horizontal composition. The scene focuses on portraying the two subjects, with the addition of more background detail than would usually be visible with a vertical composition.



78 *Self-portrait (Man with Pipe)* (1848–1849) by Gustave Courbet.



79 *Still Life with Salt Tub* (c. 1644) by Pieter Claesz. This is a good example of a well-balanced still-life composition. Cleasz used reflective glass and metal plates to bring lots of detail to the lower half of the scene. He gave the upper half more empty space, diagonally balancing with the busier half of the painting below it.

Framing is also important in portraiture. The composition is determined by how close the viewer is in relation to the subject. Selecting a distant view with more visibility of the body of the subject means you can move the subject, potentially building a more varied, interesting composition. Alternatively, a very zoomed-in portrait could create a striking look, perhaps implying confrontation or intimacy **(76)**.

Similarly, canvas size and orientation play an important role in creating portrait composition. Horizontal ratio is a rare type of portrait proportion, but it allows artists to combine several subjects on one canvas. This is often seen in movies where a character's face, or face and torso, are framed in a way that leaves space to show other characters or surrounding details. But horizontal portraiture composition was used long before cinematography was invented. Showing additional details, besides the face of the subject, or even multiple subjects, introduces more visual interest for the viewer to observe and analyse **(77)**.

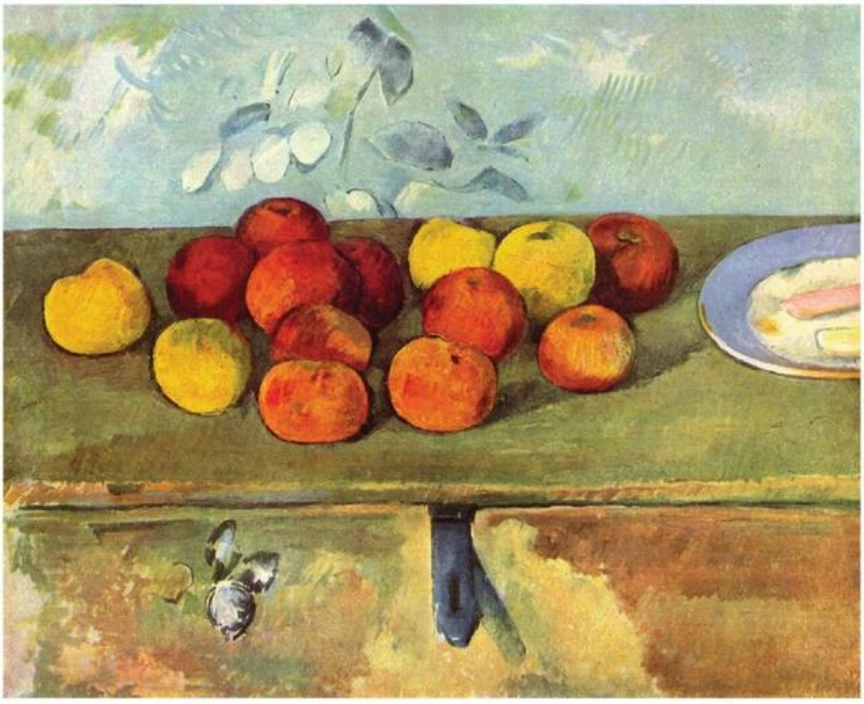
Light and color can add depth and highlight individual facial nuances. Placing the light source above the subject will increase the definition of facial bones, hide eyes in shadow, and add more sharpness to the painting **(78)**. On the other hand, using a profile or two-third angle lit by soft light with a darker background can show all the important parts of the model with more depth than a full-face angle.

As you can see, there are many important factors that affect how your portrait composition will look. Combining and experimenting with these factors can produce unexpected and interesting results.

STILL-LIFE COMPOSITION

Still-life art mostly depicts objects that are either natural, such as food and flowers, or man-made, such as plates, drinking glasses, drapery, and furniture. But it can be anything still or inanimate.

Working on a still-life painting requires preparation. To build good composition you need to set up every object in an interesting way. Form and light are typically the most important factors to consider when positioning to ensure that objects are shown from their best side **(79)**.



80 *Still life with apples and pastries* (c. 1879–1880) by Paul Cézanne. In this example you can see how Cézanne balanced the composition by framing objects, leaving the same amount of space below and above the table.

Framing is also a crucial factor and influences the whole scene, but it must be considered and merged with other factors, such as angle of view. Once you set the angle and position of objects in relation to the lighting setup, achieving the best reflections and bounced light possible, you can frame the whole scene with consistent unity **(80)**.

In still-life painting, it's really important to set the focal point. You could focus light mostly on the focal point. You could also select the placement of objects so that the composition is a triangle, with the highest object as your focal point because of its size and shape **(81)**. Another approach would be to place more colorful objects in the scene so that the focal point's color stands out from the rest of the scene.

Although still life is often used as practice, it can also possess a lot of meaning, especially when ambiguous objects are added symbolically. For example, throughout art history, artists have used skulls, candles, and dry flowers as symbols for the passing of time and human fragility **(82)**.

Capturing still-life objects in art is a fantastic skill, whether done as practice or to create finished pieces where the composition has significant meaning.

BUILDING COMPOSITIONS

Whenever you start sketching, or even if you are in the middle of an artwork, try to visualize your objects as simplified forms. Part of a rock or tree can be a simple shape in your head, and that will help you decide if something is too big or has an odd shape that doesn't really work with the composition. That simple visualization can help you to identify compositional mistakes early on.



81 *Still Life with Pie and Roemer* (first half of seventeenth century) by Pieter Claesz. This painting shows a usage of triangular composition in a still-life scene.



82 *Vanitas, Still Life* (1625) by Pieter Claesz. This example shows the usage of symbolic objects, such as a candle that's burning out, and a skull, to symbolize the fragility and transience of life.

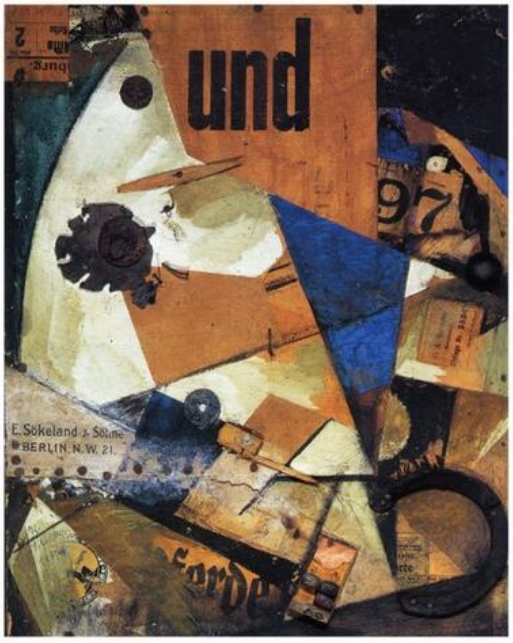
BREAKING THE LAWS OF COMPOSITION

As you have seen, there are many rules and laws in composition. From the golden ratio to more modern types of composition – such as fish-eye and ultra-wide lenses, 360-panoramic compositions, or diagonal dynamic compositions specifically used for promotional images, web banners, or social-media animations – everything that has been invented has helped artists to create better paintings.

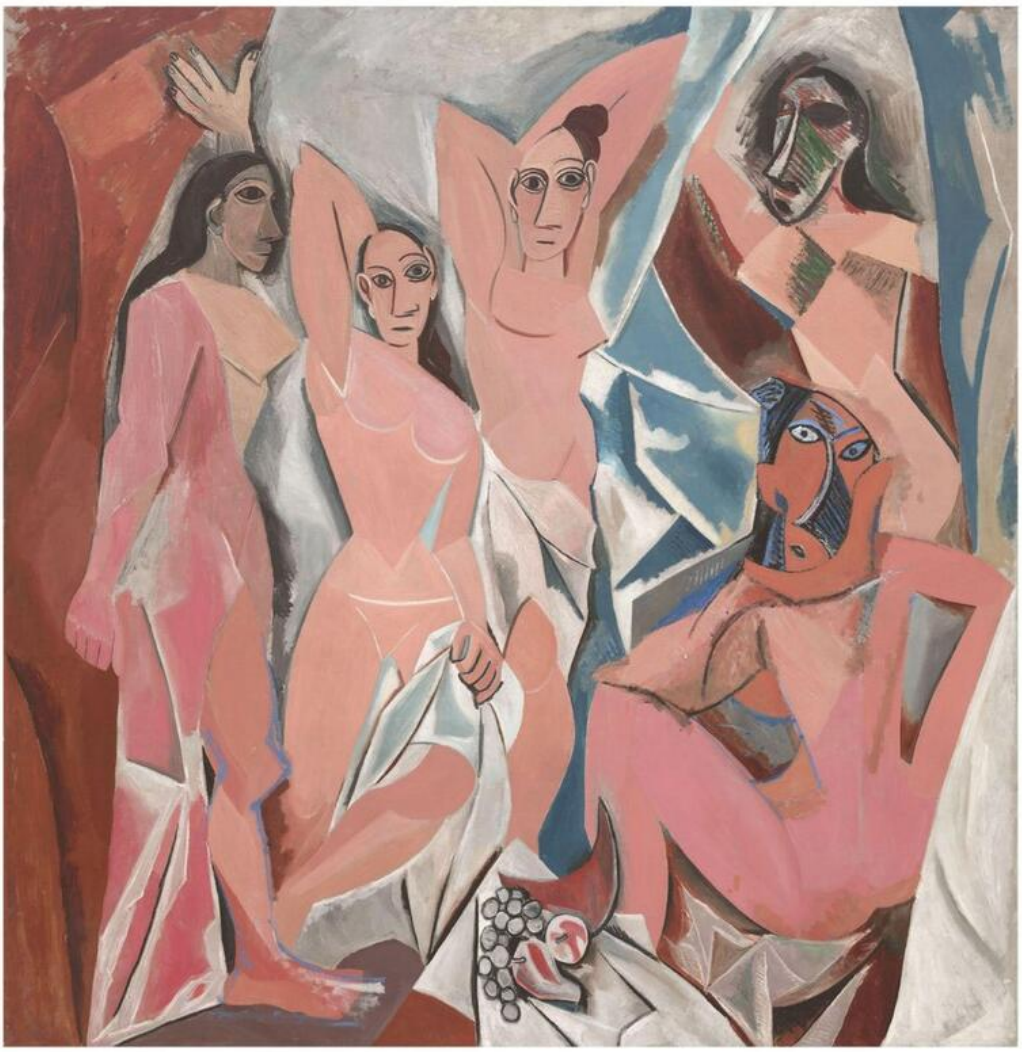
However, all the inventions were the result of experiments and finding new artistic paths. Breaking the laws doesn't always lead to a ruined composition; sometimes it can be done intentionally with a specific plan in mind. Throughout art history, there have been many times when artists have bent or even broken composition laws. Experimentation in that field can be seen in art styles such as cubism, minimalism, abstract art, and even in fauvism. **(83, 84, 85)**



83 *IKB 191, monochromatic painting* (1962) by Yves Klein. Klein was a pioneer in the development of minimal art.



84 *Das Undbild ("The And-Picture")* (1919) by Kurt Schwitters is a good example of avoiding the classical definition of composition. The rule of thirds, golden ratio, and Fibonacci spiral don't fit into this composition.



85 *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) by Pablo Picasso. This painting was considered a major step toward the founding of cubism. "Deformation" is a key word in cubism because of the movement's specific approach – it doesn't fit into known composition patterns.

Why is it important to break some rules? When I was a beginner painter, I preferred experimenting and discovering solutions on my own instead of pulling them from other sources. Was this a good idea? It's hard to answer that question, but what I've noticed is that finding your own path allows you to understand a topic more thoroughly. Artistic exploration helps to further your understanding and allows you to find the best fit for your way of working. When I started digital painting, I tended to make quick sketches from random lines and shapes **(86)**:

A. In the first stage, I drew totally random lines and shapes as a base for finding something useful.

B. In the second stage, you can see the area that I found interesting and thought was worth building further.

C. The final stage shows where I've established a final shot and built a complete sketch for further painting.

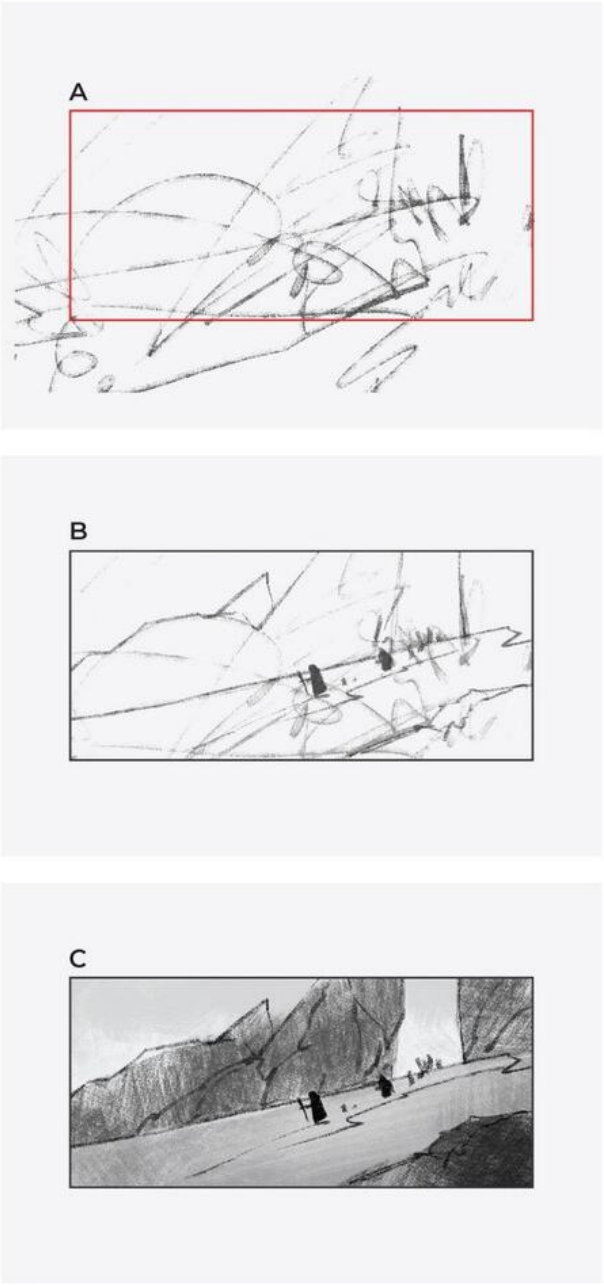
This technique proved useful for developing interesting shapes and composition concepts. When I look at it now, I realize that it was a simple form of building painting structure from scratch. It was about experimenting and drawing without thinking about the outcome.

But what about planned and intentional breaking of the laws of composition? Laws such as the golden ratio, Fibonacci spiral, and rule of thirds are not that hard to break while maintaining good results. However, avoiding other elements such as shape, contrast, proximity, or rhythm is harder to do intentionally.

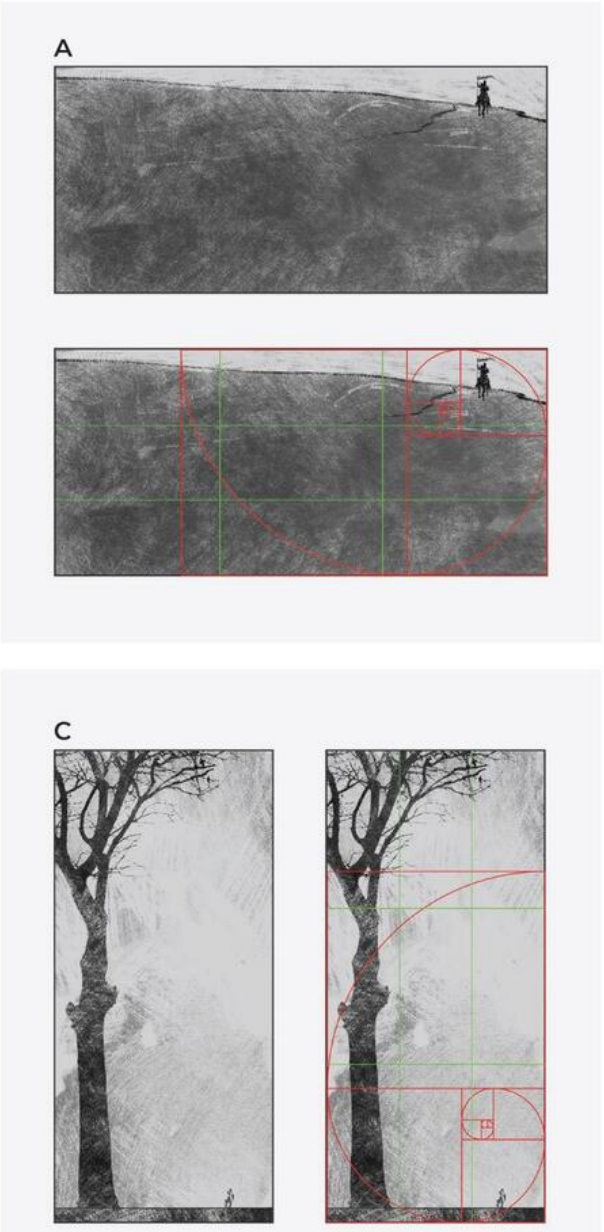
Image **87** (opposite page) shows three examples of compositions that don't obey the rules:

A. An example of a composition that doesn't match the classical idea of composition. Though it's unbalanced, it still works okay compositionally due to the use of empty space. Such areas of rest can be used to add a quiet, calming mood to a painting.

B. Another sketch that shows "incorrect" composition. However, adding more brushstrokes and imitating the rain creates flow and rhythm that saves the image.



86 Examples showing how I used experimentation to build up a composition.



87 Sketches showing classically incorrect compositions that can still work as images.

C. It is possible to maintain sense in an image that is compositionally incorrect by making clear the scale or the purpose of the specific placement of objects.

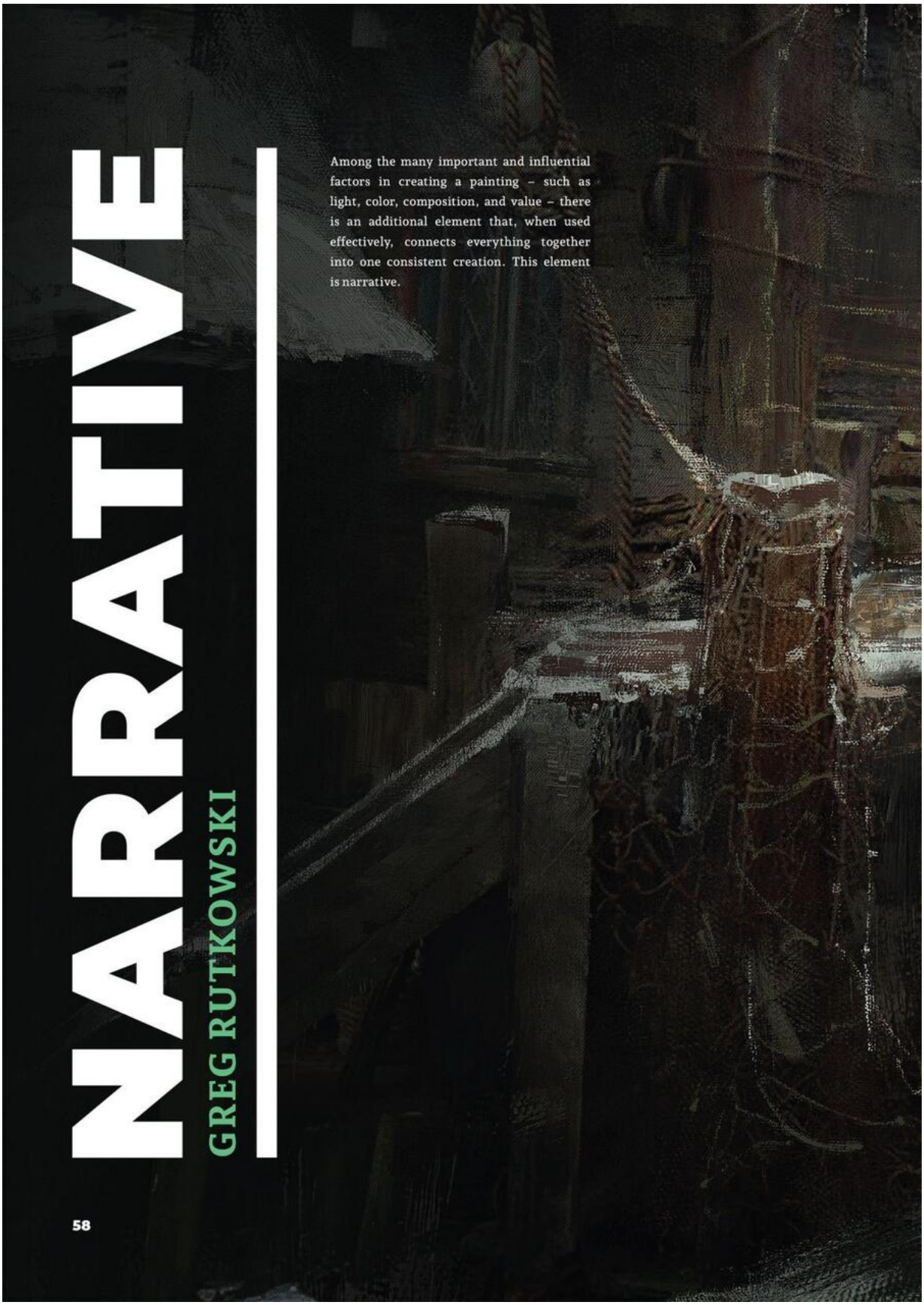
Sometimes breaking the rules can be useful, while at others it may only delay your work. Every artist will experience a few times in their career when they have to try to find a compositional solution by breaking the rules.

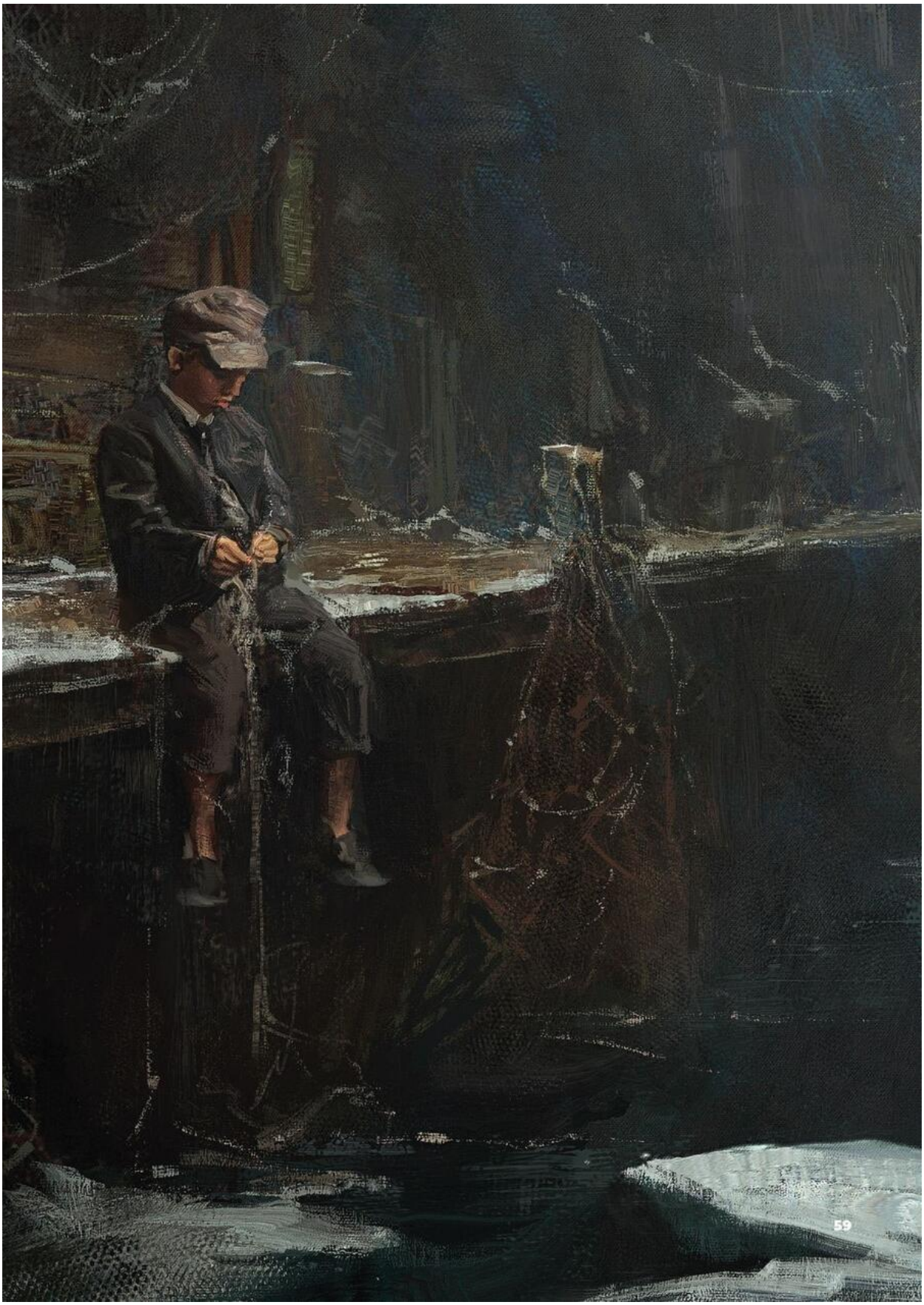
Art is fluid, and as long as the intention is to create better art and make progress, you can experiment with anything you want. Finding new solutions, especially nowadays, provides the art industry with a breath of fresh air, pushing it forward to a better and more creative future.

NARRATIVE

GREG RUTKOWSKI

Among the many important and influential factors in creating a painting – such as light, color, composition, and value – there is an additional element that, when used effectively, connects everything together into one consistent creation. This element is narrative.





INTRODUCTION

Like composition, narrative is an almost inseparable part of creation. In every branch of art there is a place for story or passing a message forward. In literature and film, narrative is one of the key factors in creating and driving the work of art. Whether it's a documentary, feature film, novel, or biography, the creation always focuses on passing a message, idea, or intention from the author to the audience.

It's similar in other areas of art, such as painting, dance, music, or sculpture. We can always admire the form of art – it can be beautifully executed – but very often narrative is the factor that holds our interest. Narrative can carry a lot of information and feeling, or simply just a certain mood.

Narrative in painting or illustration can be found in every type of work, from simple landscapes with one or two small characters, to complex book-cover illustrations or even historical scenes. It's simply a story or message from the artist to the audience. Many factors feed into narrative, starting with the composition (the placement of people in a scene matters), while location provides a background to your story, light can add tension, and colors set a specific mood or lure the viewer to see more. All these elements build the story and, equally, the story affects how the artist uses these fundamentals.

Narrative in art is often created through a series of relations between characters, objects, and the landscape around them, and even this can be done in different ways. The narrative in some paintings is so obvious that it catches the attention of the viewer at first glance. In some paintings, the story takes a while to unfold, being secondary to a landscape **(01)**, while in others it will be so obvious that it catches the attention of the viewer at first glance **(02)**.



01 *Landscape with Merchants* (c. 1629) by Claude Lorrain is a classical painting with a few characters indicating a story. The landscape takes up most of the scene, while the characters that are part of the story are a small portion of the rest of the painting. The difference in scale in this painting means the story is not the first aspect you notice.



02 In contrast to image 01, *The Meeting of David and Abigail* (c. 1630) by Sir Peter Paul Rubens is filled with characters, and the landscape is just a background. All the elements of the narrative have very good visibility. You can see the facial expressions, poses, and small details that could implicate additional elements of the story.



04 *Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan on 16 November 1581* (1885) by Ilya Repin shows how a composition can be simple, but can still convey emotions and mood.



03 *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) by Jan van Eyck is an example of a hidden message. At first it appears to be a straightforward painting focused on depicting two people with an interesting background. But if you look closely at the mirror on the far wall, you will notice two other people in the reflection. One of them is Jan van Eyck.

Alternatively, an artist can tell a story more subtly, feeding the viewer information through narrative elements that are hidden in the painting **(03)**. Many artworks have a secondary meaning that was precisely planned by the artist. Building a second story that is hidden somewhere within the painting creates an element of mystery, keeping the viewer looking at it even longer.

Storytelling also brings a lot of emotion to an artwork, filling the viewer's mind with feeling **(04)**. Artistic emotion captivates an audience and can help them to form a connection with an artwork.

Whether a simple narrative that influences emotions, or a complex narrative that tells a rich, intricate story, it's possible to communicate a story through a single image. Using bigger canvases with more details, facial expressions, and poses that imply behaviors and relationships between characters can lead the viewer to very obvious conclusions about the story. On the other hand, a simple portrait can evoke a lot of feeling, allowing the viewer to deduce their own story.

Now let's look at narrative in more detail, beginning with its presence in the history of art.

NARRATIVE IN THE HISTORY OF ART

There are many influential paintings in the history of art that tell a great story. Many of them are from ancient and medieval times, when artists wanted to show their current lives and the lives of their kings and masters. Back then, telling a story or passing on information was more important than the artistic look. At least, that it is how it appears now (05).

There were also times in art history when artists focused more on the mood and execution than the story, and others when artists covered both execution *and* story. One of the greatest examples of using narrative in a painting is Jan Matejko, a Polish painter who specialized in historical artworks. One of his most popular paintings was *Constitution of 3 May 1791* **(06)**.



05 *The Triumph of Death* (c. 1355) by Buonamico Buffalmacco.



06 *Constitution of 3 May 1791* (1891) by Jan Matejko.



07 *No Swimming* (1921) by Norman Rockwell.

In his painting, Matejko captured a significant historical event for Poland but, despite its importance, he changed some historical aspects to add to the narrative. For example, many of the characters in the painting were not actually present at the constitution procession. By adding them in, Matejko aimed to create a richer vision of the constitution and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

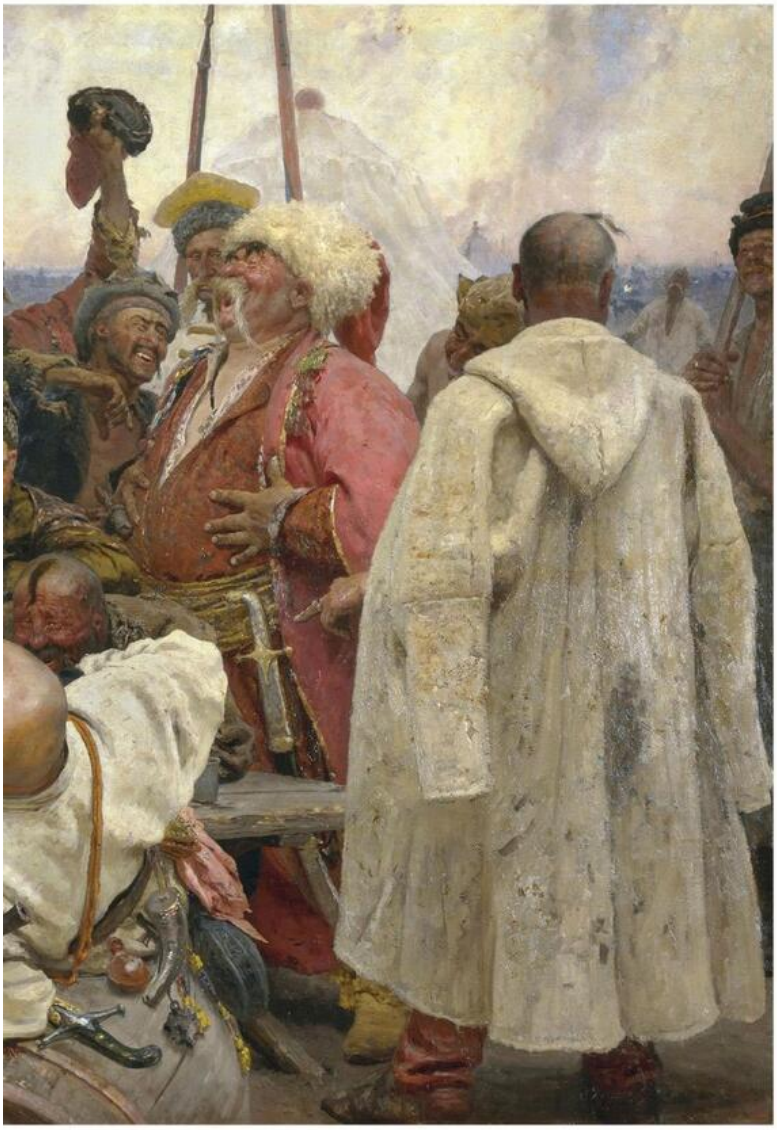
The painting is attractive not just in terms of the narrative, but also in terms of execution. It beautifully uses art fundamentals, including color, light, value, and composition, to tell its story. The composition highlights what is really important in the scene: the document. You can observe a lot of historical information, but at the same time find it very pleasant to look at.

Another great example of artists using narrative in art is Norman Rockwell. He was an American painter and illustrator who was mostly known for his work for *The Saturday Evening Post*. He mastered the art of storytelling. With a minimalist and very efficient approach, he could tell a story that was readable and understandable without further analysis.

Image **07** is an example of an obvious story, stunningly executed. It shows three children running, presumably away from an authority figure after they were caught swimming in a "no swimming" area. The fact that there is no specific background, other than a sign that says "no swimming," gives the painting simplicity and readability.



08 *Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks* (between 1878 and 1891) by Ilya Repin. This painting depicts a story based on the legend of Cossacks sending an insulting reply to an ultimatum from the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Mehmed IV. Repin shows the soldiers having fun coming up with the insults.



Ilya Repin is another good example of an artist using storytelling very successfully. Repin was a Russian realistic painter who was a master of depicting larger scenes with a variety of emotions and expressive body language. In many of his paintings, story was vividly noticeable together with beautiful execution. *Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks* **(08)** is a painting that shows many artistic narrative skills in action, from the excellent composition that supports the story and emotions captured by Repin, to the subtle value and color changes that ensure the viewer isn't distracted from the tale that's unfolding.

As you can see, a variety of techniques for conveying narrative have been used in the history of art. All of the artists mentioned in this chapter prioritized narrative as a technique on a similar level to other art fundamentals. Storytelling has to pass on a message, sometimes slightly humorous, as in Repin's painting, sometimes it carries an important historical message, and sometimes it is situational humor. It's up to the artist how important a message or story is, and how they use artistic fundamentals and tools to perfectly balance the meaning of a piece of art within itself.

Throughout the ages, artists have tried to convey a message, story, or simply an idea through their artwork, leading to the creation of countless beautiful paintings with highly complex stories. The majority of these artists weren't equipped with the technology and digital software used in the industry today. People often tried to capture stories, family history, and important events through art, as paintings, sculptures, and writing on paper were the only ways to pass such stories on to the next generation. Nowadays, with all of the technology that is designed to document our lives and history, artists can finally focus on true expression, sometimes depicting ideas that are not widely understandable because of their abstract execution. There has been no age in history where there existed as many art styles as we can witness today.

STORYTELLING IN ILLUSTRATION

If we could pinpoint the most condensed niche of storytelling in art, it would definitely be illustration. Illustration is a relatively new form of art, which perhaps truly took off during "The Golden Age of Illustration" (1880s to 1930s), when illustration in books, magazines, posters, and other printed media entered a period of excellence and became very popular. Historically, the art of illustration is closely linked to the industrial processes of printing and publishing. From the beginning, illustration was intended to interact with text and help convey story more effectively, and it still does today (09).

Illustration has evolved hugely in the digital era. We've expanded greatly on the classical paintings discussed on the previous pages – nowadays you can observe whole industries using storytelling in different ways, for example on book covers and posters, and in illustrations, storyboards, animation, and comic books. They all still use narrative as a main factor alongside the other fundamentals, but where narrative was once simply a way of capturing an event or portraying life at the time, narrative art today helps to catch the attention of the client, to keep the viewer hooked on the TV series, or to immerse them in a PC game.

Whether it is for a poster, book cover, or advertisement, artists have to think about many factors while creating an illustrative artwork. The fact that one image has to carry the most crucial part of the story is quite a challenge, because sometimes it means the artist has to "bend" rules such as lighting, realism, or composition. To fit dozens of characters on movie posters you have to think about how to show them to the viewer, keeping in mind who the main protagonist is and which elements are more or less important.

Thinking about placing text on the layout is the hardest obstacle, which clients very often don't realize. It determines the composition, which includes, for example, where to position a light and what colors and values to use to maximize the readability.

Book covers are one of the most demanding forms of illustration, not only due to the technical requirements of fitting the title and other elements on the cover; they also have to compress all of the story (or the most important parts of the story) for the potential reader, without spoiling it. A book on a shelf in a bookshop has to catch the attention of the buyer, and that's the job of an illustrator **(10)**.



09 In this comic strip from Pascal Campion's *Late Night Thoughts* series, the illustrations in each frame help to tell the story.

Image 09, *Late Night Thoughts* © Pascal Campion

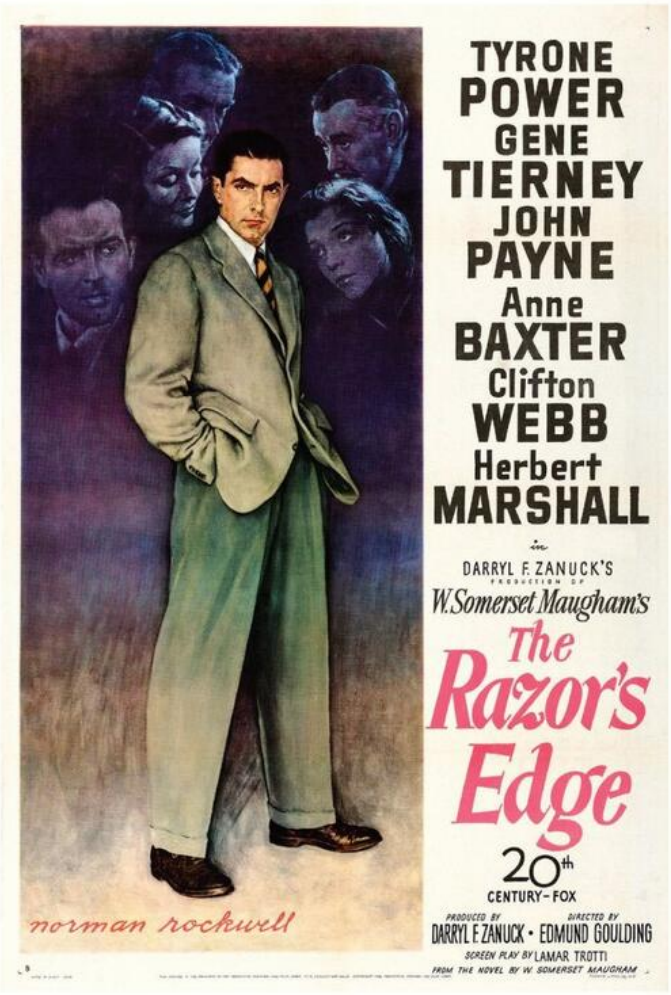


10 This cover is from the *Anzac Book*, written and illustrated by the men who served at Gallipoli, and published in 1916.
The artist perfectly incorporated the flags that are held by the soldiers to connect with the title, which is a part of the layout.

Image 10, cover of the *Anzac Book* (1916), available on Wikimedia Commons under the CC-BY-SA-2.0 license

Illustrative posters are also challenging to design while keeping the story in mind alongside technical specifications. A movie poster, for example, should contain all of the main characters and perhaps a key part of the story (but again, no spoilers). Posters must be designed with visual attention to the details of the layout, to ensure the information and narrative is conveyed effectively to the viewer.

Image **11** is an example of successful narrative illustration for a poster. The film tells the story of an American pilot traumatized by his experiences in World War I, and the story begins through the eyes of his friends and acquaintances. This is perfectly conveyed by the main character being shown in full light and the secondary characters in shadow, looking toward him with concern. In just one illustration, viewers are given a sense of the story and tone of the film.



11 Norman Rockwell, theatrical release poster for the 1946 film *The Razor's Edge*.

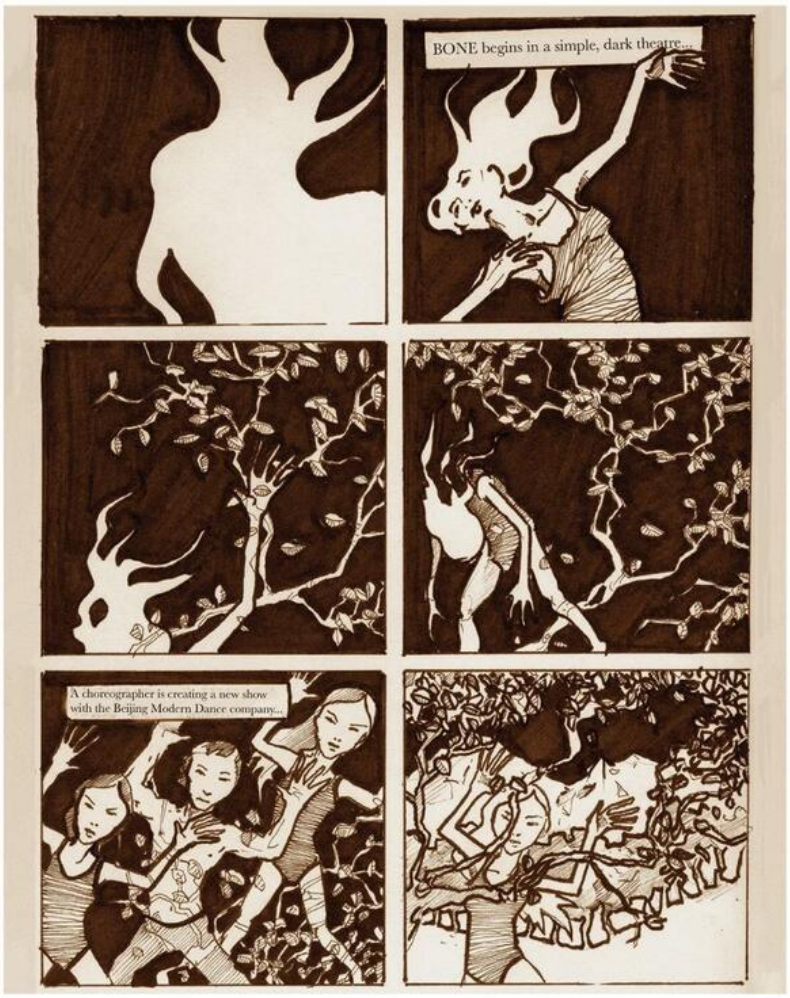
USE ILLUSTRATION FOR INSPIRATION

If you are struggling with the narrative in your work, try to find inspiration from illustrations, book covers, movie posters, or key arts (visuals that are repeated across different media, for example covers and advertisements for products, such as video games). These have often achieved interesting narrative solutions, with innovative relationships between characters or objects and the light, value, color, and composition in the image.

STORYBOARDING

There is one artistic niche that doesn't really fit into the area of illustration, but is still worth mentioning here. This is the art of storyboarding. Storyboarding is a form of art that strictly focuses on capturing key moments of a story to show the idea and main narrative in an early stage of the production of, for example, a movie **(12)**. Very often it's a form of sketch of the future keyframes. It doesn't have to be polished or finished; its main role is to carry the story and help visualize scenes better.

You can pick up many compositional solutions for creating better narrative by looking at illustration and storyboard art. Examining the posing of characters, camera angles, and interactions between characters can be really helpful in building narrative in your painting. Again, it's very clear that it's possible to successfully tell a story through one image.



12 A storyboard panel showing the early stages of planning for a dance documentary film, *Bone* (2005).

Image 12, *Bravo panel 1 color storyboard w:Bone (2005 film)* by Eye Steel Film from Canada, available on Wikimedia Commons under the CC-BY-2.0 license

TYPES OF NARRATIVE

There are many different ways to build a narrative in your work. Some of them are simple and some of them are complex. It all depends on your vision and idea for the work. Since narrative is something that affects time and space, it has to be considered as something abstract that can't be measured and sometimes it has to be judged individually.

Despite all that, narrative art can be categorized into various types, which are useful for analyzing existing paintings and understanding the intention of the artist. They may also help you decide how to best convey a narrative in your own work. The table references visual examples **13** to **19**, which you'll find on the next few pages.

	Summary	More than one frame	Repeated characters	More than one action	Notes
Monoscenic narrative	Focuses on one action and its surroundings **(13)**.	No	No	No	Common in a wide variety of art nowadays.
Simultaneous narrative	Different parts of a story are shown in one painting. The narrative may occur as multiple scenes in one setting or through a character that is shown at different stages of their story **(14)**.	No	Possibly	Yes	Used to describe biblical stories in one painting, which were very often presented at cathedral altars or as decorative art in medieval times. The viewer needs to know the story already, because, without this knowledge, everything appears chaotic and will not make sense from a narrative point of view.
Continuous narrative	Represents a series of events with repetition of main characters or other subjects **(15)**.	No	Yes	Yes	Similar to simultaneous narrative, but the viewer does not need to know the story; everything should be visible and readable in the painting.
Sequential narrative	Similar to continuous narrative, but divides each action into a separate frame **(16)**.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Used in comics and manga.

	Summary	More than one frame	Repeated characters	More than one action	Notes
Synoptic narrative	Shows multiple actions taking place in one scene **(17)**.	No	Yes	Yes	Viewer needs a prior understanding of the story to interpret the image – may include visual cues to help. While synoptic narrative may seem similar to simultaneous narrative, there are key differences (see below).
Panoramic narrative	Multiple actions and scenes depicted in sequence or happening at the same time **(18)**.	No	No	Yes	
Progressive narrative	Illustrates passing time by showing a sequence of actions in one scene **(19)**.	No	No	Yes	

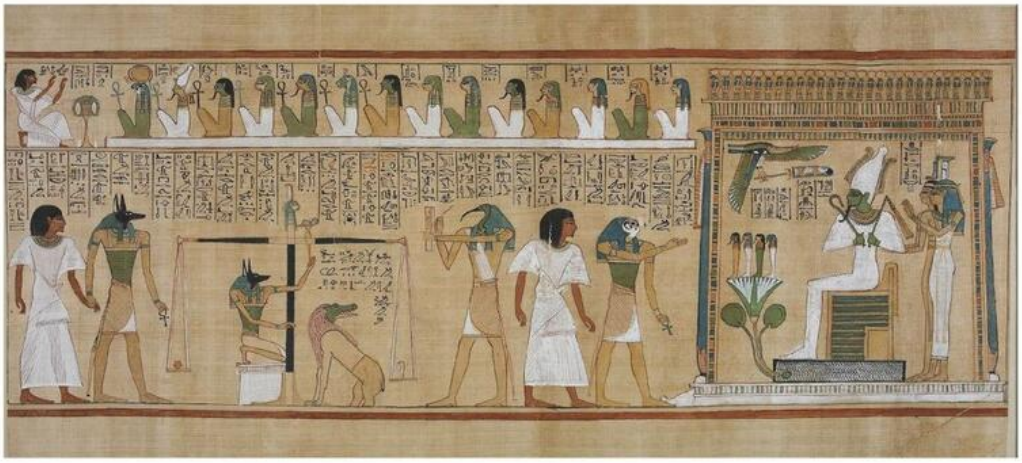
SYNOPTIC VS. SIMULTANEOUS NARRATIVE

While similar, synoptic narrative repeats characters to describe different events from one story (such as biblical paintings), whereas simultaneous narrative focuses on repeating visual geometric and abstract designs, patterns, and exaggerated forms (seen in ancient Egyptian art). Also, although the initial story may be unclear with synoptic narrative, there are clear actions. Simultaneous narrative, however, is more focused on the patterns and abstract design, and the observer must know the background story to be able to recognize its purpose.



13 *Lone Rider* by Joshua Clare focuses on the cowboy and his journey through the wilderness. An example of **monoscenic narrative**, the narrative and mood of quiet determination is contained within a single image. (Find the tutorial for this painting on page 164.)

Image 13, *Lone Rider* © Joshua Clare



14 *Papyrus of Hunefer* (1275 BC) is an example of **simultaneous narrative**. It shows multiple events in one image with a repetition of characters and use of different patterns, shapes, and exaggerated forms. Without knowing the story behind it, it's unclear what is happening in the image.



15 *The Feast of Herod and the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (1461–1462) by Benozzo Gozzoli is an example of **continuous narrative**. The successive episodes in the story are shown across one painting with a repetition of figures (John the Baptist, the executioner, Salome, Herodias, and Herod). The action is divided into three groups or points of focus. Each event is depicted in a different way – with various architectural structures and differing sizes of figures – dividing the painting into three scenes.



16 This comic from Pascal Campion's *Late Night Thoughts* series is an example of **sequential narrative**. It demonstrates how comic books divide the action up into separate frames to tell the story.



17 *Creation of Adam and Eve (Gate of Paradise, Battistero di San Giovanni, Florence)* (between 1425 and 1452) by Lorenzo Ghiberti. This example falls into the **synoptic narrative** category, as it shows the two characters, Adam and Eve, in multiple scenes in one painting, displaying different moments of their story. Cues include the snake on the fruit tree and Adam and Eve being expelled from Eden. Without knowing the story behind the image, however, the narrative is unclear to the viewer. As it's a biblical story, a small amount of knowledge of this can help the viewer to recognize the events to be able to piece them together in their mind.

This example differs from the simultaneous narrative approach in image 14, which has more visually abstract forms, exaggerated figures, and a visual design that repeats patterns.

Image 16, *Late Night Thoughts* © Pascal Campion



18 *The Last Supper* (betwen 1495 and 1498) by Leonardo da Vinci is an example of **panoramic narrative.** There is no repetition in characters and few actions take place – only conversations between characters – building one big scene.



19 *Finis Gloriae Mundi* (between 1670 and 1672) by Juan de Valdés Leal is an example of **progressive narrative**. The painting shows a scene depicting the remains of a bishop and a knight in different states of decay. Various objects and imagery around the bodies symbolize the passing of time.

BUILDING NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

Before you start any sketch, you have to know what your idea is. Of course, everything can change during the creative process, but it's important to know what kind of story you want to tell, and what tools and type of narrative you want to use to convey it to the viewer.

The Composition chapter explored how composition tools can be used to distinguish areas of an image to create a focal point. These can also be used to make a story more visible and help the viewer read the narrative more quickly and easily. For example, casting a strong light on the main subject can emphasize their significance – it won't change the story, but it will make the key character much more obvious. In wider scenes with more characters, the values of less important subjects can be set to a flatter range, decreasing the contrast so they fade into the background while the main action stands out. Similarly, clever use of perspective and composition can emphasize narrative details and improve the telling of a story.

There are a number of other ways you can build a narrative, which we will look at on the next few pages.

FORESHADOWING

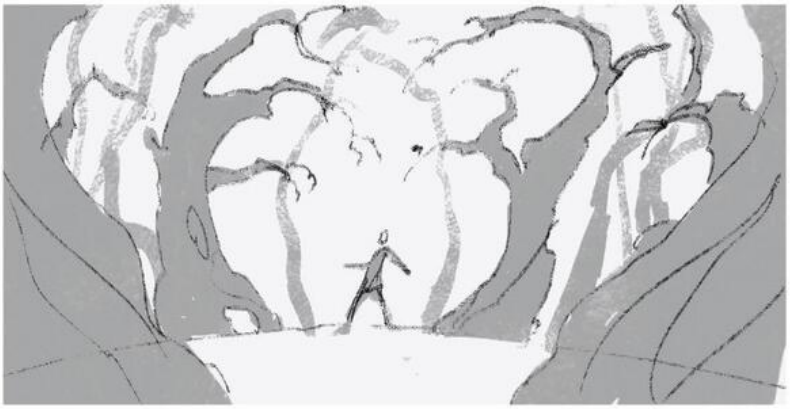
Foreshadowing suggests something that could happen in the future, often with very noticeable indicators, such as a villain hidden behind a pillar waiting to kill another character. The event hasn't happened yet, but it's highly possible. Without any further story or explanation, the viewer can only assume the outcome **(20)**.

SETTING

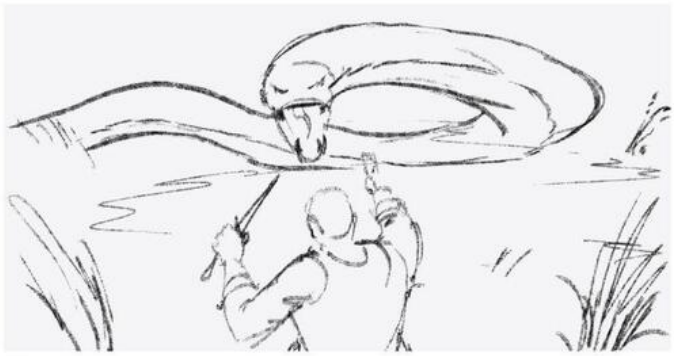
Setting can build a story by conveying a mood or tension in the background, or simply in a landscape. For example, showing one character traveling through a very dangerous environment can suggest many possible stories and create a sense of foreboding **(21)**.



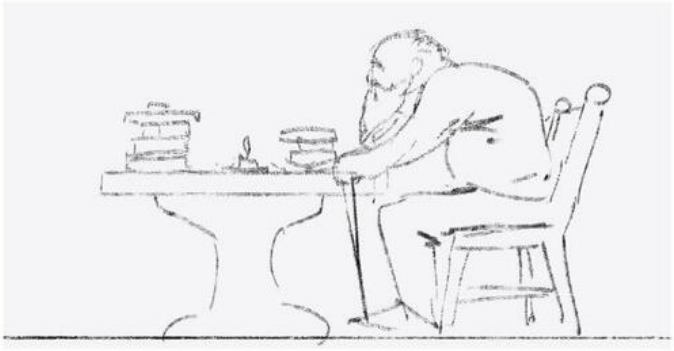
20 This example demonstrates foreshadowing by suggesting a potential scenario that can happen at any moment.



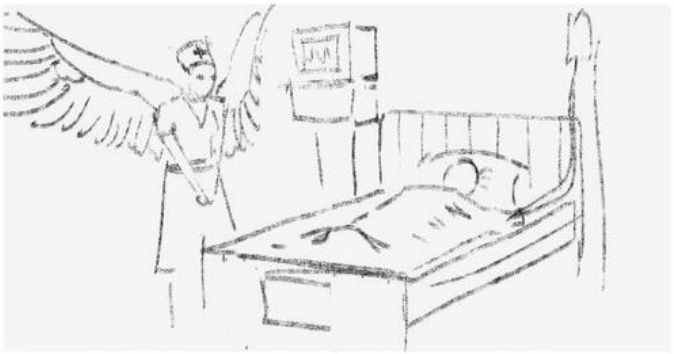
21 The forest in this sketch creates a dangerous setting for the main character.



22 This sketch shows how you can step into a character's shoes by viewing the action from behind their back.



23 An old man sitting in front of a candle that is about to burn out can symbolize the passing of time.



24 The nurse in this sketch is a metaphor for a guardian angel keeping the patient alive. Metaphor can be tricky because it depends on the viewer's interpretation, which can be influenced by cultural background and life experience. For example, this angel could also be seen as waiting to take a dying patient to heaven, rather than protecting them from death.

POINT OF VIEW

Sometimes point of view can shift the story into a different perspective. Very often it is used to emphasize the role of the character and to put the viewer closer to the scene and action **(22)**.

SYMBOLISM & METAPHOR

Symbolism is a very important element that can change a story from being obvious at first glance, to something deeper or more ambiguous when you consider its symbolic meaning **(23)**.

Metaphor is depicted using stereotypes, archetypes, or anything that has two commonly known meanings. You can show an object that at first glance doesn't mean anything or seem very important, but on further inspection provides the viewer with a totally new perspective on the painting **(24)**.



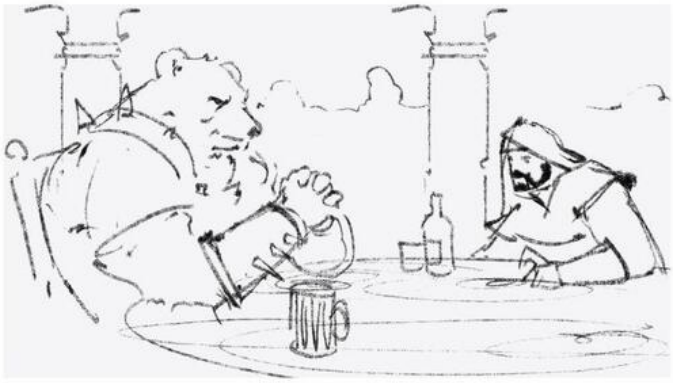
25 In this sketch, the direct look of the subject into the viewer's eyes creates a connection between them.

INVOLVING THE VIEWER

This is when a character or multiple characters make eye contact with the viewer, bringing them closer to the action **(25)**. This tool not only helps to increase tension, but can also add more mystery to the painting. A great example of this is *Mona Lisa* and her mysterious look at the viewer (see page 80).

PERSONIFYING AN ANIMAL CHARACTER

Animals are often included in scenes but usually as more of a background object without emotions or feelings. Personifying an animal character tells a story from the creature's point of view, adding more variety to the scene **(26)**.



26 A bear, dressed in humanlike armor, sits and has a drink with a man. When introducing a personified animal character into a believable human world, we suspend our concept of reality to allow the out-of-the-ordinary scene, to the point where we treat every character or occurrence that would normally be unimaginable (in the real world) as completely normal.

EXAGGERATION

Exaggeration can be used to direct the viewer's attention to an important part of the narrative. This could be something that is only taking place in the background, but because it's in some way distinctive and abnormal, it stands out against the rest of the action **(27)**.

HUMOR

Humor is commonly used in comics or entertaining illustrations. Adding an action can help to capture a series of events that lead to a humorous ending – and you may not even need to show the actual outcome to achieve the same effect **(28)**. Satire and parody can also be used, for example by exaggerating a subject's flaws to the extent that it makes the audience laugh.



27 The main action in this image focuses around two knights fighting in the foreground. However, the oversized character in the background is a potential threat and because the character's size is slightly exaggerated, he stands out despite his distance in the background.



28 *Painting of Children Pulling a Party or Christmas Cracker and Dog* (1919) by Norman Rockwell.
This has a foreshadowing type of narrative. The children's comical facial expressions, the eager dog with its big pink bow, and the childlike pastel color palette of the overall painting hints that the foreshadowed event (the loud "crack" of the cracker) will be humorous, leading the children to laugh together.



29 *Mona Lisa* or *La Gioconda* (c.1503–1516) by Leonardo da Vinci. The *Mona Lisa* is one of the most famous paintings in the history of art. Although the painting itself seemingly doesn't carry much of a story, there are many mysteries and theories about the pose, background, and smile. The mystery behind the painting has outgrown the painting itself.

AMBIGUITY

Sometimes not giving the reader an immediate answer to questions raised by a painting can be a useful narrative technique. You can create mystery and engagement even through just a simple composition and a particular expression. *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci is a good example of this – the subject has an enigmatic smile, and rather than painting the portrait with a traditional background, da Vinci opted for a landscape background, leading many to wonder where the subject is sitting **(29)**.

SIMPLICITY & COMPLEXITY OF NARRATIVE

As you saw in the introduction to this chapter, narratives and narrative techniques can be straightforward **(30)** or more complex, where the viewer needs to delve deeper into the story **(31)**. A complex narrative can describe a detailed historical event and provide the viewer with a large amount of information. A simple narrative can convey a single idea or emotion. Or what initially seems like a simple narrative can in fact have many more layers and hidden meanings that create quite a complex narrative. The approach you use depends on what it is you want to convey, and how you want to convey it.



30 *Corriendo por la playa, Valencia* (1908) by Joaquín Sorolla is an example of a simple story of children playing on the beach.



31 *Pastoral* (c. 1893) by Rupert Bunny is one of many Australian symbolist paintings that incorporates aspects of symbolism and allegorical subjects. Combining these elements with a more complex composition creates a much more developed narrative.

Image 30, *Corriendo por la playa, Valencia* (1908) by Joaquín Sorolla, available on Wikimedia Commons under the CC-BY-2.0 license



32 *Piaskarze* (1887) by Aleksander Gierymski is a highly detailed and realistically rendered painting showing a simple everyday story, without any hidden message.

It's important to note that a complex composition does not necessarily indicate a complex narrative. A simple and obvious story can be shown in a very complex painting filled with various characters **(32)**. Similarly, a complex narrative can be shown in a very simple way using as few tools as possible to depict an ambiguous and thought-provoking story. This approach can also lead to a striking or satirical depiction.

Looking at image **33** by Jan Matejko, for example, a court jester should entertain and be funny, but in this painting the jester is sad, encouraging the viewer to look more closely. In the background you can see a ball taking place, while a letter on the table notes the loss of an important trade center (the siege of Smolensk). Matejko painted the jester's face as his own, symbolizing his perspective on a time when aristocrats partied despite knowing of the loss. Historical meaning and personal connection to the stories behind this painting create a complex narrative.

As you can see, narrative can be flexible and can be used differently by each individual. It all depends on the artist's vision and the story that is being told.

Since storytelling is often very individual and can be told in many different ways, it's hard to declare one way of building narrative as better than the others. The most effective composition techniques are those that catch the attention of the viewer and hold it for a while. Foreshadowing, involving the viewer, and making the most of setting in a monoscenic narrative, are the most suitable for paintings.

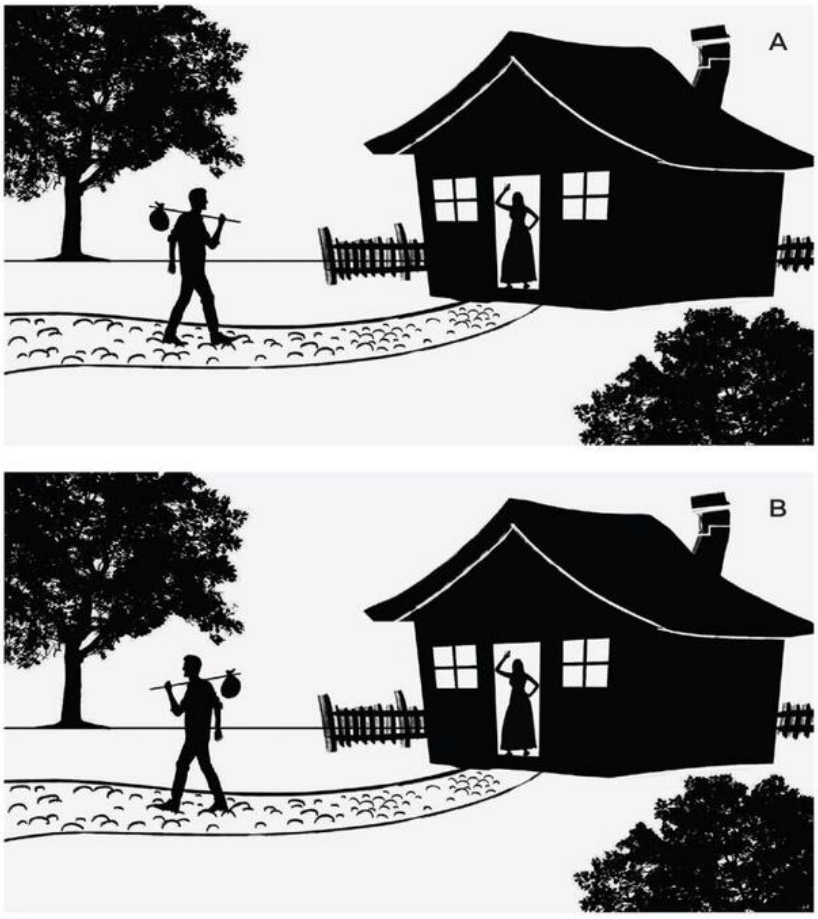


33 *Stańczyk* (1862) by Jan Matejko. Despite the fact that this painting mostly focuses on the jester, there is a deeper story behind the painting, hinted at by the ball taking place in the background.

COMPOSITION & NARRATIVE

As discussed in the first chapter of this book, composition is hugely important in conveying a story in an image. You can depict your idea using composition guidelines and tools for all of the objects and characters in your painting. If you don't pay close attention to composition, everything is likely to be randomly positioned, and it will be difficult to convey the narrative you have planned. In this section we will look more closely at the relationship between composition and narrative.

Being aware of the message or idea that you want to get across in a composition is key. Direction, order, place, and other factors can all change the meaning of your story. For example, in figure **34**, the first image depicts a man returning home after a long journey, his wife waving to him from the doorstep. The second image shows the same scene, with the only difference being that the man is facing in the opposite direction. Now the man is leaving and his wife waves goodbye.



34 This example shows how important composition is in storytelling. The direction the man is facing completely changes the narrative of the image.



35 *Market Plaza* by Dom Lay is an example of a wider scene that is able to display much more narrative than close-up compositions. In addition to the main narrative of the jungle explorer hunting for the lost relic, there are lots of smaller narratives taking place between other characters in the scene.

In the Middle Ages, artists used a flat and often central composition to convey their ideas. When you have a large field of view, presented in very visible way, story can be told by showing full poses of each character. All the aspects of the body can be shown in very noticeable ways **(35)**. In a large scene like this, the composition can explore not just one character, but their relationship with other characters and objects. Any type of composition that has a much closer viewpoint and more focused angle will provide fewer options for the story to be shown **(36)**.

That said, narrative is something abstract and, as discussed earlier in this chapter, can be demonstrated in a limited composition through techniques such as close-ups, symbolism, and metaphor.

To build an interesting story, think about it as a situation that happens in one particular moment. Thinking about the subject as a focal point is a good start. You can then build the surroundings in relation to the main character or object, and all the possible consequences coming from their interaction can help create an interesting chain of events **(37)**.

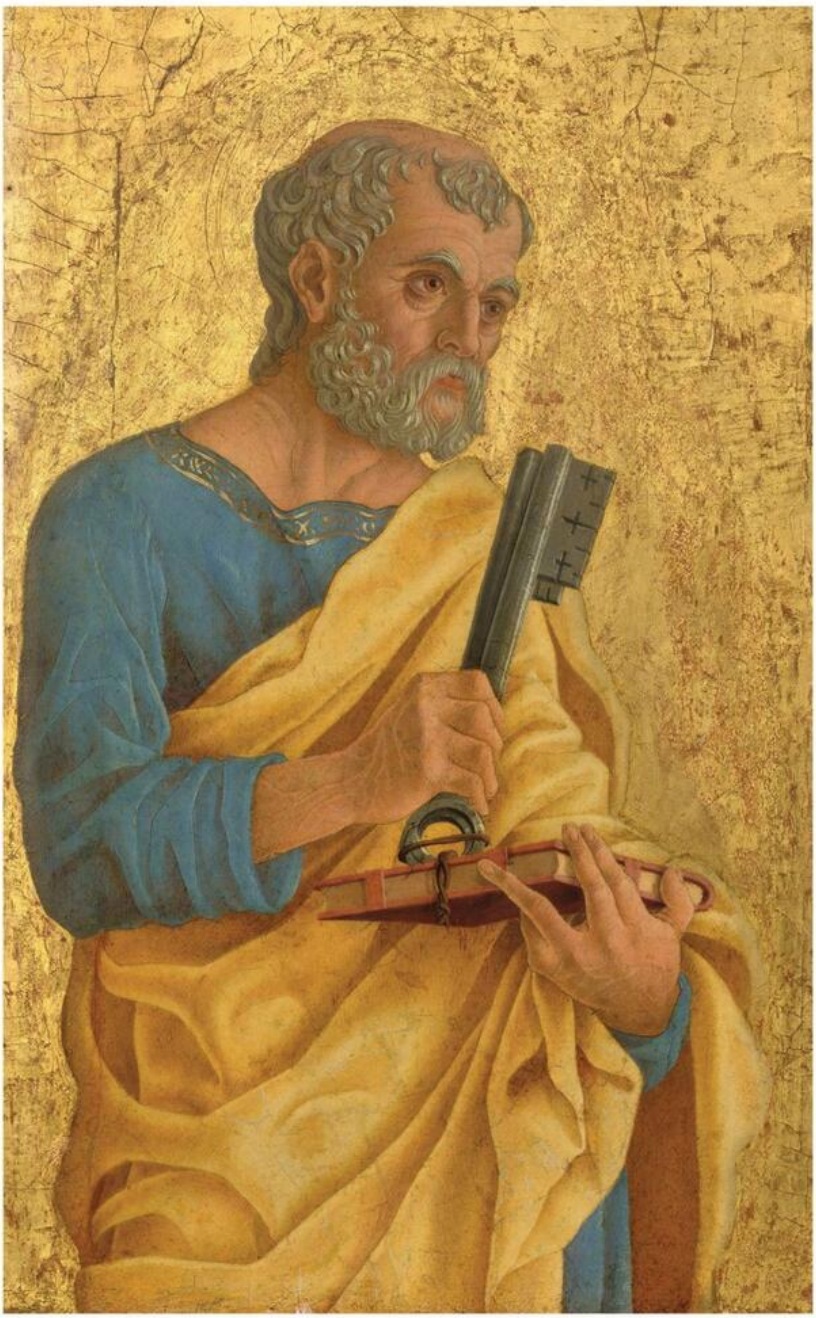
It depends on the artist as to how many interactions or important objects will be shown in the painting. Sometimes it can be just one character and one object, but presented in an interesting lighting scenario or color palette to create a specific mood that will play on the viewer's emotions **(38)**.

Sometimes including several symbolic items in a more stylized way in relation to a character can build mystery and leave interpretation to the observer **(39)**. But there is almost always a subject as the main part of the story, and all the elements have to implicate a narrative around it.

CHOOSE YOUR FOCAL POINT EARLY

When you start building your own narrative in an image, think about the deeper story behind it. Try to set your subject and relative parts as a focal point. You could place the subject using the rule of thirds, golden ratio, or any other type of composition tool. The focal point will be the start of the story, so it's good to use it for the main subject to avoid possible misinterpretation by the viewer.

Image 35, *Market Plaza* © Dom Lay



36 *Saint Peter* (c. 1468) by Marco Zoppo. This painting shows a closer angle of the subject, which is limiting for potential narrative.



37 This painting is an example of building narrative using a simple central composition around a focal point. In this case, a boy sitting alone is the focal point and all of the small details that surround him create a specific mood and indicate a particular scenario to the viewer. For example, snow and blueish tones in the right upper corner convey the cold season. A lack of socks and warmer clothes hint that the boy comes from a poor background. These details create compassionate feelings and put the viewer in a gloomy mood.



38 *Jewish Woman Selling Oranges* (between 1880 and 1881) by Aleksander Gierymski. This simple portrait painting shows an older woman selling oranges. Gierymski depicted her in dark colors and used a dark lighting scenario to create a gloomy and melancholy mood.

Image 37, *Fisherman's Boy* © Greg Rutkowski



39 *Death of Marat* (1793) by Jacques-Louis David symbolizes the idea of martyrdom in the times of the French Revolution. The lighting and style call back to more classical paintings of Christ and Christian martyrs.

When it comes to narrative in composition, it's hard to judge artists' choices. There are many examples of artists who used empty and open spaces to build a story **(40)** and there are also many artists who build a story with huge crowded scenes **(41)**. Both have their purposes. Artists who use emptier compositions often focus on mood and emotions. Painters who focus more on crowded spaces tell a story through the relations between characters and objects.

Obviously, when you look at empty space you will focus on what is painted: the shape of clouds, the time of the day, the color of the sky, and so on, in relation to the subject. When you look at a crowded scene with lots of characters you are trying to figure out their relationships; you look at the details to find meaning in the scene.

On the one hand, it's much harder to build an interesting narrative in an empty space because there are fewer opportunities to suggest a story. On the other hand, using a composition with multiple characters and relations means there is much more to think about because of the amount of details and objects. You have to balance the needs of the story and your intentions as an artist.

EXPERIMENT BEFORE GOING AHEAD

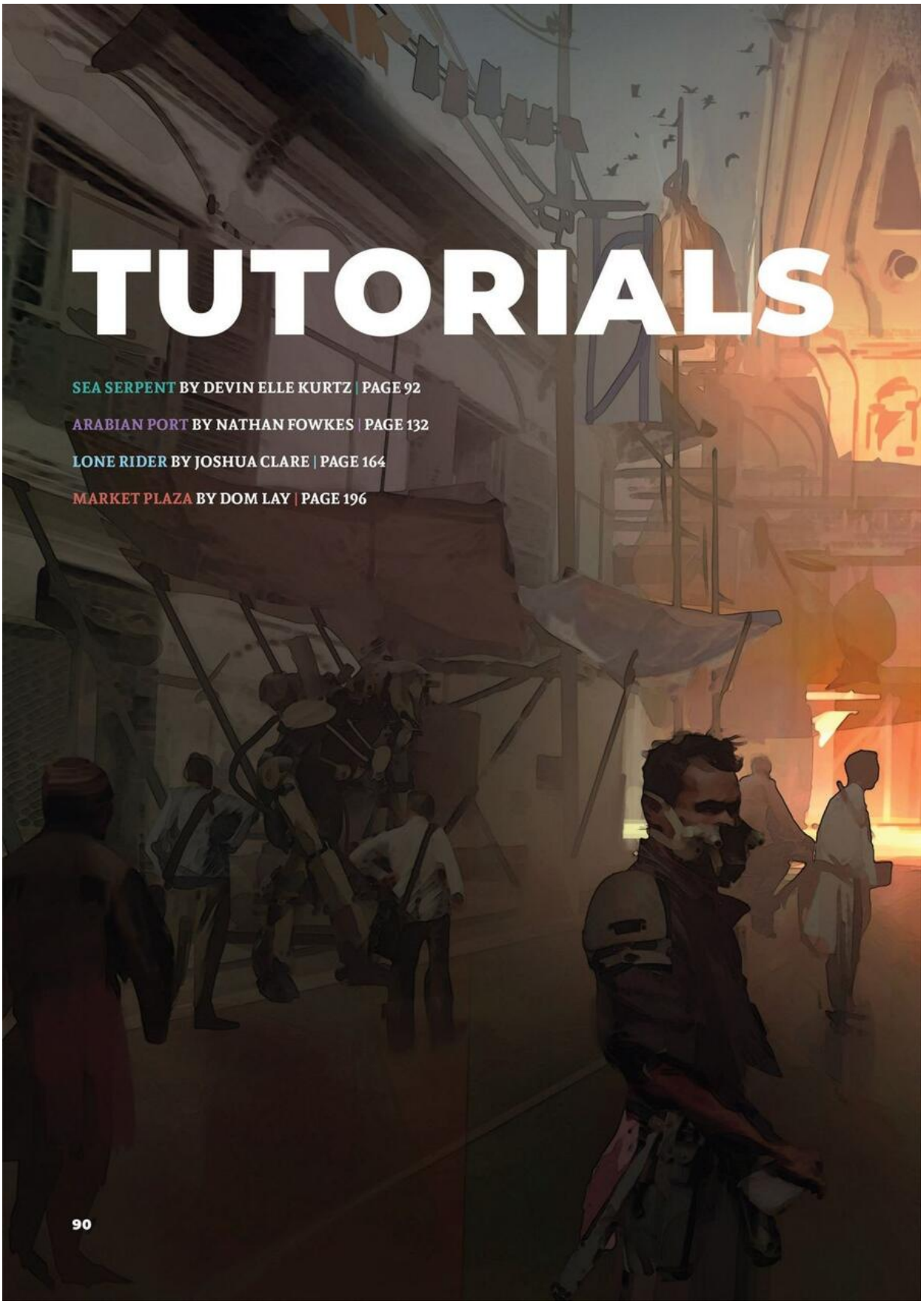
Early on in your painting process, before you start building a narrative, try at least three to four different positions for the subject in relation to other objects. A few different attempts will give you a wider picture of the story you want to tell. After a few versions of the sketch, new ideas will often come to mind, which can help enrich your story.



40 *Evening Landscape with Two Men* (between 1830 and 1835) by Caspar David Friedrich. Friedrich depicted two men, possibly brothers, standing in an open field looking at the sunset. Despite the fact that in terms of narrative this painting isn't very rich, it evokes nostalgia and plays with the viewer's emotions.



41 *The Maid of Orléans* (1886) by Jan Matejko is the biggest painting this artist ever painted (4.84 × 9.73 meters). Not only is the size something to admire, but also the amount of story included within this masterpiece.



TUTORIALS

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ARABIAN PORT BY NATHAN FOWKES | PAGE 132

LONE RIDER BY JOSHUA CLARE | PAGE 164

MARKET PLAZA BY DOM LAY | PAGE 196

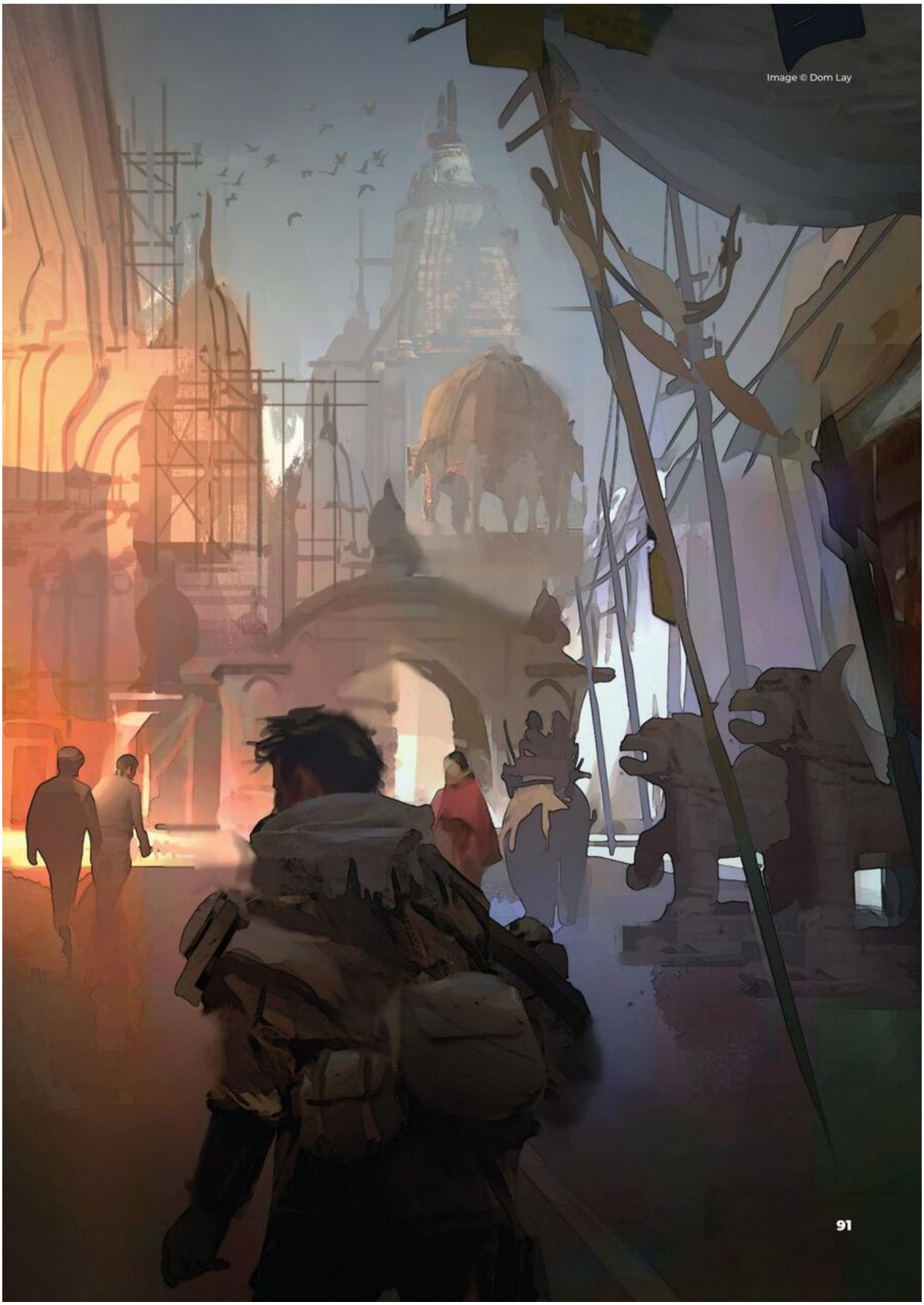

Image © Dom Lay

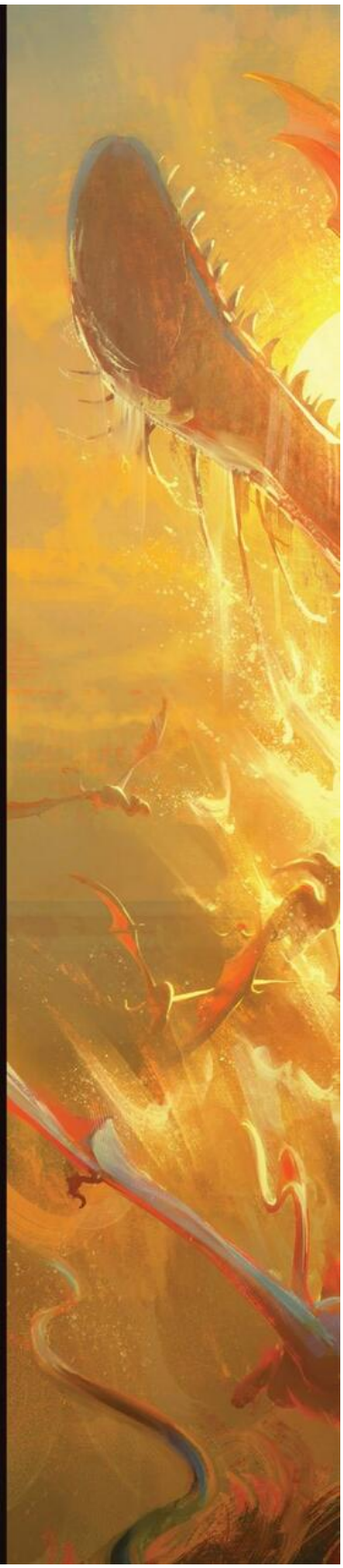
Image © Devin Elle Kurtz

SEA SERPENT

DEVIN ELLE KURTZ

The process of telling a complete story in a single image is one of life's most exciting challenges. Imparting a narrative to an audience using only shape, value, line, and color is no easy task, and it can feel especially daunting for beginners. When I was younger, I would look at masterful storytelling illustrations in awe, completely dumbfounded as to how the artist might have constructed them. I couldn't fathom ever being able to accomplish such a feat – I had no idea where to begin. I thought they must have something I didn't have – some spark, some secret inspiration, some magical ability to conjure narrative out of thin air. Now, years later, I spend most of my time doing exactly what I thought I wasn't capable of – crafting narrative illustrations. Back in my younger years, I simply hadn't learned the in-between steps yet. Sitting down at age twelve and attempting to draw a complex scene with no planning, brainstorming, or fundamental composition skills to fall back on – it was a recipe for failure.

In this tutorial, I will decode the process that mystified me so much in my youth, explaining in depth how I craft stories in my illustrations. This will provide a structure to help you avoid the pitfalls that led to failure in my younger years. As a narrative illustrator, I tell stories by placing subjects and objects in a scene, and then directing the viewer's eye to each storytelling element in the correct sequence. I craft the desired sequence of observations by strategically composing the image. This tutorial will cover how to use lines of action, intersection, gazes and, most importantly, contrast to direct the viewer's eye through an image, in a desired order, so as to reveal a narrative. I will be using Photoshop CC, but feel free to use your preferred software or medium.





01 IDEA EXPLORATION

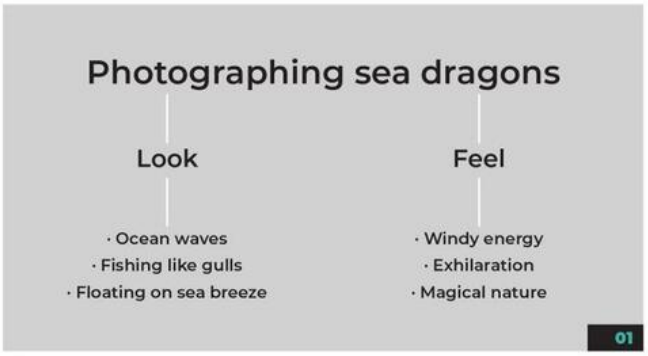
The first step in telling any story is determining what the story is about. I ask myself, what story do I want to tell? And why? Today I want to tackle a complex scene filled with energy, action, and wonder. I want to paint something magical and new; a scene impossible to find in real life that can only be conjured through an artist's imagination.

My first idea is to paint a photographer on a cliff, photographing sea dragons as they scoop squid and fish out of the ocean. I'm inspired by images of seagulls shaking their meals in the air as they fish their dinner out of the water. I like to write my story out as a sentence so I can easily identify the characters and actions that I need to place in my scene. For my initial concept, I write: "*A photographer is taking photos of sea dragons as they fish their dinner out of the ocean.*"

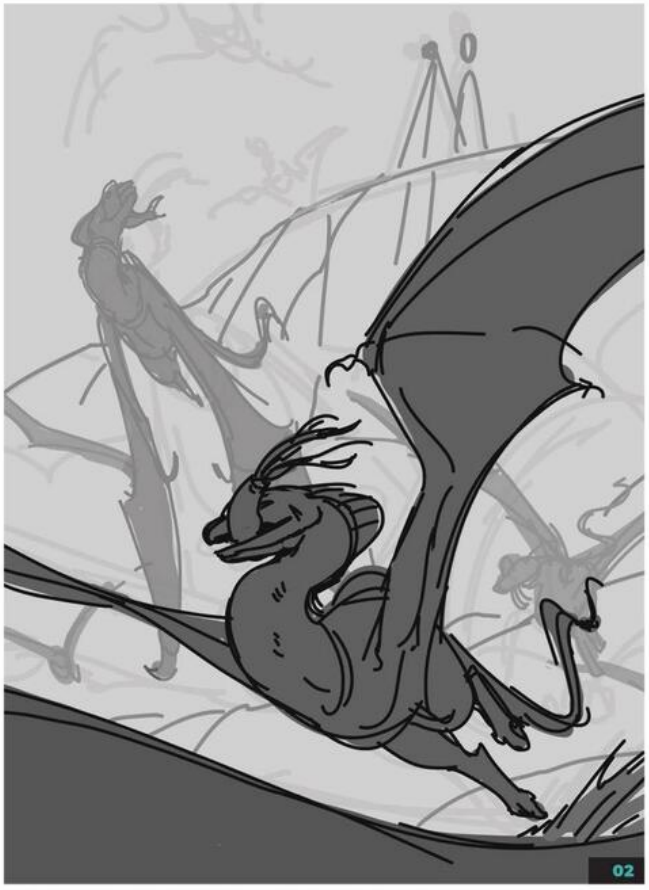
To execute this scene, I know I will need a photographer taking photos with a camera, the ocean, and sea dragons carrying fish. However, simply ensuring that all of these elements are in the image does not guarantee the story will be communicated clearly. I will need to compose these elements in a meaningful order to accurately convey the story.

STORYTELLING SENTENCE

It can help to break down your storytelling sentence to find the components necessary to the scene. For example, "*A photographer* (subject 1) *is taking photos* (subject 1's action) *of sea dragons* (subject 2) *as they fish their dinner out of the ocean* (subject 2's action)." It might sound too simplistic to be useful, but writing out and breaking down your ideas into usable components can make a daunting scene feel much more achievable.



01 Exploring ideas for the narrative.



02 The first rejected sketch – the photographer is not focal enough.



03 The second rejected sketch – the dragons are too distant.



04 A first rough doodle of the chosen image.

02 SKETCHING: ROUND 1

Here is my first attempt. I like this sketch and it has a fun energy, but it feels more like a story about sea dragons, with a photographer in the background, than a story about a photographer. I realize that the photographer's story is the priority – his triumphant joy and amazement as he achieves the perfect action shot – rather than a story about sea dragons with a distant documentarian on the shore. Sometimes it's necessary to explore a direction until you hit a brick wall in order to realize it's time to change course. Sketching out an idea, even one you don't proceed with, teaches you what you do and don't want out of your image and story. From this sketch, I learn that I want to center the photographer's experience in the painting, with him acting as a conduit into the scene.

03 SKETCHING: ROUND 2

I decide to switch the view, putting the viewer right into the photographer's shoes. Placing the camera behind the photographer lets us almost become him as we experience the image. We see what he sees from this angle, and can infer that our emotional response to the view is similar to his. Overall, however, the image feels less engaging and momentous as the dragons are so small and distant, without any larger shapes to pull the image together.

04 A CHANGE OF PLAN

I have an epiphany – why stop at the second level of the food chain? What if the story has a twist? "*A photographer is taking photos of sea dragons as they fish their dinner out of the ocean, and just as he's set to take a photo, a gigantic sea serpent splashes up from the depths to snatch a sea dragon out of the air.*" The sketch is messy, but usable. Sometimes a fervent doodle, meant to capture an image in the mind's eye before it fades, is all you need. Next, I have to translate this information into a more usable sketch to take forward.



Ten-step value scale

05 LIMITED VALUE STUDIES

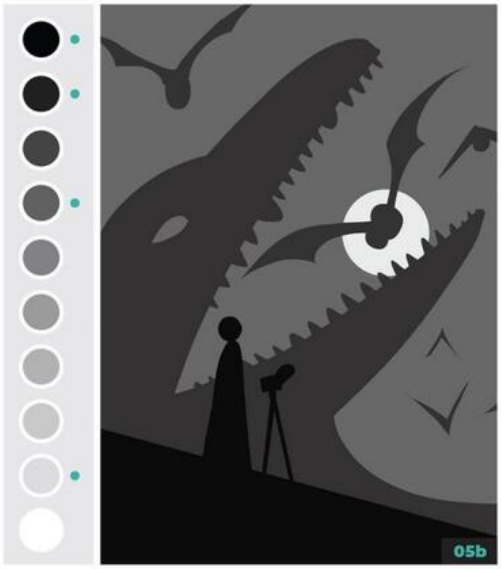
One of my favorite exercises for composition is to take my sketch and translate it into four values. Value is the level of lightness or darkness, and I typically depict it using a ten-step value scale.

To create a four-value sketch, I start by choosing four values. These values will contribute to the mood and feel of the image. It's incredible how much you can imply using only shape and a limited set of values. You can imply distance, time of day, and even the direction of the light. The exact number of values isn't important here – you can do it with five, or even three. However, I find four is often the perfect number.

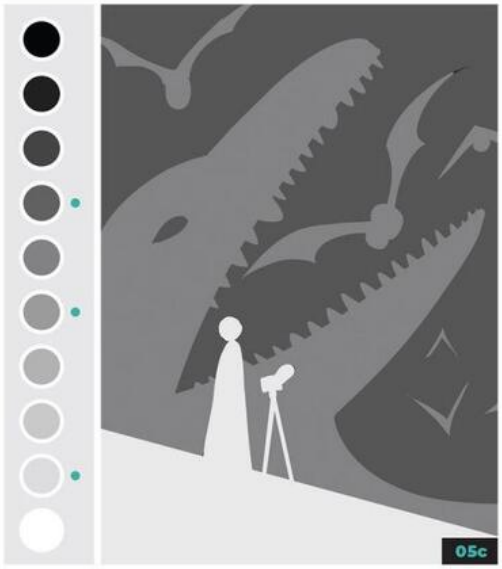
After comparing the compositions, I feel that composition **05a** is the strongest, in part due to my love of backlit sunset scenes. With an overall direction chosen, it's time to refine the sketch.



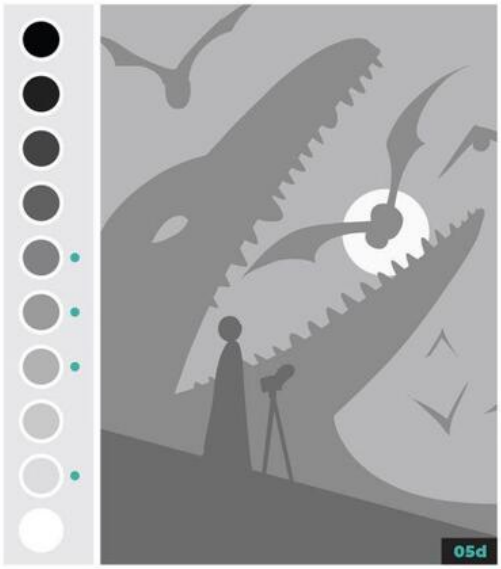
05a This composition implies a sunset scene, with the setting sun behind the dragon about to be eaten.



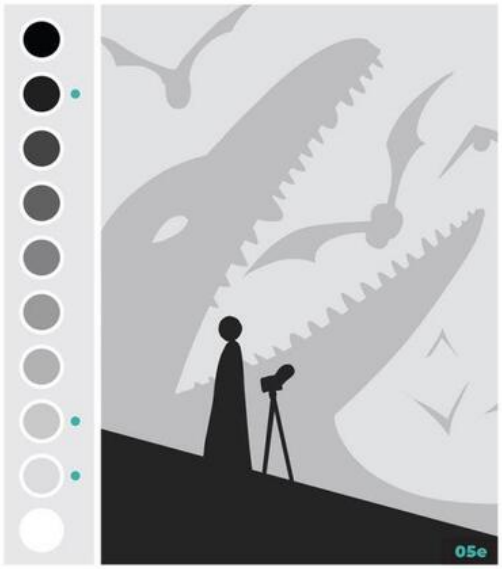
05b This version implies a night scene, with the round shape reading as a moon instead. Narrowing and darkening the overall value range, leaving only a very light moon, implies a very different scene.



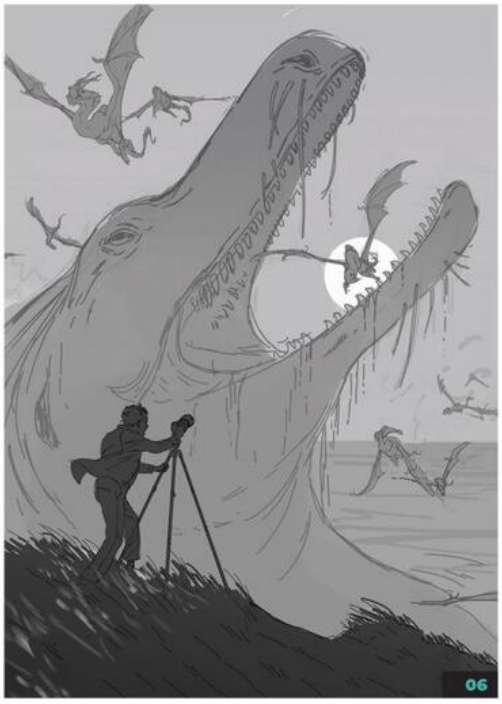
05c This composition implies the sun is behind the photographer, illuminating the foreground and middle ground as the sky darkens behind the serpent.



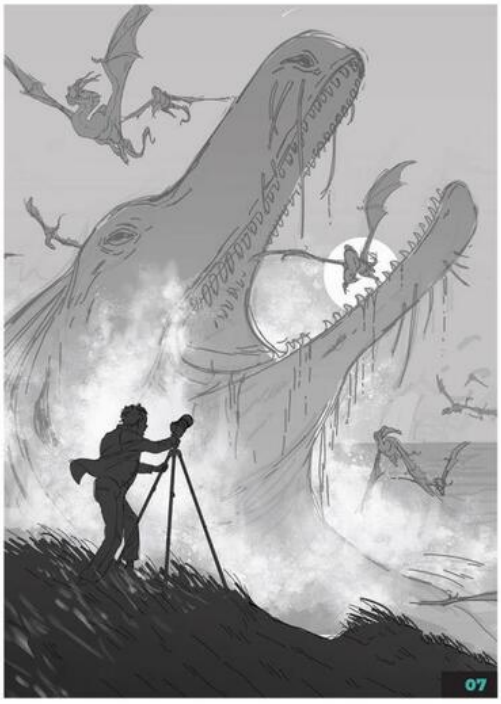
05d Pushing the values much closer together implies a foggy sunset. With the photographer so close in value to the serpent, he feels very close in proximity as well.



05e Here, the photographer feels distant from the foggy action, safely out of the way.



06 The first version of the final sketch.



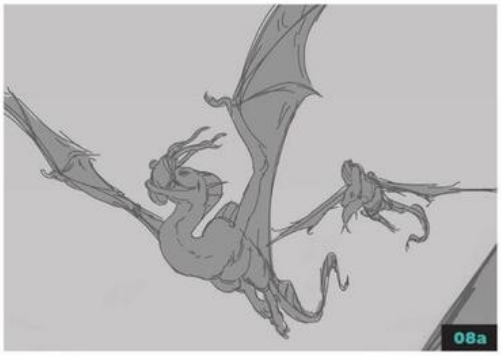
07 The final sketch, with an added splash.

06 SKETCHING: ROUND 3

With a first sketch out of the way, I return to my initial story sentence to make sure I have captured every element. "*A photographer* – yes, the clear silhouette of the tripod implies a photographer – *is taking photos of sea dragons* – his camera is pointing at the dragon silhouetted by the sun, taking the viewer's eye directly there – *as they fish their dinner out of the ocean* – the fish and squid have clear silhouettes – *and just as he's set to take a photo, a gigantic sea serpent splashes up from the depths to snatch a sea dragon out of the air* – there is definitely a sea monster." The splashing, however, isn't quite established yet, and this lack of action and motion makes the moment feel less visceral and real. It doesn't yet feel sudden and immediate. There's one other problem too: my eye is drawn to the sun-silhouetted dragon first, when I'd like the story to begin with the photographer. Luckily, I can solve both problems at once with a carefully executed splash.

07 ADDING A SPLASH

The splash creates a dramatic contrast around the photographer, drawing the eye directly to the desired starting location. Arranging the darkest dark against the lightest light – combined with noisy details like his facial features, tripod, and limbs – creates a clear focal point. The experience I want to conjure for the viewer is one of being drawn directly to the photographer, causing them to wonder what he is photographing. Humans are instinctively drawn to follow each other's gazes in life, and this instinct carries into art and imagery as well. When the highest point of contrast is a character determinedly looking in a certain direction, the audience's attention is immediately directed toward where they are looking, too. Here, the viewer begins with the photographer and is immediately directed along the powerful diagonal of the serpent's mouth, right to the next highest point of contrast: the dragon in front of the setting sun. From there, it's only a matter of milliseconds before the viewer realizes that the subject of the photographer's photo will be digesting in a serpent's stomach in a matter of seconds. Rest in peace, little dragon.





08a & 08b Close-ups of the sea dragons, showing their various poses and sizes.



09 A close-up of the photographer, showing his expressive pose.

08 VARIATION AND DESIGN

When painting several similar subjects in one scene, it's important to vary their distance, size, and position to create a natural and organic appearance. I purposefully vary the distance and positions of the sea dragons to achieve a feeling of reality.

Too much uniformity feels still, man-made, and designed rather than captured. Too much variation, however, can be hectic, unrecognizable as the same subject, and unorganized. This is the balancing act for any artist hoping to create an organic appearance within a tight composition. It's challenging to compose a scene, purposefully and with intent, that retains enough randomness and variation to effectively hide the artist's guiding hand and instead immerse the viewer in the invented reality of the image.

Some artists lean solely into the design and don't desire to hide their artistic intent, while others hope to fade entirely into the backdrop and provide a purely visceral quality. I aim to fall somewhere at the visceral end of the middle, with images that read as purposefully designed, but with enough random variation and organic qualities that they can become immersive scenes. Neither direction is better than the other; it's simply about choosing the method that allows you to tell the story you wish to tell.

09 POSING THE CHARACTER

Capturing an expressive pose can go a long way toward depicting the narrative, especially when a character's back is turned. Asking my dad to pose for me, I directed him toward increasingly more exaggerated poses and expressions throughout our photoshoot. I closed my eyes and immersed myself in the scene in my mind, imagining how I would feel and react to such a wild event happening right in front of my eyes. I directed him to spread his feet in a wide stance, bracing against the powerful vibrations of water crashing against the cliff as the serpent emerges. I then asked my mom to whip his shirt out behind him, as if it were being pummeled by the wind. In my opinion, action and emotion win out over perfect form and anatomy every time.

IDEA GENERATION FOR A STORYTELLING ILLUSTRATION

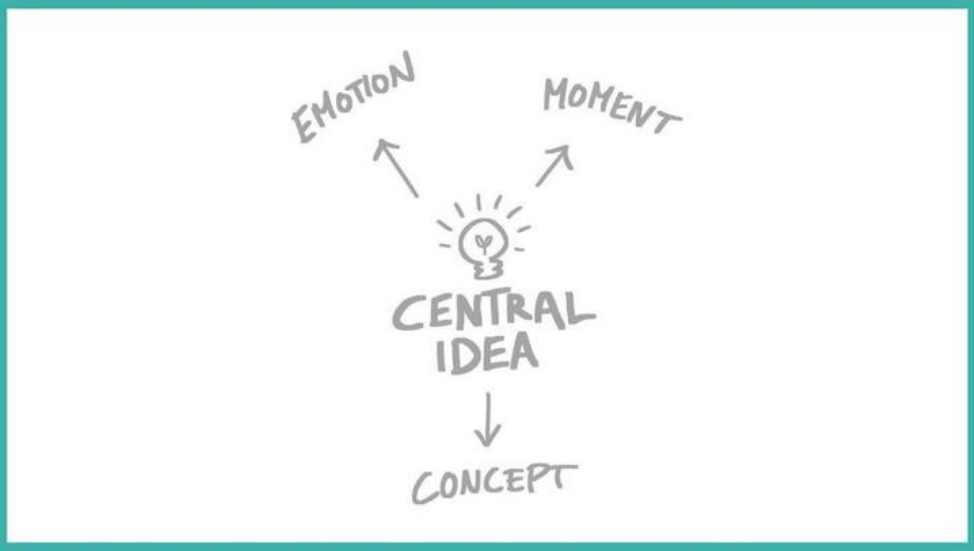
Early on in my artistic journey, I expected fully formed ideas to simply pop into my head, fleshed out and ready to paint. This was, of course, an unrealistic expectation. Idea generation is a process, and it's a process that can be practiced.

That said, idea generation can be a daunting process for beginners. It's often useful to create a mindmap or ideas page. Rather than trying to organize all the complex information mentally, writing ideas down enables you to organize them in a visual way. It also frees you up from the task of retaining your ideas and allows your mind to wander freely to new destinations, as you have the security of written reminders to ensure nothing is forgotten.

I like to begin the idea generation process with a central idea. Ideas can be very simple to start with, before developing into a more detailed concept over time. One category of central ideas would be an emotion. You could start with feelings such as "lost" or "jealous" or "torn." Another direction would be to choose a moment. This could be a magical moment in a character's life, such as finding a baby unicorn lost in a forest. It could also be a moment in your own life, such as watching your baby cousins blow bubbles in the backyard. You can even start with a single concept, such as a dragon with butterfly wings, and build a story from there.

Different artists will find it easier to begin with different types of central ideas. Some will be able to connect imagery to emotions quickly and easily, and will find it easiest to begin there. Others will find it more accessible to start with a moment, before imagining what emotions might take place in such a scene. Regardless of which path you take, the goal is to start with a simple concept you can sum up in a few key words for the middle of the idea generation page.

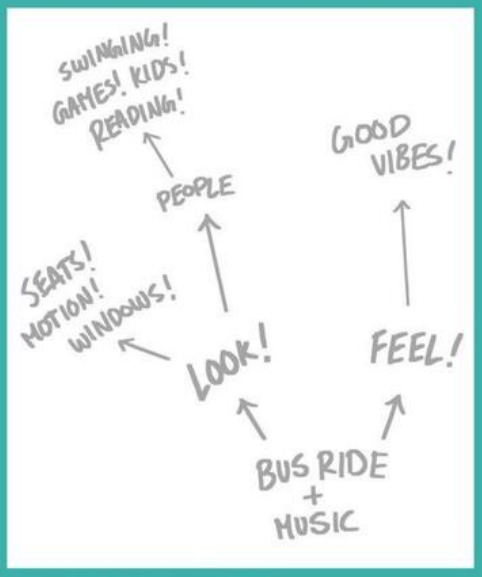
If you struggle with generating ideas, perhaps start with a simple moment in your own life. It doesn't need to be grand and important, although it can be! Sometimes, the most impactful pieces of art capture something beautifully mundane, a shared experience that people can relate to, such as listening to music while riding the bus. A moment like that can be powerfully uniting, as so many people have experienced it.



A. There are three types of central idea you can start with: the emotion, the moment it happens, and the overall concept.



B. An alternate approach is to choose a moment, whether grand and exciting, or simple and mundane.



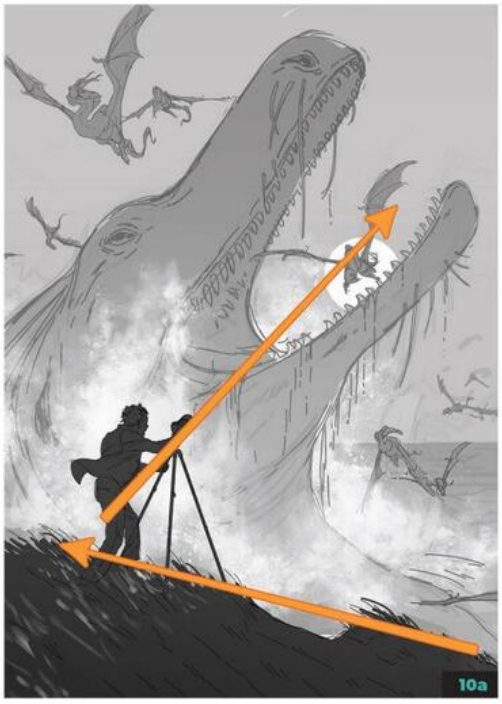
C. You can then explore how this moment will look and feel to generate ideas.

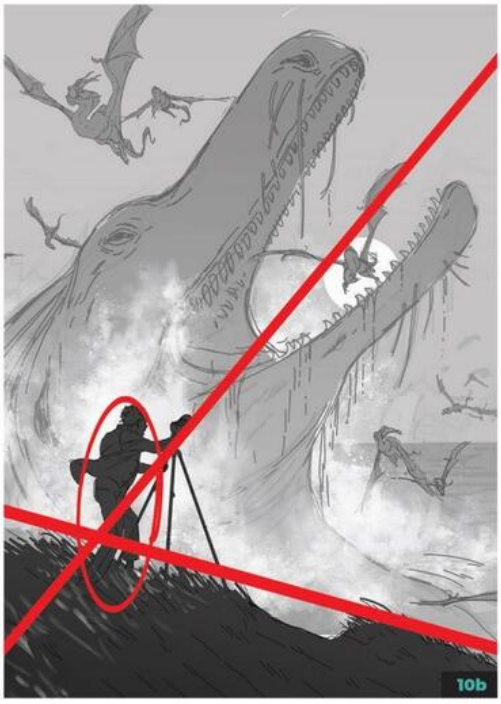
Once you have your central idea noted in the middle of the page, it's time to explore ideas! When choosing a moment, the most important elements to figure out first are: What does it look like? And how does it feel? (See *figure B.*)

When developing the "look," I often use Pinterest to create an idea board. If creating a bus scene, I will add images of rows of seats and scenery moving quickly outside the window. The scene will also need characters. People do all manner of things on the bus, so there are many options to fill a scene. One character could be playing games on their console, another could be pointing out the window with an excited toddler, while a college student with a book in her lap turns to smile at the child. Once you have the surface-level appearance down, you can begin to dig a little deeper and pull unique memories from your personal life. For example, as a child I liked to hold onto the poles and swing around, sometimes disturbing older folks who just wanted a quiet journey to work.

Possibly the most important factor of all: consider how it feels. There are countless directions to go with something as simple as a bus ride. Is it peaceful and calm? Boring and endless? Hectic and chaotic? I think back to long afternoon trips during high school to visit friends in San Francisco, with good music in my earbuds and the happy noise of people all around me. (See *figure C.*)

This simple exercise has led to ideas swimming around in my mind. The idea generation doesn't need to end here – you can branch off endlessly, exploring ideas and generating new concepts until you find one you like. Hopefully, once the page is full, putting pencil to paper won't seem so daunting anymore.





10a & 10b Diagrams showing the primary compositional lines found within the image.

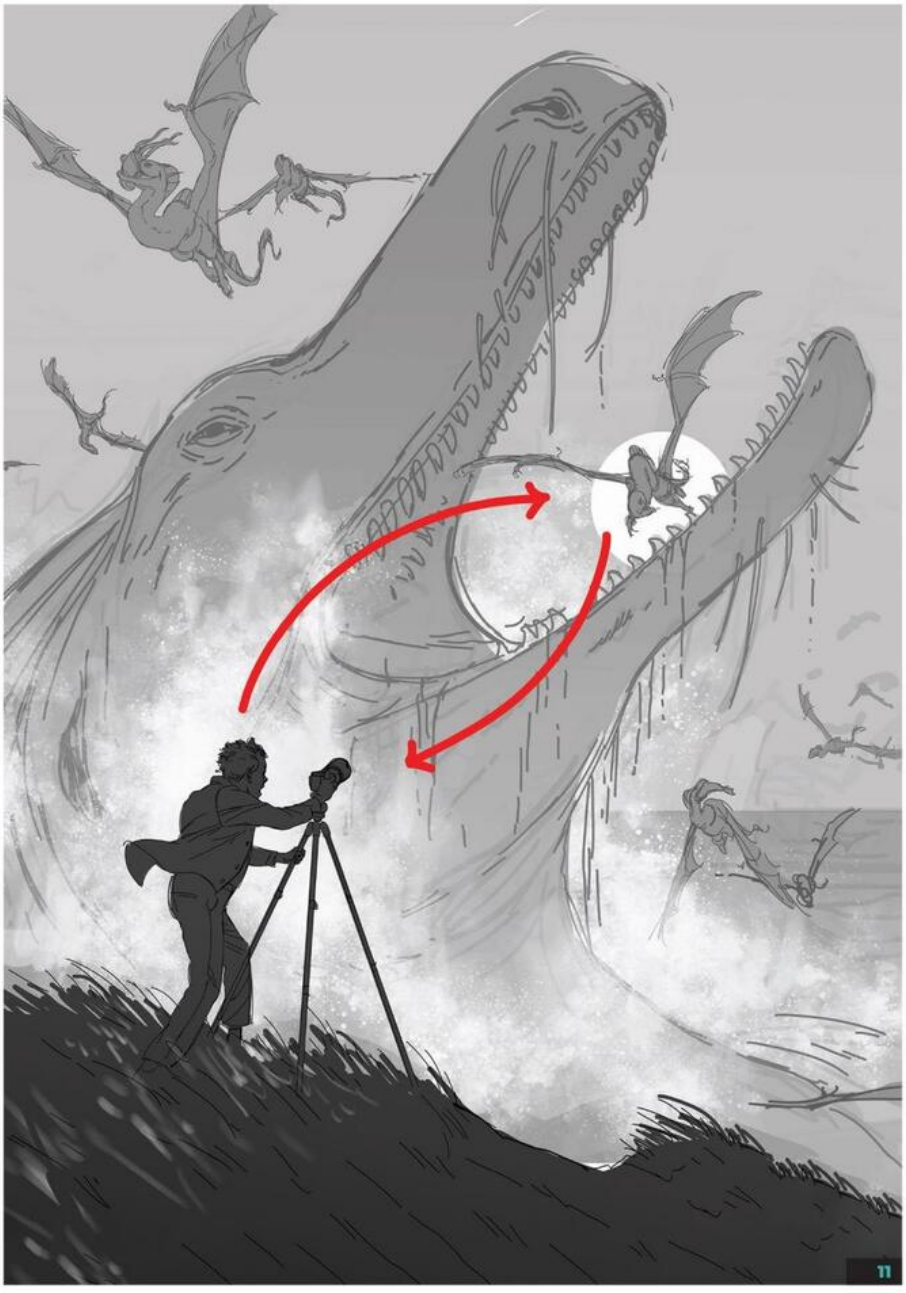
10 COMPOSITIONAL LINES

Two primary lines create the major thrusts of this image. The first and most obvious is the line of the cliff, cutting through the bottom third of the image. The second travels from the camera through the diagonally angled mouth of the giant sea serpent, dropping the viewer off at the dragon in front of the sun. These two primary lines of action intersect at the photographer – the central character. Intersecting lines can be a powerful compositional force. Positioning the focal point where two forceful lines meet is a useful method for bringing importance and attention to it.

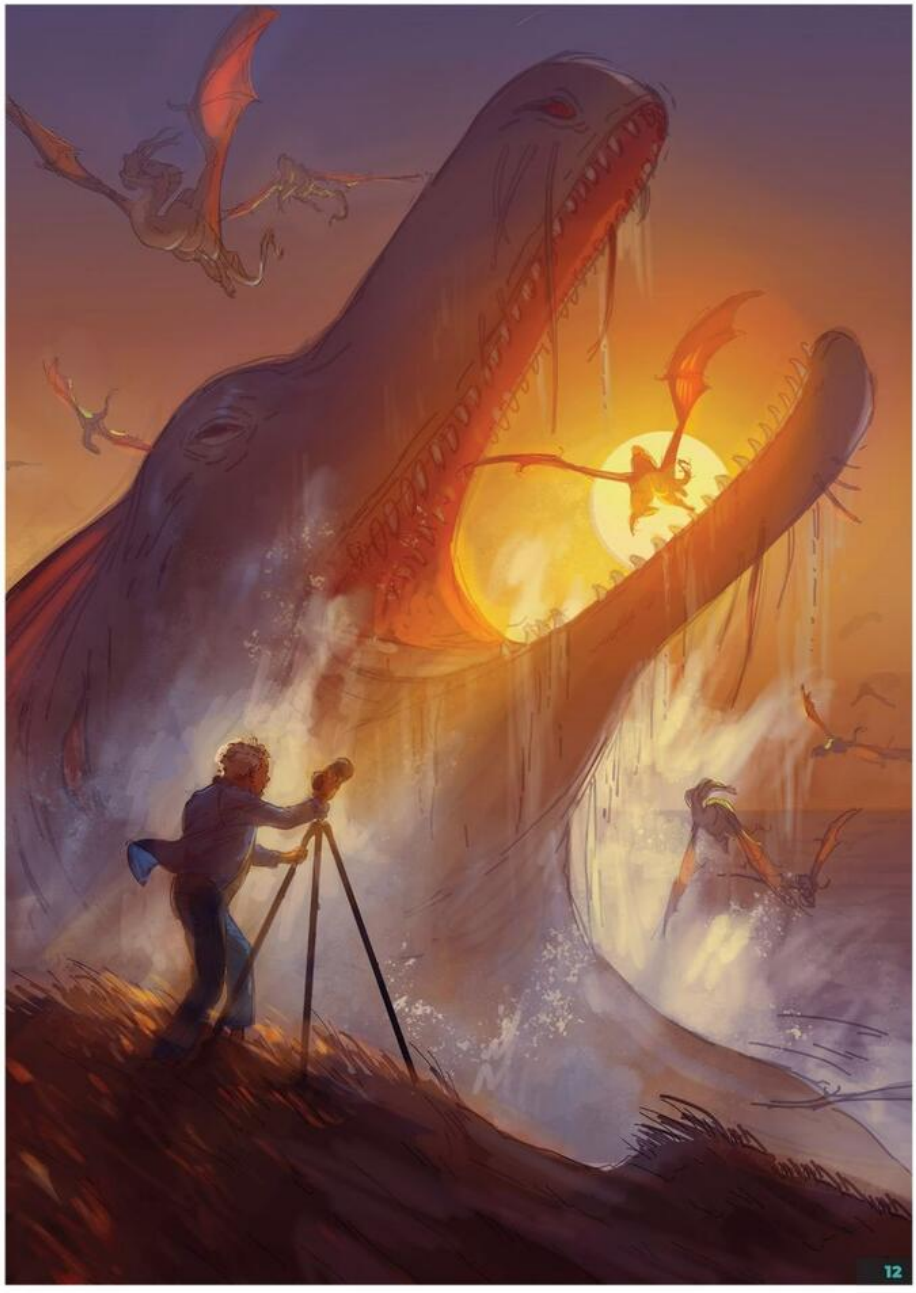
The photographer and camera also sit at about the third mark measured from both the left side and the bottom of the image. This placement leaves an appropriately large open space for the giant sea serpent to fill and find balance within. Placing a small shape in a corner position like this allows me to use the rest of the image to create balance with a larger shape.

11 COMPOSING WITH GAZES

As humans, we instinctually follow the gazes of those around us, including characters in art. While this self-preservation instinct may originally have been designed for spotting predators, artists can also harness it to direct the audience's eye in a painting. When a character is gazing in one direction, and you place another character directly opposite, gazing back, it immediately creates tension. The viewer's eye bounces back and forth between the opposing forces, heightening the emotional experience. I use this same method to create tension between the photographer and his soon-to-be-deceased dragon subject. The photographer stares in awe, the camera reinforcing the direction of his gaze, and the dragon hangs frozen in time, gazing right back as the toothy walls close in around it. The viewer's attention bounces back and forth between the two as the finality of the moment sinks in.



11 A diagram showing the exchange of gazes in the image.



12 Color key 1: a conventional blue and orange sunset creates a calm, scenic mood.

12 COLOR: ROUND 1

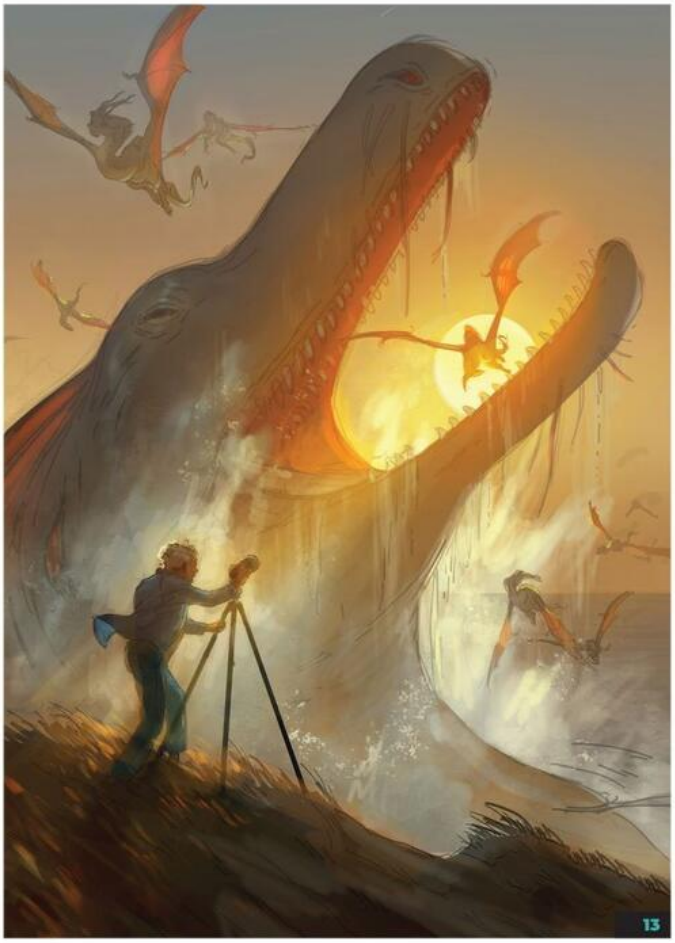
To move from value to color, I merge my sketch into a single layer and set it to Photoshop's Multiply blending mode. I then paint underneath the sketch, using it as a guide, to create my color key. I keep each major element of my color key on its own layer so I can quickly and easily grab selections of objects and subjects. I can also Alpha Lock these layers to quickly recolor areas if needed. I use the brush tool and blending modes in combination with adjustment layers to quickly work through various ideas in a single file.

I already know I want to create a sunset, but there are a few different directions I could go with the color. To start, I create a fairly standard blue and orange sunset. As this is a safe and easy color scheme with which to paint an appealing image, I decide to save out a copy of this color key and try a few different versions.

13 COLOR: ROUND 2

Next, I decide to create a much more muted and neutral comp. ("Comp" refers to the old-school illustration and graphics term "comprehensive," which means a proposed design.) You can use a Selective Color adjustment layer to desaturate hue-families with relative ease in Photoshop. For example, to shift all the blues into a more neutral range, you can take the blues at the top of the adjustment menu, then decrease the cyan and magenta sliders until you achieve the look you desire.

This version is a little outside my typical vibrant color palettes, but I like the way it brings focus to the subsurface scattering in the sea serpent's mouth and the wings of the flying dragons. (I'll go into more detail on subsurface scattering in step 20.) The photographer still stands out clearly, thanks to the value contrast, but the scene he's photographing lights up with saturation contrast in the upper half of the image. This version is a strong contender.

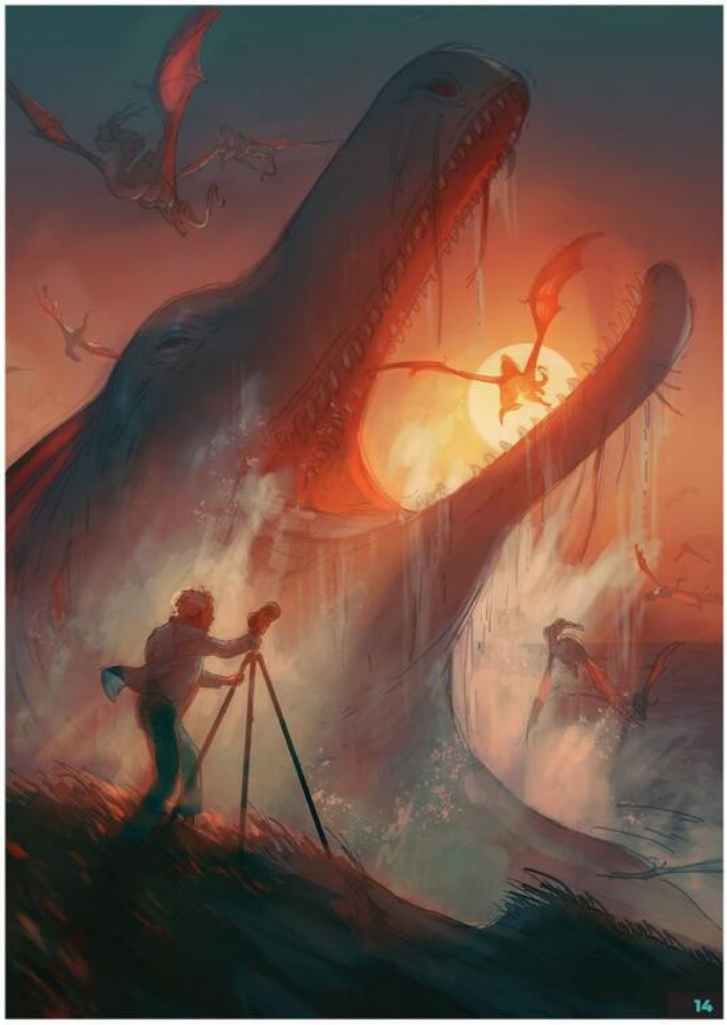


13 Color key 2: a more muted sunset lights the characters in interesting ways.

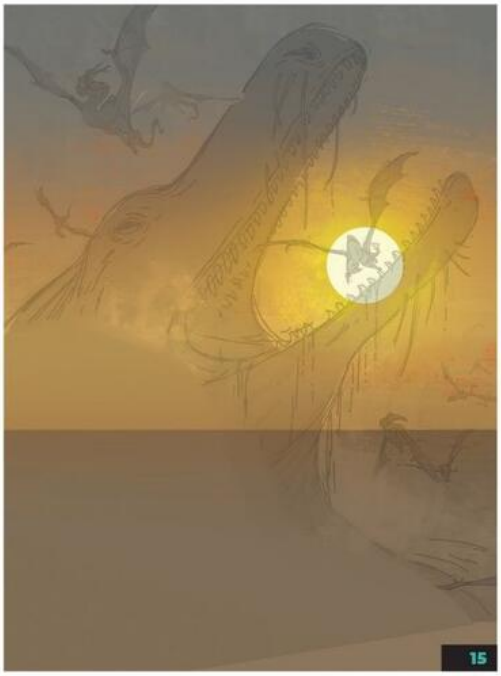
14 COLOR: ROUND 3

I try one final option, pushing the colors into a much darker, creepier range. This would certainly be an interesting route, but it feels a little too scary for the "wonder and awe" vibe I'm aiming for.

I make value adjustments at the same time as experimenting with color options. I prefer to work with my value key as a loose guide, rather than a rigid set of rules. Hue and value work in conjunction in the final image, so I allow them to grow and evolve in unison. I always keep a layer set to the Color blending mode and filled with pure black on top of everything. This allows me to check the values to make sure they still fall in the same general range I was aiming for in the value sketch. I also allow my values to evolve as I work. I like to think of each stage as adding to the previous one, with invention and creativity permissible at every stage.



14 Color key 3: this version gives the scene more of a horror-genre feel.



15 The initial block-in of the background, with the sketch on top set to Multiply.



16 The initial block-in of the serpent, using a brush with Color Jitter to create a multicolor base.

15 BLOCKING IN THE BACKGROUND

Deciding to proceed with color comp 2, it's time to begin the final painting. When starting a complex painting, my first steps involve setting up an appropriately noisy base to paint on top of. In an image full of action and motion, I decide to use a noisy painting style with loose brushstrokes and wild, scattered colors. Building up the base to render on top of, I use brushes with a rough and expressive texture to achieve the desired look.

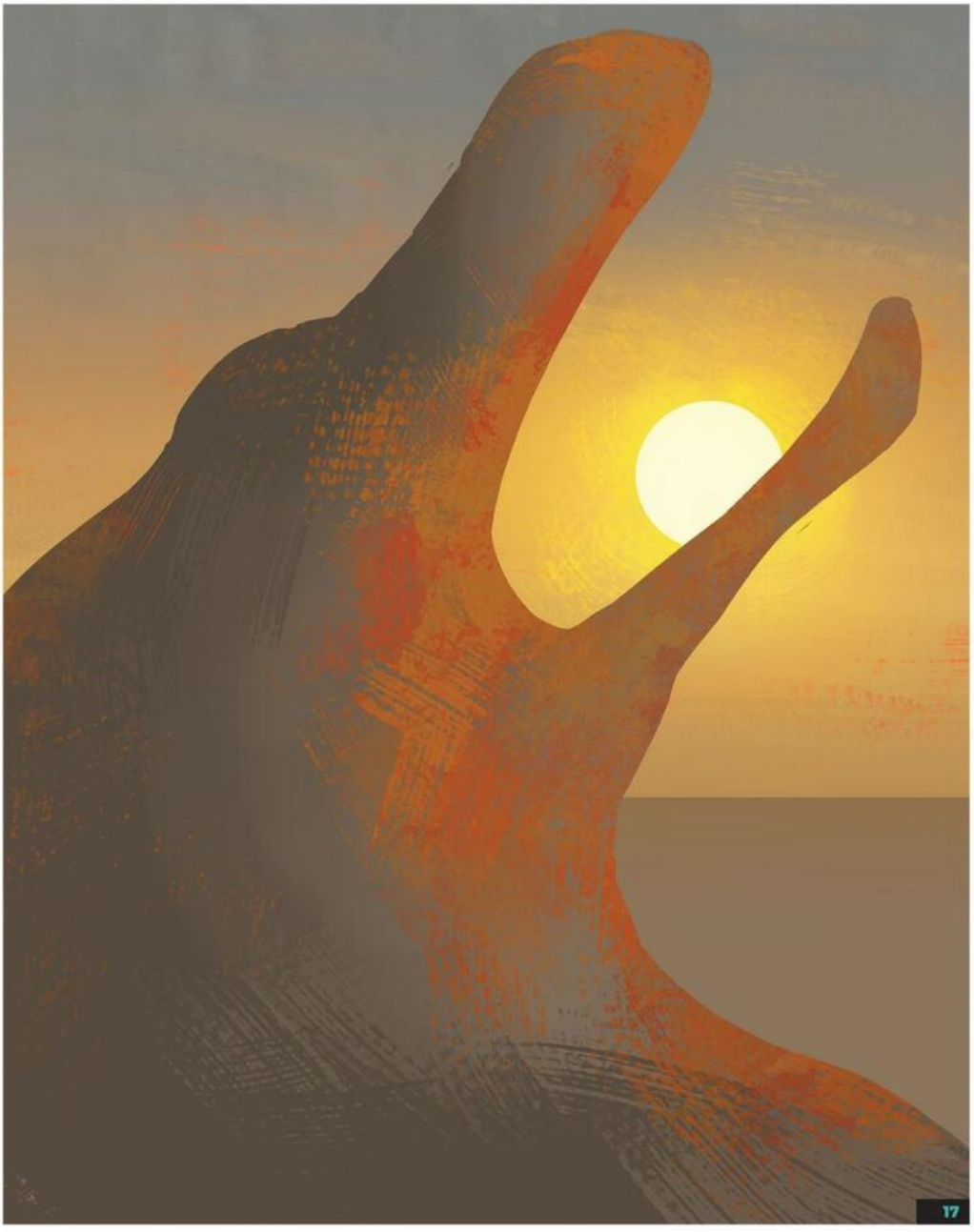
One feature I really like in looser paintings is the appearance of a warm underpainting seeping through. This stems from traditional oil painting, but can be replicated digitally by beginning with vibrant, warm base colors. I also brush hints of bright oranges loosely over the top of areas such as the sky. Notice the textured salmon-colored brushstrokes near the horizon on the right, and just above the serpent's eye on the left.

16 BLOCKING IN THE SERPENT

I lasso the perimeter of the serpent and fill it in with a noisy orange base to achieve the look mentioned in the previous step. Color Jitter can be added to brushes through the Color Dynamics option of the Brush Settings panel. I typically leave Foreground/Background Jitter off, then increase the Hue, Saturation, and Brightness Jitter to 2–5 each, depending on the look I want to create. I leave Purity at 0 and typically check the Apply Per Tip box.

BRUSH PANEL

If painting digitally, learning to manipulate the brush panel in your chosen software can be incredibly beneficial. When you need a specific type of brushstroke, sometimes the fastest way to achieve it is to create it yourself. I often edit brushes as I work to achieve the necessary brushstroke. It can be daunting for a beginner, but if you spend a couple of hours experimenting with each setting to see what it does, it will quickly become familiar.



17 The first paint pass on the serpent's body using textured brushes.



18 The second paint pass on the serpent's body using smaller brushes.

17 PAINTING THE SERPENT

I use a variety of textured brushes to bring the serpent's body color forward, while leaving plenty of light bloom glowing through to achieve the desired translucency (I talk more about light bloom in step 25). I like to begin with large, sweeping brushstrokes, and then slowly work toward medium-sized brushstrokes, and finally small brushstrokes. This technique helps me to effectively control detail contrast. Placing the highest level of tiny brushstroke details in the focal areas, and leaving the emptier areas without such detail, guides the viewer's eye more effectively toward the focal areas. Starting with large brushstrokes and working my way slowly down to smaller ones allows me to naturally build a hierarchy of detail over time.

18 PAINTING THE SERPENT CONTINUED

Next, I use a medium-sized brush to begin adding the indications of the next level of detail, starting to sculpt out some form in the base and create a nice three-dimensional palette of noise to eventually render on top of. I'm not exactly sure what I want the sea serpent to look like at this stage, so I focus on sculpting major plane changes and indicating an appropriately scaly texture. Even at this early stage, I begin concentrating the detail around the eye of the serpent.

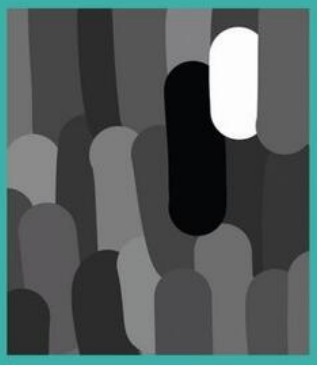
DIFFERENT TYPES OF CONTRAST

Once you have decided on the different components you want to include in your narrative illustration, the next step is to ensure the viewer sees and notices each of those components in the order that best tells the story. This can be accomplished by using contrast to create a hierarchy of importance in the image. This hierarchy is what tells the viewer where to look first, second, third, and so on.

The most important type of contrast in most scenic illustrations will typically be value contrast (see *figure A*). Notice how the eye looks straight to the lightest light against the darkest dark, regardless of how many other noisy shapes there are in the image.

It's possible to create similar focal points using other types of contrast. The human brain is wired to pick up on differences, which artists can harness to guide the viewer's eye to focal points.

Successful images will often combine many of these techniques to create powerful focal points, clearly ordered hierarchies of importance, and areas devoid of heavy contrast to let the eyes rest. An image where everything is made important is in fact an image where nothing is important. Our job as artists is to choose what's important in our images and to use the various forms of contrast to direct the eye to those areas. Storytelling emerges when you craft a sequence of discoveries through narrative elements, guided by a hierarchy of contrast (among other compositional techniques).



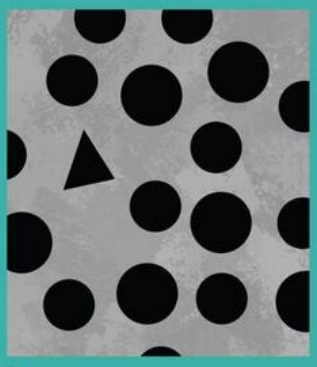
A. Value contrast.



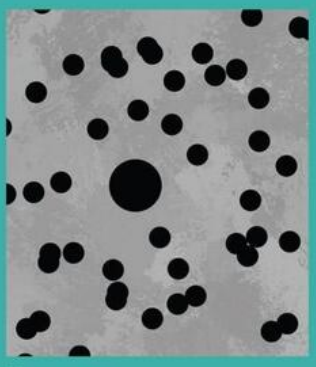
B. Hue contrast.



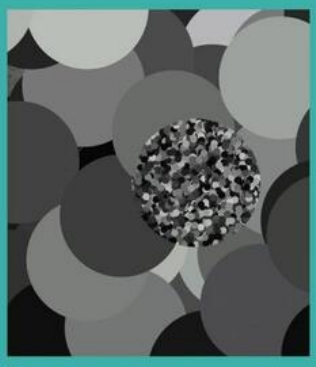
C. Saturation contrast.



D. Shape contrast.



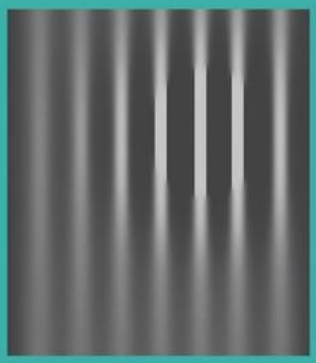
E. Size contrast.



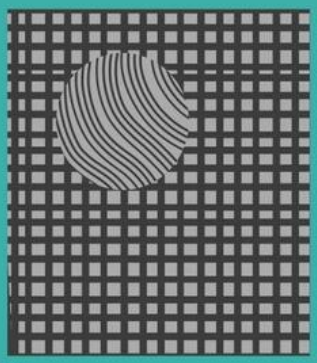
F. Detail or noise contrast.

For example, you can create a hierarchy of focal points by adding value and hue contrast to the primary focal point, while only giving the second focal point hue contrast (see *figure I*). The viewer's eye will automatically look at the first area, before naturally traveling to the second area afterward. You can tell a story with two beats by placing the first story beat in area 1, then adding a twist in area 2.

Each of these types of contrast is a tool in your artistic tool belt. If you notice that your intended focal point isn't reading clearly, you can look through this list and select the types of contrast you could use to bring the focal point forward and clarify in the image. Rather than feeling despair at a muddy image, you can instead approach it like a problem to be solved, as a seasoned craftsperson with many tools to try.



G. Edge contrast (or sharpness contrast).



H. Texture contrast.

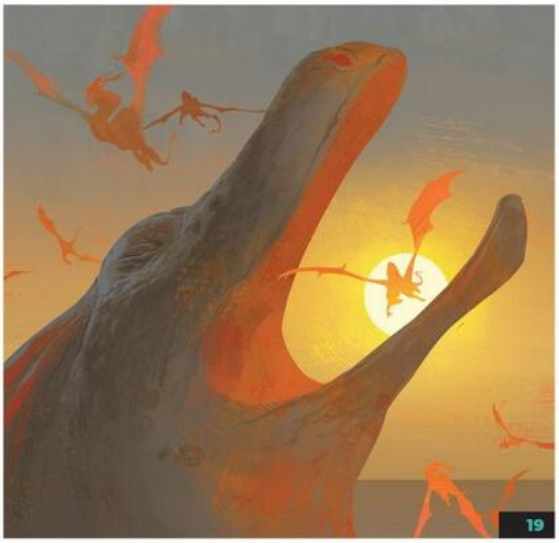


I. A hierarchy of focal points.

19 BLOCKING IN THE LITTLE DRAGONS

I use the Lasso tool to select all the small dragon silhouettes and fill them in using the same technique, but you can use any method that is quick and comfortable for you. With complex scenes, I typically start with very clean and crisp silhouettes, and then slowly lose edges as the painting progresses. I find it's often harder to find a crisp edge within mush than it is to blend out crisp silhouettes, so I tend to start with hard edges all over.

One of the reasons I like the Lasso technique is that as soon as I've selected the full silhouette, I can immediately paint within it using textured brushes to create a noisy base, rather than having to fill it in first and then Alpha Lock the layer to achieve this look. When using the Lasso tool, I select little pieces of each silhouette at a time, holding the Shift key to add each new section to my existing selection. I can also hold Alt to carve away from the selection, if needed.



19 The block-in stage of the small flying dragons. I use the Lasso tool to select their silhouettes, then use textured brushes with Color Jitter to fill them in.

20 PAINTING THE LITTLE DRAGONS

I lock the small dragon silhouettes and paint their local colors on top using the same technique as used for the giant sea serpent, continuing to let the base color bleed through to create a "glowing from within" appearance. This technique is especially effective when subsurface scattering is involved.

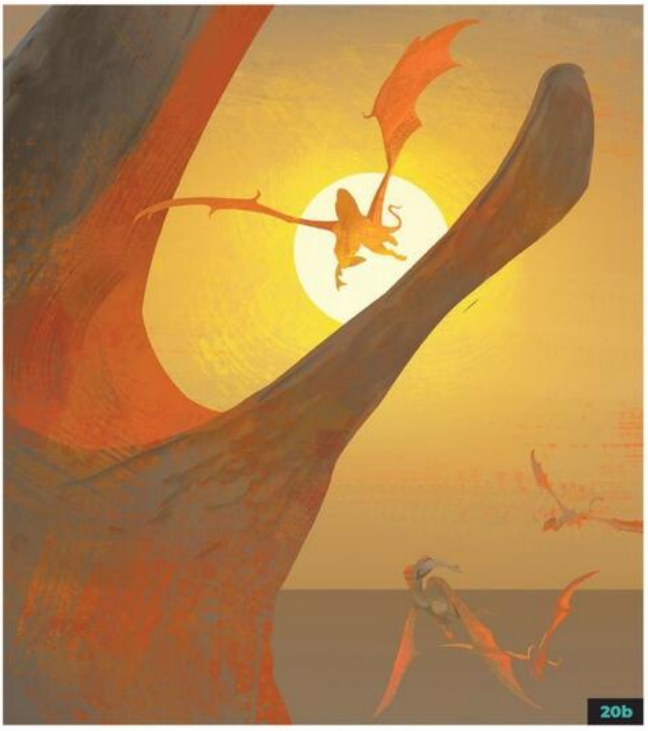
Subsurface scattering occurs when light penetrates a semi-translucent object and is scattered inside the translucent matter. This can often be seen with leaves and blades of grass, which appear to light up from within with a brilliant bright green when permeated by the sun. You can also observe this phenomenon by holding your hand up to the sun, or even to a flashlight or lamp. The skin illuminates with pink, as you are semi-translucent, just like leaves. The color will vary based on skin tone, but subsurface scattering will occur on all human skin when held in front of a bright light source. This is often most visible in the ears, nose, and fingers, as they're the thinnest areas of the body, but you can observe hints of it in other body parts when placed in front of a bright enough light source.

In this painting, the wings and dorsal fins are made of a very thin membrane that will illuminate brightly with subsurface scattering in the brilliant light of the setting sun. Starting with a glowing base, before painting solid color on top, can mimic the real-life appearance of skin glowing from the inside out, as light bounces around within the semi-translucent molecules.

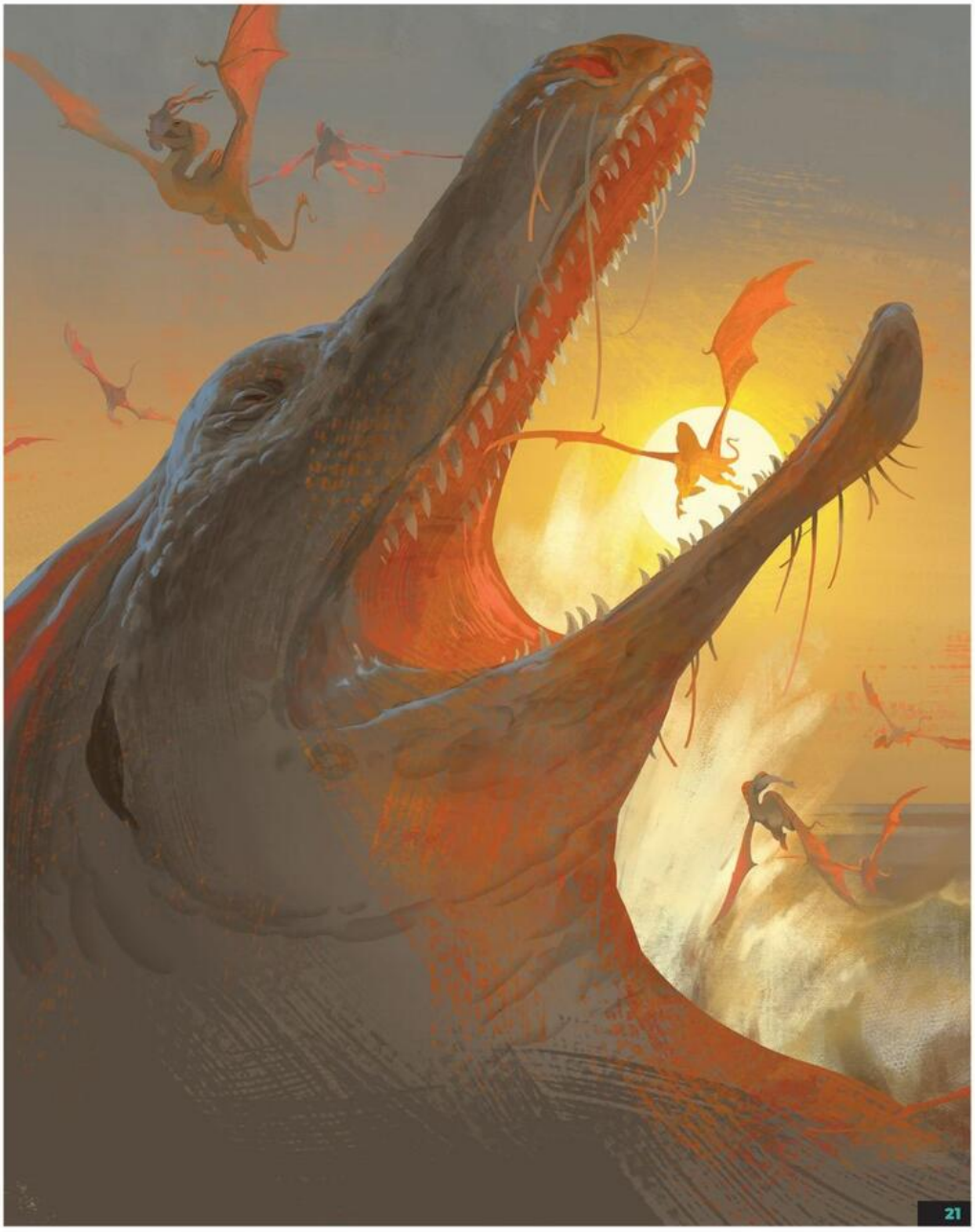
21 A DETAIL PASS

As I move across the image, I use a variety of brushes to paint in various details. Something I love about digital painting is the ability to use simple brushstrokes to suggest such a wide variety of materials and textures, just by varying the brush used. Modern brush engines are incredibly powerful, not only in Photoshop, but in Clip Studio Paint and Procreate too.





20a & 20b The first paint pass on the small flying dragons, using textured painting brushes.



21 A detail pass across the image, focusing on texture and energy.



22 The initial block-in of the splash in front of the serpent.

22 BLOCKING IN THE SPLASH

I now start to take atmospheric perspective into consideration. I want the sea serpent to read as a clearly separate plane, set back in space from the photographer. To accomplish this, I need to clearly group the values into a narrower, lighter value range. This is easy to realistically accomplish in a scene filled with illuminated sea fog. Fog particles light up throughout the air between the serpent and photographer, providing a light film that unifies, narrows, and lightens the values of everything beyond. The more distant an object, the more the atmosphere and sea fog will collapse and lighten its value range. As I introduce the splash between the serpent and photographer, I use the foam and fog to unify and set the lower half of the serpent back in space.

23 BUILDING COLOR AND NOISE

I continue to build up layers of detail and noise. At this stage, I start to introduce a variety of spatter and grain brushes to effectively build up the appearance of a foggy atmosphere. I use a wide variety of spatter brushes to avoid too much uniformity. My aim is to create an organic array of grains and spatter effects, with enough natural randomness for it to appear believable and lifelike.

24 CREATING A HIERARCHY OF DETAIL

As I render the small sea dragons, I create a hierarchy of detail based on how close the dragon is to the camera. More distant dragons receive a very loose detail pass, focused only on establishing major color groups, subsurface scattering, and plane changes. Closer dragons receive more anatomically oriented light and shadow passes, and a quick pass of facial details.

I even aim to create a hierarchy of detail within each dragon. Far-side wings and tails are simplified compared to their closer counterparts. This technique is useful for organizing a composition. The human eye is naturally drawn to detail, so this helps viewers to focus on the closer and more important areas of the image. In life, the eye can't focus on everything at once, so losing detail in the less important areas of an image also serves another purpose – mimicking the way things appear in real life, rather than in photos that artificially sharpen and clarify everything in a scene.



23 Building up color and noise in the painting.

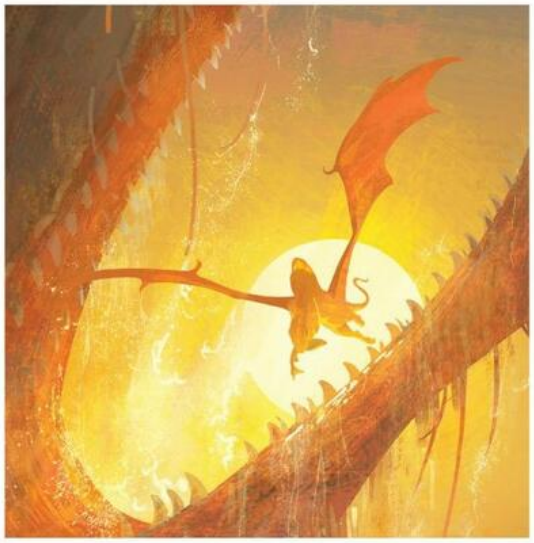


24 A close-up of the small dragons in the top left, showing the hierarchy of detail between the closer and more distant dragon.

25 PAINTING LIGHT BLOOM

When light filters through a heavy atmosphere, such as fog or ocean spray, the semi-translucent atmosphere particles catch the light and bloom vibrantly, projecting it into the space surrounding the light source. This effect occurs around the sea dragon as it flies in front of the sun. The bright sun narrows the colors of the dragon to a very concise range, consisting entirely of bright oranges, salmon pinks, and vibrant yellows. I also generously bleed the sunlight out into the sky. This effect creates a visceral and almost blinding brightness that makes the light appear more realistic to the viewer.

I use this effect strategically in my compositions to soften the edges of bright lights. Highlights can be "bloomed" into the surrounding space when they attract too much attention. It's a fantastic tool for structuring the hierarchy of highlights in an image.



25 A close-up of the dragon between the sea serpent's jaws, showing the light blooming into the sea-fog atmosphere.

26 RESHAPING THE SERPENT

Now that the base painting is established, I take a step back and evaluate it. I decide to turn the head of the serpent slightly toward the viewer, creating a more dramatic and engaging perspective. I also decide to move away from realism in my rendering, introducing a slightly more cartoonlike and appealing face shape instead. When the perspective of a subject is close to front-on or full profile, it can create a feeling of stasis in the composition. Turning the subject to something closer to a three-quarter view can bring fresh energy to an image, when used in the right context. It's important to allow your paintings to change and evolve at every stage, along with a willingness to make big changes at any step in the process.

27 A PAINT PASS ACROSS THE SERPENT

The three-quarter angle shift brings a new energy to the painting, making this change worthwhile. Next, I focus on introducing more three-dimensionality to the forms of the serpent. It will need to be set further back in space, with additional atmosphere and fog, so I need to solidify the major forms. I create impactful planes with enough of a value shift that even after additional fog is added, they will still read clearly.



26 A second sketch pass on top of the serpent, giving it a slightly more appealing face shape.



27 The first paint pass of the new serpent sketch.

SILHOUETTES AND VALUE GROUPING

Clear silhouettes combined with clear value ranges are an effective way of organizing even the most complex images. No matter how many characters and objects are in a scene, you can use a clear value structure and decisive silhouettes to create a coherent and organized image.

Figure A shows the ten-step value scale from step 05. You can group sections of your images into specific value ranges in order to separate them from one another.

For example, in *figure B* the background is grouped into a very narrow midtone value range, whereas the orbs are grouped into a dark and a light value range respectively.

This also works when there are lots of noisy details and more complicated silhouettes, as in *figure C*. Despite the noise, the silhouette of the man still reads clearly due to the value grouping.

This technique can be used to create clarity and structure within any complex illustration. For example, in *figure D* there is a complex scene with many unique shapes.

If you want to organize the image into two clear planes, such as a middle-ground plane and a background plane, you could do so by collapsing the foreground into a lighter value range, and the background into a darker value range, as in *figure E*. Notice that no matter how many small, individual shapes are placed within each section, if they stay within their specified value range, the middle ground and background will still read as cleanly separated planes.

Figure F adds another plane: the foreground. The foreground will also consist of a variety of small, complicated shapes and objects. You can group all these objects into an even darker value range to solidify them clearly into a foreground plane.

Building on top of this, *figure G* demonstrates how you can harness the compositional tools of contrast to create a clear focal point within the scene.



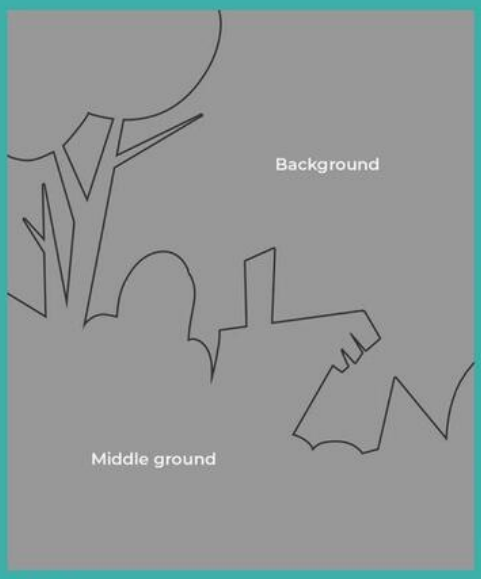
A. Ten-step value scale.



B. Different value ranges.



C. Noisy details.



D. Sketch.



E. Middle ground and background block-in.



F. Foreground block-in.



G. Focal point block-in.



28 A detail pass across the painting.

28 A DETAIL PASS

With the middle ground and background now thoroughly established, it's time to start using smaller brush sizes to carve out detail contrast in the areas I want to bring into focus. I use a variety of oil-textured brushes for this process, hoping to create textured strokes that mimic the surfaces I'm painting. Soft ocean spray is highlighted by fanning oil textures that appear blended, rather than harsh. Smaller highlights on scales, teeth, and antennae receive much grainier and thicker strokes. Grainy brushes with a lot of texture go a long way toward implying an object or creature is large and further back in space.

The implication of many tiny details is very helpful for conveying scale in a painting. These details don't need to be present everywhere in the image – a few areas of suggested detail are all that's needed to effectively trick the viewer's eye and convince them that the same level of detail is present everywhere. As discussed earlier, the human eye can only focus on one area at a time, and the brain simply assumes the rest of your field of vision also contains the same detail. When you render a small selection of detail, it implies the same exact phenomenon. The viewer's eye naturally latches onto the areas of detail, and the brain does the rest of the work filling in the gaps.

BRUSHES

Before starting a big painting, spend some time picking out unique brushes to use for each major element or material to speed up the process when it's time to render. In Photoshop CC, select the gear icon followed by New Brush Group to create a brush folder specifically for your new painting. As you test and find brushes you like from different sets you've downloaded, add them to the folder to create a quick and easy menu to select from.



29 A Luminosity layer is used in conjunction with the Gradient tool to neutralize the values at the bottom of the image.



30 Blocking in the foreground, plus added detail for believability.

29 USING A LUMINOSITY LAYER

The lower half of the middle ground is starting to feel slightly too busy and high contrast for the foreground to be able to sit cleanly on top of it. I want to minimize the contrast in the lower area of the middle ground in order to move the eye away from the area, and up to the top half where the action is taking place. I use a new layer set to Luminosity to fix this problem. Luminosity layers retain all the hue information and only affect the value. I use the Gradient tool to pull a neutral, unifying value up from the bottom and through the lower half of the splash area. This neutralizes the value changes in that area and lessens the overall value contrast of everything it covers. I use a gradient to softly ease this uniformity out as it approaches the focal area of the middle ground.

30 BLOCKING IN THE FOREGROUND

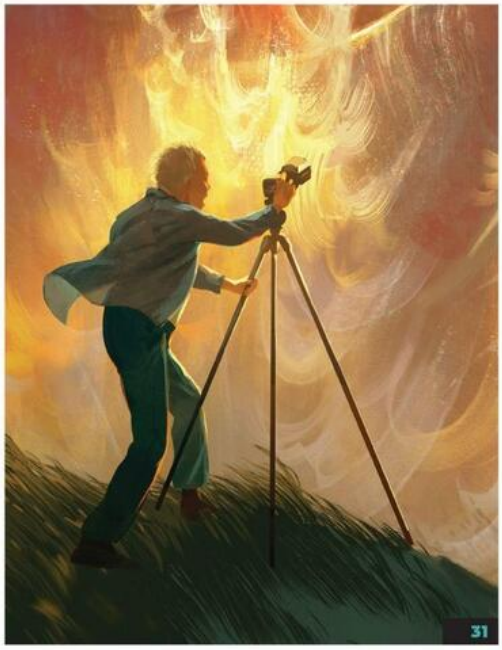
As I move into the foreground of this painting, my primary focus is to create a clear difference in the value and color range to clearly separate it from the middle ground and background. I choose a dark cyan–brown color range for the grassy cliff, keeping the value range narrow to distinguish it from the rest of the painting.

Using rake brushes to suggest grass detail, I begin to introduce areas of light filtering through the grass to suggest texture and dimension. Even when containing the foreground to a narrow and dark value range, it's still important to include enough detail and dimensionality to ensure it feels believably close to the camera.

31 BLOCKING IN THE PHOTOGRAPHER

I paint the photographer within the same relative color range as the cliff, deviating slightly within the warm skin of the face. I use much smaller and more refined brushstrokes for the foreground, as this will help solidify it as being closer to the viewer in space. Narrow highlights, such as those on the tripod legs, would only be noticeable on an item so close to the viewer, so adding them helps to root the photographer in the foreground. The mechanical shape of the thin tripod legs isn't found anywhere else within the image, creating an effective shape contrast to draw the eye to the focal point.

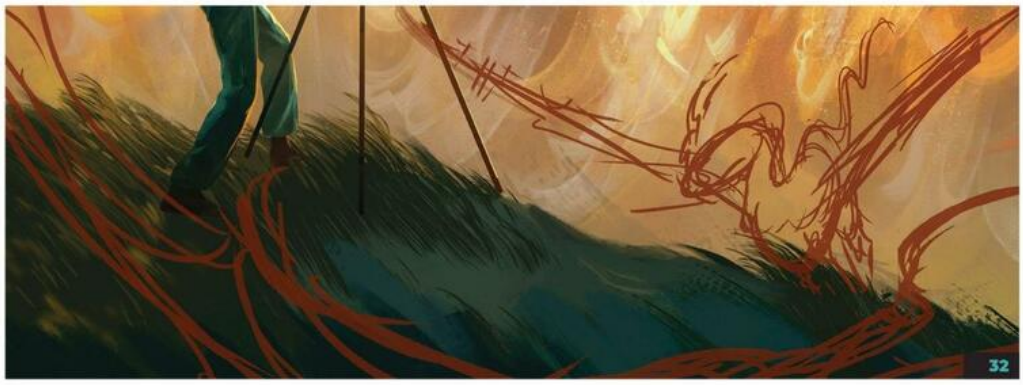
I also pay special attention to achieving translucency and luminosity in the fabric of the character's shirt as light filters through it. Semi-translucent fabrics will be affected by subsurface scattering, similar to the membranes of wings and fins. Adding translucency like this contributes to the overall luminosity and glow of an image, and repeating it with the foreground character helps situate him in a scene full of translucent, glowing wings. Repeating elements, such as glowing translucency, can help to tie various objects more closely to one another in a composition.



31 Blocking in the photographer, and adding a translucency to his shirt that echoes the subsurface scattering of the dragons' wings.

32 CONNECTING THE MIDDLE GROUND & FOREGROUND

The composition has begun to feel a little contrived and overly designed, without any elements to break up the clear line of the cliff, and no middle-ground elements overlapping into the foreground. I decide to try breaking up the foreground with sea dragons, connecting the middle ground to the foreground in a more obvious way. This type of organic overlap can add considerable depth to an image and can help conceal the artist's touch for a more natural and visceral appearance. This will also add energy, action, and a hint of danger to the foreground, pulling the photographer into the midst of the scene rather than stranding him as a distant observer. It also helps to pull the viewer into the scene, giving them a leading path that's closer in proximity to the "camera."



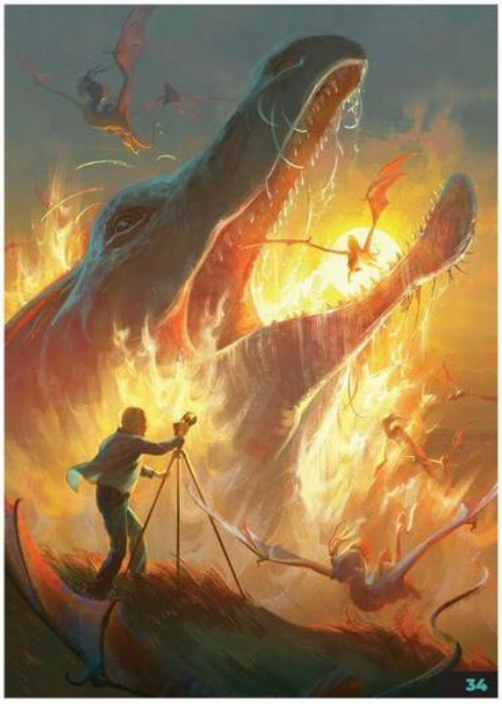
32 The sketch of the foreground dragons to connect the foreground to the middle ground.



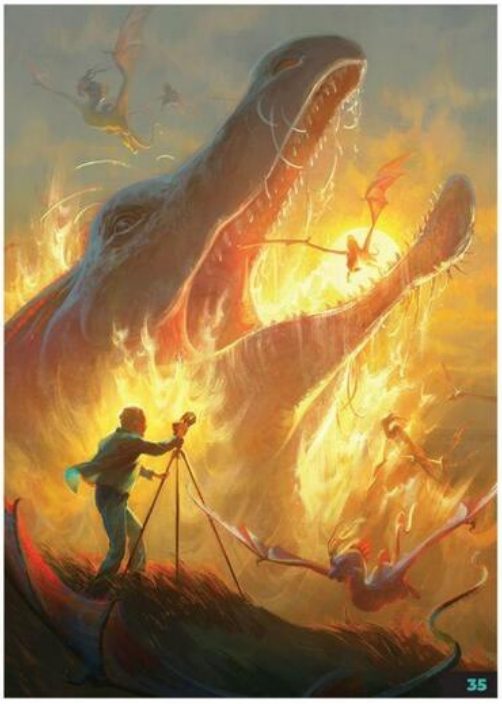
33 The first paint pass of the foreground dragons.

33 PAINTING THE FOREGROUND DRAGONS

I love the action and motion that the foreground dragons provide, but they present a clear problem for the overall composition of the image. The dragon directly above the cliff stands out too solidly against the middle ground, pulling considerable attention away from the intended focal point (the photographer). In order to remedy this, I will either need to increase the contrast around the photographer to overtake the dragon, or reduce the contrast of the dragon so it no longer competes with the photographer. Because the photographer is already such a high-contrast point of interest, the best solution is to decrease the contrast around the dragon to force it into a lower position in the hierarchy of importance and attention. Decreasing the value contrast will be the first step, but reducing the hue and edge contrast might prove very effective as well.



34 The second paint pass on the foreground dragons, adjusting the values to re-establish the hierarchy of importance.



35 Lightening the sky to set it back in space.

34 REBALANCING THE COMPOSITION

First, I use a layer set to the Darken blending mode to reduce the highlights on the dragon. I decide to imply it's in the shadow of the splashes rather than being hit by direct sunlight, and illuminate only the highest points on its head and tail. The rest of the highlights are instead relegated to secondary blue light from the sky. Next, I use a layer set to Luminosity to unify all the values surrounding the dragon, darkening the splashing water behind it and lightening the dragon's body in the process. Finally, I shift the entire body toward a neutral–warm hue to avoid the heavy temperature contrast between cools and warms that was pulling attention from the photographer. This already looks much more balanced and allows the photographer to reclaim his position in the hierarchy of importance.

Now this is fixed, I notice that the sky and middle ground still look like they're coming forward in space too much, so they appear on a nearly equivalent plane to the foreground dragon. To push them back in space and establish the proper read of distance, I need to use atmospheric perspective to lighten and collapse the value range of the middle ground and sky, using the same techniques used on the dragon.

35 FINE-TUNING THE VALUE STRUCTURE

I use a Soft Light layer with a light gray brush to lighten the value of the entire sky and set it back in space. Next, I create a new layer and set it to the Lighten blending mode, then paint over the sea serpent with a neutral brown that is slightly lighter than the darkest areas of the middle ground. This groups all the darker values into the neutral brown I've chosen, narrowing the overall value range into a lighter and more compressed gamut. Next, I deepen the color range of the foreground to pull it closer to the "camera" and separate it further from the middle ground.

36 CONCENTRATING DETAIL AROUND THE FOCAL POINT

I often add small strokes of extra-vibrant, highly saturated color around the focal point. If executed well, these strokes are barely noticeable once zoomed out, but go a

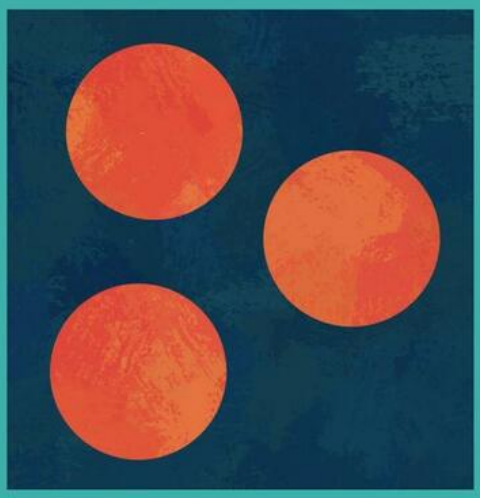


36 A close-up of the photographer, showing off the highly saturated brushstrokes.

long way in drawing extra attention to the primary areas of focus. I add strokes of cyan and blue across the shirt and trousers, and strokes of orange, red, and magenta around the skin and highlights. When highlights blow out in photos, the result is often artifacts of magenta and cyan bordering pure white. I like to take advantage of this phenomenon to make my highlights look even brighter and shinier. This also helps to add detail contrast to the focal point; adding lots of noisy details right where you want the viewer to look is an effective way to draw the eye.

BLENDING MODES

When you need to increase or reduce the contrast in an area of a painting, digital software such as Photoshop possess a variety of useful layer blending modes you can use to make the task easier. This tip will demonstrate several simple and practical examples, however these techniques can be applied to any image, no matter how complex.



A. Starting image.

Let's imagine you need to create a hierarchy of importance in *figure A*. The first task is to make one of the orbs into the focal point, since all three orbs are currently demanding the same level of attention. You can use a Luminosity layer to remedy this.

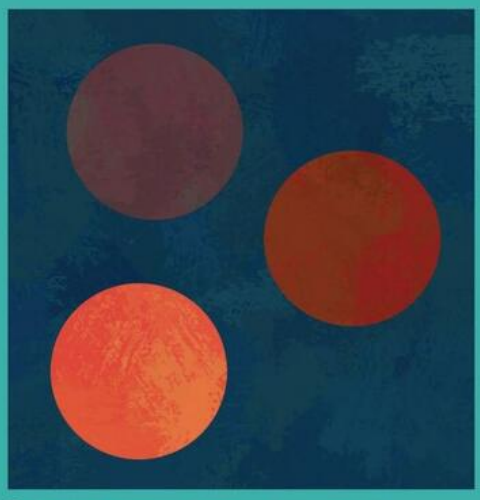
Create a layer on top, clipped to the orb layer, and set the blending mode to Luminosity. Next, eyedrop the color of the background, lighten it slightly, and paint it over two of the orbs. As seen in *figure B*, this sets those two orbs back in space by drastically reducing the value contrast between the orbs and the background.

Use a Color layer to create a hierarchy between the top two orbs. Create another layer on top, clipped to the orb base, and set the blending mode to Color. Next, lightly paint over the top-left orb with the same blue color of the base, reducing the hue contrast between the orb and backdrop. As seen in *figure C*, this creates a clear hierarchy of importance, using only blending modes. You can use these techniques to create the same effect with any objects in a painting.

These aren't the only useful blending modes, either!



B. Two orbs are set back, making the lower orb the focal point.



C. There is now a hierarchy of importance between the orbs.



D. Darken mode can be used to reduce the contrast of highlights.



E. Lighten mode can create a glow around an image.

When you set a layer to Darken, your strokes will only show up when the color you use is darker in value than whatever lies underneath. As seen in *figure D*, the zigzag brushstroke is not clipped to the orb, but it only shows through on the orb because the background is darker than the chosen color. This is very useful for reducing the contrast of highlights in an image.

Setting a layer to Lighten does the opposite; it only shows up when the color you use is lighter in value than what's underneath. As seen in *figure E*, a glow has been added around the exterior of the orb by using a layer set to Lighten. This is also a useful blending mode for adding a fog effect.

In *figure F*, a Lighten layer is used to apply a thick layer of fog on the lower half of the image. This layer mode is useful for adding fog, as it doesn't lighten the highlights in the way a Screen layer would, and it doesn't change the hue in the way an Overlay or Hard Light layer might. It provides a very uniform and believable foggy haze, perfect for setting objects or planes into the distance with atmospheric perspective.

Experiment with the blending modes available in your preferred choice of software, exploring how you can use them to aid the composition of your painting.



F. Lighten mode is used to create a foggy haze.

37 LOST AND FOUND EDGES

For distant and less important elements, such as the dragons in the bottom right, I lose as many edges as I can while still retaining an accurate read of the subject. Lost edges – edges that are blended out into their surroundings – are an effective way of moving attention away from an area in a composition. The eye is naturally drawn to crisp, hard edges. When you want to move the eye away from an edge, blending it out reduces the contrast. At this stage of painting, I typically select everything and select Edit > Copy Merged, then paste the merged image on top of everything in order to retain the layer structure, but gain the ability to blend edges using the Smudge tool or the Mixer brush.

38 CREATING A VIBRANT RIM LIGHT

To make a backlit subject look hazy and luminous, I often make use of a warm, peachy rim of subsurface scattering around the edges. Here I select the same reddish orange I used to paint the subsurface scattering within the membrane on the neck fin, and use it to paint a soft red rim around the sea serpent's head. This serves a dual purpose of softening the edge and adding a sense of translucence and luminosity also.

39 USING THE MIXER BRUSH

To create an added layer of motion and energy, I use various oil-type brushes to paint strategically across various surfaces in motion, mimicking the direction of movement for an organic motion blur with a traditionally painted feel. Blending out edges with a motion blur effect is an excellent way to harness edge contrast and bring added energy to a piece simultaneously.

STEP AWAY

When approaching the final stages of a painting, try stepping away for a day or two to reset your eyes. After looking at the same image for a long time, you sometimes lose the ability to notice mistakes due to overfamiliarity with it. Taking a break and coming back with fresh eyes can help you to spot problems. Flipping the canvas is another approach that provides a fresh look.

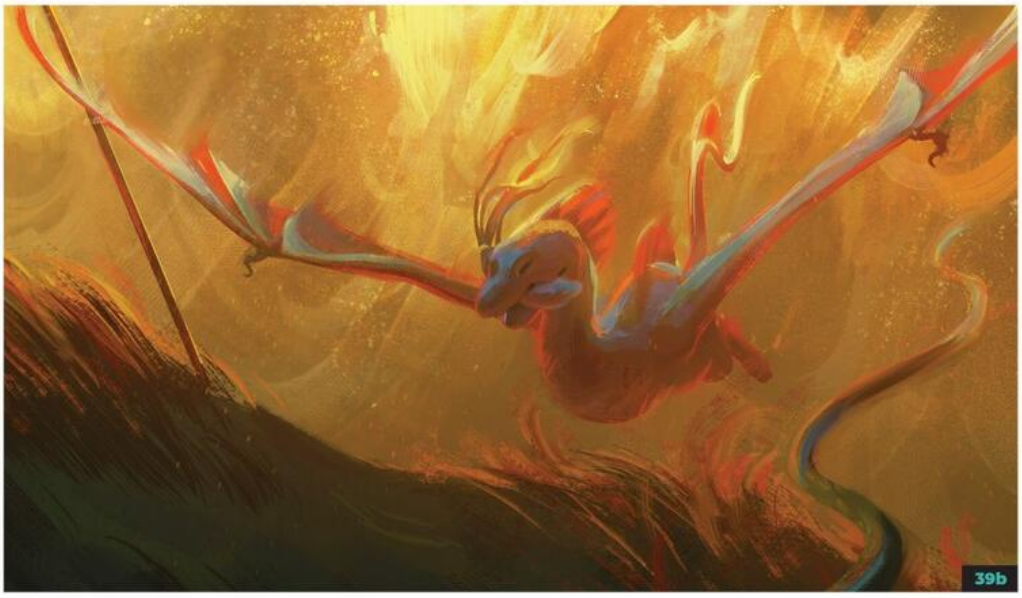


37 A close-up of the splash area, depicting lost edges.



38 A close-up of the serpent's eye, depicting the reddish light rim around the head.





39a & 39b Close-ups depicting the use of a mix of oil brushes.

FINAL TOUCHES

Once the painting is complete, I sharpen the focal areas of the image using the various sharpening filters that Photoshop offers. Smart Sharpen is a safe choice, but I recommend experimenting with the various filter options in your chosen software to find one you like. I often do this for web display, by saving a copy of the image, then sharpening the focal areas specifically for viewing on computer and phone screens. This offers a subtle heightening of focus around the photographer as a final touch.



Sea Serpent. The finished painting after final sharpening tweaks have been made.

Final image © Devin Elle Kurtz



Image © Nathan Fowkes

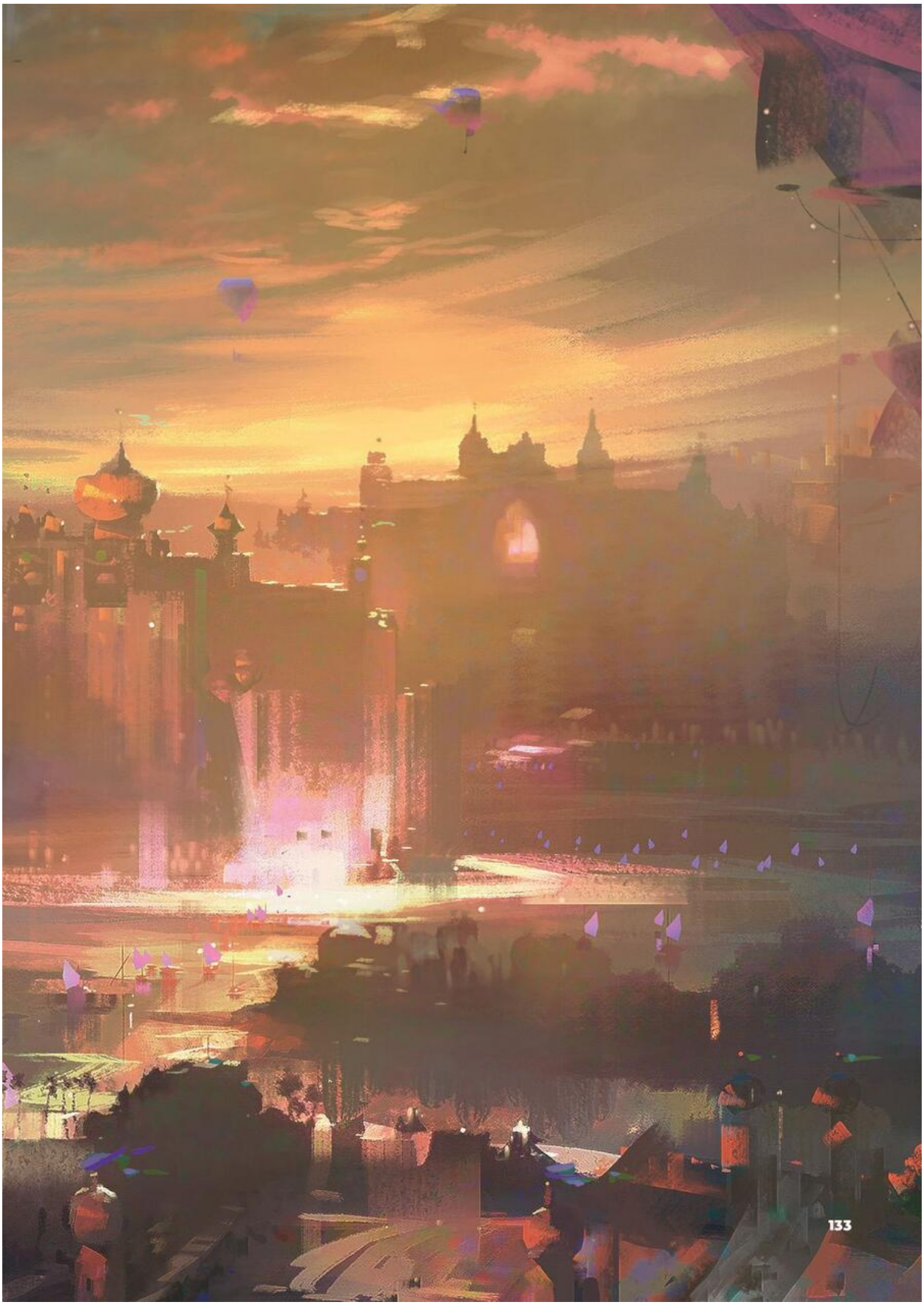
ARABIAN PORT

NATHAN FOWKES

As an animation artist, my job is to read a script then visualize key moments in the story through paintings. I imagine emotionally engaging environments and depict the story narratives that happen within them. It's a great profession, but incredibly challenging. How do you take the huge variety of elements that make up a painting and weave them all together to serve a single purpose? Achieving this difficult goal is the nature of picture composition.

In this tutorial I will be creating an epic environment in which hundreds of ships and balloons are setting sail from an Arabian port at dusk. The challenge is to take vast palaces, trees, towers, ships, reflections, islands, clouds, balloons, and more, and weave them all together meaningfully into a compositional narrative. And if that's not tough enough, I will demonstrate how to create alternate versions that are even more intense in mood and compositional purpose.







01 The view from my hotel window in Dubai, which I will use as inspiration.

01 REFERENCE PHOTO

Many years ago, I worked on the DreamWorks film *Sinbad: Legend of the Seven Seas*. I loved working on a mythical Arabia that was visually lush and filled with heroic narratives. Since then I've welcomed any opportunity to work with a mythological and epic tone in a place and time that never really existed; a place that can only be brought to life through imagination.

This photo captures the view from my hotel window when I stayed in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, with a view across the Palm Jumeirah. As I looked out over the bay, I imagined a different time, with ships, sails, and regal palaces. This reference is a starting point, but only a very loose inspiration. My job as an artist is not to show the real world, but to create those imagined stories and places. Knowledge of composition and narrative is required to bring this idea to life.

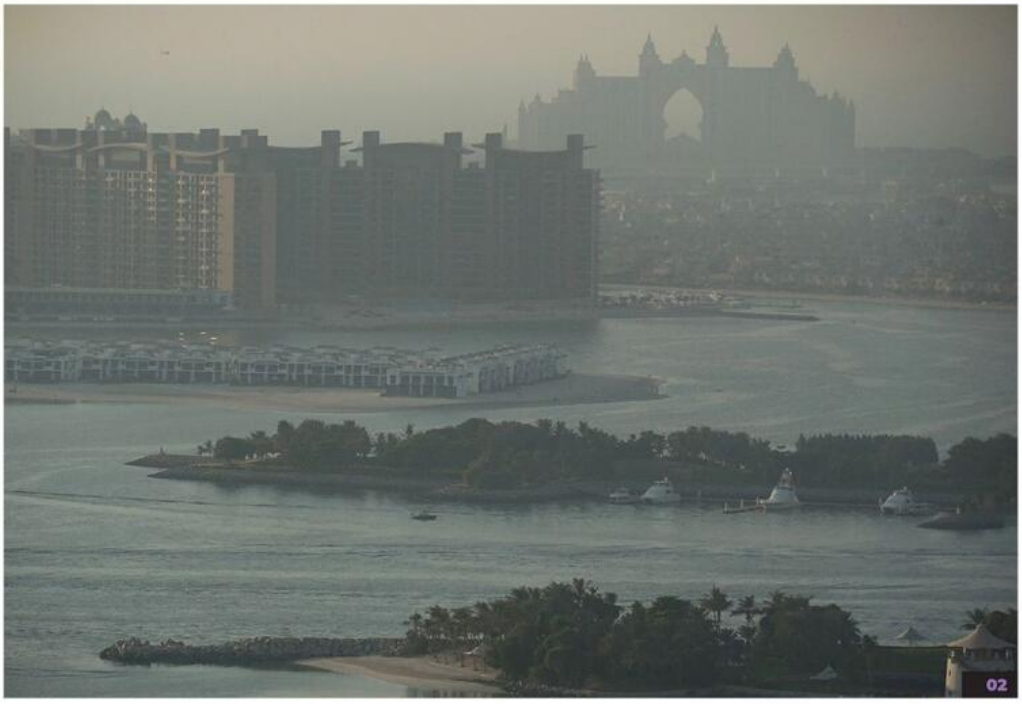
02 TAKING A CLOSER LOOK

Here's a close-up of the bay, with the grand Atlantis hotel in the distance. The buildings are very different to those where I live in Los Angeles, so to me they seem very exotic. I plan to use them as my destination point in the scene. Though they are already very big, I intend to enlarge them to an epic scale. I also plan to alter them so they appear less modern, resembling more of a mythological version of Arabia.

03 INITIAL SKETCHES

Once you have your inspiration and reference material, it's time to start sketching. There's no one right way to do this; any tools and techniques will work, as long as they produce a good range of light and dark. I prefer to start in a sketchbook. It's a medium where I can experiment and there's no pressure as to whether they work or not. I can quickly rough out five or ten ideas and there's a good chance at least one of them will be worth pursuing.

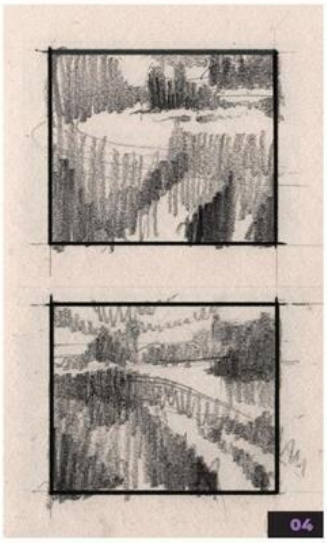
Here I use a good sturdy white paper that has a nice tooth to grab the pencil (Tombow graphite pencil, 2B hardness). A sketchbook is also liberating because you can take it anywhere. It allows you to take a break from the computer screen and sketch in the fresh air. Plus, you can take it on errands and it gives you something to do while waiting for buses or appointments.



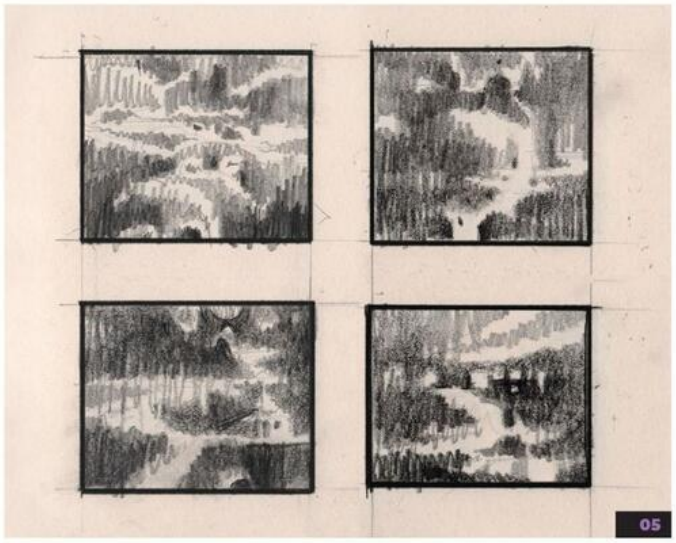
02 A close-up photo of distant regal buildings that will serve as key inspiration in my painting.



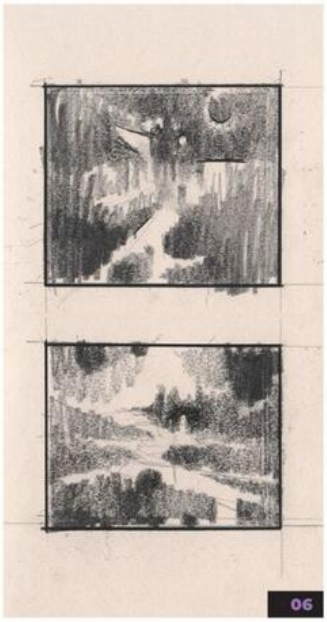
03 I work out my initial ideas in a sketchbook; pencil and paper are all you need to begin.



04 Sketches are a simple starting point to begin generating ideas.



05 Rough sketches in my sketchbook to explore layout ideas for the painting.



06 I plan to follow the lower sketch most closely, though it's only a loose indication of where I will go with the final painting.

04 EXPLORING IDEAS

Let's start simple by beginning to explore ideas. The composition will be a vast scene, which the viewer will enter and weave through before arriving at the destination. I begin by indicating larger, darker elements in the foreground that follow a perspective toward the middle and background, with the suggestion of what will ultimately be a distant palace. Don't worry about indicating specific foreground buildings, trees, or boats, but focus on capturing a composition to which these elements will be applied. Your aim is to grab the viewer's attention and transport them to a mythical place.

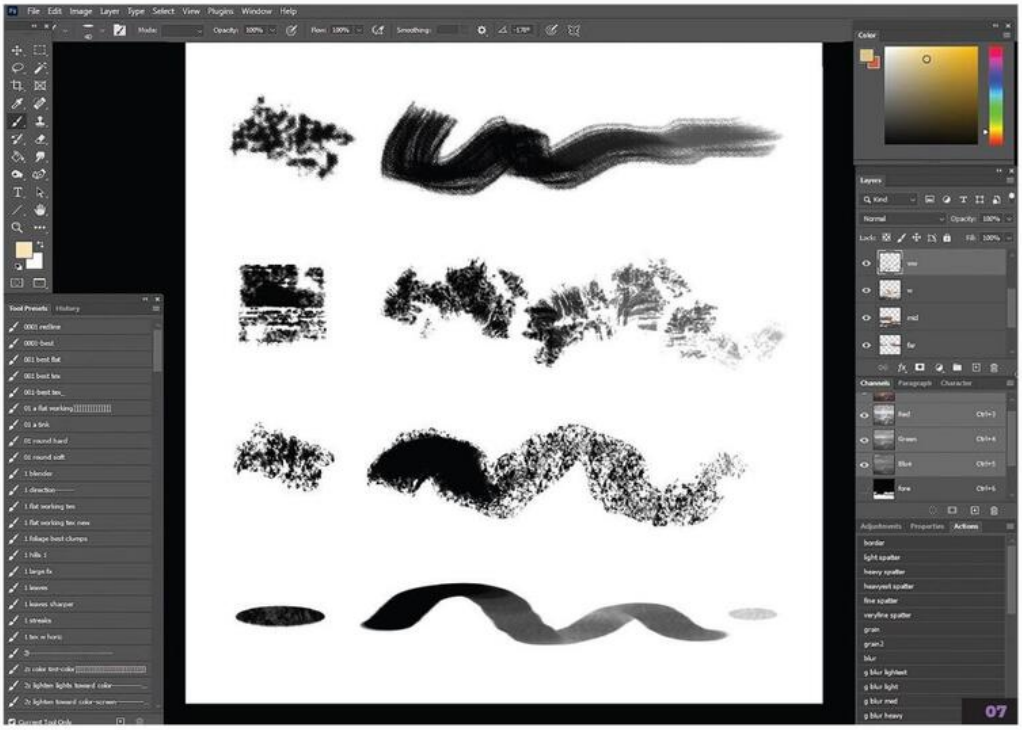
05 EXPERIMENTING WITH COMPOSITION

Since my plan is to take the viewer on a weaving journey through an imaginary environment, I think about how I will compose this. I consider different ways to take the audience through the foreground, into the bay, and on to the palaces. I think about the sky also; the viewer should be able to weave through the sky in a way that brings them to the same destination.

I also use these sketches to think through additional ways to emphasize the destination. I create stronger light-and-dark

PURPOSE

Every image you create should have a clear purpose. This could be a story you're trying to tell or a theme you wish to evoke. Make sure every line you draw and every brushstroke you paint is designed to serve that purpose. This will ensure your compositions convey a sense of authority, as well as engaging your audience in a greater way.



07 This is my usual Photoshop layout and my typical brushes used for digital painting.

contrast, more aligning and overlapping elements, and harder edges. Though there's variation on placement, I keep primary elements toward the middle and center of the image to reinforce the formality of the composition.

06 CHOSEN SKETCH STUDY

On my final page of layout studies, I find that the lower sketch is the strongest and clearest idea. However, there are little kernels of ideas in the previous sketches that will be useful to refer back to later in the process. This is why it's important to take the time to sketch out various exploratory studies; it generates lots of ideas to draw from without being stuck on a single direction. I keep the framing more square than panoramic, as the sky will be an important element of the painting. Having established the foreground, bay, palaces, background, and the sky, I'm confident I've found the right proportion and framing for the scene.

07 CHOSEN MEDIUM

I decide to paint digitally from this point on. Digital painting is the ideal medium for commercial illustration and production work, as it's efficient for making changes and adjustments when receiving notes and requests from clients. The three programs most often used are Adobe Photoshop, Corel Painter, and Procreate. I prefer Photoshop and will be using it for the remainder of the tutorial, but you can follow along in your preferred medium.

Most of the brushes I use come standard with Photoshop and resemble chalk or a flat paintbrush, using pen pressure to determine the opacity of the stroke. All you will need to follow this tutorial are a few basic brushes that create organic-looking brushstrokes, as well as some texture.



08 My starting point is a simple block of orange to set the color tone of the painting.



09 The initial placement of the sky, emphasizing warms, cools, and a windswept look.

08 CREATING A COLOR COMP

Let's start simple with a color comp. This will help establish the color and lighting design for the final painting. As it will be a warm sunset scene, I begin with a solid orange. When I paint transparently over the top of this, the painting will be infused with the warmth I'm aiming for. I often begin this way, though it may not always be the correct way to work, depending on the image you are creating. My painting is going to be very complicated and I'll be juggling many elements, so a simple technique that will help unify the entire painting is very useful.

09 CREATING SKY

Starting with the sky, I begin with a neutral cyan that's about the same value as the underlying orange and weave this back and forth to suggest a windswept quality. The horizon is located roughly halfway down the image, so I bring my brushstrokes down to that area, keeping them fairly translucent at the bottom for more warmth. The sky grows darker and bluer toward the top of the image, and I place a light, illuminated area where the palace will be.



10 I block in the big simple statement of the image, including the pathway through the scene and the palace destination.

10 ESTABLISHING COMPOSITION

This next step establishes the lead-in as well as the destination for the scene. I use warm and cool earthy tones sweeping back and forth across the ground planes, leaving orange in the middle as a pathway to the palace. The diagonals get steeper in the lower front of the scene to suggest perspective. The horizon is completely flat, and the brushstrokes become more diagonal the more they move away from it. The palace is just a shape with a couple of spires and an opening in the middle, but set against the background of bright orange, these shapes are demanding of attention. I use dark neutral vertical strokes in the foreground to suggest the trees and buildings that will eventually be placed there.

THE POWERFUL SIMPLE STATEMENT

Each painting you create can be enhanced by the idea of a powerful simple statement. This is not a rule or formula that must be followed, but a purpose or intention for the image. One of the best ways to achieve this is by emphasizing the simple core statement of a painting. By doing this, an intensity of purpose emerges.

To demonstrate this idea, I take the final image (A) plus one of the alternate versions (B) (created in steps 38 and 39), turn them to grayscale, and add a noise reduction filter (C & D). The noise reduction filter is to blend away small details and textures to allow you to see the underlying simple statement.

Despite the hustle and bustle of visual activity in the final painting, there is a very simple statement of value, shape, and edge underneath it all. I concentrated those three elements in the areas of greatest importance and let the other areas fall away gradually in their level of visual demand. Without this underlying idea, my painting would be a patchwork mess.

The alternate final image (D) shows this idea even more. My goal was to replace the hustle and bustle of visual activity with emotional intensity. The result is even simpler than the image it was created from.



A. The final image.



B. An alternate version of the final image.



C. The final image treated to show the underlying simple statement.



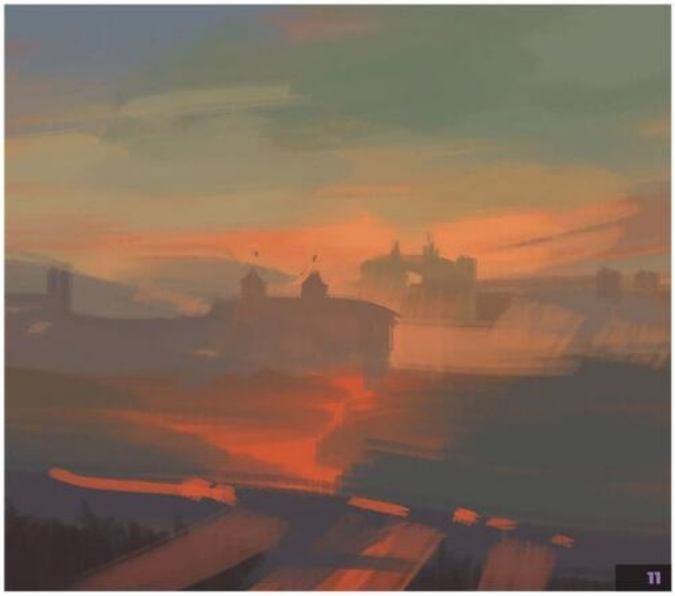
D. The alternate version treated to show the underlying simple statement.

11 OVERLAPPING SHAPES

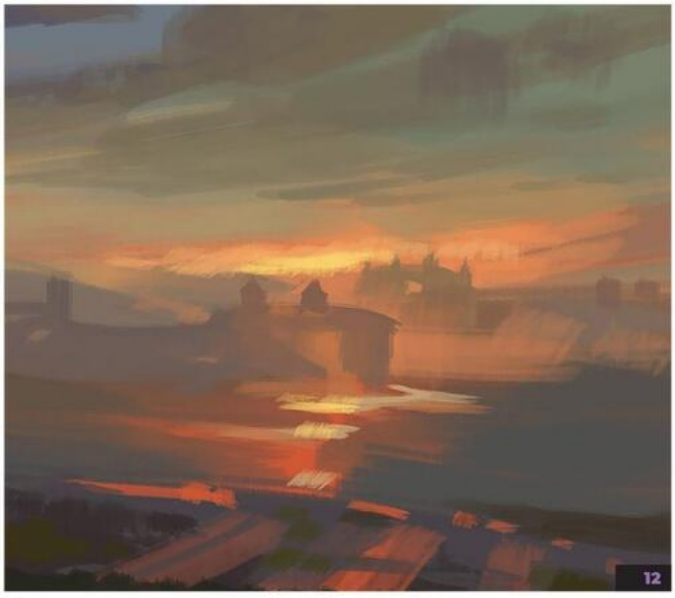
Overlapping shapes are crucial to create the depth and visual interest needed, so I place a larger palace in the middle ground of the scene. These two majestic buildings will work together to create the attention needed in this area. I suggest some additional buildings on the outskirts along the horizon for a visual balance. The foreground needs to grab the viewer's attention and pull them into the painting, so it deserves significant attention at this point. I lay down large strokes of orange, as if reflecting from the sky, being careful to follow perspective lines that point out to the horizon, directing the viewer to the palace.

12 ADDING LIGHT & DEPTH

To direct greater attention to the central destination of the scene, I add a brightness in the sky directly behind the palaces, then reflect this down into the water below. The light that wraps around the lower front palace and disappears behind it is an important depth cue. I add an element of light to the front plane of the nearer palace to create interesting shapes of light and shadow. I also add depth to the skies. Perspective is very important here, so I create shapes flowing from the top down into the middle of the painting. They're bigger and darker in front, then become smaller and lighter as they recede toward the horizon.



11 These additions draw attention to the foreground as an important lead into the painting and a useful overlap in the middle-ground palaces.



12 The lightest lights are added and structure is emphasized in the sky through clouds with perspective.



13 A scattering of detail and suggestion of form completes the color comp.

13 ADDING VISUAL INTEREST

The next step is to complete the lighting and add visual interest. I scatter a suggestion of trees in areas I feel need additional visual interest; some in shadow and some in light. I also paint a suggestion of form and detail in the light hitting the middle palace. Next, I under-light the clouds. The sun is low on the horizon, so I use the pattern of light falling across the under planes of the clouds to zigzag back and forth, creating depth and leading the eye straight to the far palace. I also give the far palace more emphasis by lengthening and darkening the spires. After adding a few strategic points of highlight, the color comp is finished.

14 ANALYZING THE COMP

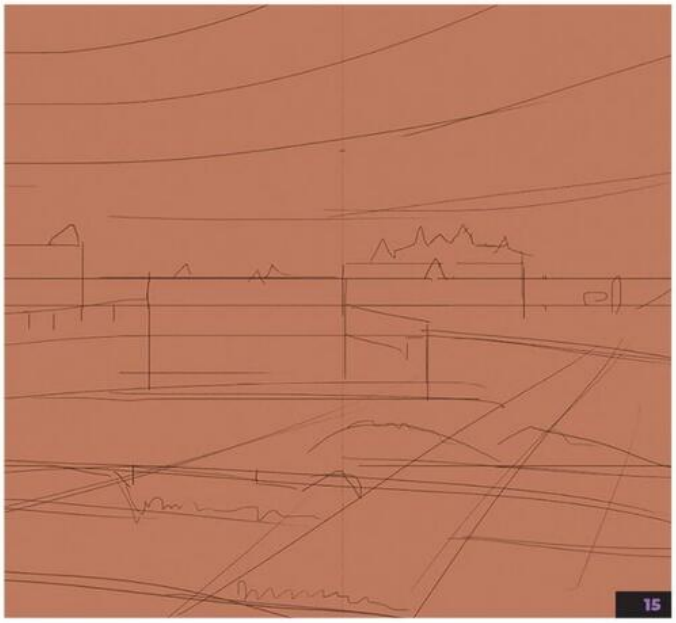
The next step is to analyze the comp to be sure I've made my goals clear. The magenta line is the horizon. The far palace is strategically placed so the center opening is in line with the horizon to give it emphasis. The clouds above and shapes below weave through the scene in perspective, creating a sense of a journey to the destination, marked with the red arrows. Additionally, I emphasize the shoreline against the water, marked in yellow, and create a similar break in the sky with the brightest clouds. These help create a sense of foreground and middle ground for a better sense of depth and scale in the scene.

15 LINE DRAWING

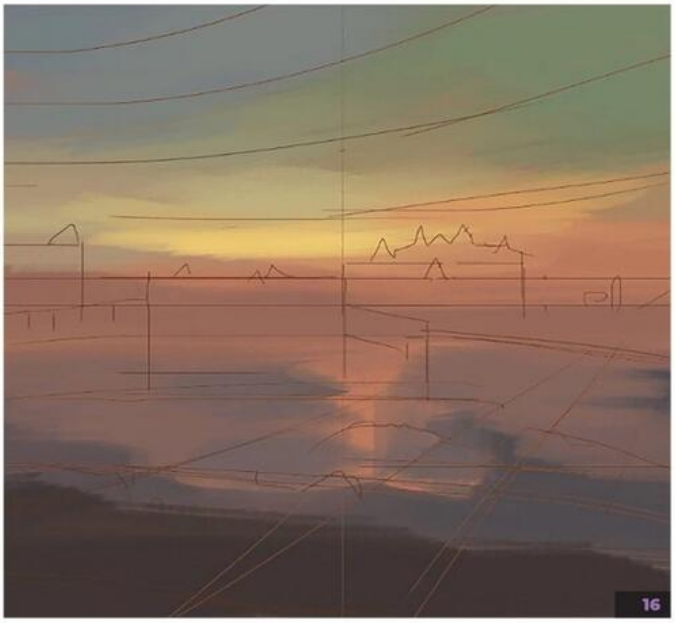
It's now time to start the final image. I once again begin with a warm block-in, though I decide that the dense orange used in the comp was a little strong. Here I opt for a starting color that is a little lighter and slightly more neutral. The important element here is the line drawing. While I drew the sketchbook roughs and color comp freeform, I now need to be very specific to enable me to paint directly and with confidence. My starting point is the horizon line, which I match up with the palaces, as shown in the previous diagram of the comp. Next, I carefully lay out the flow of the clouds and add perspective reference lines from foreground to middle ground. I mentioned the importance of overlap earlier, and as such I create layers from foreground to middle ground, suggesting groves of trees and islands in the bay.



14 A diagram of the major spacings and movements in the scene.



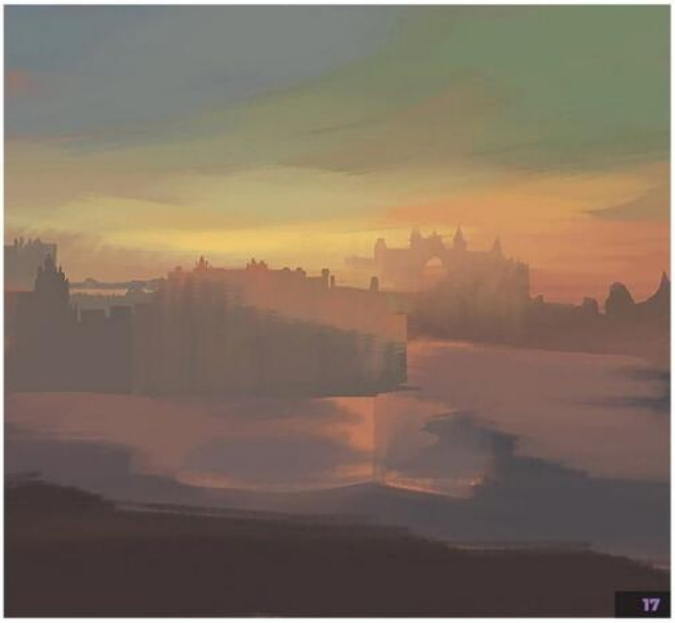
15 I establish the layout of the scene with a committed line drawing.



16 The overall block-in of color and light as the important underpainting for the scene.

16 SIMPLE STATEMENT

Using the line drawing as a guide, I block in the big, simple statement of the scene. Transitions of value and color are very important here. The sunset is a pale yellow that transitions to a darker neutral blue above, with two colors blending to a rich, neutral green in between. Not only are these surprising greens part of the magic of sunsets, but they act as a critical color note for the scene. Just above the horizon there is a layer of haze that uses much of the underlying orange as sunset light diffuses through it. Below the horizon, the landscape transitions from warm neutrals to darker, cool neutrals, then ultimately a dark warm in the foreground. I leave the underlying orange exposed to illustrate a reflection directly underneath the brightness of the sky. This worked out well in the comp, so I recreate the effect here. Getting the underpainting right is crucial, as it will influence everything that comes after.



17 I silhouette building shapes by creating masks and painting within them.

17 BLOCKING IN SHAPES

Now it's time to start blocking in the layers of buildings. I use Photoshop's Lasso tool to create shapes that will act as masks, allowing me to paint clean silhouettes quickly and efficiently. Taking a "best of both worlds" approach, I maintain both graphic structure and a painterly approach by laying fresh, painterly strokes within my mask. To emphasize the backlit glow diffusing into the surrounding atmosphere, I ensure the buildings are lighter and warmer surrounding the brighter area, then transition cooler and darker the further they move away. Lights and darks are very subtle at this point, but typically the layers will get darker as they move closer to the viewer.



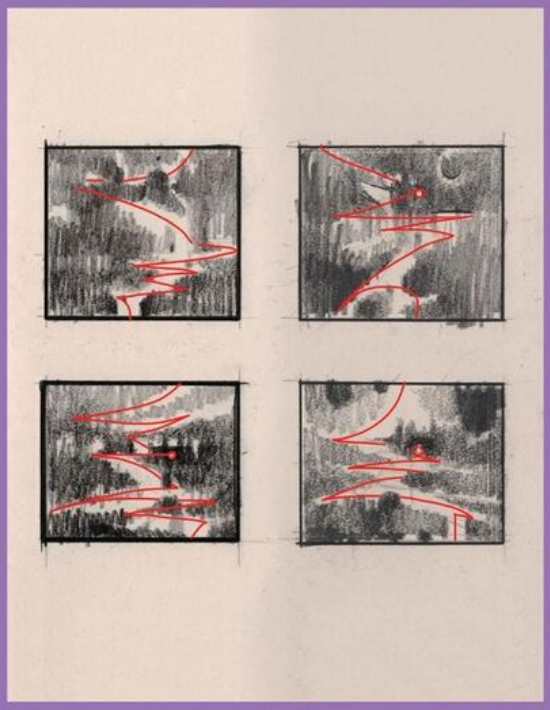
18 I continue with silhouetted shapes, adding contrast to areas of importance.

VISUAL CONTRAST

Every artist must be a master of creating interesting and engaging visual contrast. Make a list of every kind of visual contrast you can think of. The list should go well into double digits, if not beyond. This exercise will encourage you to think of unique ways of creating visual contrast that may not occur to other artists. It could even lead to a breakthrough in the uniqueness of your work! A few basic examples to get you started include warm vs. cool, textured vs. smooth, big vs. small, sharp vs. round…

18 ADDING CONTRAST

I continue creating masks and painting within them to maintain carefully designed shapes. Creating more contrast in some areas and diminishing contrast in others is of primary importance at this point. As the viewer weaves through the landscape, the central areas are intended to be of greater visual interest. I do three things to achieve this. I add contrast of value, shape, and edge in the primary areas, and then the diminishing areas, and group these three elements along the outskirts. Without this, the painting would lose its quality of journey and purpose, and turn into an unwieldy mess. Notice, for instance, that I concentrate palm trees and sharper shapes in the middle darker foreground, as I want to lead the eye to this area and then up to the palaces.



How the zigzag is used through the sketchbook comps.



How the zigzag is used through the sky and landscape.

THE MAGIC ZIGZAG

While there are no magic bullets when it comes to good composition, the magic zigzag is a technique I sometimes use to put three very important ideas together into one efficient stroke. The first idea is **perspective**. Perspective provides depth and form, letting viewers feel the lay of the land, and you cannot go on a journey through an environment without it.

The second idea is **overlap**. The more you layer one element in front of another, the more quality of space and depth is created. Every time the zigzag hits a corner and doubles back, it implies that the one line is in front of the other, creating the quality of overlap.

The third idea is **motion**. This is important in picture composition, as static two-dimensional images contain no actual motion. Instead, artists have to find ways to create a sense of movement in the scene to help the experience feel real and engaging for the viewer. The zigzag moves the viewer through the scene in an active, adventuresome way.

In both the comps and final image, I've charted out how I'm using this zigzag idea. I weave it through the clouds and even more so through the landscape to stack the image with elements of interest throughout. I also add a little close-up to show a simple but important example of overlap. I suggest a tower, then include brushstrokes that come from the front then wrap around behind, as well as brushstrokes that seem to start from behind and wrap around the front. This creates the illusion that there are five different overlapping elements as you move from front, to middle, to back, and vice versa.



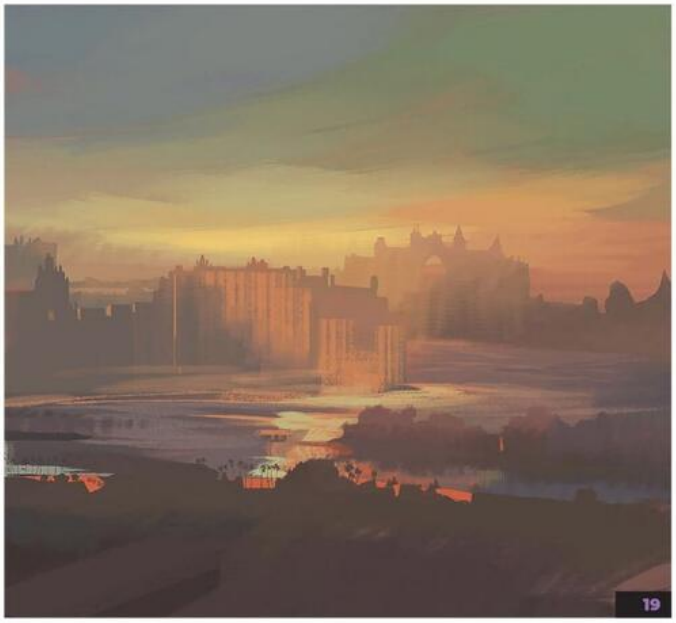
How lines wrap around objects, from front to back, to create overlap.

19 FOREGROUND TO MIDDLE GROUND

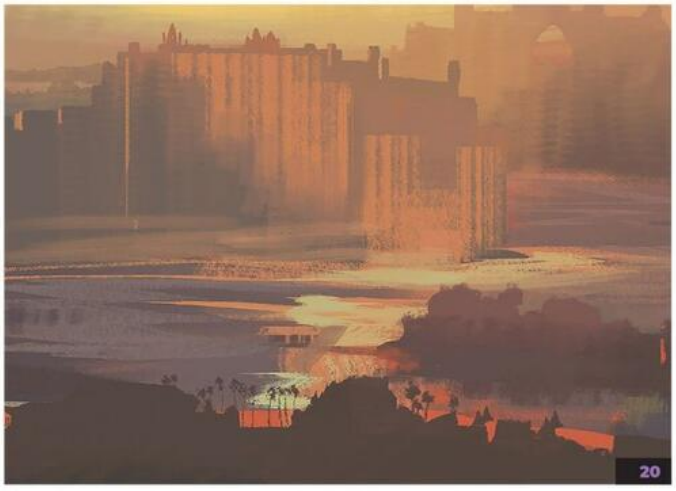
It's time to connect the foreground and the middle ground. First, I add orange reflections where the foreground meets the bay, then lighter, vivid reflections that lead out to the middle-ground palace. At the same time, I add lights falling along the front plane of the palace, coming down to the water. Reflections are very important at this point, so I make sure some of the darker areas reflect in the water. This creates a clear pathway from foreground to middle ground, with the background silhouetted against the sky. The sense of journey, adventure, and purpose is emerging!

20 BRUSHSTROKES & CONTRAST

A careful look at the technique here is important. The brushstrokes are crucial, because they apply four different kinds of contrast simultaneously. They add value contrast, texture contrast, color contrast, and movement. I use a specific brush on the building that has textural gaps to suggest architectural detail, without having to do any rendering. I flatten the same brush for the reflective strokes in the bay, which wrap around the palace and weave through the scene into the foreground. They also help create a strong silhouette for the trees and hills of the foreground where it meets the bay. This approach is quite loose, yet the confidence of the strokes and the way they carefully follow the perspective of the ground plane gives them a particular authority.



19 Using lighting and reflections to connect the foreground with the middle ground and background.



20 A close-up view of the technique employed to add light to the middle-ground areas.

CONTRAST AS NARRATIVE

So much of what we do as artists revolves around the design of contrast. Let's say you're creating a scene with a crowd of people surrounding a mighty king. For the viewer to understand just how big and mighty the king is, he must stand apart from the crowd in a noticeable way. In other words, he needs to have visual contrast. You might paint him in a bright white robe, while the crowd wear drabber garments, to create value contrast. You could give him an ornate crown and rich, embroidered patterning on his robe to create shape contrast. His silhouette may have a firm edge to contrast against a dark background. His flowing hair and ornamentation might create vivid texture contrast. Or his colorful royal crests could possess both hue contrast and saturation contrast.

These elements can be combined to command the viewer's attention. Using all of them at once all but guarantees that the king, or any visual element of significance, will be identified as highly important to the viewer. Likewise, the lack of these contrasts in other areas also helps to guarantee that the area of contrast is significant. Artwork is often hierarchical. Some elements are meant to appear more significant than others and without this hierarchy there is no narrative. There are many different forms of contrast, but the foundational six listed here are: value, shape, edge, texture, color hue, and color saturation.

Continuing with the image of the king and the crowd... perhaps the royal bishop is present and considered to be the second most important person shown. They would require significant contrast, but not as much as the king. And perhaps a subject is being brought forth to appear before the king. This person would also need to have greater visual significance than the crowd.



Foundational ideas for creating value, shape, and edge contrast.



Foundational ideas for creating texture and color contrast.

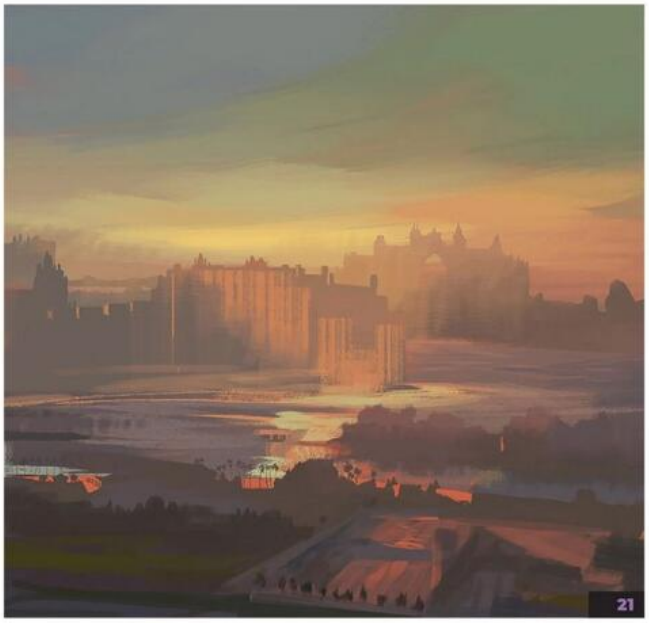
21 DEVELOPING THE FOREGROUND

To develop the foreground, I focus on three things: additional perspective elements that lead the viewer into the scene, more silhouetted layers, and some local color. I place a contrast of trees along a perspective line at the bottom center to pull the viewer's attention there, preparing to send them off on a journey through the painting. I follow that with a perspective ground plane that points straight out at the far palace and leads to the active area where land and sky meet. To the lower left, I suggest a silhouetted grove of trees along perspective lines to continue the idea of layered silhouettes, and add a pop of color to the lower left and right to suggest fields of green. This green is also a nice repeat of the greens in the sky for the purposes of color harmony.

22 CLOUDSCAPE COMPOSITION

Now to work on the sky. Student artists may approach a cloudscape like this one with a great deal of trepidation about the technique. While the technique is important, the composition and design are even more so. In terms of composition, the key element in the sky is the white band of lit clouds that lie behind the darker ones. Remember, the goal here is to take the complexities of the scene and find ways to weave them together to create purpose and meaning. A wild landscape combined with a vast cloudscape can quickly get out of hand. The band of light in the sky is a meaningful repetition of the line created below where the landscape meets the reflections of the bay. These two elements bring an element of unity and organization to the chaos.

In terms of technique, the clouds simply need to follow the proper perspective, opening up at the top and disappearing into the sunset along the distant horizon. The clouds grow darker the farther away they are from the sunset, with the exception of the lightened band. Digital brushes that produce soft organic shapes are ideal for creating this kind of cloudscape.



21 I develop the foreground with accent shapes, colors, and perspectives.



22 Clouds are now applied with the perspective and design that was laid out in the color comp.



23 I add illumination along the underside of the clouds and appropriate glints throughout the landscape.

23 WARMTH & LIGHT

This next step will give the clouds form as the warm sunset light rakes across their underside. Using the same soft, organic brush, I once again consider the form and perspective. I also need to add visual interest below, so I sprinkle highlights along the islands and masses of trees where they might catch a little light. Additionally, I add the odd glint of light here and there to suggest elements peeking out from the land – just enough to catch the sun.



24 Understanding the simple statement of the illuminated clouds.

24 CLOUD CLOSE-UP

Illuminating the clouds may seem complicated, but it doesn't have to be. The clouds are like a canopy layered overhead that recedes toward the horizon, each one with a form of its own. The sunlight illuminates each cloud simply by wrapping around its form from the appropriate direction. In this case, the clouds are darker in the upper foreground, growing increasingly warmer as they recede toward the horizon.

25 INFORMATION & DETAIL

This step will introduce more information into the landscape. In the furthest part of the background, near the horizon, I add a hint of layers to encourage the idea that the empire stretches far into the distance. To the middle-ground palace, I add the distinctive domes typical of Arabian or Moorish architecture, as well as additional details and ornamentation. The foreground also requires more perspective and accents of green local color, so I invent elements to convey that. I also place towers on either side of the foreground entrance to make it feel almost like a portal into the mythical land.



25 Adding additional layers and ornamentation to the foreground, middle ground, and background.



26 An important addition of foreground local colors and a sprinkle of detail throughout.

26 ENHANCING THE IMAGE

Now I have the substance of the environment, it's time to introduce more visual interest. I heighten the lighting and sparkle on the center palace, before strengthening the reflections throughout the water. The scene is in great need of more local color to avoid the same warms and cools appearing everywhere, so I paint in trees in full pink blossom in the foreground. I judiciously paint in white glints around the scene for added visual interest. These are primarily centered in the foreground entrance, the middle palace, and the underlying lagoon.



27 A closer look at foreground elements.

27 FOREGROUND CLOSE-UP

Zoom in on the foreground. This area is fairly abstract and can remain simple. While the trees are little more than patches of organic color, I'm careful to keep a logic to them. Their local color is warmer, with cool skylight applied on top and darker areas underneath to emphasize their spherical form. In terms of other shapes, there are vertical silhouettes to suggest trees, as well as lighter perspective elements that suggest structures.

28 ADDING BALLOONS

As explored in one of my earlier pencil sketches, now is the time to introduce some balloons into the scene. I block them in quickly and directly, but only after carefully thinking through their placement. As the middle-left palace creates a weight of visual



28 The addition of balloons to the scene.

interest, I place the biggest, and closest, of the balloons in the upper right as a visual balance. It risks looking a little odd if all alone, so I paint a flock of balloons around the rest of the image, as well as suggesting a handful in the far distance, headed toward the palaces. At present they consist of little more than a dark shape with a few suggested highlights. As illustrated in the next step, they won't need much more work.

UNITY & CONTRAST

Unity and contrast are simple ways to keep your painting under control. If the image feels busy and distracting, find ways to simplify and unify. Conversely, if the image is too passive, find ways to add meaningful contrast. This contrast will usually be needed in areas that best serve the central purpose of the image. While not every painting needs a singular center of interest, nearly all have accented areas that are of greater importance than others.

29 ADDITIONAL DETAILS

I suggest significantly more detail in the foreground entrance area, finish off the balloons and hang baskets from them, add green flags for an accent of local color, and populate the bay with boats. The purpose of the magenta sails on the boats is to add an accent of color, which helps to move the viewer through the pathway I'm developing from the entrance to the palaces. I also paint in a couple of waterfalls in the foreground to emphasize the sense of adventure. I thought this would be the final step. After all, what more is there to add to the scene without over-busying it with additional elements? Yet I want the scene to be pure magic! I've talked about the sense of destination from the start, so the next step will develop that idea further.



29 The detailing of important elements and ships in the harbor.

BALANCE & RHYTHM

Two further methods to manage the complexity of your paintings are balance and rhythm. These two ideas are very simple, which is what makes them so useful.

Balance is universal. Every movement we make and every moment of our lives are balanced against the force of gravity. It's an ever-present consideration, so it makes sense that we prefer an element of balance in images also. In this painting, I tried to make sure there was a similar amount of visual interest on either side of the image. Studying this diagram, each circle represents an area of significant contrast, and there is roughly the same volume of circles on either side of the painting. I've indicated a fulcrum of balance with a black line to indicate this idea as well.

Rhythm is a meaningful repetition of picture elements. Humans love rhythm; it provides structure, lets us know what comes next, and unifies. In this painting, most aspects of the scene curve in the same way from the foreground to the middle ground, and then up to the sky. These curves sweep through the image to create meaningful repetition and act as a unifying element.



Balance. Charting the visual interest of the scene to show how the visual weight on either side is roughly equal.



Rhythm. A meaningful repetition of curves throughout the image.



30 A closer look at how I create the suggestion of ships in the harbor.



31 The creation of a stronger destination point.

30 SHIP CLOSE-UP

Before moving on, I take a closer look at the ships in the harbor. As you can see, they're quite simple. In the previous step I created a distinctive sail shape in Photoshop, used it as a repeating brush, and scattered it throughout the harbor where more visual interest was needed. I then painted dark shapes underneath, plus vertical masts and reflections.

31 CREATING VISUAL ACTIVITY

Next, I add a flash bang of excitement in the middle of the scene where the palaces meet the bay. What is it? What created it? Who knows! If it looks and feels right, then follow your gut. I also significantly brighten the horizon for the same reasons, before adding more brushwork and visual activity to the foreground and middle ground.

FINAL TOUCHES

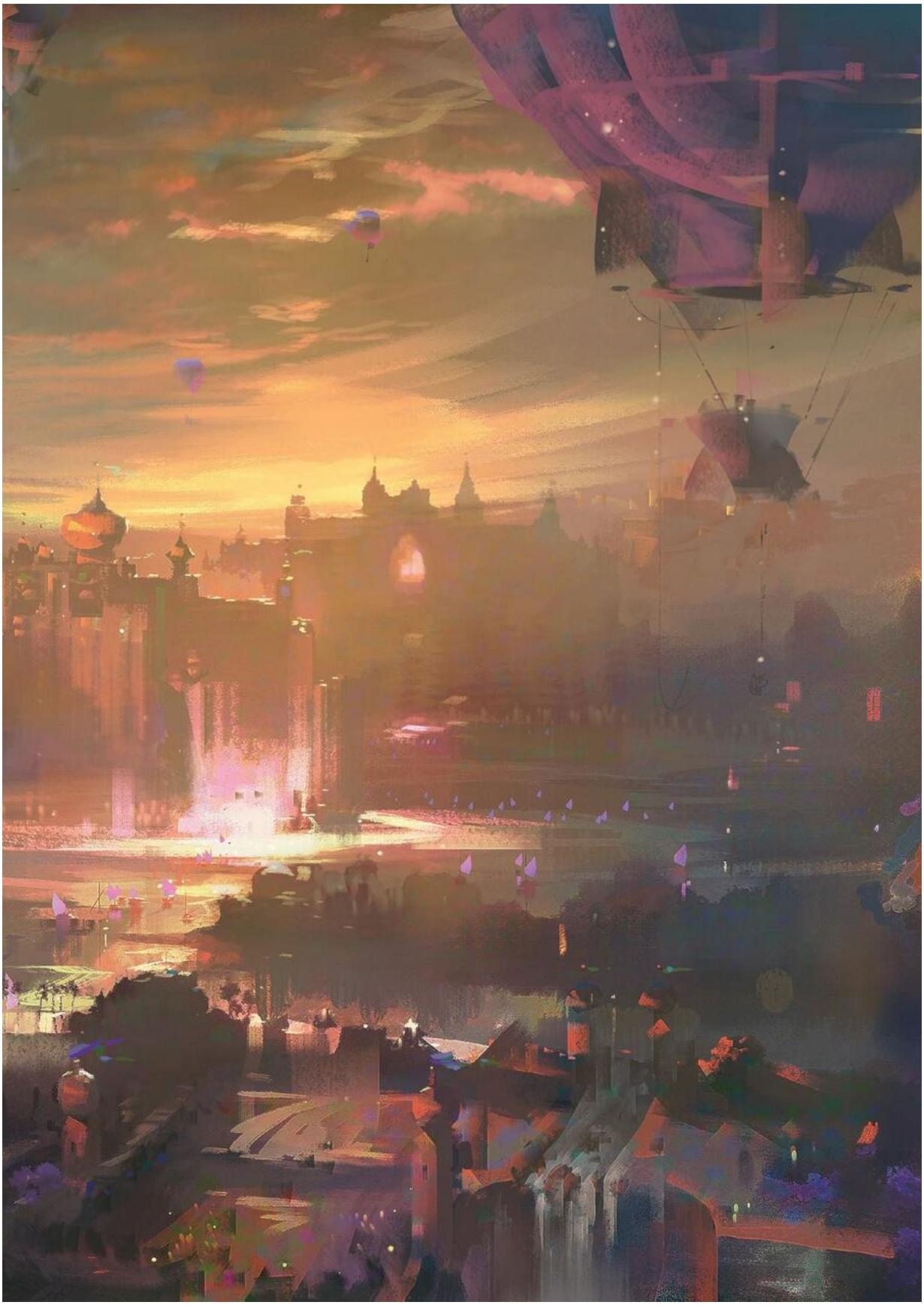
It's now time to clean up the image, including adding final accents and editing away any distractions. I call this stage the "search and destroy mission," as there always seems to be accidental distractions that appear in a painting, such as areas of contrast that demand the viewer's attention for no good reason. I study the entire image carefully for any such mistakes, then begin enhancing the areas where I want to create heightened contrast. I primarily do this with rim lights. Even though the scene is lit by sunset light from the left, I cheat a little and paint rim lights along the top of the rear sides of the palaces. This tightens their silhouettes and emphasizes the visual importance of this area. I use the same technique where the water meets the shore, as well as on the towers that line the entrance to the scene. After these final tweaks, the painting is finished.



Arabian Port. Laying down the final touches.



Final image © Nathan Fowkes



32 CENTRAL PURPOSE

Now the painting is finished, let's examine the composition and narrative in more detail. I have referred to the idea of a powerful, simple statement numerous times in this tutorial, so here I will focus in on the central purpose of the painting. As there's so much happening in this scene, I made the decision to include interesting accents just about everywhere the viewer may look. Yet the central powerful, simple statement of it all is this: the viewer enters the scene at the lower gates, zigzags through the bay, and is brought to the engaging destination of the palaces. Likewise in the sky, the sweep of the clouds brings the viewer down to the palaces in the same way. This is the core aspect of the scene.

33 FRAMING

Another simple device I use is to create a quality of framing around the image to help draw the viewer into the central destination. In the sky, the balloons have been strategically placed to help reinforce the sense of framing in the scene. Below and to the sides, elements become darker and more grouped together to serve the same purpose. While framing can be overused to the point of looking self-conscious and is not right for every painting, in this instance it has made the image stronger.



32 Diagram showing the simple statement of the scene.



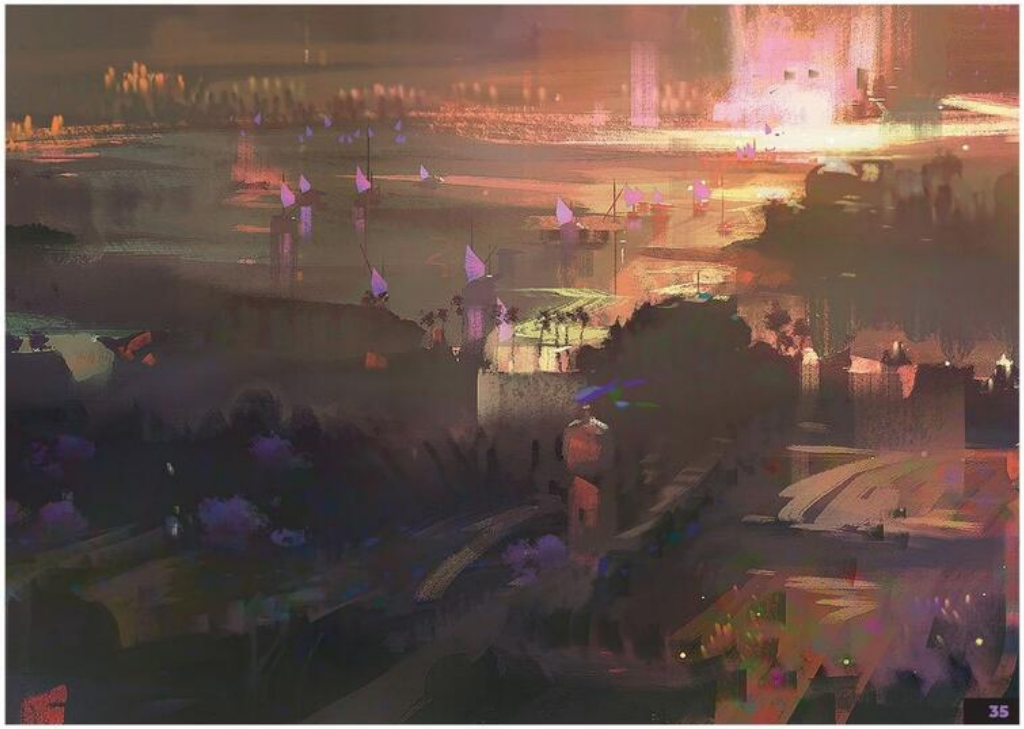
33 Diagram showing how the scene is subtly framed.



34 The purple circles show how and where visual interest is placed.

34 CONTRAST & VISUAL INTEREST

While I tried to sprinkle visual interest throughout the scene to ensure the viewer has plenty to take in, the concentration of visual interest is focused on weaving through the image to deliver the viewer to the front and tops of the palaces.



35 Foreground and middle ground close-up.

35 USE OF COLOR

The close-ups in this and the next few steps provide a clearer look at the techniques used throughout this painting. The area of foreground shown above is mostly neutral, but employs a few more saturated local colors that advance out into the water toward the destination in the form of boat sails. This area also shows how I try to weave a little extra color into neutral areas. For example, there is a subtle patchwork of neutral reds and greens in many of the shadowy silhouettes.

36 PALACE CLOSE-UP

Here is a close-up of the middle-ground palace. Even though it's fairly loose, you can see how I paid close attention to form lights and cast shadows. I added accents of green and a touch of purple to avoid drab repetitive colors throughout the image. These take the form of flags and banners, which also provide a dash of pageantry to the image.

37 BRUSHWORK CLOSE-UP

This is a close-up of the lower-right foreground. Much of the brushwork is a simple indication of silhouetted shapes catching the light. I created a very simple digital brush that is opaque and hard-edged on one side, but softer and more transparent on the other. This brush allowed me to quickly convey form by creating a hard-edge light on one side of an object, but wrapping around the form and falling off on the other side. I used this brush throughout the painting wherever this detail was needed.



36 Close-up of the middle-ground palace.



37 Close-up example of brushwork.



38 This alternate version intensifies the magical theme.

38 MAGICAL VERSION

Now to create two alternative versions of the painting to explore what will happen if different design choices are made.

I want the scene to feel somewhat mythological, with an almost magical feeling. This alternative version will intensify the magic direction, giving it even more of a fantastical narrative. I achieve this not so much by what I add into the scene, but what I edit away. The more it focuses in on one theme, the more intense it will feel.

I use digital effects to dim the scene and introduce a tint of cyan into the middle-value shadows. I choose cyan, as for the lights to feel supernatural, they need to be a mystical color that doesn't occur naturally. Additionally, I add glowing magenta lights at the entryway towers, in the explosive glow of magenta in the center, and in the central window of the far palace. Now it feels more like a magical land.



39 This version changes the narrative to a city at night.

39 NIGHTTIME VERSION

This alternative version will be monochromatic and moody, with more of a nocturnal or gothic narrative. I shift the overall color to a spooky green and push a neutral red-purple into the foreground. This color transition, from foreground to background, ensures that the painting doesn't look like I simply applied a filter to the whole image, but rather considered depth and the increasing density of atmosphere into the background. I paint a moon into the scene, hovering over the silhouette of the palace, to reinforce the ghostly, nighttime theme. I then add glinting reflections of the moon in the water and other surfaces below, then finish the scene by painting red lights in the windows and their reflections on the water.

FINAL WRAP UP

While complex images such as this are fun to paint, they often provide many challenges along the way. The principles of composition help artists to take the complexities of the subject and weave them together meaningfully and with a great sense of narrative and purpose.

Image © Joshua Clare

LONE RIDER

JOSHUA CLARE

Composition, or good design, can cover a multitude of sins. Even if color, drawing, edges, values, and paint handling are all fairly average, you can still create a great final image if the composition is strong. On the other hand, you could succeed with the color, value, edges, texture, and drawing, but the painting can fail if the composition is weak or ill-conceived. Andrew Loomis said that composition is "the thing that makes you or breaks you, when everything else is said and done," and I believe that is true.

In this tutorial, I will walk you through how I select, compose, and paint an engaging painting with an interesting narrative that intrigues the audience.





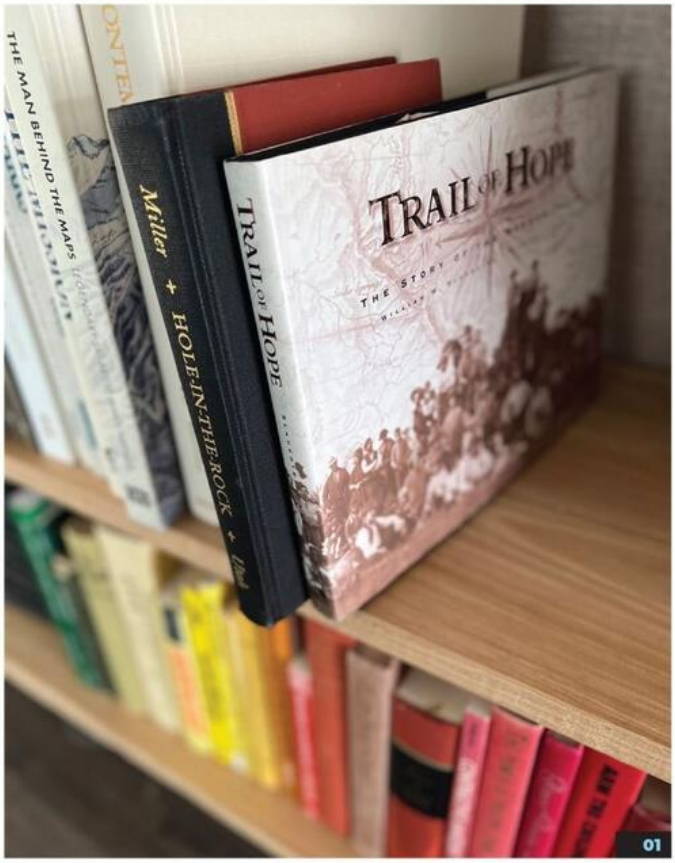
01 FINDING A SUBJECT

Deciding what you want to say is one of the most important parts of creating art, but it can also be one of the most difficult elements. Every artist has something important to share with their audience – something that matters deeply to them. Before putting brush to canvas, think carefully about what you have to say, then tell it in paint. Your work, and the world, will be better for it.

This year my focus has been on painting pioneers. My family history is full of brave men and women who did incredibly difficult things because of their faith in God and a desire to bless their families and neighbors. It's been extremely challenging to try and do justice to their lives in paint, but I've found myself growing artistically as I push beyond my comfort zone and learn along the way. This painting will be based on my pioneer heritage.

02 GATHERING REFERENCES

Once I've decided what to paint, I either set up a photo shoot or browse references I've already gathered that could work with my chosen subject. For this painting, the reference comes from photos I took on a horse ride with my friend several years ago. As I sift back through the photos from that day, I become even more excited about how they make me feel and what I might be able to do with them. One of the reasons I'm so pleased with these photos is because I'm looking for an image that makes me feel a certain way, rather than an image telling a specific story, and these photos are just right for this type of broad storytelling. I want this to be a painting of a thousand afternoons spent by a thousand different men and women who rode across these vast western plains, dreaming about what they could become. I keep this concept at the forefront of my mind as I select potential reference photos.



01 When deciding on a subject for your painting, choose something you feel deeply about.

COLLECT GOOD DESIGNS

A useful way to develop your design sense is to examine beautiful artworks in order to understand what makes them work. Ask yourself what elements are contributing to the sense of equilibrium or balance you feel as you look at them. Do they have a focal point? How is the variety in the shapes contributing to the success of the design? Look for good composition in everything; flip through magazines, visit museums, and critique billboards and product labels.

Create a collection of good designs that speak to you. Keep a digital file on your computer or rip them out of books and magazines. Start to view the world more purposefully and intentionally, and by doing so, begin to cultivate your own sense of balance and beauty in design.



02 Browsing reference photos that could fit with the chosen concept.



03 I choose this photo because the gesture of the horse and rider speaks to me. There is a sense of peace and purpose in the stark, simple shapes and the subtle curve in the figures that I find both beautiful and inspiring. It's miraculous how shapes and colors can make us feel such emotions.

03 SELECTING A REFERENCE

I set aside some time to sift through my reference photos. On my first flick-through I select everything that captures my interest, before looking over this longlist to narrow my selections down again. It may take me five or six rounds of choosing until I finally decide on a specific reference photo to use. Many factors contribute to a photo capturing my interest. Sometimes it's the color, sometimes it's the drawing. Other times it's the shapes, gesture, or lines.

On my initial passes through the reference photos, I don't worry about identifying exactly what it is that grabs me, but as I narrow my choices down, I start to ask myself more specific questions about why the chosen photos intrigue me. Once I've identified this, it's much easier to select which one I'll use as my reference.

DECIDE WHAT YOU WANT TO SAY

Decide what you want to say, then say it. This is the most important design principle in existence. Your design choices must help tell the story you want to tell or communicate the emotion you want to convey. You can't navigate the endless sea of color, value, and design choices at your fingertips unless you have first chosen a destination.

A few years ago, I worked on a painting of some pioneers. Something about my reference photo had spoken to me, but I hadn't taken time to identify what it was. I jumped into a large painting and quickly became discouraged. The sky wasn't working, but I didn't know why, so I painted over the fluffy clouds with a darker, moodier sky that didn't feel right either. I then painted a different set of clouds back in and pushed and pulled for a while, but while the arrangement of shapes felt balanced and pleasing, it still didn't feel right. I painted cliffs into the background, but it felt even more wrong than before. Then it finally hit me – until I made a decision about why I was painting this image, I would never be able to resolve the sky. I had an infinite number of questions and an infinite number of possibilities. Should I stylize the clouds, or paint them realistically? Should I paint one cloud, or thirty, or none? Should I paint a stormy or clear sky? The list went on and on. So long as I didn't have a clear "why" for my painting, there wouldn't be any answers to those questions or the hundreds of others I would encounter. Without a "why" I was lost.

As you take the time to consider your "why," it can be helpful to simplify it into a single sentence, word, or emotion. Clarifying and simplifying your intention to this extent will make it much easier to answer questions, such as how dark to paint the sky, how may figures to include in the background, or just what to do with the foreground. Ground yourself and your painting in a clear "why" and let it guide every choice you make.



Together
18 × 18, oil
Family means everything to me – there's nothing I'd rather paint. I tried to compose this image so that every element directs the viewer to the focal point of mother and child. Their closeness as they walk together illustrates the love and joy that we can experience in families.



04 Identify your motivation and reason for creating the painting – what is it that you wish to capture? What narrative or concept do you wish to share with your audience?



05 Oil paints can create a sense of timelessness, which is a perfect fit for the narrative of my painting.

04 IDENTIFY YOUR "WHY"

"Painting my pioneer heritage" is far too broad a concept to guide me through the myriad of choices I will have to make as I create the image. The subject will need narrowing down as I identify very clearly and succinctly my "why" for creating this painting. If I can't condense my motives for creating a painting into a single sentence, or better yet, a single word, I have very little hope of creating a successful painting. Without a clear a goal, I won't know if I've arrived or even if I'm heading in the right direction. Your "why" will be very personal and could be any number of things. Spend time identifying your motives before writing them down.

After some careful thought, I decide that my "why" for creating this painting is to convey a sense of quiet determination. I want it to remind the viewer about all those beautiful souls, past and present, who keep moving forward in spite of great difficulty and discouragement, with a quiet hope that everything will somehow work out. My compositional choices, plus color, edge, value, and texture choices, will all need to work together to help the viewer feel this.

05 CHOOSING A MEDIUM

As with every other decision you will make in the painting process, your choice of what medium to use should be governed by your "why." I choose oil because I love its tactile nature and the way you can reach out and run your hand over the gritty surface of an oil painting. I love the texture you can create with several layers of oil and the incredibly subtle magic of a glaze or a scumble. It may be because oil has been around for so long and it's the medium we're used to seeing when visiting museums, but oil also carries with it a certain sense of timelessness. I hope it will help me create an image that exhumes a sense of quiet determination.



06 The square format will provide good balance between areas of rest and activity.

06 CANVAS SIZE

The next decision to make is whether to paint this image on a large or small scale, and what dimensions to make the canvas. Good composition can occur at any size or aspect ratio and my decision often depends upon what frames or canvases I happen to have lying about the studio – but don't let what you have to hand restrict you. Your choice of size and scale for your painting should be made when considering the "why."

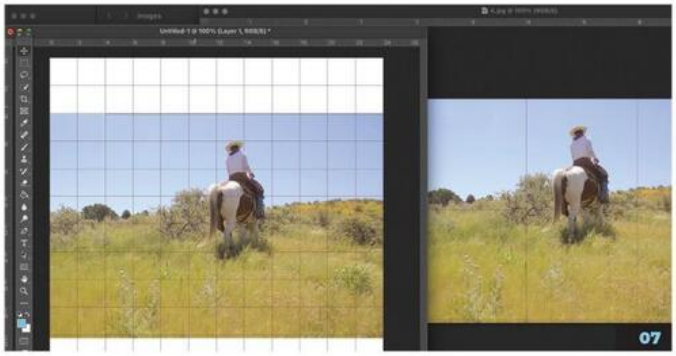
I choose a square 24 × 24-inch format for this painting, as there's a kind of solidity to the square format and I think it will fit well with the emotions I'm trying to convey. I know that I want the horse and rider to be dominant in the composition, but it's extremely important that the painting also contains a lot of quiet space – areas of rest where the eye can pause.

07 START DESIGNING BY CROPPING

The moment you make a mark on the canvas, you begin to divide visual space and compose. The same is true when you crop a photo. I skip drawing in my sketchbook and instead use the computer to create my thumbnails, or Notan sketches, for this image. I start by creating a new blank image in Photoshop, set the artboard to 24 × 24 inches, and drag in the reference photo. I take some time to nudge it around and scale it up and down to find the ideal composition. Digital software is a wonderfully versatile tool for artists. Photoshop allows me to create layer after layer of compositional ideas and flip back and forth, from one to another, to see what is and isn't working. Good design is often only arrived at after much trial and error. It can take a great deal of edits and revisions to find a beautiful arrangement of shapes.

08 COMPOSITIONAL DECISIONS

I start by cropping the image so that the horse and rider fill the canvas, then push them to the left, but something about this composition feels wrong. I move the horse and rider to the right and it immediately looks better. They're just beginning to turn to the left, their gesture emphasizing the turn, and something about giving them space to move feels necessary. With time and practice, you will learn to tell when something is or isn't working. Every artist has the potential to cultivate and develop that sense within themselves. I also apply a warming filter over the photo to harmonize and unify the color slightly.



07 Creating thumbnails by cropping the reference photograph to refine the composition.



08 Experimenting with the composition of the photograph.

09 DIGITAL SKETCHING

Once the scale and placement of the horse and rider feel right, I start painting digitally onto the photo. Large shapes are all that matter at this stage, so I'm not afraid to use the mouse and brush tool to apply rough, clunky brushstrokes. Refining the smaller pieces of the painting before the big shapes have been established is like frosting a cake before it's been baked.

The decisions I make as I design are very organic; I often don't analyze or think things through logically as other painters might. I lower the angle of the hill on the right to create a line that counteracts the hard angle of the rider's hat and shoulders tilting down to the left. I experiment with it in several positions until it feels right, then move onto the next element. When working digitally, these changes can be made extremely quickly and on different layers.

10 CLOUDS & MOUNTAINS

After slanting the hill down to the right, I need to create an opposing line to balance that hard push to the left, as well as introduce distant mountains and clouds to further balance the composition. I experiment with adding clouds to the sky, but after trying numerous different ideas, I decide that an excess of activity in the sky could distract from the focal point of the painting. I return to a single, simple cloud shape that directs the viewer back to the area of interest.

Until you try, it's impossible to know how much a painting can hold. I often have to push things too far to know that it's too much and I need to return to an earlier version. This process of pushing and pulling is an integral part of the way I compose a painting. Push the color and come back. Push the hardness or softness of the edge and come back. Push the size, gesture, or line and come back. This kind of experimentation is critical to finding the sweet spot that's somewhere between timidity and vulgarity, between not enough and too much. It can only be found by going to the extremes and pushing your painting to its limits.



09 Pushing the angle of the hill down to the right so that it counteracts the hard angle of the rider's hat and shoulders that slope to the left.



10 Adding mountains and clouds, without introducing too much activity that will distract from the focal point.

BALANCE

Balance is one of the three design principles that I rely upon as I paint. I define balance as a sense of evenly distributed weight in an image and measure it entirely by the way I feel as I look at shapes of light and dark in my painting, rather than by using mathematics. It's not just dark and light shapes that carry visual weight either; color has a visual weight and must be as carefully balanced and considered as the shapes. Intense color weighs more, visually, than neutral or gray colors.

Elements often feel very balanced somewhere in the beautiful "golden ratio" section of the painting (see page 16 of the Composition chapter). There are eternal laws that govern balance, beauty, and composition, which are all useful for composing a painting. Another approach is to simply *feel* your way to that balance, rather than measuring it with a ruler, but only experienced artists should attempt this.

Deep down in that part of us that thinks, loves, and wants, there's the ability to *feel* when a design is or isn't working. That's the place I turn to when I'm trying to balance a composition. I trust that part of myself and keep working until I feel a sense of balance, peace, or rightness. Creating a beautifully balanced image can be as challenging as walking a tightrope, or building a carefully stacked tower of cards. You become good at it in the same way you become good at any skill, by practicing.







The Old Grey – 48 × 48, oil

This is a very formally balanced piece, and it took a lot of pushing and pulling to find that balance. While the outline of the trees on the left- and right-hand side of the barn don't balance out, the dark shape of shadow on the trees does (see image B). This is because visual weight is not a function of the outline of objects, but of value shapes. If I hadn't lightened the value of the clump of trees on the left (see image C) and grouped them into the lighter value or sunlit shape, it would have thrown off the balance and made the left side too heavy.

11 SAVING SOME PROBLEMS FOR PAINT

I'm careful not to spend too much time refining a shape, such as the cloud, once I'm happy with it. It's important that I save my enthusiasm for the final piece and don't tire myself out bringing the digital sketch to a perfect finish. While I get close to a final composition and digital overpainting, I don't fully resolve every problem at this stage. Instead, I save some problems for the final painting, as the blood, sweat, and tears shed when painting can integrate themselves into the canvas and add a little something extra to the painting. I enjoy seeing the struggle for "rightness" in other artists' work, so give myself permission to conduct a little on-the-spot searching myself, knowing that it's one of those almost imperceptible things that can add to the overall beauty of traditional artwork.



11 Resolving some problems, but leaving others to the painting stage.



12 My brushes and palette, along with the silicone scrapers and palette knives I sometimes use when painting.



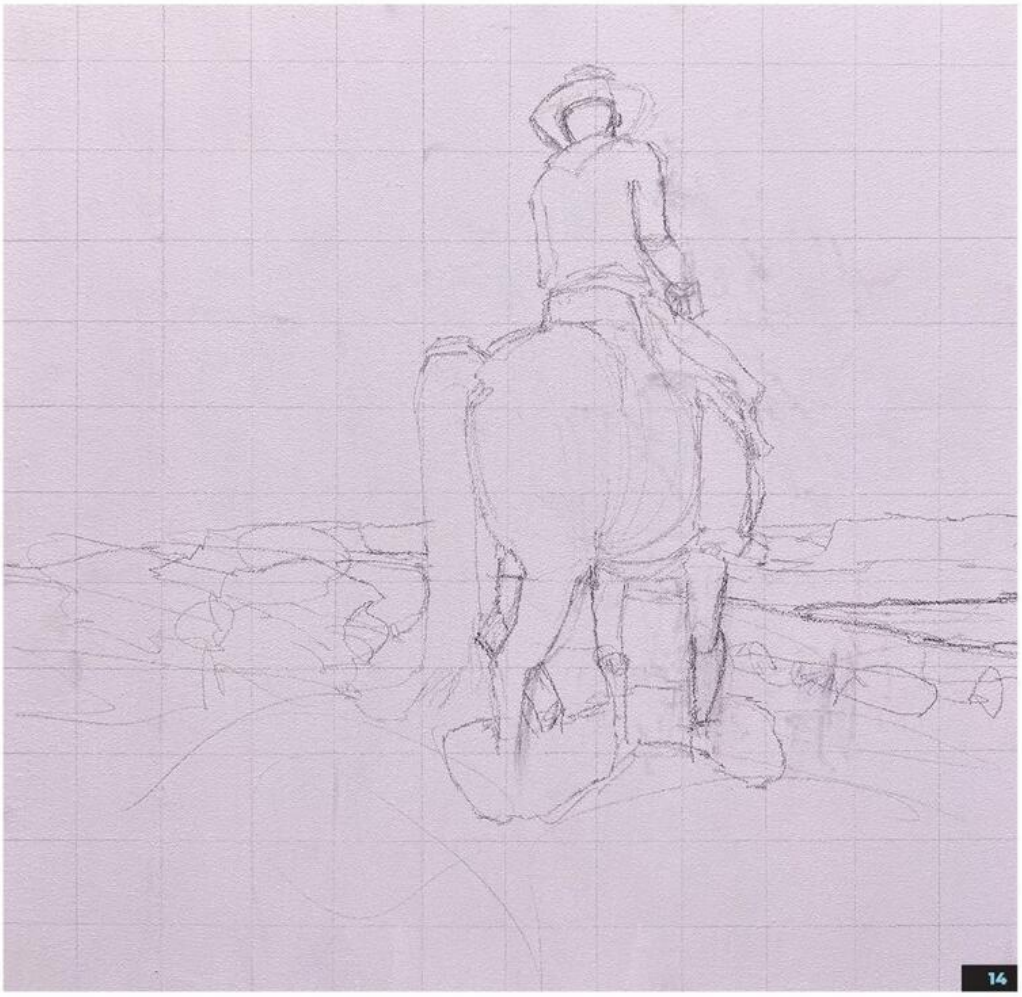
13 Selecting a variety of paint colors.

12 MATERIALS

I use a gessoed hardboard for the support, using a hardboard that has a pre-finished slick white coating, gesso, and paint on the back side. I use shellac to seal the board and finish it with two coats of acrylic gesso, applied with a paint roller to give it some texture. My brushes are mostly bristle brushes, flat and filbert, with some synthetic filberts and rounds for smaller shapes. I have a jar of odorless mineral spirits and a mixture of turpentine, stand oil, and damar varnish in the medium cup (which I barely end up using). Tucked into the easel pocket are a couple of silicone dough scrapers and palette knives.

13 PALETTE

I use Winsor-Newton and Rembrandt paint for this painting. My palette is never the same. I spent the first four years of my career painting with just red, yellow, blue, and white, so I learned to mix everything. While I've added lots of color to my palette since then for convenience and intensity, I still view it as a mix of reds, yellows, and blues.



14 Transferring the image from Photoshop to the canvas using the grid method.

14 TRANSFERRING THE IMAGE

Sometimes I start a painting without drawing a sketch first, instead drawing with paint and finishing as I go. When I compose the image digitally, however, I often transfer my image to the canvas using a grid. After doublechecking in Photoshop that my image is the same size as my canvas, I set the grid preferences to mark a line every one or two inches. I grid my canvas quickly, without worrying too much about getting it perfect, before roughly transferring the drawing onto the surface. I don't worry too much about details at this stage – the focus is on ensuring the large shapes are sketched at the right size and in the right place from the start.



15 Initial lay-in of colors, with the aim that they will make subsequent color choices warmer.



16 Blocking in base colors, starting with the clouds and grass.

15 TONING THE CANVAS

I don't normally tone my canvases, as I'm better able to compare and judge color on a plain white surface, but in this case, I lay down a warm wash of black, burnt Sienna, and yellow ochre with mineral spirits, hoping that it will make my subsequent color choices warmer. Toning the canvas often causes me to make warmer color choices than I otherwise would. On the initial lay-in of color, I enjoy how the sky vibrates with the warm tones peeking through, but I end up painting over it a little too much. The wash does make my color choices warmer, however, and once I have all the colors laid in, I'm pleased with how the colors work together. I like how the color of the piece adds to the sense of "quiet determination" that I'm hoping to evoke.

16 STARTING THE BLOCK-IN

As I start the block-in of color, my goal is to lay down approximate colors and values so I can see how they work together and can adjust as needed. It's likely that I will later paint over almost everything I lay down at this stage, so I don't worry about getting it perfect. I simply do the best I can, before moving on to the next shape. I don't add too much color variety at this point; making it too interesting early on can create limitations later if the surface has a "once-and-done" feel rather than the layered look I try to create in my studio work.

I start with the white of the clouds, as it's a color and value I'm confident I can get almost right immediately. Next, I move on to the mountain, middle ground, and foreground grasses.

17 SKIES & NARRATIVE

I quickly block in the sky to see how it influences the rest of the landscape. I'm constantly amazed by how dramatically a sky can impact the mood of a painting. The sky was a value or a half-value too dark to begin with, and it wasn't until I brought it up to a higher value that it began to feel luminous and true to how I wanted it to look. As you experiment, you will notice how changing the value and color of a sky can influence the emotion of an image. The sky can often be the difference between a painting that feels right and a painting that appears slightly off.

18 FINISH EVERY ELEMENT AT THE SAME RATE

My aim is to work on all the elements of the painting at the same time, bringing it to a gradual finish, rather than finishing each individual section, one at a time. Neither approach is better than the other – they're just different ways of working. I choose which way I work based on what I'm trying to achieve with a painting, or sometimes just how I'm feeling that day. This method of bringing everything to a finish slowly can be hard on the ego, as the painting remains in the rough, unfinished stage for a long time. The main benefit of working this way, however, is that it focuses your energy on the big shapes in a painting: the overall design or tonal arrangement. It also helps you to avoid getting lost in the small shapes and details too early. Repainting a large field of color that took fifteen to twenty minutes to block in takes much less courage than wiping out three days of work and starting over.



17 Experimenting with the value of the sky, observing how it influences the mood of the image.



18 Bringing all of the elements to a gradual finish by working on the painting as a whole, instead of individual sections.



19 Painting in the saddle and rider's legs, without detailing them too much. Sometimes less is more.

19 LESS IS MORE

Since I learned that less truly is more, I try to edit every non-essential detail I can out of my paintings. I'm not aiming to paint visually exhaustive essays. Instead, I want the work to be poetic. Introducing too much detail or information into a painting separates the viewer from the work, keeping them from participating in the act of creation by filling in blanks purposefully left by the artist. There's a tremendous amount of joy to be had as a viewer in being invited to fill in the gaps the artist has left to your own imagination.

I paint initial marks to represent the saddle, rider's legs, and saddle blanket, as well as other elements that won't change much from my initial lay-in to the final image. I leave a lot out of this area because more detail isn't only unnecessary, but would also be harmful to the painting. I'm not trying to tell the story of a saddle, the rider's legs, or his spurs. I instead want the painting to tell a story of quiet determination.

20 COLOR RELATIONSHIPS

Now that I have most of the color notes down, I'm able to begin to see how the different elements are working. It's amazing how much the painting starts to come together now I've blocked in the horse and covered up that streaky burnt Sienna wash. A painting is a delicate house of cards; whether each shape and color you put down succeeds depends upon the shapes and colors that surround it. Truth in a painting isn't a matter of matching color and value, but a matter of matching color and value relationships. Those relationships don't exist until you've laid some paint down.

While you shouldn't rush your way through the lay-in, it's equally important that you don't treat your block-in as overly precious, changing it over and over in a bid to get it to look or feel right.

21 COLOR & EMOTION

I quickly paint in a lighter value for the grass and am impressed with how dramatically it changes the mood of the painting – it feels like the sun has just come out from behind a cloud. I realize later that the value is a little too light and needs to decrease slightly, but the change is a good one. A sunny day conveys more of that sense of hope and optimism I'm aiming for, enabling my painting about quiet determination to come one step closer to what I want it to be.



20 With the color notes down, it's possible to begin to see how the painting is working.



21 Painting a lighter value for the grass and watching how it alters the mood of the overall image.



22 Texture can play a key part in a painting, but only if it contributes to your established narrative.

22 TEXTURE

As I manipulate the colors and values of the foreground grass, I don't just think about color, value, and shape. I also consider texture and how the marks I lay down now will influence subsequent layers of paint. I think a lot about texture in my work, often to the point of distraction. Texture can be an exciting and effective part of a successful painting, but only if it helps you to say what you want to say. The moment it begins to detract from your "why" is the moment you need to scrape it down and start over.

23 MAKING ADJUSTMENTS

Now that most of the color notes are down, I realize that the shirt needs to be at least two values darker as it's not reading correctly and risks detracting from the truth of the piece. I also darken the foreground grass. As discussed in step 18, working in a broad manner to slowly bring everything to a finish allows me to make what would otherwise be daunting changes casually and without fear. Repainting the shirt could have been a real setback if I'd spent a lot of time on it.



23 Darkening the shirt and foreground grass.



24 Experimenting with darker accents in the foreground and middle ground.

24 A RECORD OF THE STRUGGLE

I experiment with darker accents in the foreground and middle ground, pushing and pulling as I work out how I want to resolve this part of the image. The shapes throughout the middle ground go through about thirty revisions before I'm satisfied with them and feel they help to tell the story. Jumping into a painting without fully resolving details like this might be one of my many artistic shortcomings, but sometimes I would rather work out such problems in paint than in the digital medium. I really like the history of struggle you often see in paintings when viewing them closely. It helps you to realize that even the greatest artists almost never got things right immediately – they had to work to resolve problems just like the rest of us.

VARIETY OR ELIMINATING SAMENESS

Variety is another one of the design principles that I rely upon as I paint. Unity in variety is one of the best definitions of beauty I've come across. The idea is to cram as much variety as you can into an image without losing its sense of unity or oneness. The most beautiful things on earth have an incredible variety of shape, color, edge, line, value, and texture, but as I compose and design, I'm focused almost exclusively upon variety of shape.

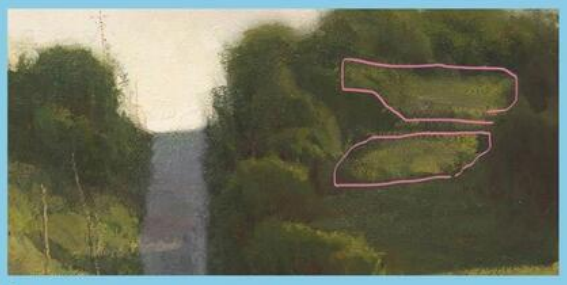
Go outside and look at a tree, cloud, flower, or body of water – I promise that you will see variety in all its glorious perfection. Nature almost never repeats its shape. I say almost because it does happen occasionally; but when it does, it's remarkable. Perhaps I will see two clouds that are almost the same shape, but then I take two steps to the left and the shapes overlap, and I'm right back to the awe-inspiringly beautiful variety of nature again. Sameness in nature, when it happens, doesn't last long.

I think about variety constantly as I compose and paint. Sameness in nature may be so rare that it's remarkable, but sameness in paintings and drawings is something I still have to combat daily, even though I've been painting for twenty years. When I notice a shape in my painting that's jarring, it's often because I've repeated that shape somewhere else. Design could almost be summarized as simply catching yourself when you trip into sameness, and finding creative ways to fix it and return to the beauty of variety.

Look for sameness and repetition in your own work and find the simplest way you can eliminate it. You will be amazed at how much your work improves.



A. While I love this painting and there isn't anything I find particularly jarring about it, I was still able to find some repetitive shapes.



B. Notice these repetitive shapes in the trees.



C. Here is a digital paintover of how I might have been able to fix these shapes to make them less alike.


25a


25b

25 THE HUNT FOR SAMENESS

On finding an area of "sameness," I make a critical change to the composition by removing the outline around the cloud and changing its shape. I'm always excited when I find monotonous repetition in my work because I can change it, knowing that the painting will be better for the change. The cloud, the negative shape beneath the cloud, and the distant mountain are all very similar shapes, with a similar thickness and length. To introduce some variety, I make the cloud thicker and eliminate part of the blue sky shape that shows beneath it. While it doesn't feel quite right yet, I have identified an important problem and started to solve it.


25c

25 Identifying areas of sameness and introducing variety.



26 Developing the smaller shapes within the bigger forms.

26 WORKING BIG TO SMALL

After allowing the painting to dry, I begin a new session. I now make the transition from working on the large shapes to the smaller shapes within the bigger forms. I work on the small shapes within the shirt, hat, horse, and foreground. I'm nearly finished with the cloud and won't touch it again until I'm almost finished with the painting. The gesture of that shape has changed a great deal from the last step and I'm now much happier with it. There's sufficient variety in the three shapes of cloud, mountain, and negative shape between them that they now feel right. They add to the story by conveying a sense of distance to the piece; a feeling that this lone rider has a long road to travel, which is an essential element of the narrative. Without that distance, the sense of a determination to conquer and survive is somehow diminished.

FOCAL POINT

A focal point is a center of interest, a specific location in a painting to which the eye and attention of the viewer is drawn. It's typically created using contrast, such as a contrast in color, value, edge, texture, shape, placement, or a combination of those elements. A focal point is one of the most fundamental ways for an artist to say what they want to say and direct their audience's attention.

All great paintings direct the viewer's attention in some way. Using the elements mentioned above, an artist can help their viewer to navigate the painting, giving them a visual path to follow through the shapes, places to rest, and areas to focus on. It's possible to have more than one focal point in a painting. Many of my favorite paintings have first, second, third, and fourth reads. However, in most of my favorite artwork there is a clear hierarchy of focal points, with a single area of interest acting as the star of the show.

About halfway through my painting, I realize that I could use color to emphasize the focal point, so I change the color of the rider's scarf from brown to red. While the change is fairly subtle and doesn't revolutionize the painting, it's an opportunity to both emphasize the center of interest and add variety, and the painting is better for it.



A. Here the brown scarf does not draw too much attention.



B. The red scarf helps to draw the eye to the rider as the focal point.



27 Adding texture and color, all the while noticing how it affects the mood and narrative of the overall image.



28 Making the corrections needed to help tell the story.

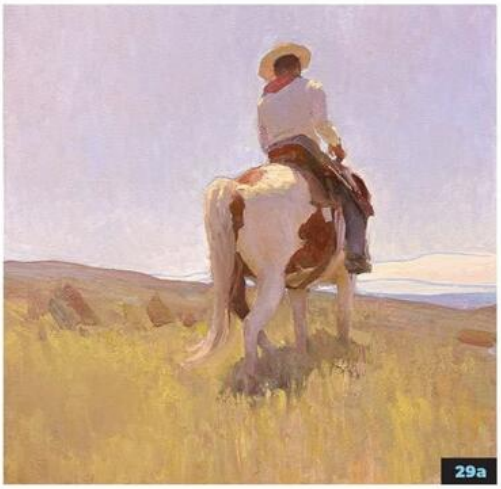
27 TAKE REGULAR BREAKS

I apply another layer of paint to add texture to the foreground, then introduce some cooler colors to the middle ground on the left. I begin to feel a sense of the landscape receding, telling the story of how far this cowboy has still got to travel much better than it did before I added the cooler tones.

As I paint, I remain conscious of how the changes I'm making can influence the mood or feeling of the painting. My aim isn't for it to look exactly like the reference, but rather to make it feel "right." If I get too tired or stop intentionally thinking about my "why," I could fall into the trap of mindlessly making changes without analyzing their effect on the narrative of the image. At this stage I take a step back from the painting more frequently to ask myself how it feels and if it's saying what I want it to say yet.

28 ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

I change the line of the hills, repaint the entire foreground for the fifth or sixth time, and make small corrections to the horse's right rear leg. There's a lot of back and forth, experimenting and making hundreds of changes over six hours. What I should have done is stepped away and taken a break at this stage, returning the next day with fresh eyes. The key to finishing a painting is to ask yourself the right questions, but this is hard to do when you're tired. There are a thousand different ways I could have treated the foreground. Which one is right? The best solution is one that helps to tell the story; the one that progresses the narrative and helps to convey the sense of quiet determination I'm aiming for. Ten minutes of thinking, feeling, and asking questions of your painting is often more useful than six hours of mindless painting.


29a


29b


29c


29d

29 ARE YOU SAYING WHAT YOU WANTED TO SAY?

I allow the paint to dry to the touch, glaze the foreground with a thin wash of color, and begin to work back into it. Notice how subtly and yet completely the painting changes from step to step.

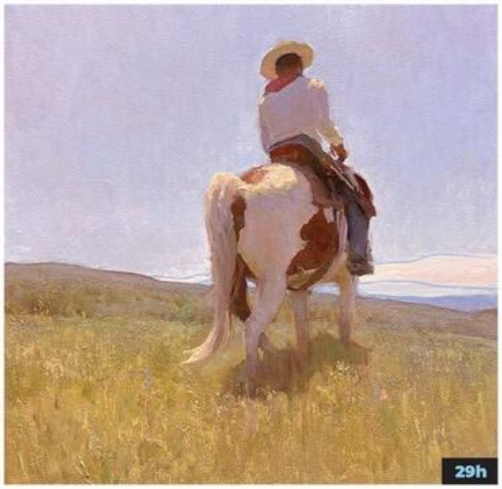
For me, composition and narrative require a tremendous amount of pushing and pulling. It takes time, patience, and focus to resolve how color, value, edges, shape, and arrangement of shape can work together to tell the story. Or even to work out if they're telling the story at all. The most important thing I can do now is continue asking myself the right questions, such as: does this foreground help to communicate a sense of quiet determination or not?

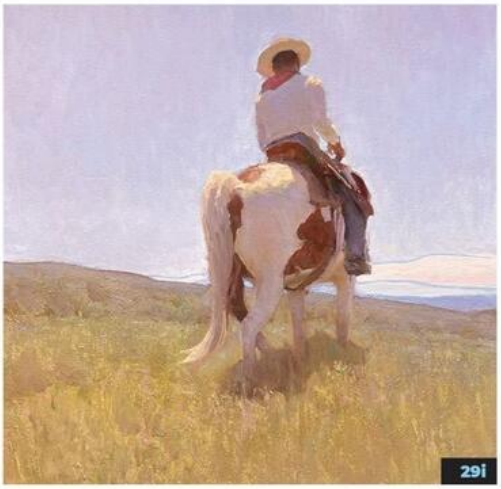
When I decided to create this painting, the first thing I did was to identify what I wanted to say. In other words, what the narrative would be. Now the question is, am I saying it? Is the narrative obvious? If not, what might I be able to change to tell the story I set out to tell?


29e


29f


29g


29h

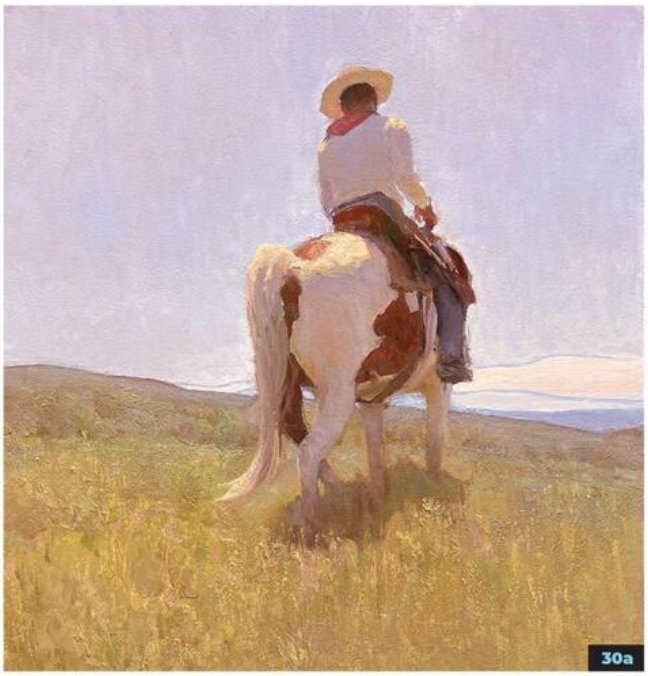








29a – 29l Examining whether the painting tells the story it was intended to tell.





30a & 30b Making small adjustments to the hat's shape to make it less monotonous and more interesting.

30 TWEAKING SHAPES

I make small adjustments to the shape of the hat, which helps to center it on the rider's head and gives it a more pleasing shape. Previously, the hat's shape was too monotonous, so I add some variety. Study the red line I've drawn to follow the contour of the hat. Notice how the long curve of the brim suddenly changes direction to create a kind of corner. Also, how another long curve does the same as it turns to go behind the rider's face. Adding variety to shapes like this can help to make them more visually pleasing.

YOUR "WHY" WILL SHOW

It's easy to forget your "why" when you're tired and eager to finish so you can move on to another project. It's important to fight back all distractions and ulterior motives, however, keeping your "why" at the forefront of your mind as you paint. Your "why" gets mixed into the binder and painted onto the canvas no different from pigment. This is true of paintings, but also of movies, music, and books, as well as our very own lives. Our motives shape us, flavoring everything we do. If you are deliberate and consistent in reminding yourself of your "why," redirecting yourself to focus on it throughout your painting, you will be amazed at how your intent shines through the finished piece. You won't need a lengthy written artist's statement next to the painting, or a documentary film explaining what you were trying to accomplish with your work. It will be stuck there in the paint, a permanent part of what you made, distinct and undeniable to those who view your work.

31 FIXING ONE LAST BIT OF SAMENESS

These images show one of the last changes I make to the painting. After letting it rest for a couple of days, I realize that the line of the cloud intersects the hill at a point where the hill changes direction, creating a nasty tangent. Such sameness is rarely found in nature and strikes a jarring note of untruth in a painting, as I discussed on page 183. To fix this, I extend the shape of the cloud past that curve of the hill to eliminate the awkwardness of the tangent.

The longer I let a painting rest, the better I'm able to notice repetitive shapes like this. The quickest way to fix the repetition is always the best solution. When I find annoying repetition – and I almost always do – I ask myself, what is the smallest change I can make to these shapes to create a pleasing sense of balance and variety? It's okay to be lazy in correcting repetition – resolve it with as little work as you possibly can.

32 DIGITAL PAINTOVER

I notice a dark spot to the right of the horse's front left leg that makes it look like the leg is too long. I take a quick photo of my painting on my phone and import the photo into the ArtStudio app, though there are numerous different apps that you could use. Next, I select the Brush tool, click and hold to select the colors I want to paint with, and then see if the change I'm proposing to make will work. When I'm happy with the digital paintover, I take my brush and paint this change onto the canvas. Digitally painting over your image in this way is similar to the trick some of the old illustrators used when they painted on cellophane or clear plastic taped to their canvas to see if a certain alteration would work or not. It's both quick and effective.

NOTICE HOW ART FEELS

I've talked a lot about how your motives will shine through whatever work you engage in, but don't just take my word for it... Go watch your favorite movies and try to feel the director's motives in the pacing, cinematography, lighting, and music. Try this with music, or with paintings in a museum or gallery. Your ability to feel and receive art will grow as you become a more deliberate connoisseur. Your ability to feel paintings will be magnified tremendously if you are able to view the original works.







31a – 31c Extending the shape of the cloud to correct a tangent, removing any sameness.





32a & 32b Using digital software, such as ArtStudio, to see if a proposed change will work.

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN A PAINTING IS FINISHED?

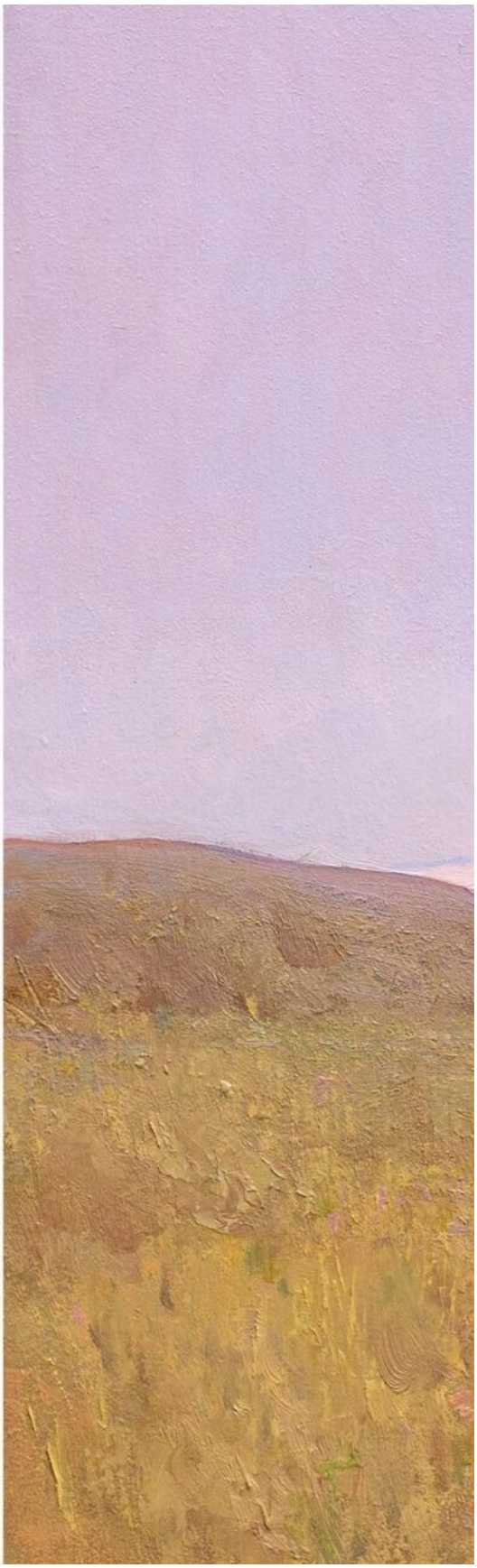
Identifying a "why" early on in the process is key to knowing when a painting is finished. A painting is finished when it says what you set out to say. "Finish" describes the way a painting feels, not the way it looks. Harvey Dunn was a masterful artist and storyteller, and his paintings are beautiful examples of stopping when you've said everything you intended to say. Look at Sorolla, N.C. Wyeth, and Sargent – especially the latter's landscapes and watercolors – to find the same beautiful truth. The great masters never tried to paint nature merely the way they saw it. They were trying to capture the way nature made them feel. They didn't paint until their paintings looked finished. They painted until their work was finished. It was finished when it felt right.

FINAL TOUCHES

After making that small change to the horse's front leg and shadow, I continue to slightly alter the shapes of the front legs and change the line of the rider's shirt so the angle isn't quite so harsh. I could continue painting forever, making small tweaks here and there, but the painting now feels right and conveys the intended narrative. I don't see any repetitive or jarring shapes, and the final image feels balanced.



Lone Rider. The painting is finished when there are no more jarring shapes or repetitions to fix, and it illustrates the narrative successfully.



Final image © Joshua Clare



Image © Dom Lay

MARKET PLAZA

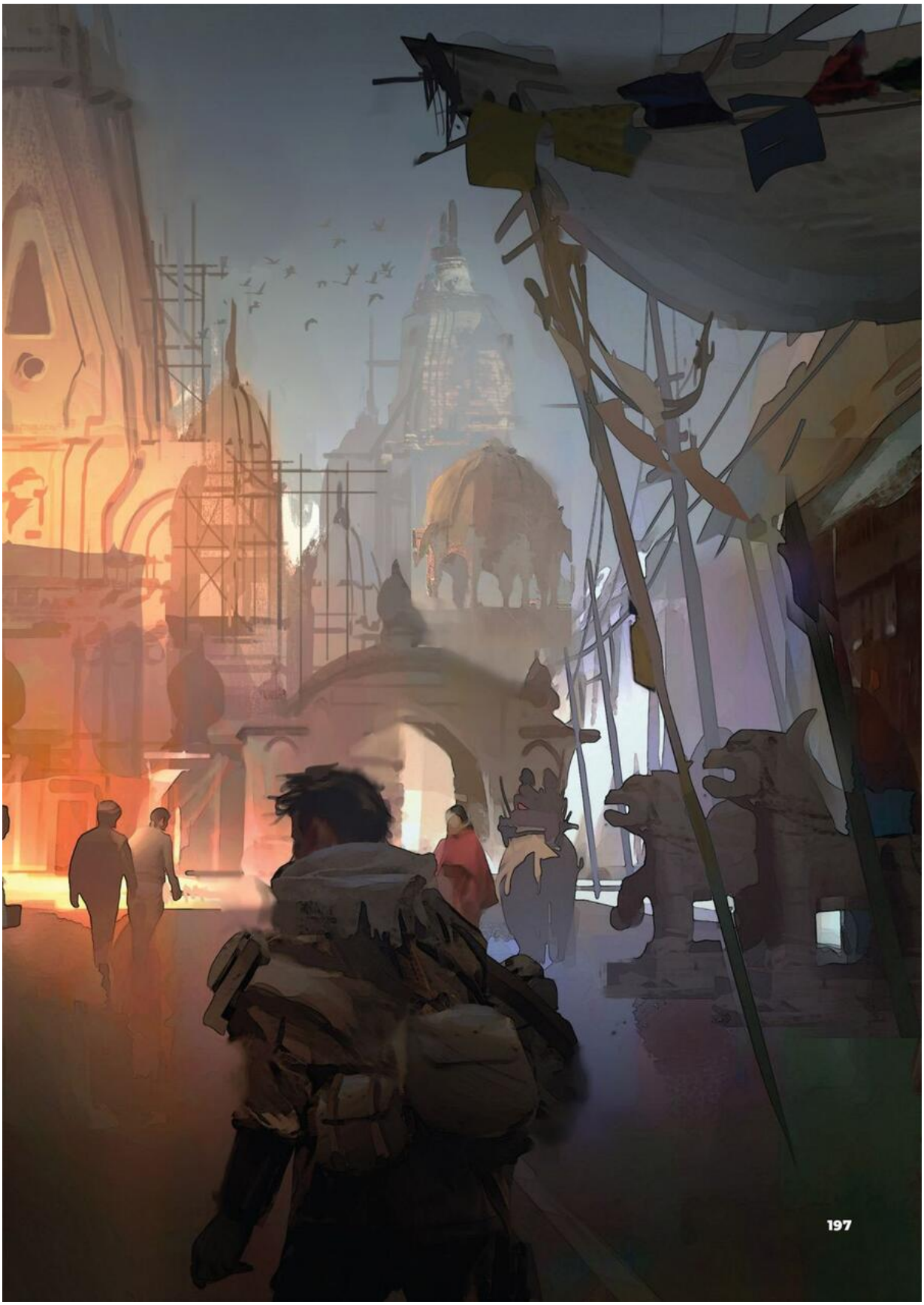
DOM LAY

Set in a somewhat science-fiction world, the painting tells the story of a tomb explorer as he searches for a lost relic hidden deep in the Southeast Asian jungle. He arrives at this market plaza to look for spare parts to repair his mechanical bot. But he is also here to find a woman who is rumored to know exactly where the relic is…

I will be using simple one-point perspective for the composition, using compositional techniques including the rule of thirds and golden ratio to plot the main points of interest. While the composition I have chosen is not overly dramatic, the careful way I arrange the objects in the scene will successfully drive the narrative forward.

This tutorial will demonstrate how I approach narrative, as well as discussing the fundamentals that will help guide the viewer's eye around the painting. It will look at how to use characters and other objects in the scene to contribute to the narrative. I will also explore how lighting, color, value, and other techniques play a large role in directing the story, without the need to describe every single detail in the image.





01 GATHERING REFERENCES

Before I set pencil to paper, I typically spend twenty to thirty minutes gathering references to compose my scenes. This step is essential to developing a solid composition, allowing me to look for key elements that will add to the narrative. One reference could be for lighting, one for atmosphere, one for mood, and a few for set dressing. Once combined, these will help to develop the overall story. As I progress with the painting, I can always find more references along the way if needed, but starting with five to ten solid reference images is better than thirty references you may not use. Look for what you will need for your painting and discard any excess. Nothing is worse than being overwhelmed by references that are not useful to your story. A simple scene is far more effective than a complex one.



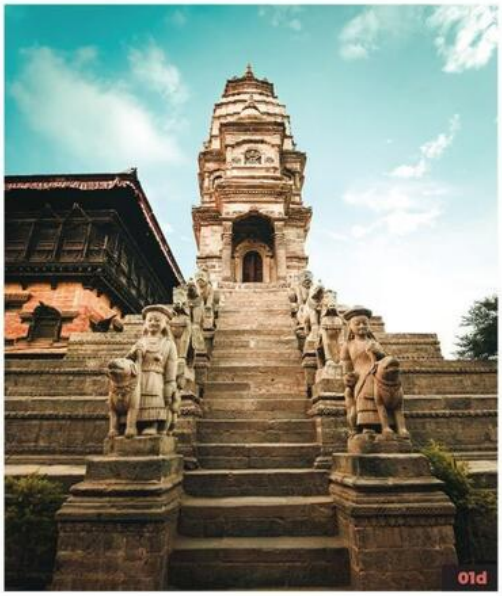
01a



01b

Image 01a photo © Mehmet Turgut Kirkgoz from Pexels | Image 01b photo © Bimal Ranabhat from Pexels







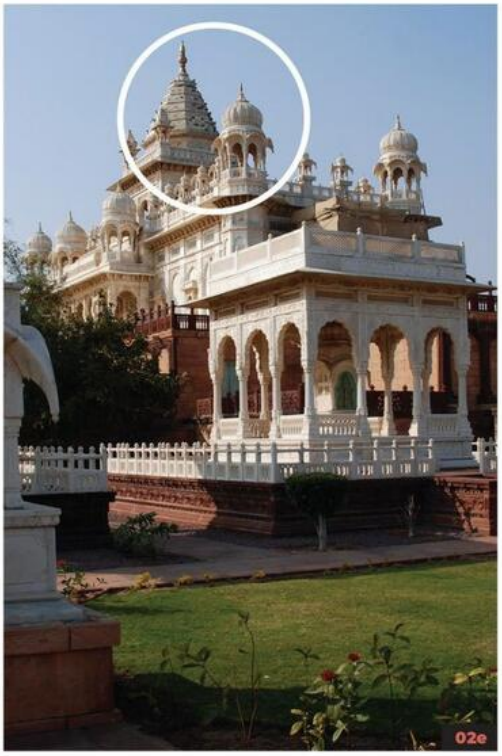
01a – 01e The research stage is incredibly important – without reference imagery, there is no way to gauge the historical accuracy of the image.

Image 01c photo © Alix Lee from Pexels | Image 01d photo © Sunil Poudel from Pexels | Image 01e photo © Tom D'Arby from Pexels





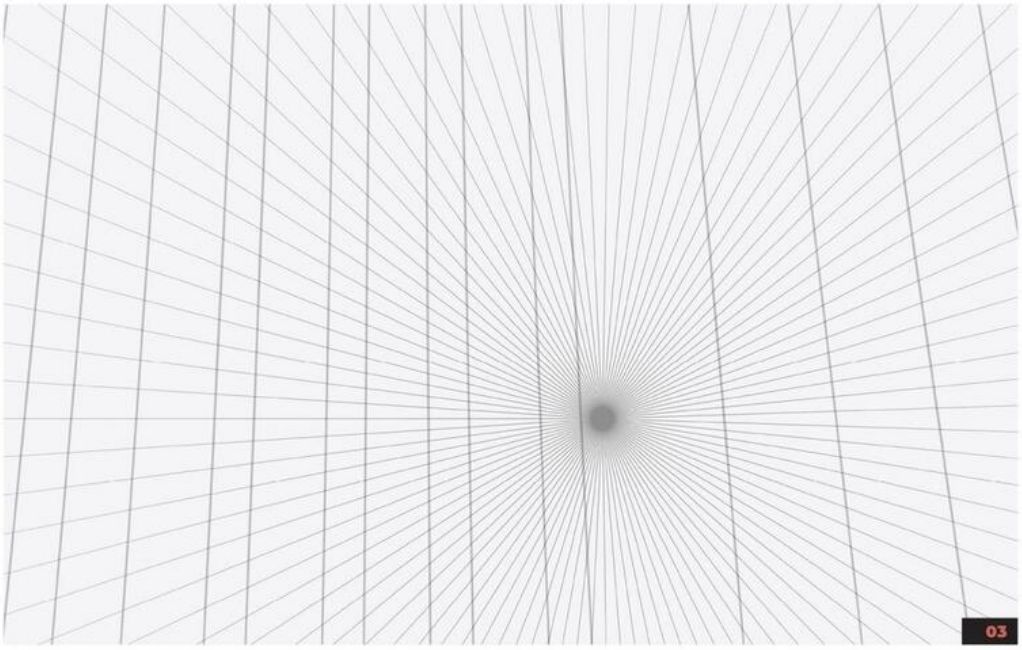






02a – 02e Analyzing the references helps me to see which elements to use and which to discard.

Image 02a photo © Mehmet Turgut Kirkgoz from Pexels | Image 02b photo © Bimal Ranabhat from Pexels | Image 02c photo © Alix Lee from Pexels | Image 02d photo © Sunil Poudel from Pexels | Image 02e photo © Tom D'Arby from Pexels



03 Perspective will ensure the image is not skewed or warped.

02 ANALYZING REFERENCES

I analyze my references for another twenty to thirty minutes to see what elements I can pull from each one. As I study the images, I invent a story in my head and begin to think about how I'll compose the scene. I seldom start with thumbnail studies. Instead I imagine different scenarios and watch the narrative unfold through the locations in the references. If you want to create thumbnails, however, use this step to experiment, sketching out each idea until you find the perfect composition. I like to extract different elements from each reference, combining them together to create an entirely new painting.

03 PERSPECTIVE GRID

A strong composition requires the use of perspective to make sure all elements placed in the scene are at the correct scale. Before I dive into the painting, I create a perspective grid to establish not only how I see the scale of the piece, but also the focal distance. I place the vanishing point on the right side of the canvas. Considering the rule of thirds, I imagine what sort of interesting focal point could be placed here. The grid also helps to guide all lines and shapes toward the vanishing point. It can be tempting to skip this step if it becomes tedious to plot out, but once I figure out the perspective lines, it makes the process much easier going forward. I often use either a one- or two-point perspective grid, as this provides a simple way of creating an image. It becomes much more complex once you start introducing three- or four-point perspective.

THE RULE OF THIRDS

As the Composition chapter covered on page 22, the rule of thirds is a well-known compositional technique that every artist should have in their arsenal. It's my favorite compositional technique, as it takes less than a minute to plot. Whether you're creating a drawing or painting, this essential tool can not only help you to make sense of the composition, but it will ensure all the elements in your image flow cohesively.

The rule of thirds technique also helps artists to know where to place key focal points, along with how many objects they should place within that focal point. The guideline dots usually fall on the four main quadrants on the central third of the canvas. It's also possible to split the quadrants into mini quadrants by creating additional vertical and horizontal lines down the middle of the empty spaces until they intersect one another.

I tend to use the rule of thirds more than the golden ratio in my paintings, as it's the easiest technique to use for even the most challenging compositions. The rule of thirds doesn't require any complicated mathematics or lines, but allows you to plot composition effectively without being proportionately exact in your measurements. Plus, it can work on both horizontal and vertical canvases; the guidelines will usually fall into the same place every time.

Another reason why the rule of thirds is so useful is because it helps to create a clear focal point – whether you place the object on the left or right side, or whether the object is large or small. You can create a strong focal point if it lands within those zones.



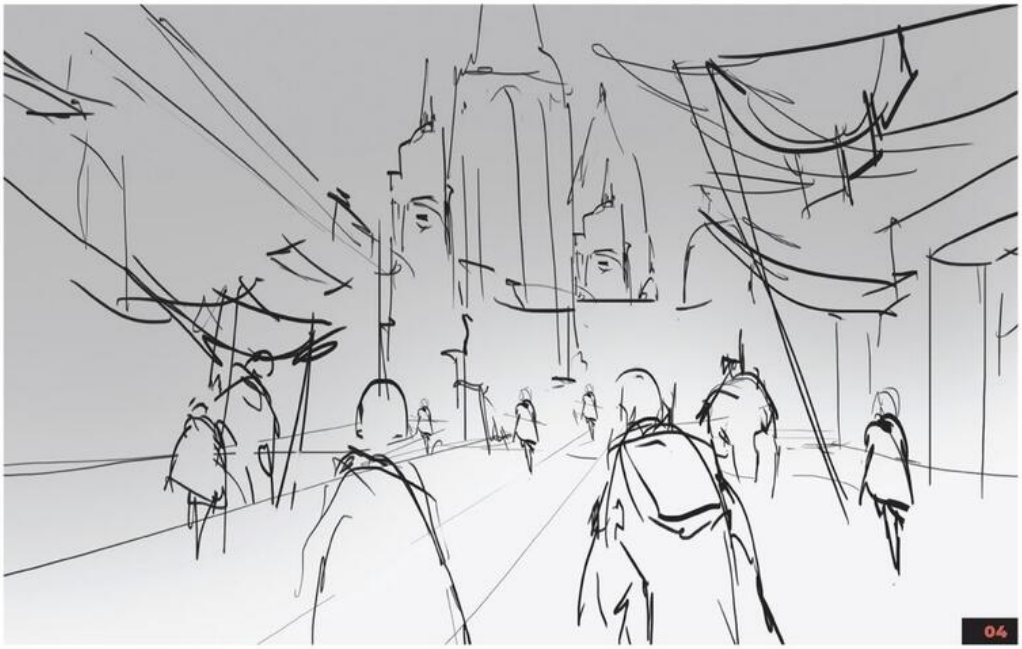
With the rule of thirds, the focal points should land approximately on the main four quadrants.



If you split the quadrants up into quarters, you can see how the other focal points sit in areas marked with a yellow X.



The two points on the right side of the quadrant will almost always feature the main focal points.



04 Whether loose or tight, a line drawing should indicate which elements you want to place in the scene – it's also a great way to establish a story and composition.

04 INITIAL SKETCH

I begin a loose sketch to explore how I want to draw out the scene and tell the story. For more complex scenes, a line drawing can act as a good road map to follow. If the scene is less complex, however, I often skip the sketching stage and jump straight into the painting. It can be useful to plan out the composition in the line-sketch stage, as this allows you to explore your initial thoughts and continue adding other elements as you progress further into the composition. Here I draw lines, such as the tarp on the right, to guide the eye into the main structure in the middle. I also use the rules of perspective to point the direction at the right side of the canvas, landing on the right third. Inspired by my references, the scene will take place in a fictional world that is similar to an Indian or Tibetan market plaza. I want the temple spires, also known as mandirs, in the background to capture the viewer's attention, as these are visually interesting and have an intriguing silhouette.

CROPPING AND FRAMING

Cropping the canvas allows you to increase or decrease the spacing between the edges of the scene and any objects that come into contact with those edges. If the object comes too close to the border, crop the image further out to create adequate breathing room for the subject matter. Alternatively, if the object is too far out from the border, you can bring the border back in to frame it with just enough space.



05 Establishing strong silhouette shapes indicates clear forms, which are needed to distinguish one element from another, allowing a clearer story to unfold.

05 SHAPE BLOCK-IN

I begin to establish the main shapes of the various buildings in the scene, using a midtone color to indicate the forms. I usually leave the highlights until the end, once I know the direction of the light, which is important for driving the narrative of the composition. I first block in the large shapes, avoiding getting caught up in the smaller details. Blocking in these initial shapes is a useful way to see where shapes are in relation to one another. I adjust accordingly if I see any tangents, which is when two objects touch each other at an edge, either vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. Tangents can make or break the composition, as they remove breathing room between objects. If one element is too close to another, simply move it slightly. I take care to establish adequate values before moving on to later steps such as color. The blocked-in shapes will allow me to see the main compositional objects in the scene.

06 ESTABLISHING TIME & PLACE

I render and paint the side of the building on the left, loosely basing it on the reference imagery. I maintain the directional flow of the building from the sketch phase, using the perspective lines to aim it at the focal point in the center, as this is where I want the viewer to look first. Loosely rendering this side building can help to establish the setting. I make sure to include Indian and Tibetan architecture to establish the culture and time period of the market plaza. While this side building wall is not important in terms of focal interest, it does aid in the creation of the composition. In terms of fidelity, I am aiming for a middle ground. I make use of implied detail – detail that is not heavily rendered – and the forms are still described loosely.

07 BACKGROUND FORMS

Next, I start to think about adding shapes to form the buildings in the background. I consider the effect the size difference of these structures could have on the overall composition and narrative. The buildings should vary in size throughout the image. If the shapes are too similar, especially in the focal area, it will create a kind of tangent. Shapes should decrease in value the further away they are. This will ensure they are not the main focus compared to the middle and foreground objects. Background elements should avoid detail clashes with the main elements. In terms of storytelling, I decide to include an archway next to the front mandir. Perhaps this archway could lead to the main entrance of the palace.



06 Blocking in a small amount of detail helps to establish the time period and culture of the scene.



07 Considering which elements to place in the background can add more story to the image and will avoid empty spaces.



08 Introducing a cultural focal point can help to establish the historical context and time period of the scene.



09 Refining and adding to the focal point can progress the story of the structure and overall scene.



10 Shadows help distinguish between highlighted and non-highlighted areas – shadow areas allow you to silhouette objects against the light to emphasize their shape.

08 MANDIR

I now consider adding a few more tertiary details to further describe the story elements of the environment. Looking at my references, I decide to include a segment of Indian architecture. This allows me to set the stage for the set dressing and introduce the cultural aspect. I want the audience to be able to tell that this is a key focal point in the image and for it to be one of the first things they look at. Inspired by my references, I paint a rough shape for the mandir, before tweaking it to create my own version that will fit with the scene. The adorned lines that surround the triangular-shaped window add complexity and visual interest to the otherwise blank front. The triangular-dominant lines contrast with the squarer shapes that surround it, signifying that the mandir is an important building.

09 DEVELOPING THE MANDIR

Always thinking of the narrative, I add additional structures to either side of the mandir. Perhaps these duplicate pieces could be royal living quarters, or maybe they are simply facades. Perhaps this is a much grander type of mandir to which pilgrims come to pay their respects. These kinds of small details add more support to the focal point. The mandir now feels more imposing, with all four points of the structure pointing upward, while possessing a triangular stance. Triangular objects add more dynamism to the scene due to the diagonal angles. Overall, the structure has an air of grandeur, as if a person of power resides there. Going forward, remember that you can recycle and reuse architectural pieces in various different ways to create complex or simple shapes that add to the composition.

10 DYNAMIC SHADOWS

Shadows are important because, along with light, they help to create strong focal contrast. Without dynamic shadows, there will not be enough value information to combat the strong light source, and I wouldn't be able to create negative space or have enough value range to push back the less important, lower-value details. Light cannot exist without the dark. Shadows can also help to create a sense of mystery and intrigue to the narrative of a painting.

A large portion of the shadow in this scene sits in the foreground and middle ground, taking up a third of the image. It almost creates a looming sense of uncertainty, or even calm. In the next step I will introduce stronger light shapes. I will also use this large shadow area to frame the silhouettes of the foreground elements in later steps.

VALUE & COMPOSITION

Value and composition are crucial for creating any masterpiece. They are two of the basic pillars needed to craft an image's foundation. Without a strong value structure, a painting is at risk of feeling flat, with no dimensionality. If a painting lacks a distinct range of values, you will not be able to tell which areas need light and which areas need dark. Instead, everything will lie within a midtone value range, causing the viewer to see everything within a similar tone. Variety helps to push the dynamism in a painting so that it grabs the audience's attention, directs them where to look, and tells them where the focal point is.

A painting can succeed through value alone. Color, in my opinion, is always secondary. Value's power lies in its ability to convey emotion and story through the use of light and shadow. If you have ever seen noir cinematography, you will have noticed that while many of the frames are in black and white, they are still able to successfully capture the mystery and drama thanks to the skillful use of light and shadow.

It's the same with painting. If a painting lacks a strong composition, the entire framing falls apart. A painting can have the most lackluster brushwork and color palette, but if the composition is powerful, the rest does not matter quite as much. This is because the composition is still able to guide the viewer's eye to the main points of interest. Scale, angles, and perspective all contribute to the painting's narrative. Composition is essentially a roadmap for the viewer, showing them the path to take around the image and what details to observe along the way.



Observe the overlap between the light and dark shapes – this clear distinction between the elements enables you to better see the form and silhouette.



Notice how the people are walking in the same direction, to the archway, causing the eye to look there also.



The interaction between the main character and secondary character provides a compositional bridge with the main mandir, forming a triangular formation.



11 Lighting tells the story through emotion and mood – without it, most images would either be lost in only darkness or within midtone values.

11 LIGHT SOURCE

This next stage involves beginning to refine the light source further. When it comes to lighting, I think of everything in shapes. Just like designing concepts, shape language is important in lighting too. Sometimes there will be areas with a large pool of light, while other times there will be small areas of concentrated light to highlight points of interest. I want this slit of light that cuts through the shadows to set the stage for the foreground silhouettes.

Without strong light, it can be difficult to establish the mood and atmosphere in a painting. It's key to evoking emotion within a painting's narrative, as contrast and defined areas help the viewer to know what to focus on. The painting's current mood and atmosphere evokes calm and relaxation after a long day. A strong indicative light can also direct the eye to prominent areas in the composition. A simple yet distinct light source can contribute much more to a painting's story and composition, removing the need for a lot of unnecessary rendering.



12 Deciding on a definite direction for the light source will set the stage for highlighting the areas of interest I want the audience to look at.



13 Using a few diagonal lines, the fundamentals of perspective, and simple rendering to illustrate the ground plane.



14 Detailing the initial grayscale sketch stage is important to ensure the values make sense.

12 CHOOSING LIGHT DIRECTION

It can be difficult to decide on the direction of a light source in a scene. Light can hit many different surfaces at once, so it can be challenging to determine where it falls into place. The direction of light, or a change in lighting, can drastically affect the mood of a painting and its narrative. For example, if the light source is high in the sky, it may create a bright and cheery mood. If the light source sits lower on the horizon, however, it could create a calm or eerie mood. I typically choose a light source that shines from either the left or the right, as this allows for large areas of shadow. The main thing I want to achieve through the lighting is how to frame the contrast. It's possible to bend the rules a little in order to make the lighting feel believable, even if it's not always accurate to how it would appear in real life. Experimenting with light in an imaginative way can make the composition much more interesting.

13 GROUND PLANE

Notice how the ground plane does not currently have much detail. It's possible to describe a satisfactory ground plane without the use of highly detailed rendering. Not everything in the painting has to be thoroughly thought out. In fact, some of the best paintings possess areas that aren't finished and are left for the audience to interpret.

I want to use the ground plane as a compositional element. The diagonal guidelines draw the eyes to the vanishing point I established earlier on with the perspective grid. It also guides the viewer's eye to the focal point: the mandir. I often leave empty areas to create places of rest for the viewer's eye to pause.

14 FINAL GRAYSCALE DETAILS

This is the stage to add any remaining elements to the composition before the introduction of color. I paint in two small monuments at the front and a concrete archway to the side of the mandir to signify the entrance to the main palace. The opening of the archway will direct the viewer's eye to this focal area. The two ornate monuments will also guide the eye to a smaller doorway entrance. As seen here, composition allows you to break the rules a little when it comes to object placement. Small details can sometimes add to the main focal point that has already been established. I want the viewer to enjoy spotting these little details that wouldn't be obvious if the painting was viewed as a tiny thumbnail. Surprising your viewer with interesting compositional elements will encourage them to look at the painting for longer in the hope of finding more.



15 Introducing color into the scene adds a new level of mood and tonality that is not always present in grayscale.

15 APPLYING COLOR

The next step is to introduce color to add more tonality to the painting. You can use color from your imagination, from the photo references, or even from other forms of media such as movies or video games. The possibilities are endless. Colors will drive the emotion in narrative even further. For example, if I were to use dark reds, the narrative could grow more intense and aggressive. If I introduce blues, the atmosphere may become peaceful and serene. After surveying my options, I decide to use a more natural color palette along with some more exaggerated hues. The oranges and blues create a feeling of tranquility, as well as a touch of mystery. I imagine the scene is taking place in the late afternoon, with the warm rays of the golden hour beginning to shine across the market plaza. I will progress the storytelling even further in later steps through the addition of characters and environment props.

16 ADJUSTING VALUE & COLOR

This step will adjust some of the colors to make them slightly smoother in tone. The first pass of the color application had more contrast, but I am now starting to push the warm sunlight to slightly alter the mood of the scene. The mandir now appears more accentuated, making it more of a focal point in the composition as the warm afternoon sunlight hits the window area. Next, I lighten the atmosphere in the background a little, as this helps to push the values back, which pushes the middle ground and foreground forward as a result. Elements that are closer to the audience should be darker in value, while elements that are further away should be lighter in value. Most of the silhouette shapes still read well, even after slightly adjusting the values as a whole.

17 COLOR & VALUE

Colors cannot exist without a strong value structure. I began the image in grayscale and it's evident how little the color effect has had on the value structure. This is because the image has a balance of the brightest highlights and the darkest darks. Without this element, the contrast would not be stark enough to enable the colors to sit nicely on top of the grayscale values. Color and value need to work together to create a visually appealing composition and narrative. How you control lighting and mood will have a huge influence on the depiction of mood and emotion in the narrative.

The structure of your value painting can also make or break an image. If there's no introduction of strong light in the value stage, this will produce a rather dull, non-dynamic composition. Never use the blackest or whitest values, yet don't be afraid to progress past the midtones into a brighter value. Be subtle with highlights and don't go overboard.

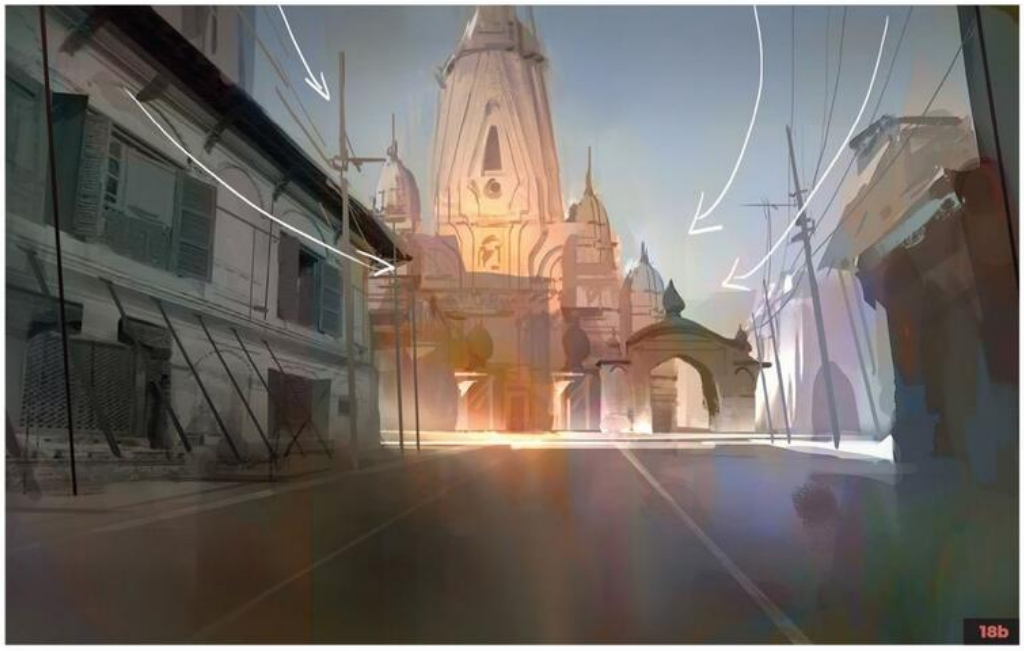


16 Slight adjustments to the color palette to balance certain areas.

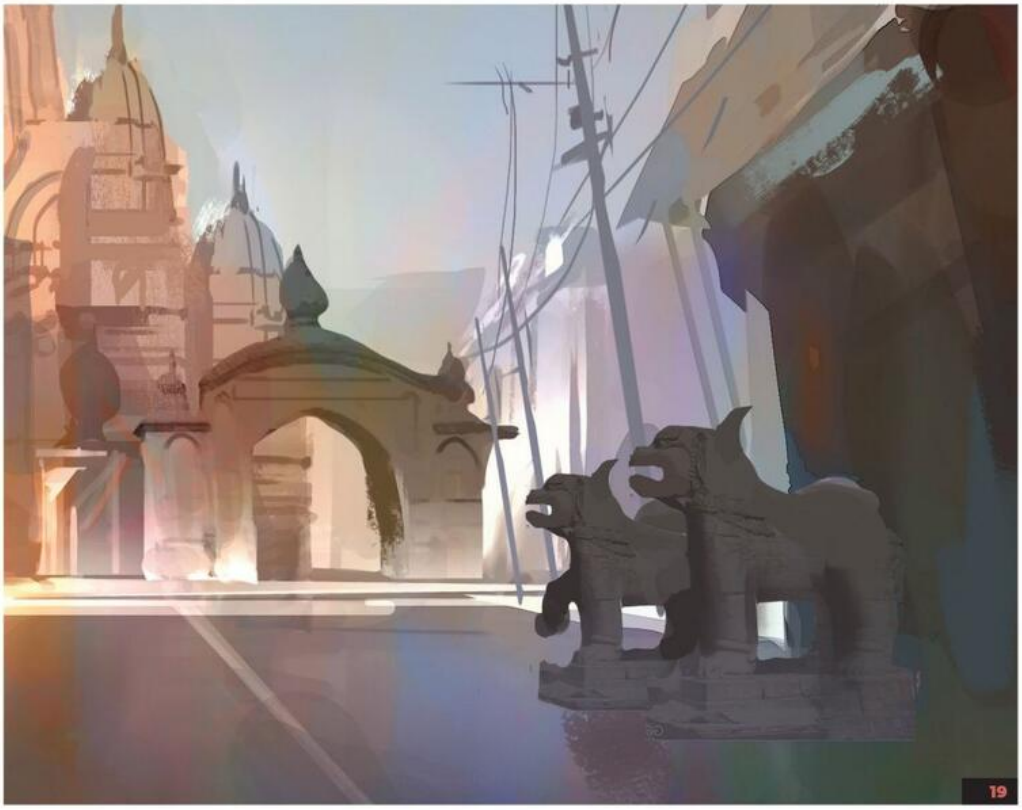


17 The strong grayscale foundation makes it easy to apply color on top of the values.





18a & 18b Using the lampposts to subtly direct the viewer toward the main focal point.



19 Incorporating cultural elements, such as these lion statues, can help to locate the audience in the setting.

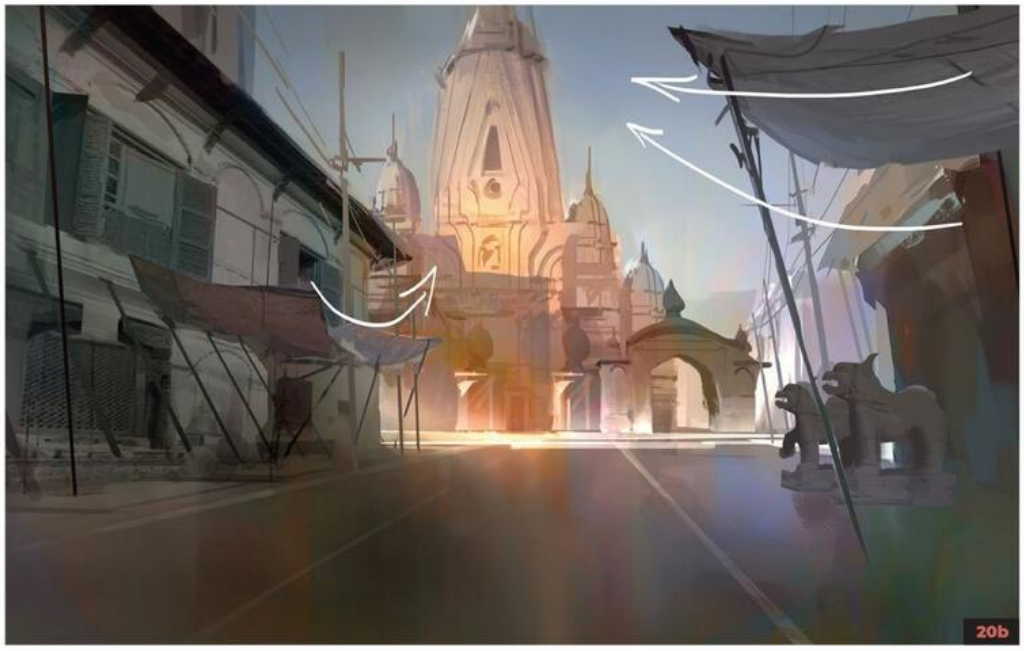
18 LAMPPOSTS

Next I want to add in an element that will lead the viewer's eye toward the focal point. I paint in these lampposts using simple line shapes. As with the ground plane, I don't fully render these objects, yet it's still obvious what they are and they blend in well with the scene. At this stage, most elements are still relatively silhouette-based in terms of detailing. The wires that connect the posts help direct the eye toward the central area of the image, landing on the right third. There are many different elements that can be used to help guide the viewer to where you want them to look, such as adding elements that point in that direction. Rather than painting them so they align perfectly vertically, the posts have a slight slant to add a little dynamic flow to the scene. The slant contrasts well against the vertical elements in the scene. Don't be afraid to exaggerate certain elements – this can make the scene more dramatic.

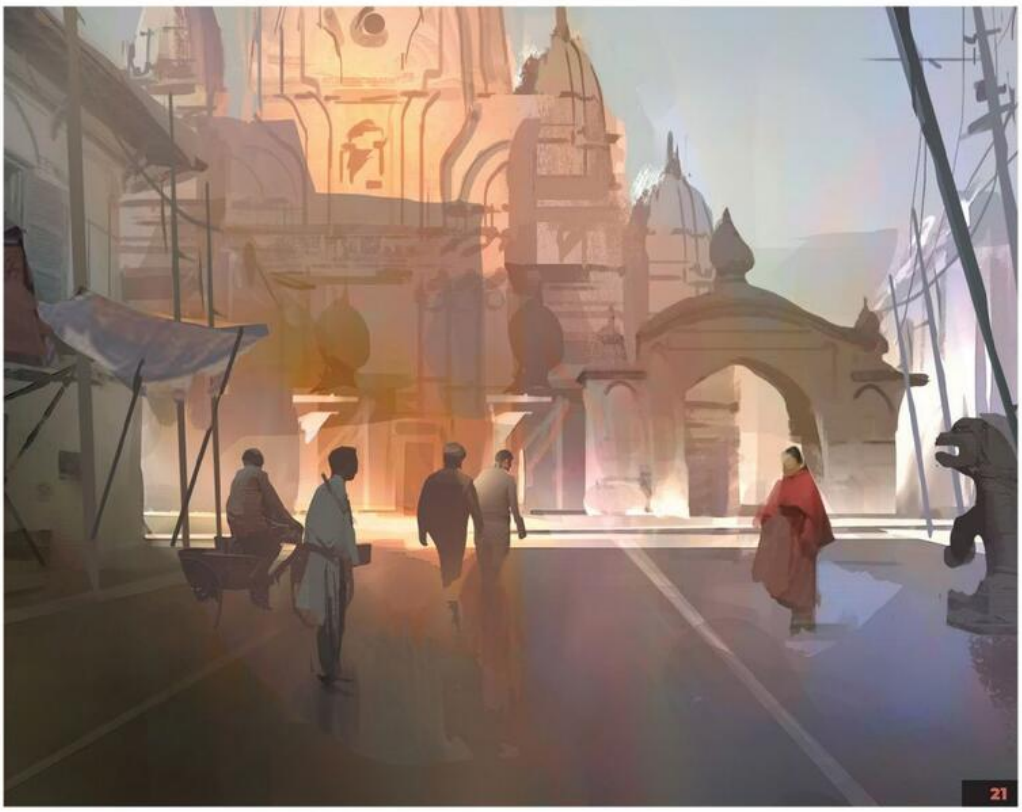
19 LION STATUES

Wanting to incorporate an extra architectural set piece for the viewer to notice, I roughly paint in two ancient lion statues. Though these are loosely based on similar statues in my reference materials, I alter them with my own design elements, such as horns and open mouths. Even though they are small, such set pieces can add visual interest as well as a cultural aspect. As this is a Tibetan-Indian-style market plaza, it's important to incorporate the history of the region to further the narrative of the painting. Perhaps the villagers brought the ancient lion statues from nearby countries, or carved them by hand. Maybe they were placed there to ward off evil spirits. Whatever the story, the viewer will identify these statues as special. If you are designing a painting set in a certain culture or time period, including ancient set pieces can enhance the vibe and believability of the scene.





20a & 20b Including more tertiary elements in places where the image feels empty helps to fill in important story details.



21 Adding characters to an empty scene to bring it to life, providing narrative and movement.

20 PLACING THE TARPS

The scene is now beginning to take shape. From this point forward, it is mostly about set-dressing the market plaza. I paint in a few more elements, such as the tarps on each side of the scene. As with the lampposts, the tarps are also not overly rendered to ensure they don't feel too stiff. The tarps can also be used to direct the viewer's eye toward the center of the canvas. Both the left- and the right-side tarps point in the direction of the mandir.

In terms of narrative, perhaps these tarps are used to create shade on very hot days for those who work in the market. These types of tarps are common in both old and modern-day outdoor markets all over the world, including Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and even some parts of Europe. I slightly darken the tarps with cooler tones and add a slight purple hue to indicate the shadow area.

21 POPULATING THE SCENE

Now that some of the set-dressing is established, I begin to add people into the scene to breathe life into the space. This is one of the most important steps in narrative storytelling. Artists can become so caught up in detailing a beautiful environment that they leave it void of human activity. This can leave the environment feeling lifeless and almost alien. When approaching an environment, I always include at least two or more characters roaming around the scene to enhance the narrative. Here the people move in the direction of the archway. The center-left man closest to the viewer stands directly under the mandir's main window, creating a point of interest in the lower third of the canvas. Each person in the scene has their own story, inviting the viewer to wonder what they might be doing or where they might be going.



22 Checking the flip side of the image to look for tangents and warped perspective.

22 ADJUSTING WARPING

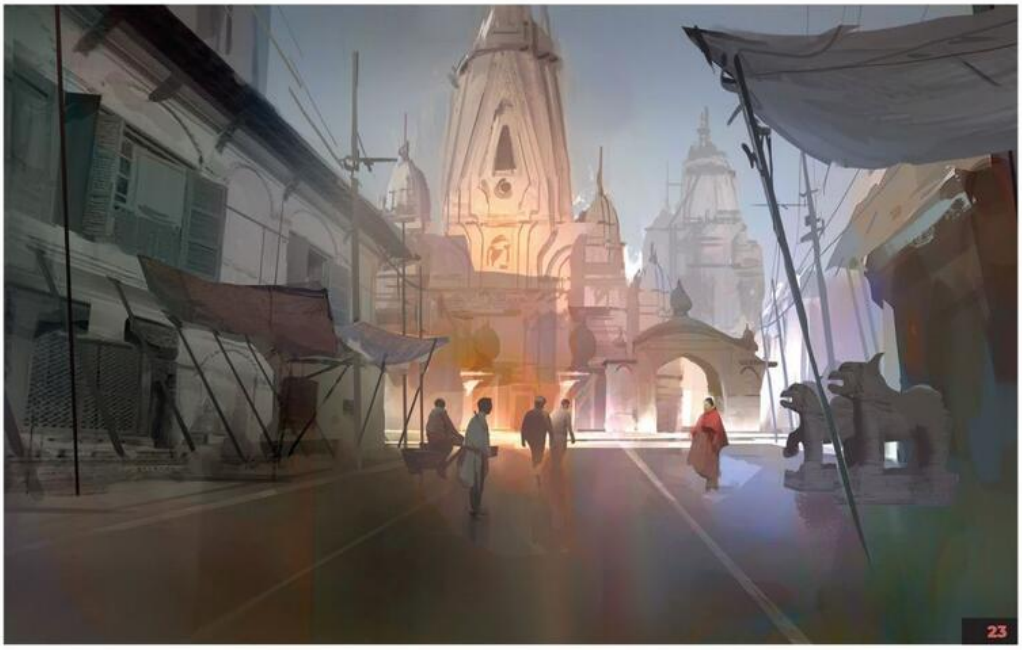
At this stage, I have spent ample time working on the grayscale foundation, introduction of color, set dressing, and now the characters. But what about the perspective of the image? Up until this point, the perspective can change dramatically if you don't check its mirror image. Simply flip the canvas horizontally to see if there is any skewing or warping of the perspective. I find that my canvas has been tilting while I was painting, so I use the Perspective tool to make the image more vertical and straight. Over time you will develop an instinctive feeling if the painting looks a little off.

23 FILLING BACKGROUND SPACE

The next step is to fill the empty space to the right of the mandir. Looking back at my references, I find another interesting architectural piece that will add to the narrative. Perhaps there is a royal courtyard on the other side of the plaza in which there are more ancient mandir structures that are used for prayer or other religious ceremonies. These will be much larger in scale than the market structures in the foreground, but because they are further back in space, I introduce a hazy atmosphere to decrease their detail. If they were highly detailed, they would steal focus away from the front focal mandir. If I feel unsure about how to decrease the detail of an object, I create a gradient from the bottom going upward, leaving slightly more detail at the top part.

24 MAIN CHARACTER

Now that a sizable portion of the environment is populated, I start to explore more of the story by introducing a character in the foreground. The main character is what holds the composition together. In much of my artwork, I often position the camera so the scene is viewed through a third-person perspective, meaning the viewer stands behind the character. This creates the sense that you are going on a journey with them. This character is a rugged tomb explorer, so when exploring clothing options, I paint in practical items such as a well-worn jacket, belts, and pockets, plus other accessories the character might wear for their adventure. He needs to carry a backpack and several pouches to store food, extra clothes, and warm blankets, since he is a nomadic traveler. I use references to provide inspiration for these items, looking at old action figures and model figurines. Taking the time to research the type of clothing the character should wear will ensure these details fit well with the existing environment and narrative.



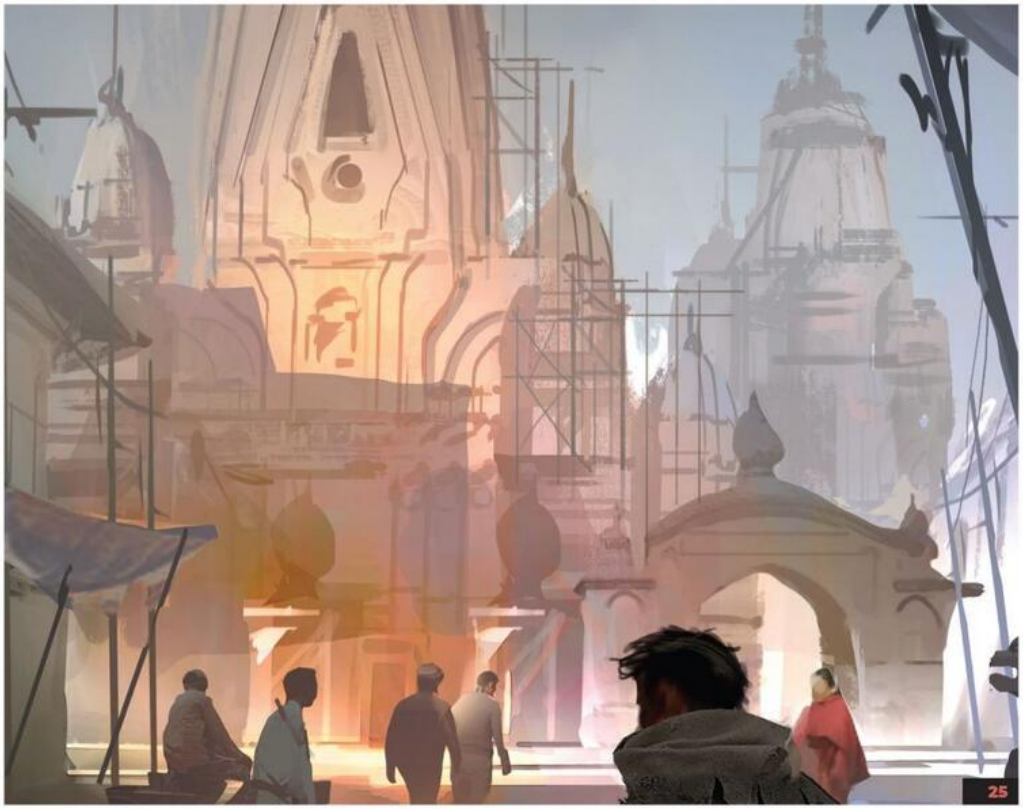
23 Planning out additional background elements creates more focal points in the scene, ensuring there is no empty space for the viewer to get lost in.



24 A main character gives the painting more meaning and impact – just like any fictional novel, every artwork needs a protagonist to lead the exposition.

STORYTELLING VS. DESIGN

Humans have connected with stories for centuries. A powerful narrative should always come before design. Even if a painting has the coolest design, it risks feeling uninspiring if it lacks a good narrative. Depicting a story that resonates with the audience makes the painting much more likely to be remembered.



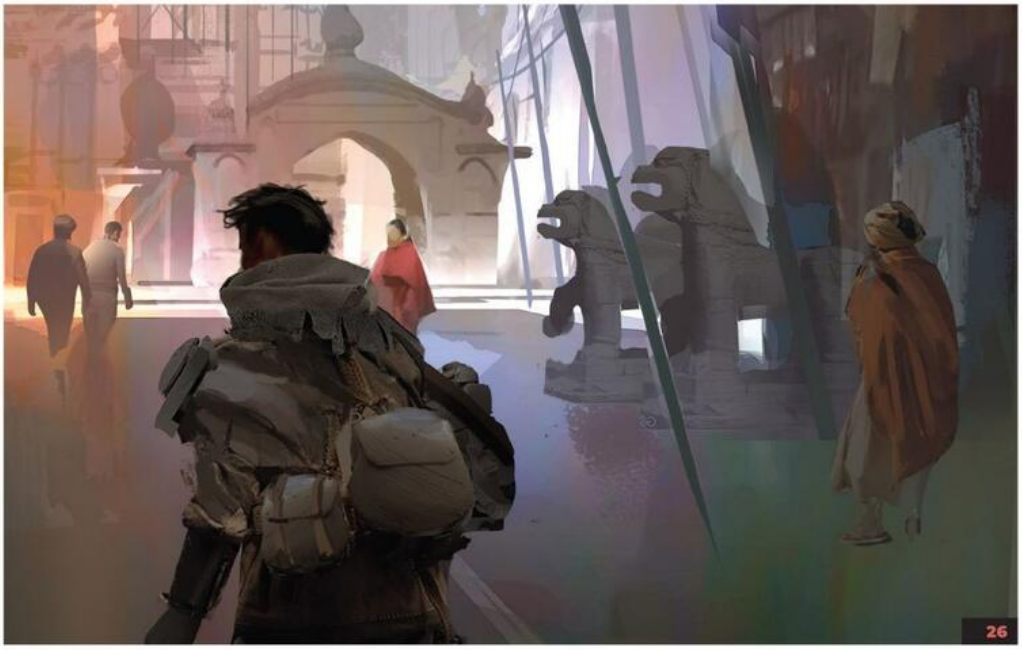
25 Adding extra storytelling elements for the viewer to notice – tiny details can add another layer of interest.

25 SCAFFOLDING

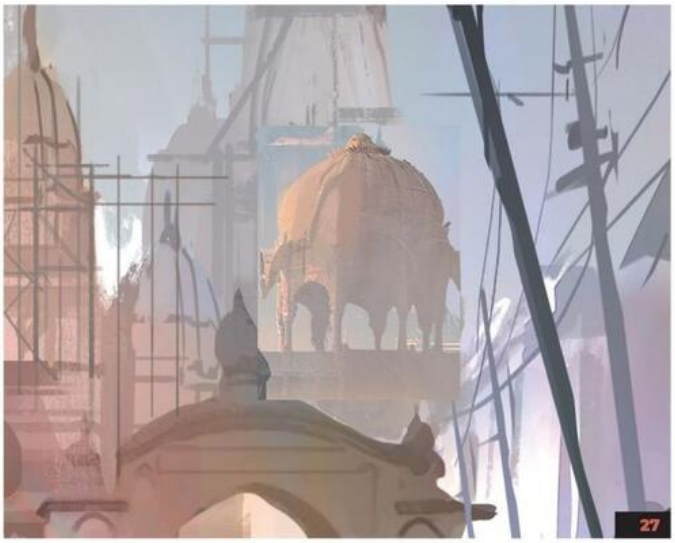
Taking a step back to view the painting as a whole allows me to notice any gaps. As most of the large and medium details have now been established, I can start to think about introducing smaller details. Such finer features can add a lot to a painting. Returning to the main focal point, the large central mandir, I paint some scaffolding on the side using a few vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines, keeping the rendering simple. Considering the narrative, the mandir could still be under construction, or maybe the side of it is chipping away and needs some more reinforcement. In another scenario, perhaps the workers abandoned the scaffolding altogether and never returned to finish the job. There are countless possibilities for where the narrative could take you. Compositionally, since that area is now more detailed, it draws the eye to that part of the painting. The more detail there is, the more prominent an object will be.

26 MARKET VENDOR

The area on the right feels a little empty, so I paint in a market vendor selling his wares. As this world is subtly infused with science fiction, the market vendor is just as likely to be peddling robotic parts as he is oriental antiques. He could be selling ornate carpets and rugs, or mechanical items to fix vehicles or mechanized suits. In addition to the character, I paint in a few pieces of drapery hanging down from the roofing. Standing in front of his shop, perhaps he is low on customers and is trying to call passersby over to purchase his merchandise. Considering how posture and body language can be used to tell a story, I give him a somber stance to show his disappointment at his empty shop. This section of the painting provides some background noise, while also contributing to the narrative of the overall scene. The viewer's focus should still be drawn to the center of the image, and this minor character does not distract from this.



26 The addition of the market vendor on the right prevents this area from feeling empty and adds to the market plaza narrative.



27 Adjusting smaller set details is similar to playing with building blocks – keep building the scene until it is adequately fleshed out.

27 PUSHING FURTHER DETAILS

I decide to push the detail to the right of the scaffolding area by adding an Indian-style cenotaph. A cenotaph is a monument where a person, or people, are buried, whether someone of importance or those who lost their life in a war. Sitting in front of the distant mandir, this cenotaph could be where local nobles or maharaja are buried. The cenotaph's small arches and ornate shape language are visually interesting, and its majestic silhouette complements the surrounding architectural structures. It's one of the few structures in the scene that possesses a rounded dome roof, contrasting nicely against the mandirs' pointier and more linear shapes. Sitting in the right third of the canvas, it acts as a smaller focal point.



28 It's beneficial to check the values in the middle of the painting process to see which areas blend into one another and need an atmospheric push.

28 FIRST VALUE CHECK

This point in the painting is an ideal time to do a value check. Checking the values can help you to identify which areas are blending into each other and which are not. It can also help to check the contrast of the composition so far. I place a black layer on top of all my pre-existing layers and switch it to a color blending mode. I can see that the foreground, middle ground, and background each have their own distinct separation of value. The color application has not overly affected the foundation of initial values that I laid down in the early stages. If I spot an area of similar value, it's important to make sure that one of the values overlaps the other. Think of it as light on top of dark, or dark on top of light. If an area needs more separation, then I lighten the layer behind with a little atmosphere. I may conduct another value check at a later stage.

29 SECOND CHARACTER

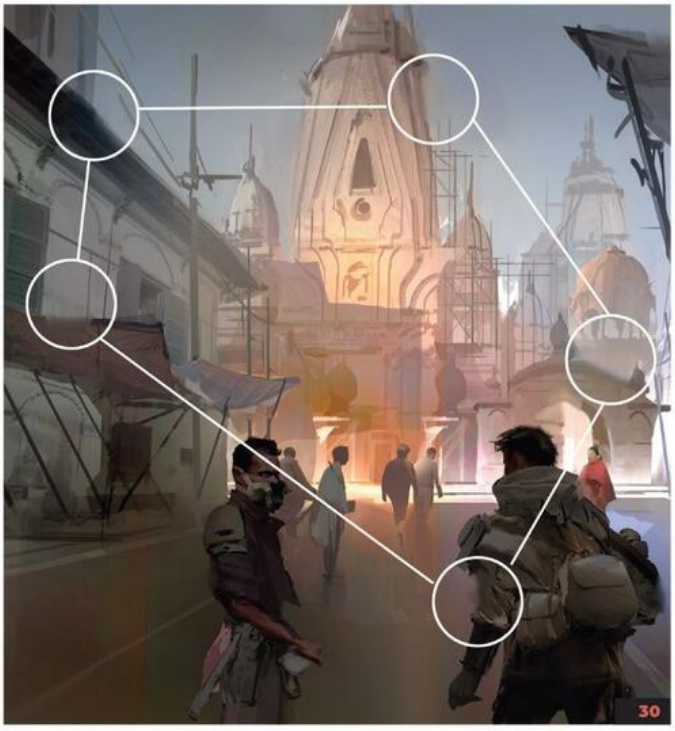
Next, I introduce a secondary character into the scene for the main character to interact with. As the scene is set in a somewhat science-fiction world, the secondary character will wear a kind of armor plating to convey the sci-fi element. Perhaps he is one of the royal militias surveying the area, or maybe he is a kind of armed mercenary locating undercover contacts. I want his facial expression to appear rather neutral to illustrate that he's on an important assignment. He also needs to be at eye level and the same height as the main character, in accordance with the rules of perspective. Most of the time, in a perspective view like this, characters in the scene should be eye level to the horizon line to ensure they are on the same ground plane. If a character is above or below the horizon line, it will break the rules of perspective and the composition will feel unnatural.

30 LOST EDGES

Without the presence of soft, lost edges, paintings risk appearing a little stiff and unnatural. Tools such as a smudge brush or mixer brush allow you to blend edges around certain areas in a painting. While it may be tempting to make all the edges either hard or soft, it's good to have a balance of both. If a painting has too many hard edges, it can look rigid or artificial, as if it wasn't painted by an artist's hand. Too many soft edges, however, and the painting can lose form and silhouette design, though this is not always a bad thing if the painting is more abstract in style. As this scene needs some level of readability, I aim for a middle ground to ensure the painting is pleasing to the eye.



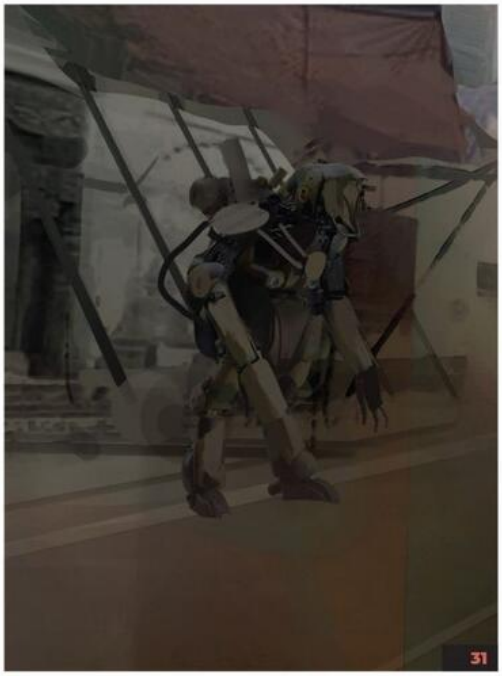
29 Including a second character adds another layer of storytelling – the main character has another person to interact with as he enters the scene.



30 Including a variety of lost and found edges will prove easier on the eye – it helps the viewer to pay attention to both more and lesser detailed areas.

BRUSH ECONOMY

Choosing which brushes to use is an important step in enabling you to create the intended look for your painting. How you use your selected brushes is equally important – consider how the motion of your hand and arm can be used to control the movement of the brushstroke and the effect this creates. Not using your brushes efficiently can result in a final image that looks dull or void of expression and narrative.



31 The mechanical bot store fills the previously empty space and adds further narrative to the left side of the scene.



32 Two characters inspect the robot, providing another layer of narrative to the painting for the viewer to wonder about.



33 The inclusion of prayer flags against the Indian architecture brings the Indian and Tibetan cultural influences together – while small, this set dressing can further the narrative.

31 MECHANICAL BOT

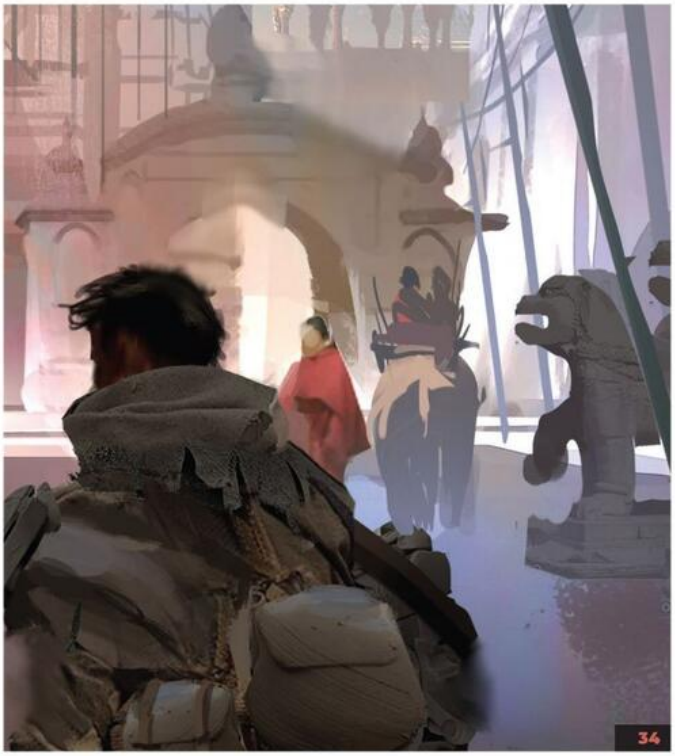
Another interesting element I wanted to include in this scene is the almost unnoticeable mechanical bot standing beneath the tarp on the left. This small yet significant detail informs the audience that this is a store where the mechanical bots are built and repaired. Perhaps they are used as farm hands, or to fetch supplies from the market for villagers. Here the main character, the tomb explorer, needs to find a vendor that sells mechanical wares. If planning to use non-human or robotic characters in a scene, one of the best ways to go about this is by building a digital 3D model or using toy figurines that you can make or buy yourself to figure out the bot's structure and anatomy.

32 SMALL NARRATIVE DETAIL

Though the mechanical bot was previously standing alone, I now want to paint in a bot vendor selling the bot to a customer. When adding characters, however small or minor, I typically take photos of family and friends for reference and then pose them in the scene. I decide the robot should have a tall stature, so I make sure the two people appear smaller when stood next to it to show its scale. This is a tiny detail that can add to the overall narrative. I want the viewer to be able to look at the scene and locate all the different story elements present. Perhaps the customer needs the bot for farm labor, or maybe to carry out repair work. It invites viewers to use their imagination as to what is going on, as well as to ask questions as to why that particular object or person is there, and what their role or task is in the scene.

33 PRAYER FLAGS

The area on the right-hand side could use more of a Tibetan influence. I decide to paint in Tibetan prayer flags, which work well alongside the Indian architecture. This set dressing solidifies the final few cultural details in the scene. In this fictional world, perhaps there is a different mountain range that is even higher than Mount Everest that intrepid travelers come to climb, making a quick stop at the market to count their blessings and stock up on supplies before they make the treacherous hike. Or maybe the flags are only for decorative purposes, strung up to add a touch of festivity to the plaza. In terms of composition, the prayer flags serve to lead the eye toward the main focal point of the central mandir.



34 The addition of the elephant fills the empty space between the lion statues and people walking through the plaza.

34 ELEPHANT

Next, I paint in an elephant on the right-hand side of the plaza, with people riding on top of it. As it's only a small detail, it doesn't need to be fully rendered, so I paint a rough silhouette and adjust the lighting accordingly to match the rest of the scene. Maybe these elephants are brought out for local festivities, or perhaps they carry villagers through the jungle and valleys on the outskirts of town. As they are quite common in Southeast Asia, I wanted to include them within this fictional world also. Incorporating these small, almost unnoticeable details for the viewer to notice creates little storytelling moments, inviting them to imagine where these characters are going. If I had not decided to include the elephant in this middle-ground area, the space would have been left feeling a little empty. Every detail works to build the narrative of the scene.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STORYTELLING

The great philosopher Plato said, "Those who tell the stories rule the world." Many people underestimate the power of narrative and storytelling, when in fact it's the foundation that every artwork is built on, considered even before composition. A beautiful scene can only go so far when the artist has not imbued it with a narrative that takes the reader on a journey through the image.

There are many different elements that can be used to tell or influence the narrative of a painting. Through the skillful use of composition, you can frame the image to lead the viewer's eye around the canvas. With the addition of characters, you can evoke empathy and emotion to connect with the viewer on a human level. And by using vibrant or subtle colors, you can describe the mood and atmosphere of the scene to influence how the audience feels about the painting and the scene it depicts. These fundamental techniques create the framework of a strong visual piece. A successful painting cannot exist without them.



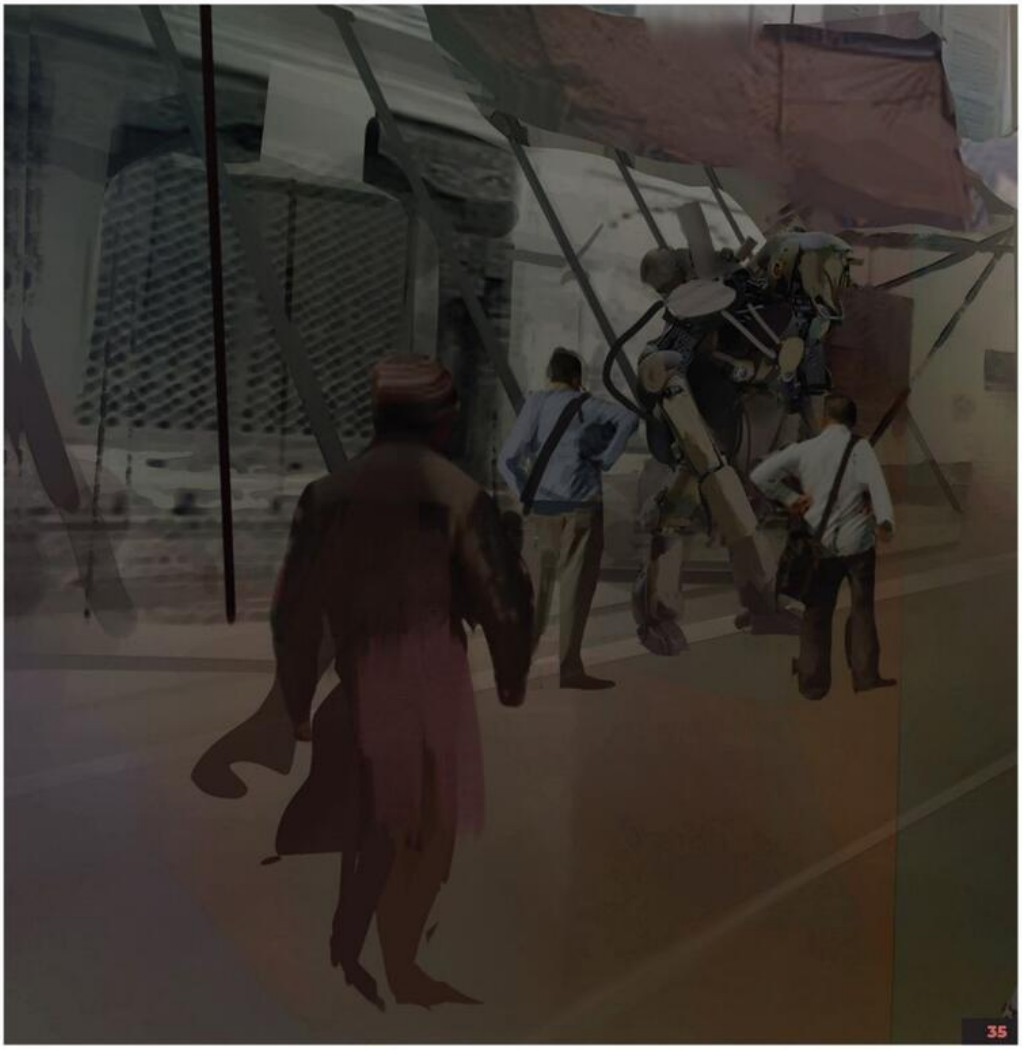
The use of lighting to tell the story – different shapes of light can determine how subtle or dramatic the scene is.



Here two main characters are used to set the tone for the narrative – they act as focal points and allow the viewer to imagine the story.



Filler information, such as background characters, can bring an environment to life even if they are standing still – they give extra support to the main characters.



35 Adding characters in empty areas can ignite the viewer's imagination and provide an element of interest for them to look at, if only for a short time.

35 FILLING GAPS

I decide to paint in an additional character on the left to fill the empty space. Though this character is not the most interesting of subject matters, simply adding an element to close up the gap ensures the viewer's eye does not get lost. When I notice a vacant area, I always take the opportunity to add a character or object. The viewer's eye will continuously move around the image, meaning a focal point or element of interest is needed in each area to guide the eye through the image. Too much empty space around the canvas does not stimulate the viewer and can even risk boring them. Creating a narrative for this character, perhaps he is a guard patrolling the area, on the lookout for mischief. Or maybe he is homeless, begging for money to allow him to purchase goods from the market vendors.



36 This small detail helps to bring the final set-dressing elements together, while also adding a little more vibrance to this market seller's store.

36 MORE PRAYER FLAGS

Next, I add a string of prayer flags to the tarp area on the right. This will help to balance the composition and enhance the sense of place. Like the majority of other shapes in the image, I keep the prayer flags fairly simple by painting a silhouette outline of the square flag shape and adding a flat color. I paint a few squares then warp them into perspective, creating a new string of flags that can be brought slightly closer to the camera. As they are closer to the camera, these right-side flags are slightly brighter and more colorful when compared to the duller tones of the flags on the left. While only a small detail, these extra details work together to make the painting feel more cohesive. The horizontal positioning of these flags also leads the eye toward the mandir, as well as adding an aesthetic touch to the stall on the right. Perhaps the travelers who visit his shop also receive a blessing before venturing out on their journeys.

GOLDEN RATIO

The golden ratio is an advanced compositional tool often used in paintings (see a more detailed explanation on page 16). Also applicable to mathematics, it can be employed to create a perfectly balanced composition. With its signature arches and spiral, artists can use the flow of the line to bring the painting's elements around in an almost full circle. Applying the golden ratio to this painting, the left side of the spiral starts with the character on the left-hand side of the frame, then makes its way to the top of the mandir, down to the tarp and vendor on the right-hand side, before landing on the main character in the right-third quadrant.

The spiral can also be flipped in various ways, such as left to right, right to left, up to down, or down to up. This allows you to explore the various different compositional choices the golden ratio creates. This technique is incredibly useful, especially for more dynamic compositions where there is a lot of movement, or where the perspective pulls the camera from front to back.

The golden ratio also allows an artist to see the different challenges they may face within the composition, such as tangents between objects, or where more detail is needed in a certain area compared to areas where there is substantially less noise. The technique is also helpful for highlighting areas in a painting where you could add more visually interesting shapes to the composition, whether those shapes emphasize the focal point or simply aid the flow of the image. Think of the golden ratio as a river that connects everything together in a spiral.



The standard golden ratio view starts on the left and ends on the main character.



Flipping the golden ratio vertically, the spiral starts in the upper left-hand corner before swooping downward and ending at the top-right focal point of the distant mandir.



Flipping the golden ratio horizontally, the spiral begins at the tarp on the right-hand side, then brings the eye up to the main mandir, before landing on the left-hand focal points.



37 Scanning the image for areas that lack detail and making sure everything looks final.



38 Flipping the canvas one last time to look for weak areas in the painting and fix any remaining proportional issues, such as warping, scale, or perspective issues.



39 Viewing the painting through a color-scale layer, before finalizing the image, to see if any areas lack the necessary contrast.

37 TWEAKING FINAL DETAILS

I am now approaching the final stages of the painting. I adjust some of the levels and values to enhance the lights and darks. I check the whole painting over to see if there are any inconsistencies that jar or stand out at first glance. I could choose to finetune the painting a little more, but decide against it, as the style of the image is relatively impressionistic, while also maintaining a somewhat realistic feel.

Next, I check the color hues to make sure they're not imbalanced. The painting has a visually pleasing balance of both warm and cool colors, working well with the overall mood and tone of the narrative, which is both mysterious and calm. The characters in the scene are nicely spaced out and don't seem cluttered or overcrowded. Had I included more people in the scene, the noise density would have gotten out of control. I want to make sure the environment is detailed enough to evoke a liveliness to the market plaza, but not so much that the composition feels claustrophobic.

38 CANVAS FLIP

I flip the image once more to check for any warping of the final details and note that, on the whole, everything looks as it should. The architectural structures and characters do not appear to be swaying or off-kilter. Instead, everything looks vertically sound on both sides of the canvas. It's worth noting that not everything will be one hundred percent perfect when flipping the canvas. It's normal to spot some areas in which the perspective appears a little skewed. As long as the important elements, such as buildings or characters, are not severely affected, there is no need to make changes.

39 FINAL VALUE CHECK

I carry out an additional check of the color scale to check the value of the overall image. Turning on a black layer with a color mode applied on top, overlayed on top of the other layers, allows me to view the image in black and white. There is a decent level of contrast throughout most of the elements, with enough light and dark information. This is important to note, as I didn't see a drastic shift in values throughout the color application process. This shows that my earlier value stage was strong enough to carry through the whole painting. Checking the values enables you to see if the different elements in the painting possess adequate contrast. If objects blend into one another, they can be separated using a subtle pass of atmosphere.

FINAL TOUCHES

Conducting final checks, I can see that the main focal point of the central mandir is successfully established in the middle ground. The application of color on top of the color scale affects the overall atmosphere of the scene and highlights the point of interest. The characters not only add narrative to the scene, but also effectively frame the composition. The different focal points guide the viewer through both the left and right sides of the canvas, utilizing the rule of thirds and golden ratio techniques.

I make sure certain areas possess a balance of soft and hard edges, and that detail is evenly distributed throughout the piece. Noticing an empty space in the sky, I paint in a flock of birds to add a little more life to the scene. A light touch of atmosphere glazes the image to push a few of the elements back in space.

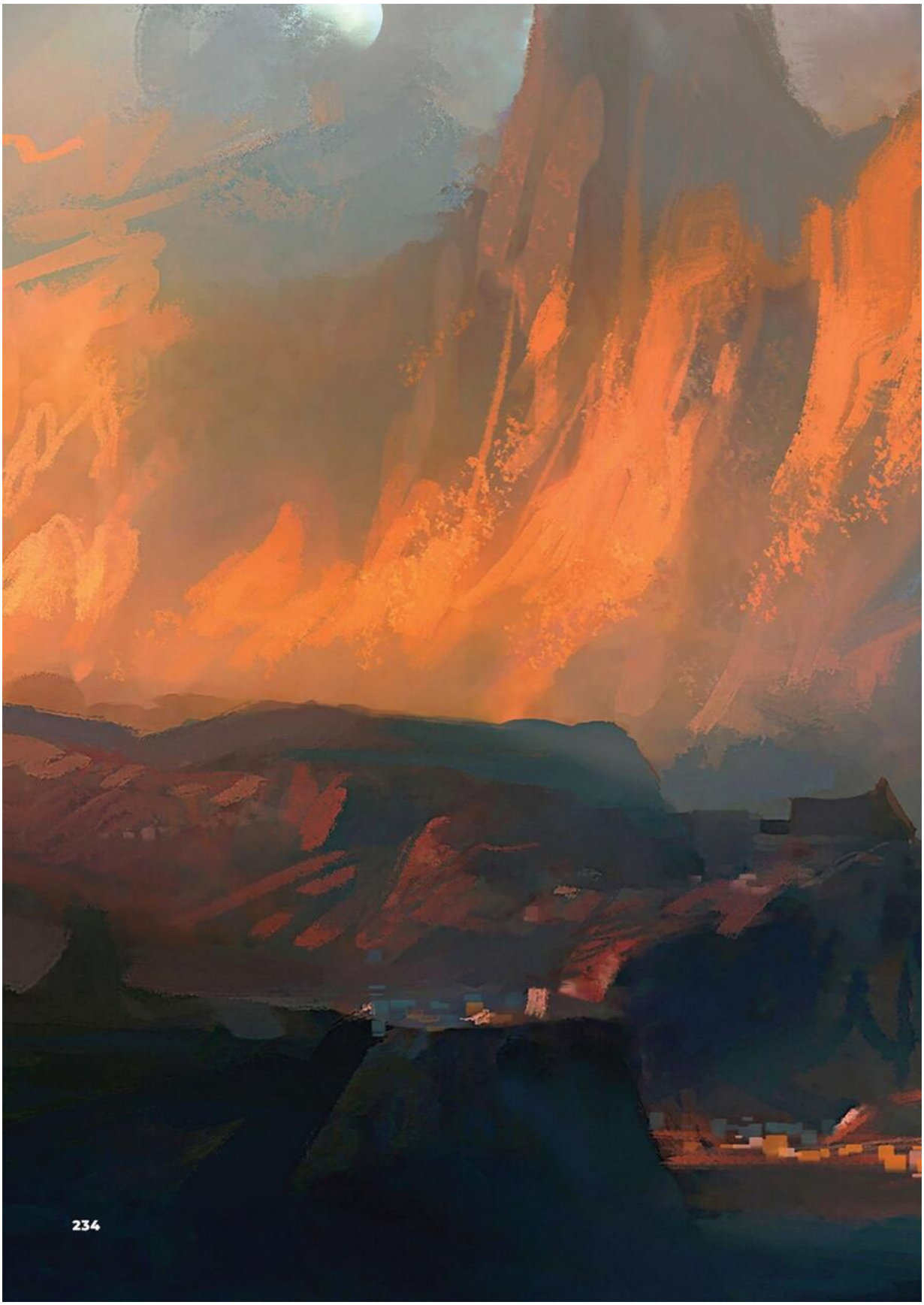
I have successfully created a vibrant image through the use of narrative and composition, while also employing the techniques of color, value, perspective, and character to enhance the feeling and emotion of this environment.

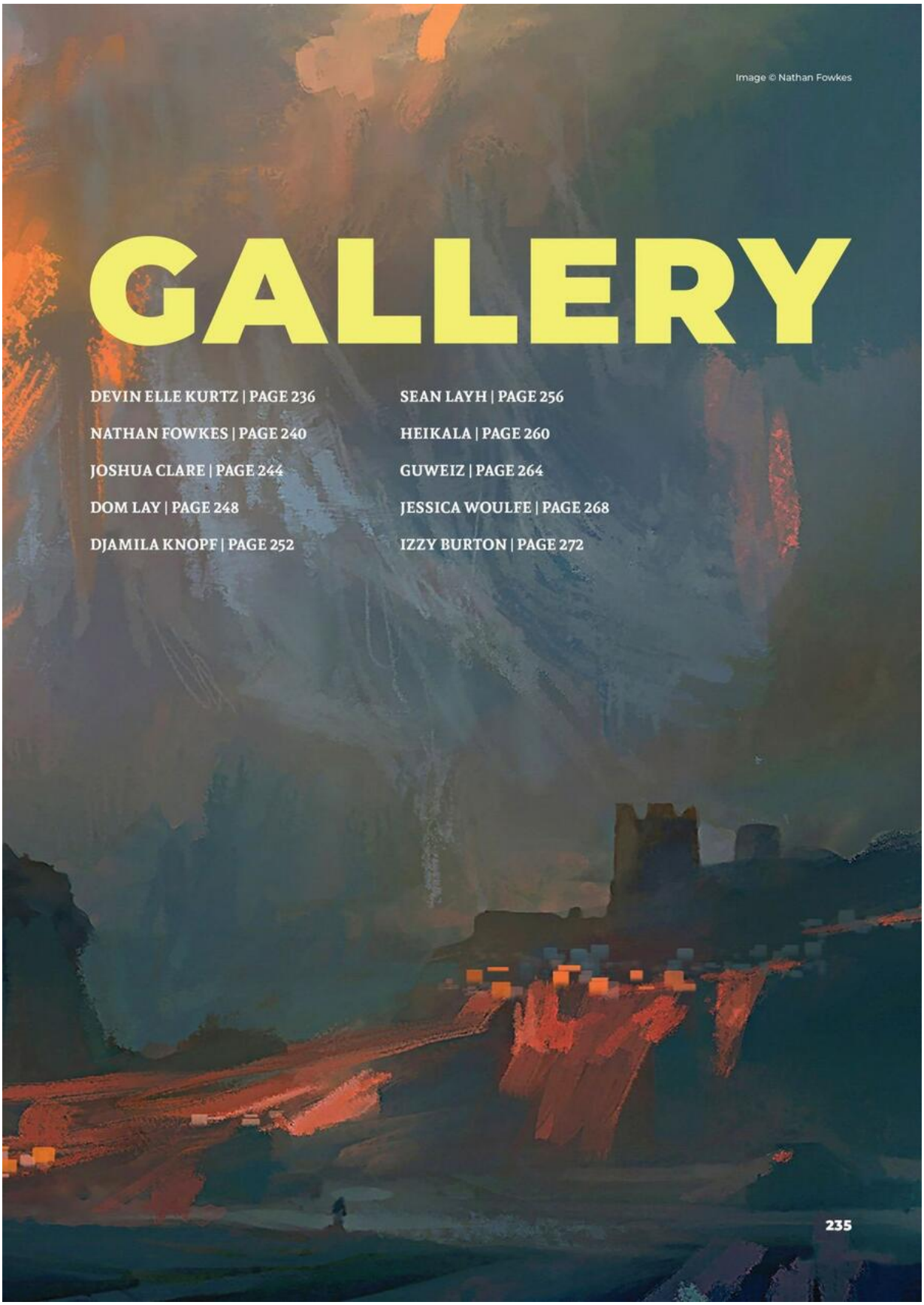


Final image © Dom Lay



Market Plaza. A final pass to check whether each element adds or takes away from the overall image.





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DEVIN ELLE KURTZ

As an illustrator and visual development artist, the majority of my work involves telling stories through carefully composed narrative illustrations. As I create paintings for video games, novels, movies, and independent projects, I use the tools of composition – such as contrast, compositional lines, and gazes – to craft story and narrative within my work. I have a background in TV animation, where everything we do is in service of the greater story. I've carried this same perspective with me into the world of illustration, as my primary love in life is storytelling. Stories connect us, reminding people to have compassion for one another. There's nothing more magical than expressing a story in an image that can be understood across language barriers and can reach people across the planet.



The Hallway



The Hallway

There's a sense of meandering motion through the image as the characters, mermaid, and sharks all move left, but are interrupted in their flow by the wavy lines created by the schools of fish. These wavy lines keep the motion feeling slow and dreamlike, rather than fast and forceful. The low placement of the floor and characters creates a feeling of majesty and wonder, as the fantastical environment envelops the majority of the scene.



The Lost Little Dragon

The dragon is established as the focal point due to the high level of overall value contrast and noisy high-contrast details around his face and upper body. His longing pose and the pouring rain elicit a feeling of pity as he sits alone and hungry. His gaze encourages the viewer to explore the contents of the bakery window, while the segmented window division at the top creates a soft barrier to prevent the eye drifting off, guiding it back down toward the middle of the image.



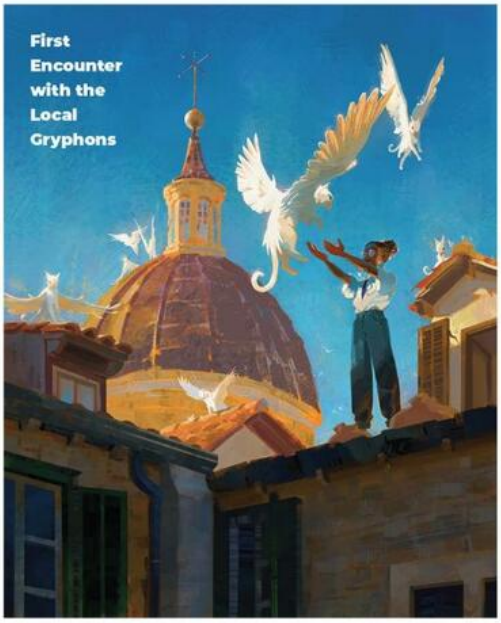
The Lost Little Dragon

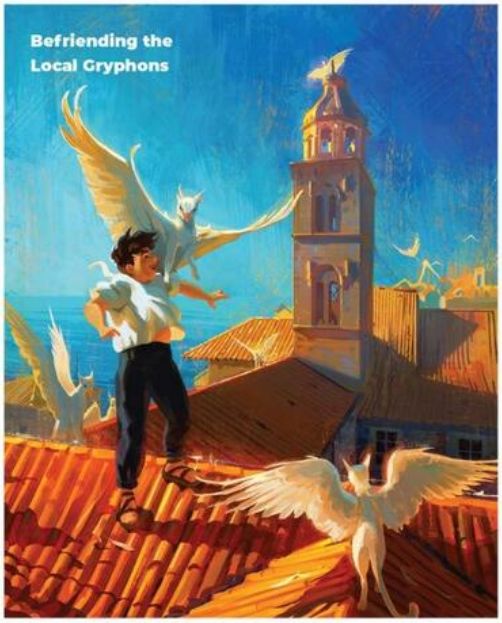
Images © Devin Elle Kurtz



Please Slow for Ducklings

Images © Devin Elle Kurtz







Please Slow for Ducklings

I aimed to bring magic to the mundane by combining everyday imagery with a special moment. Placing the camera behind the child encourages the viewer to step into her shoes and experience the wonder of this duckling encounter alongside her. The child's pink jacket and reflective dark brown hair create a powerful hue and value contrast to cement her as the focal point. Many elements lead back to her, such as the diagonal line of the stroller and the gazes of the background characters.

The curve of the street guides the audience from the duck puddle through each of the background characters, allowing the viewer to notice each of the characters' emotions and expressions. The long reflections of the car's headlights then send the viewer's gaze back to the puddle.



First Encounter with the Local Gryphons

The character gazes at the main cat-gryphon while it stares directly back, creating an emotional connection between the two characters. There's a tenderness that's elicited from the interaction, which gives the scene a soft, caring energy.

The character stands nestled in the gap between buildings, creating a clear silhouette and high level of contrast against the light blue sky. This allows the angled and curving rooftops of the various buildings to point directly to the focal point. The foreground is clearly solidified at the front of the image due to the dark and narrow value range. The middle ground retains a full range of value, from light to dark, offering the highest level of contrast and keeping the focus in that area of the painting.



Befriending the Local Gryphons

The focal point is established through the value contrast of the main character's white shirt against black pants and hair. This anchors the scene around the character's joy and exhilaration, aided by bright and airy colors and energy. The blowing hair and shirt, combined with the cat-gryphon's spread wings, creates a windy and exhilarating feeling. The character's expression of joy tells the viewer that this experience is exciting and new, creating a sense of adventure.

The repeated element of the cat-gryphons trailing off into the distance along the rooftops offers clarity on the depth and perspective of the environment. Repeating similar elements throughout an image also creates harmony and cohesion.

NATHAN FOWKES

My professional animation work always has a narrative and has been deeply influenced by my love of landscape sketching. When I come across a distinctive location I wish to capture, I always ask myself: what is the specific quality that makes me want to paint this particular spot? I then focus in on that idea, removing any distracting or unnecessary elements. This is how I learned to tell the story of the place, rather than simply reproducing details. This practice of only telling the story at hand, while editing away any distractions, has made me a stronger animation artist. The paintings in this gallery are either digitally painted from imagination, or are my interpretation of places I've visited and painted in traditional media.



Jade Lake



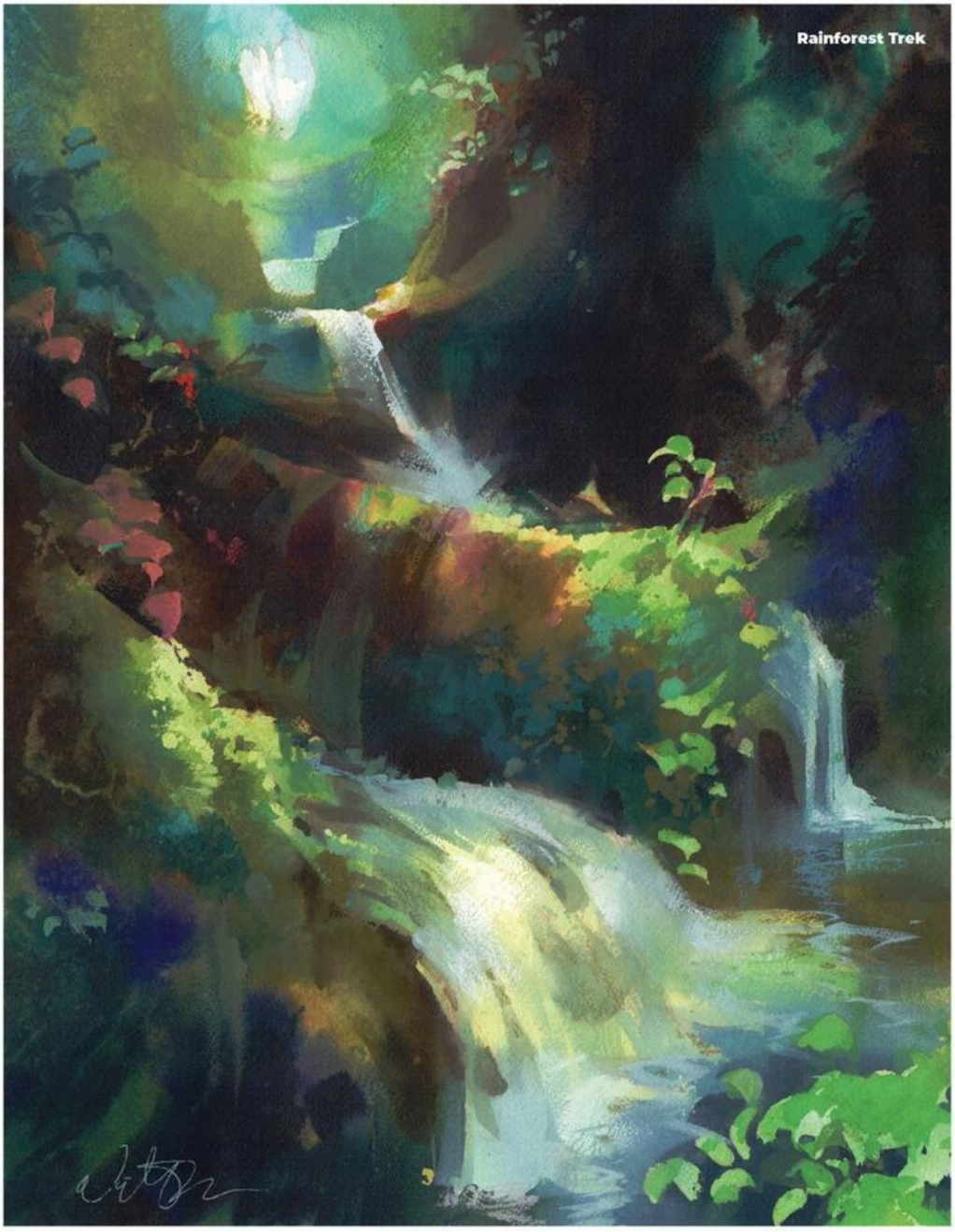
Jade Lake

In this mountain scene, the lake and sailboat are carefully framed by the surrounding rocks and mountains. I intentionally kept the rocks jagged and vertical to make the lake feel placid, calm, and cool in comparison. To avoid the central placement of the focal point appearing boring, I introduced other points of interest, such as the vertical rocks in the right middle ground. I covered these with colorful moss, birds, and their white guano on top, and let a ray of light hit the rock's crest, all the while framing them against a darker background.



Rainforest Trek

Leading the viewer's eye from spot to spot, this composition uses repeated patches of leaves to take the viewer on a rainforest trek. Viewers look at the leaves in the lower-right corner, then the illuminated patch of leaves on the middle left, then the cluster of similar leaves to the upper-middle right, then the illuminated leaves in the top middle. To create a feeling of rhythm, large curves stack one on top of another, leading the eye to the distant opening at the top of the image. The distant gap in the trees is much cooler than the illuminated foreground, which helps to create a sense of depth.



Images © Nathan Fowkes


St Alban's Gothic



Mountain Fantasyscape



St Alban's Gothic

Using watercolor to paint this church in Copenhagen, I chose a vertical composition to emphasize the uplifting quality of the building's spire. This framing also allowed me to carefully design layers of foreground and middle ground leading up to the building. Using a stacking technique, I painted a textural foreground bush framed by reflections in the river, against a hill catching a hint of orange light, in front of some dark shrubbery, leading into the building, with clouds layered through the sky.

I used texture, or lack of it, to help create the layered composition. The texture of the foreground bush is the most extreme, as I caked on paint and scratched into the paper to exaggerate the effect. The amount of texture gradually diminishes to a flatter effect at the church. This creates space and depth, and describes the quality of the place.



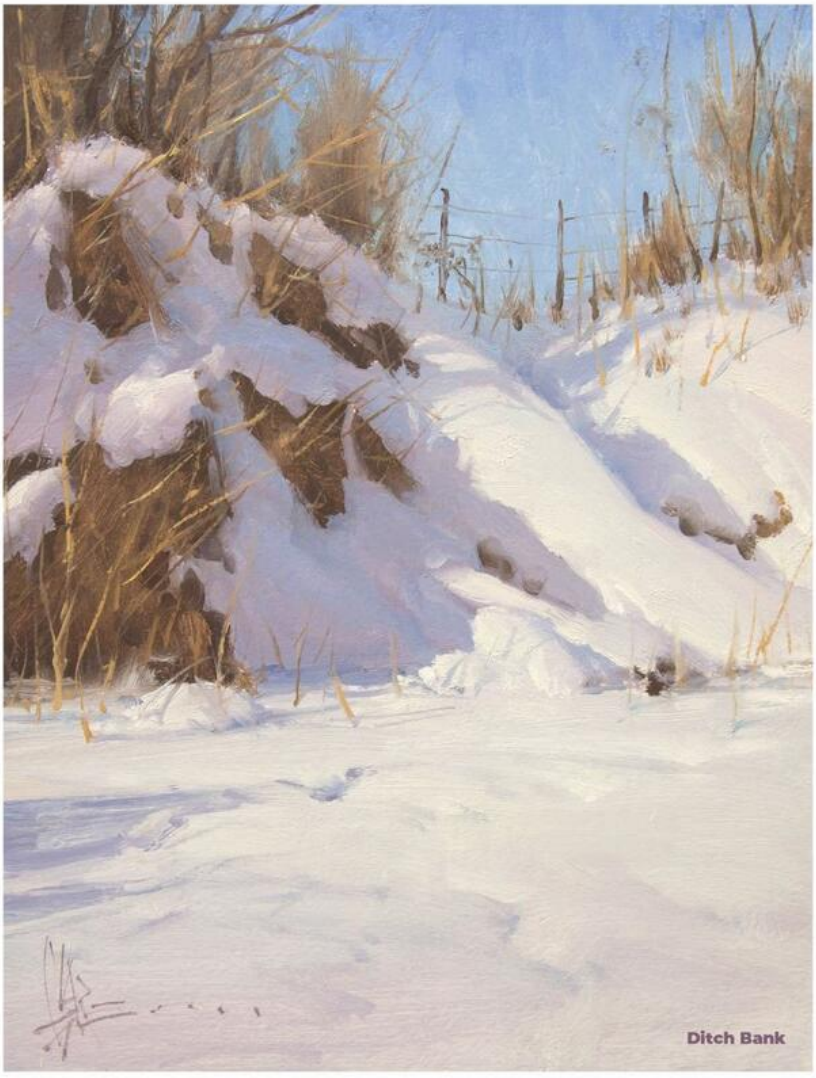
Mountain Fantasyscape

This digitally painted fantasyscape depicts an epic scale, achieved through contrasting the tiny buildings against the grandeur of the mountains behind them. To avoid an overly busy painting, I positioned more visually active areas alongside calmer areas. For instance, the simple foreground is set alongside the active shaft of light falling across the city and fortresses, followed by a restful area at the base of the mountains, then an active area of light, and so on. Rhythm is created by the repetition of light sweeping across the landscape in related curves.

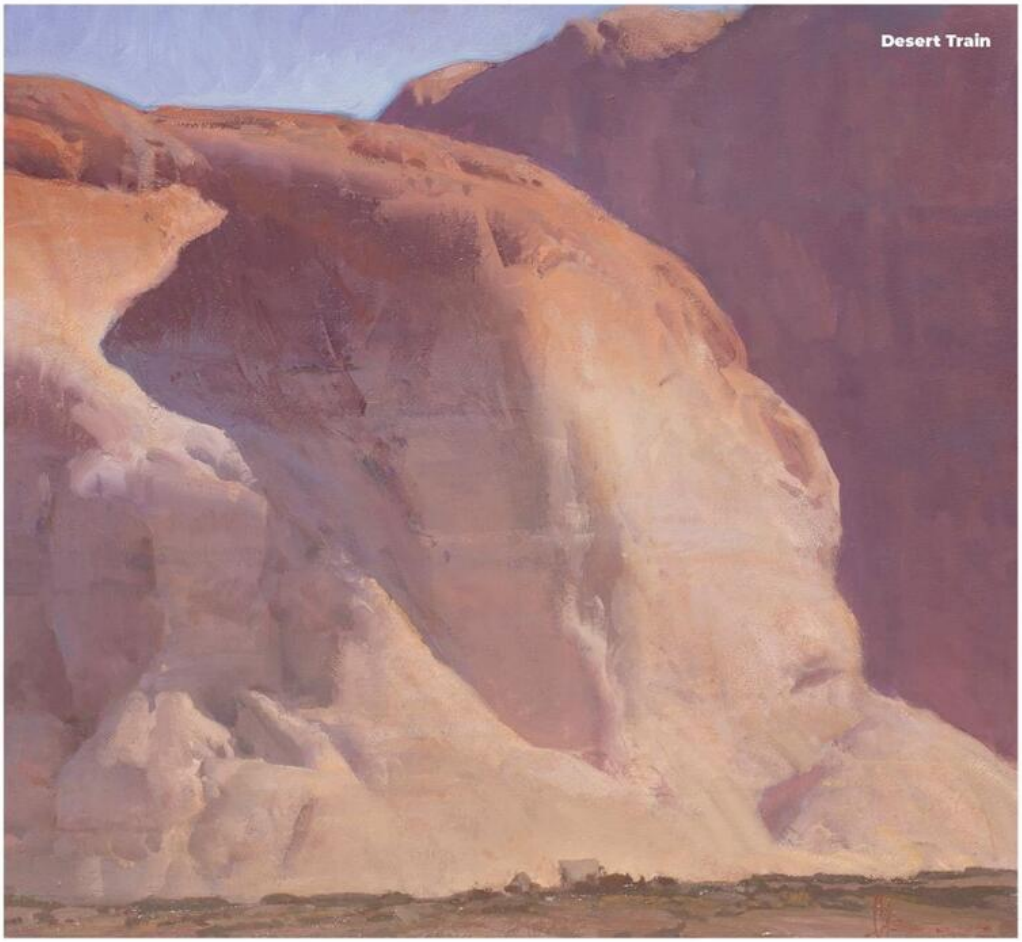
Images © Nathan Fowkes

JOSHUA CLARE

Composition, or the arrangement of dark and light shapes within a space, is the most important element of fine painting. It has always mattered most to me, more important than drawing, values, edges, color, and texture. Great design isn't easy – it takes time, patience, and every ounce of creative energy and focus you can muster – but when you get it right, it's worth it. Value, color, edges, and texture can make a finely composed painting better, but they can't save a poor arrangement of shape.



Ditch Bank





Ditch Bank

This is a painting of the bank of the small canal that runs behind my house. It's a good example of the principles of balance and variety that I discussed in my tutorial (see pages 173 and 183). Notice how I've arranged the dark shapes of grass in the shadow shape on the left, before looking at the shapes of the shadow itself. My main aim when composing this image was to create a variety of shape and balance. The painting's narrative is simple: you don't have to look far to find incomprehensible beauty in nature. Just open your eyes.



Desert Train

Inspired by the Hole in the Rock mission, I wanted this painting to help viewers feel the enormity of the task the pioneers undertook when crossing the Colorado gorge and the desert that lies southeast of it, to finally settle in Bluff, Utah. I can't imagine how daunting it must have been to roll their wagons into those enormous canyons and gulches. The huge scale helps to create a sense of just how arduous and challenging it must have been, while the light and warm colors convey a feeling of hope and optimism.

Images © Joshua Clare





Almost Paradise

This barn painting illustrates a very important design principle: shapes in a composition are not defined by the objects you paint, but by value groups. The tree in the center works because it's a secondary shape and blends into the primary shape of the barn, roof, and entire foreground, as it has similar value. The painting can be simplified down to only two shapes: the light shape of the sky, mountain, and white shed; and the dark shape of the barn, trees, and foreground.



Kaiping

I spent a couple of weeks in China and found this place in a tiny village. The focal point is achieved through the use of color contrast. While the colors are mostly true to life, I added the tree and the small red area on the left to balance the heavy shapes on the right. Try covering the tree or the red shape with your hand and you will see how critical they are to the balance of this painting.



Images © Joshua Clare

DOM LAY

Composition and narrative are important components in the creation of my artwork. Value and light, coupled with composition and narrative, are all you need to create thought-provoking images. Composition itself can exist without the likes of color and line, if necessary. Many artists underestimate the power of composition, but it's one of the main foundations to a successful painting. Think of composition as the underpainting. Without this roadmap, your painting can fall apart. It's important to understand how to avoid tangents, balance shape, and describe your story without words. While composition is a challenging fundamental to learn, it gets easier with time and practice.



Tomb Raiding in the Afternoon



Tomb Raiding in the Afternoon

The dark interior sets the mood of this mysterious tomb. A few slits of light peek through the ceiling to highlight the main areas of interest, such as the statues and floor. The size of the ancient statues can be used as a guide for scale, as well as perspective. The character in the middle ground is the first point of narrative focus, his sword drawing the eye toward the light. Perhaps he is searching for treasure with his fellow mercenary.

The color palette is fairly monochromatic throughout, showing how strong value can convey many emotions with a limited color palette. Atmosphere and value are all you need for an effective mood shot.

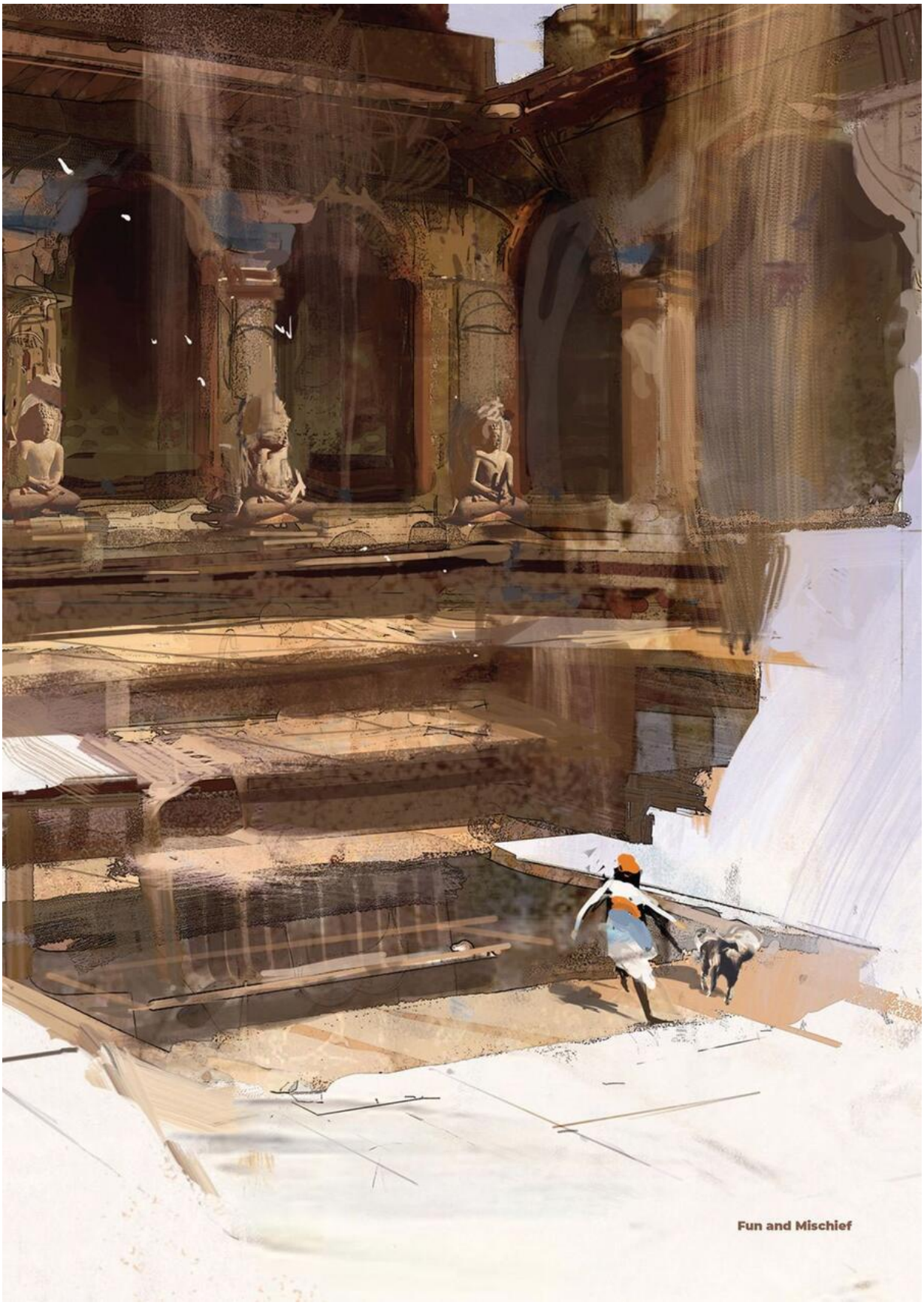


Fun and Mischief

The character and her dog sit on the right side of the rule of thirds, immediately creating a focal point. The steps provide a horizontal contrast against the vertical arches and pillars. The steps lead downward, guiding the eye back to the character. The three statues are the most detailed part of the painting, so naturally the eye will focus more on these objects. The empty areas in the lower half of the painting provide a space for the viewer's eyes to rest, ensuring the focus is on the temple cut-out in the middle. This style is a great way to play with simple vs. complex areas.



Images © Dom Lay


Fun and Mischief





Catch of the Day

After a long day's work, the fishermen are ready to pull the boats back in and unload their catch. The natural lighting conveys the specific time of day and the calming sunset perfectly captures the intended mood.

Shapes can be used to lead the viewer's eyes to where you want them to look. Here the shape of the boat points to the vast horizon in the distance. The man on the left throws an object to the other side of the dock. This directs the viewer's eyes to the right side of the canvas, which is also the brightest area.



Jungle Pilgrimage

The three figures in the middle ground guide the viewer toward the temple in the background. They are different heights to avoid size tangents that occur when objects are the same size or height. Positioning smaller characters in the background by the temple helps the viewer to distinguish how far in focal distance the three worshippers are in the middle ground. The tiny figures next to the temple also show its large size.

The bright lighting in the center makes the composition feel more dynamic. Notice how there is not much detail behind this area, making it an area of rest for the eye.

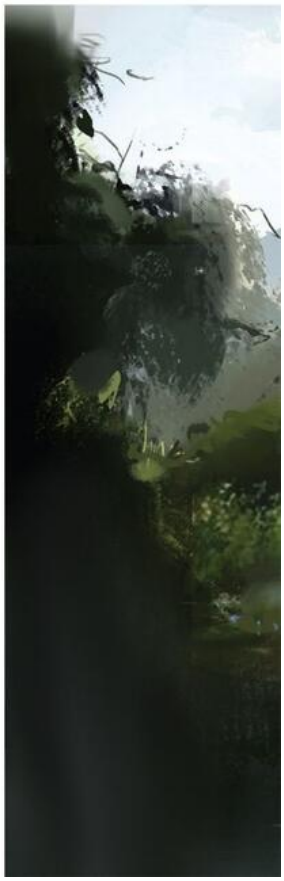


Morning Incense

While central compositions aren't often used in paintings, various elements work to support it here. The trail of water behind the character leads the viewer into the scene. The triadic composition of the middle statues and temples in the background form the focal point. This type of composition is often seen in Italian Renaissance art. Known as the golden triangle, it uses diagonal lines to form this triangular composition.

The temple pillars decrease in height, guiding the eye toward the triangular composition of the statues. This helps to vary the silhouettes, ensuring they don't fall under the tangent of same size relations.





Images © Dom Lay



Jungle Pilgrimage



Morning Incense



DJAMILA KNOPF



Composition is an incredibly complex topic as it concerns so many factors, from scale and shape language to color, light, and contrast. Altering any one of these elements instantly changes the composition. As my paintings are often very complex, it can be challenging to arrange the different elements in a way that is pleasing to the eye. When approaching a new painting, I first and foremost focus on narrative and storytelling. After thinking about the story I want to tell, I then figure out the most appealing way to portray it. This involves shifting around the different elements, and playing with color and light. This is much easier when working with digital media, as you can easily cut, paste, and adjust parts of the scene.

I follow three main principles when developing compositions:

- **I categorize the various elements in the scene into big, medium, and small shapes, trying to maintain a balance between them.**
- **I juxtapose areas of detail against plain areas to give the eye places to rest.**
- **I break up geometric shapes with organic ones.**

Children of the Sky

This painting is fairly simple, focusing on two characters against a plain background. I wanted the scene to feel dynamic, yet peaceful. Horizontal and vertical lines create stability in a composition, whereas diagonal lines create dynamism. I used the *koinobori* (carp streamers) and the cloud shapes to create dynamic lines to underline the children's running motion. In contrast, I left the grass as horizontal to introduce a calming element.

As I wanted to create a light, carefree narrative, I left a lot of negative space (the sky) to give the characters breathing room and to allow them to move freely in the frame. In contrast, I paid extra attention to the patterns on the *koinobori* to provide the viewer with enough visual interest.

Images © Djamila Knopf


Weightless



Colorless Street





Weightless

With vibrant blue hair, this character is the personification of the sea. I wanted her to feel somewhat otherworldly, not quite human and almost frozen, in contrast to the active sea life around her.

While the scene's composition may appear slightly random at first, there's order to the chaos. The girl is the center of the image, framed by the sea life that swirls around her in a circular motion. The composition is darker and denser toward the bottom of the painting, and lighter and airier toward the top.



Colorless Street

The mood I wanted to achieve in this painting called for rainy, overcast weather. This didn't provide much opportunity for strong lights or shadows, so I exaggerated the lightness of the sky. This created a pathway of light that runs down the center of the image, framed by the dark alley on both sides. I placed the character in the lighter part of the painting to create a silhouette that was easily readable. I also wanted them to be looking at something that the viewer can't see, to suggest a bigger story. Open questions and hidden story elements can prove intriguing in an illustration.



Hideout

The painting captures a character in their secret hiding place on the rooftops of a residential area, with pathways connecting the different houses. The wide view shows the ocean in the background to make the scene seem inviting and magical.

A detailed scene like this can easily become cluttered, so I made sure to include a large section of sky to create an area of rest. The laundry and cherry tree break up the rigid shapes of the houses. The diagonal lines of the roof on the right create a slope that points down toward the character.

Images © Djamila Knopf

SEAN LAYH

Narrative and composition are central to my artwork. When I begin to design a new painting, narrative is the first element I resolve. Narrative, to me, is anything that creates tension. Without tension, there is no story. Once I conceptually know what my narrative is, the next thing to address is how to compose it visually. Composition is the art of setting the scene to a narrative. For me, it is simply learning to pay attention to the things I like – a film, a painting, or a piece of music – and noticing how they are put together and arrange their different elements to create a story.



Calling

While it's hard to clearly identify what the narrative tension is here, it seems to hinge on the two dogs rapidly approaching the central figure. Their energy and speed are in direct contrast to the still, pensive child sitting on the rock. The focus of the artwork is reinforced with a splash of light. I chose to backlight the child so they are tonally similar to the rest of the piece. Sometimes it can be too jarring to have a front-on light source.

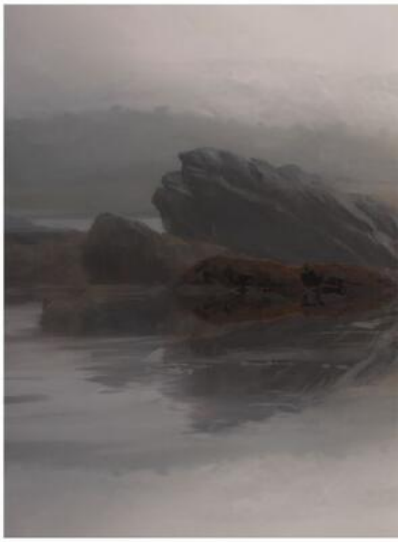
Another way to emphasize the central figure is through angles. Nearly everything in the composition is either flat (the moors, the river) or tilted (the trees, rocks, even the dogs), while the central figure is bolt upright. Sometimes an odd angle is enough to hang a whole composition around. Another more subtle trick is to use contrast to keep the viewer's eyes on the middle of the artwork. The plane on which the figure sits is more contrasted than the misty moors behind. This effect is enhanced by the low contrast of the immediate foreground, a still body of water reflecting the sky above.



Whittling

This meditative painting depicts a man whittling beside a fire in the dusk light of a winter forest. More often than not, a narrative image needs tension to succeed. While the man looks calm and occupied, it's obvious that he's in an inhospitable environment. The character is clearly self-sufficient and has carved a cozy nook in an otherwise bleak forest, communicated via the triangle the large felled trunks make in the center right. These logs set the parameters of his fireplace, while pointing the viewer into the cold forest behind.

Compositionally, I tend to cram a lot of information into the center and let the peripherals allow the details to breathe. Here the man has been placed alongside his tools, felling axe, wood he has split, and tree stumps. All of this helps to communicate the central drama: a human carving a space out of nature.







Calling



Whittling

Images © Sean Layh



Toll Road

This artwork depicts a horse-drawn cart, bogged in a mire on a winter road. The horses have become stuck in the mud and the driver labors to free them. The action is largely contained within the second third of the composition, focusing the narrative on the plight of the man and his fallen horses. The first and last thirds of the artwork show where they have come from, and where they were heading. The loop in the road reinforces this narrative of motion and gives extra weight to the drama of the scene, as the man and his horses have ground to a halt. The bend in the road also draws the eye in a loop, continuously guiding the eye to the central action of the artwork.

The foreshortening of the bogged cart is another device used to prop up the narrative, as its back half is receding, guiding the viewer's eye into the misty spruce forest from where the man has come, while pointing ahead to the drama of the scene.





Toll Road

Image © Sean Layh

HEIKALA

Creating an interesting or visually pleasing composition is one of the first things I consider when beginning work on a new painting. I start by creating tiny, matchbox-sized sketches of my ideas, which allows me to compare which composition works best. This enables me to visualize the main focal point without losing myself in the finer details.

My artwork always tells a story. The characters, environment, and colors all play a part in building the stories I want to depict. I like to explore themes of magic and wonder, and I enjoy giving my paintings titles that expand upon the visual narrative or give the image a new meaning in the viewer's eyes.





Echoes

I wanted to evoke the peculiar experience of sounds distorting underwater that almost transports you to another world. At first glance, the viewer may not notice that the character is upside-down, the tips of her toes touching the rippled surface of the water. The lines that run along the bottom of the pool, the perspective of the tiling on the sides of the pool, and the wobbly lane lines on the water's surface are all directed toward the character. I didn't use a ruler for anything, as I wanted the piece to have a wavy underwater feel.



Shapeshifters

Inspired by Japanese folklore, this painting portrays a group of *tanuki* (raccoon dogs) on a nightly gathering. I use different values of color to establish a clear foreground, middle ground, and background to create a sense of depth. The background is the lightest area, the midtones fade to a darker color in the middle ground, and there are both light and dark objects in the foreground. I wanted the lantern character and front-facing tanuki to be the focal point, so created a contrast of values between their silhouettes and the pale background.

Images © Heikala




Cloakmaker







Cloakmaker

Though the center composition is simple, the contrast of light and dark directs the eye to the focal point: the cloakmaker and her creation. The light shining from the right illuminates the character, and the two birds embroidered on the lower half of the cloak face toward her. I used a brighter color palette for the character and cloak, then painted the background elements with a murky, toned-down palette. The details in the environment bring the scene to life. The spools of thread, pin cushion, patterned fabrics, and the scissors in her apron pocket all help to tell her story.



Noita

Drawing inspiration from Finnish folklore and traditional garments, *Noita* (witch) combines visual elements from Finnish culture into a mysterious witch character. The pine cones and pine needles that adorn her hat are common in Finland's forests. The earring depicts a looped square, a symbol used in ancient Finland to ward off evil spirits. The composition mimics those of renaissance portraits where the subject's pose is solemn and still. The character's face is the lightest area to ensure it is the focal point. The dark background pushes her silhouette forward.

Images © Heikala

GUWEIZ

Designing compositions around narrative is a goal I've been pursuing over the last couple of years. This has been an intentional shift and a huge step up from my previous practice of simply creating visually pleasant images. When composing an image with narrative in mind, the raw visuals of the image need to flow well. For example, placing high contrast near focal points, or creating dynamic shapes to direct the eye. In addition, it's essential that the narrative purpose is integrated through the use of meaningful information. For a composition to succeed, there needs to be a level of symbiosis between visual impact and clear narrative.



Streets



Streets

Rather than using an obvious visual hook, this image relies on a combination of readability and narrative presence to attract attention. Key elements – such as the characters, their actions, and the type of environment – should be immediately recognizable at a glance.

Perspective is crucial to how we process and understand visuals, so I ensured there was no confusion or unnecessary complexity with this aspect. Presenting the scene like a long corridor simplifies the perspective and encourages viewers to latch on to the details at first glance. Using lighting to increase the contrast and silhouette the characters also helped to make their body language and action clear at first look. These design choices are integrated with the narrative context, such as the steam from freshly cooked street food and the bright light from the stall. Such an arrangement makes the narrative accessible and brings it to the forefront, while deriving visual impact.



Boat

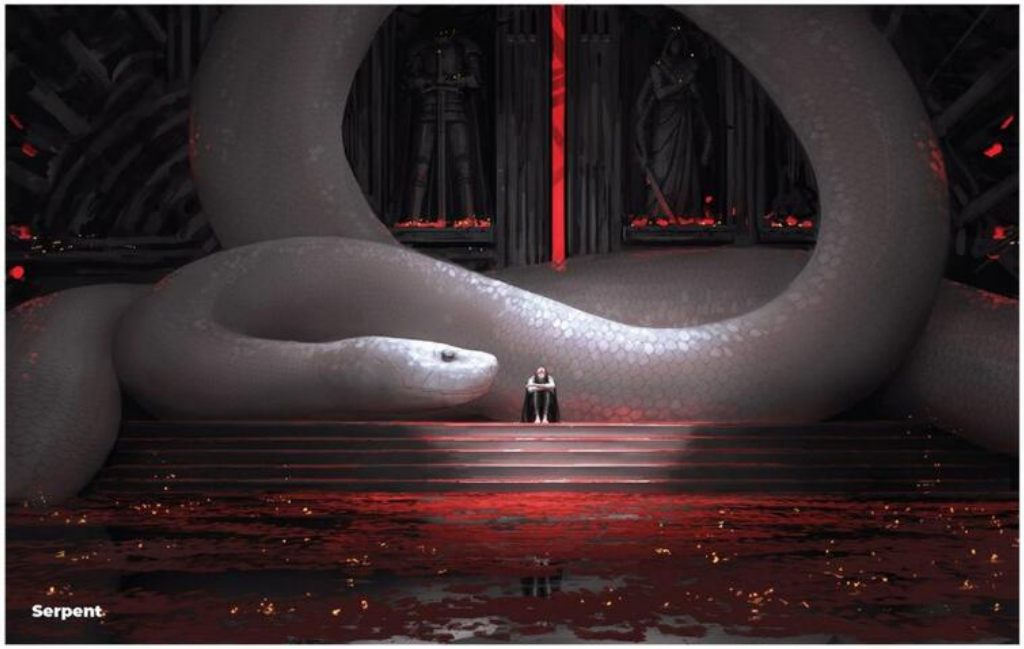
Making use of perspective and scale, I used the physical elements of the scene to create a strong visual impact. The bird's-eye view provides an opportunity to emphasize shapes while retaining realism. The shape and pattern of the fallen petals on the lake, formed in the boat's wake, is the target visual effect and an important physical component of the scene. Without these, it would be difficult to create the same visual impact.

The density of the petals also adds a narrative element, informing the viewer of the presence of numerous flowering trees in the story. The character and boat, in contrast, draw less immediate attention, but their central position in the composition indicates their narrative importance. The quiet confidence of the composition also mirrors the character's narrative role in the scene, which is that of a silent traveler on a purposeful journey.



Boat

Images © Guweiz



Serpent



Serpent

Exaggerated scale can be a powerful tool. Distorting the size of otherwise common elements draws immediate attention to the disparity and grabs the viewers' attention. The size of the snake, plus its proximity and attention toward the character, creates a sense of unease and anticipation in the narrative. A clear separation of scale is required for the composition to be readable. This can be achieved by populating the scene with objects of human scale to act as visual anchors for the viewer, such as the stairs, character, and floating petals in the foreground.

The unsettling nature of how a snake moves can also add to the visual impact and narrative. It emerges from the water, coiling around the chamber before finally approaching the character. This motion is presented entirely in a single frame, helping to guide the viewers' eyes through the piece. The main area of interest is lit by spotlight-style lighting. In a large scene with numerous elements and complex shapes, a simple solution like this can reinforce the focal point. It gives the character, who only takes up a tiny space, a lot more visual and narrative weight.



Crow

Portraits can be slightly more challenging when designing composition. If the character fills much of the canvas, it often leaves less space for other supporting elements. Despite this, there is still a need to present both visual impact and meaningful information.

Make use of the character's silhouette, exploring how shapes within it can be used to better effect. By designing the character with dynamic lines and curves, using elements such as hair and gesture, you are able to increase the visual impact of the composition. The challenge of balancing this with narrative need is still present, however. For example, if a scene is set in an environment where the character needs to appear relatively still for the purpose of the story, then other options to enhance movement and visual impact should be explored.

Supporting elements also play a part in enhancing the composition. Placing areas of high contrast behind the character's silhouette creates a more interesting variance in contrast, while also preventing the silhouette from looking like it's pasted onto the background. These elements also need to make sense from a narrative perspective.



Images © Guweiz

JESSICA WOULFE

Composition and narrative are essential to my work. It's important that I have a story in mind before I start a painting, as this can influence every artistic decision I make. Even if the story is only a descriptive sentence or brief, it can add depth and inspiration to the artwork. Camera angles, size relationships, directional lines, color, mood, and lighting structures are all techniques that artists use to convey the story. Shape language is also useful, as jagged, angular shapes typically convey a more aggressive and threatening feel than soft, rounded shapes. I often reduce detail in unimportant parts of the composition, while increasing the detail at the focal point. This ensures the viewer only focuses on what I want them to see, without getting lost in small details. If I have done my job well, the composition will tell the story without words.

As an artist it's essential that you don't create a literal depiction of things, as a photographer does, but rather an image that is filtered through the lens of your creative abilities, where you are in control of every aspect of the artwork.



The Ancient Ones

Low angles can make the viewer feel small in comparison to the landscape. They are frequently used in environment concept art and cinematography, where the purpose is to showcase the epic landscape. We relate everything to human size relationships. In this artwork, the character appears tiny compared to the huge statues, conveying a sense of their scale. The birds also capture this, as well as the hazy texture of the waterfall fading into mist in the distance.

The directional lines of the waterfall direct your vision toward the character, the central focal point. Directional lines can be helpful in pointing the viewer to where you want them to look. In addition, contrasting the dark character against the bright waterfall in the background creates an obvious focal point. The eye is always drawn to human figures first in an image, as well as highly contrasted areas.



The Future is Bright

This image shows the traditional way of life (farming) looking toward the future (floating wind turbines). The farm and farmer represent the past, while his daughter and wind turbines symbolize the future. The one-point perspective draws the eye toward the father and daughter. They are the primary focal point; dark figures contrasted against the fields glowing with golden-hour lighting. The golden hour is a time of transition – from day to night – and is used here to enhance the story.

Intending the landscape to feel bright, optimistic, and peaceful, I used round shape language with only natural materials. Note, there are no jagged shapes, or metallic and industrial materials. The round shapes of the wind turbines mirror the shape of the sheep. The long, horizontal lines across the composition create a sense of ease and peacefulness.







The Ancient Ones



The Future is Bright

Images © Jessica Woulfe





Downpour

It's been a long day on the rice paddies and the farmer is finally heading inside. It's foggy and rainy, heavily atmospheric, and the mood feels somber. Cool tones convey a sense of peacefulness. The atmospheric fog helps to reduce any detail in the background, directing focus to the darker, more detailed focal points in the foreground. Though the farmer is small against the large triangular shapes of the farmhouses and tall triangular trees, the directional lines all lead toward him as the focal point. While the wooden walkway points toward the house, the triangle points back down toward the character, who is framed by buildings on both sides.



Downpour

Image © Jessica Woulfe

IZZY BURTON

Strong composition makes for a strong narrative. I am always thinking about how to lead the viewer into the artwork, as well as what I want my artwork's story to be. I often use secondary characters within my compositions to guide the viewer. Sometimes they are looking into the image themselves to help direct the viewer's eye, while other times I place them in a way that makes the eye jump from character to character before landing in the center, where the main story is being told. These secondary characters often take the form of cats or birds, as they are silent observers and don't draw the audience away from the main story. I frequently create studies of photographs with strong compositions, as this helps to train the eye to spot those masterful storytelling moments.





Fishing

The girl is the focus of the narrative. A darkened figure against a bright sunbeam, she is the strongest point of contrast in the image to ensure she captures the viewer's attention first. The composition is centralized; the buildings create a frame to pull the eye into the center of the image. While there's lots of gritty texture and scribbled details, the composition isn't compromised or confused. This is thanks to the strong values and shapes of the buildings and background, as well as the clean space created by the sea and fog, against which the girl stands out. The foreground elements are darker, but as the viewer looks further into the background, it becomes brighter and brighter with the sun, drawing the eye into the artwork.



Dinant Witch

The composition is almost completely split down the diagonal center of the image. The top-left half is detailed and busy, while the lower-right half is relatively simple, comprising of water and clouds. Clouds and atmospheric fall-off work well to simplify areas. The visual noise created by the city naturally draws the eye, as does the contrast of the character on the simplified side. If the character were placed on the city side of the image, it would have been confusing and unclear. The witch's broom trail shows where she has traveled from, as well as guiding the viewer's eye through the image. The trail appears thinner as it gets further away, illustrating the depth of the image, as well as how high up in the sky she is.

Images © Izzy Burton


Dinant Witch

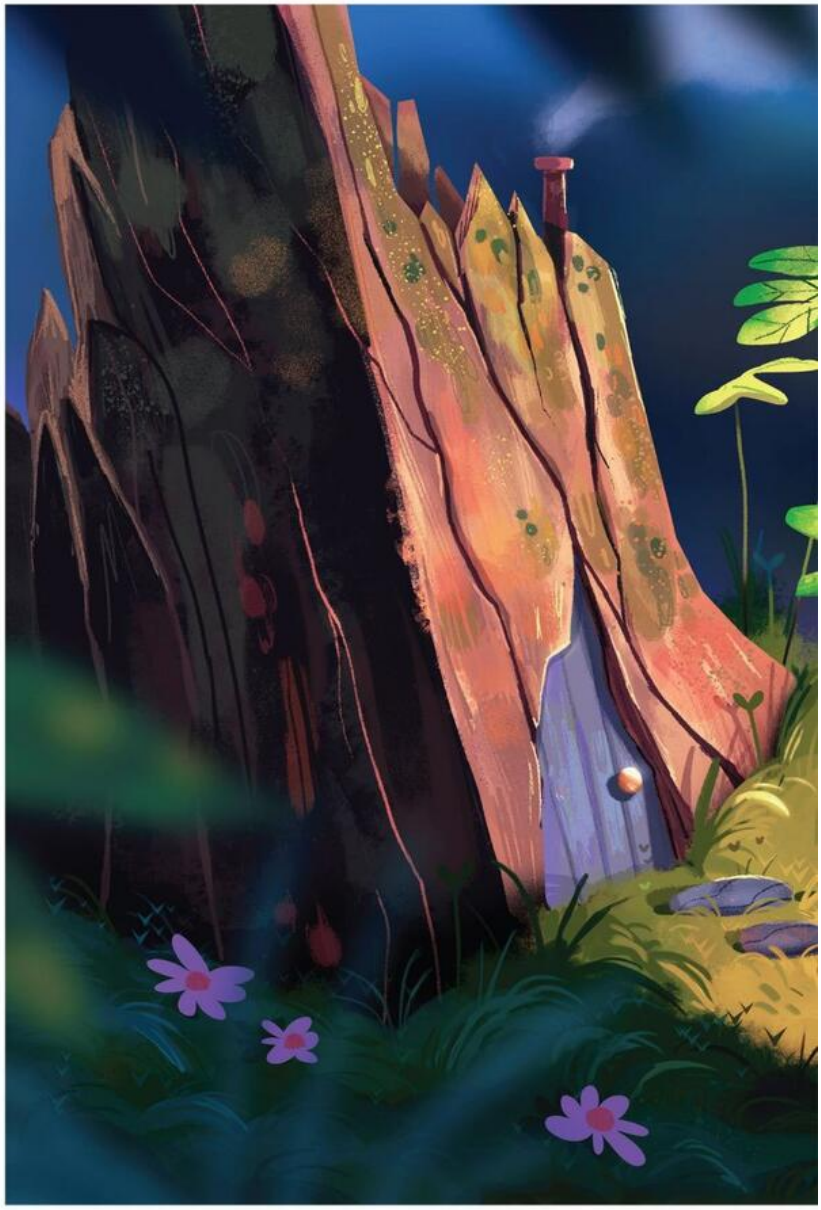


Little White Rabbit Goes Home

This painting tells the story of a little white rabbit returning home after a day adventuring. The low light casts strong shadows, illustrating that it's the end of the day, while also creating a strong value contrast between the tree-stump home and the darker background elements. This ensures the viewer is drawn not only to the brightest point of the image (the rabbit) but also to the house, which is integral to the story.

The tree-stump home sits on the left, while the rabbit is just right of the center. The path adds a directional line to show where the rabbit has come from, leading the viewer into the image from right to left. The tree-stump home is higher on the small hill, which emphasizes the diagonal and guides the viewer's eye from right to left with the rabbit.

The strong depth of field causes close-up and faraway objects to appear blurry. This helps to give the image depth, as well as stopping any objects that aren't integral to the storytelling from distracting. Some of the near, blurry leaves point into the image center, helping to guide the eye.





Little White Rabbit Goes Home

Image © Izzy Burton

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Izzy is an award-winning director and artist working across animation and publishing. She has worked with clients such as Netflix, Passion Pictures, and Golden Wolf.




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Fine artist | joshclare.com

Joshua has been painting in oil for nearly twenty years and is widely known for his landscape and figurative work. He resides in Utah, USA, with his wife and five children, and draws continuous inspiration from the joy of family life and beauty of his surroundings.




NATHAN FOWKES

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Nathan is a Los-Angeles-based feature animation artist who has worked on films for DreamWorks, Disney, Blue Sky Studios, and Paramount. His work has been featured in numerous publications and solo exhibitions. He is a guest lecturer at ArtCenter College of Design and teaches online at Schoolism.com.




GUWEIZ

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Guweiz enjoys bringing his imaginary characters and the world around them to life in the form of illustrative art. His first book, *Guweiz: The Art of Gu Zheng Wei*, was published by 3dtotal Publishing in 2020.




HEIKALA

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Heikala is an artist from Finland, now based in Tokyo, Japan. She uses colored inks and watercolors in her artwork to tell stories and bridge the divide between mundane and magical.




DJAMILA KNOPF

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Djamila is an independent artist, based in Leipzig, Germany. She creates illustrations that evoke a sense of wonder and nostalgia, and primarily focuses on personal projects.




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Devin lives in north San Diego County with her dog and numerous houseplants. She comes from an animation-industry background and is currently working on picture books and freelance illustration. Past clients include Netflix, Dark Horse, Disney, HarperCollins, Penguin Random House, and LucasFilm.




DOM LAY

Freelance concept artist | artstation.com/dlartistry

Dom is a freelance artist based in the United States. He specializes in concept art, world-building, and storytelling. He is known for creating and marketing his own personal intellectual properties and crafting them into full-length art books.




SEAN LAYH

Artist | seanlayh.com

Sean is a Melbourne-based fine artist who works primarily in oils and dry media. He previously created bodies of work, some of which are featured in the Gallery of this book.




GRZEGORZ "GREG" RUTKOWSKI

Freelance illustrator & painter | artstation.com/rutkowski

Born in Zgorzelec, Poland, Greg was interested in drawing and painting from a young age. He has worked as a professional illustrator since 2010 and lives in Poland with his wife and two daughters.




JESSICA WOULFE

Concept artist | artstation.com/jessicawoulfe

Based in Canada, Jessica is a concept artist with experience working in both animation and video games. She loves going on hikes, spending time with her cats, and creating art.

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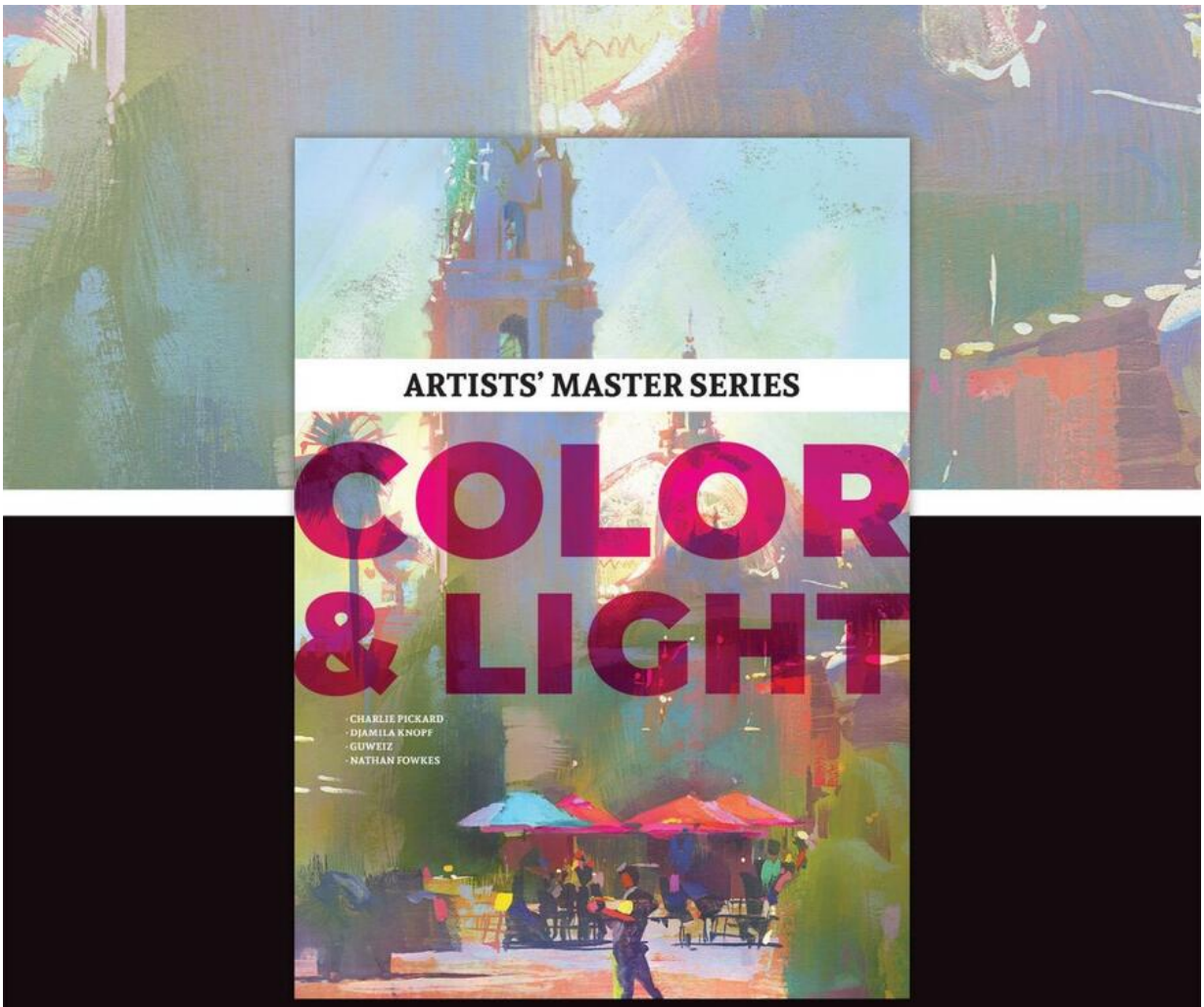
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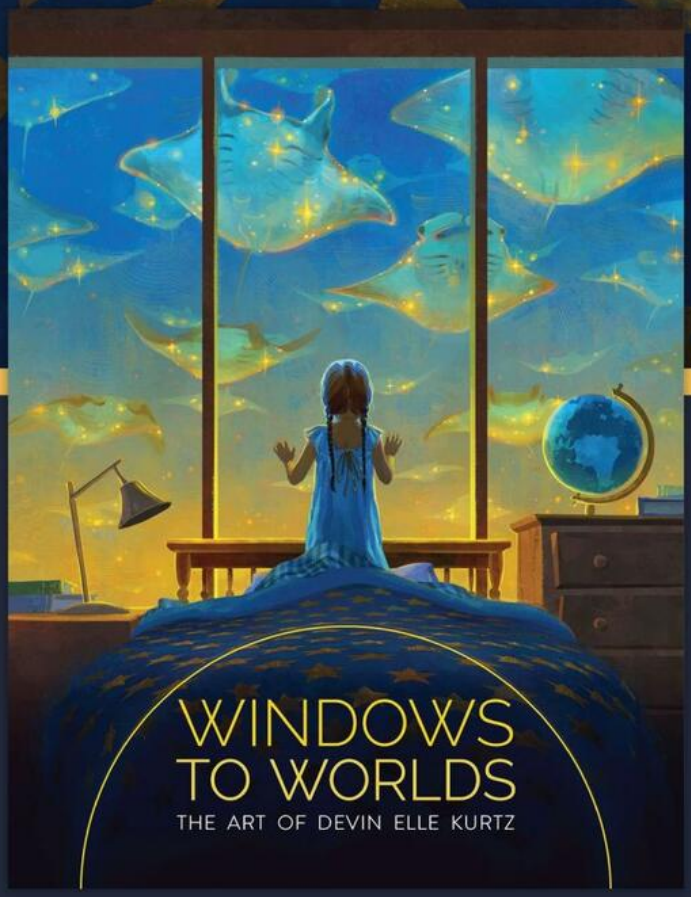
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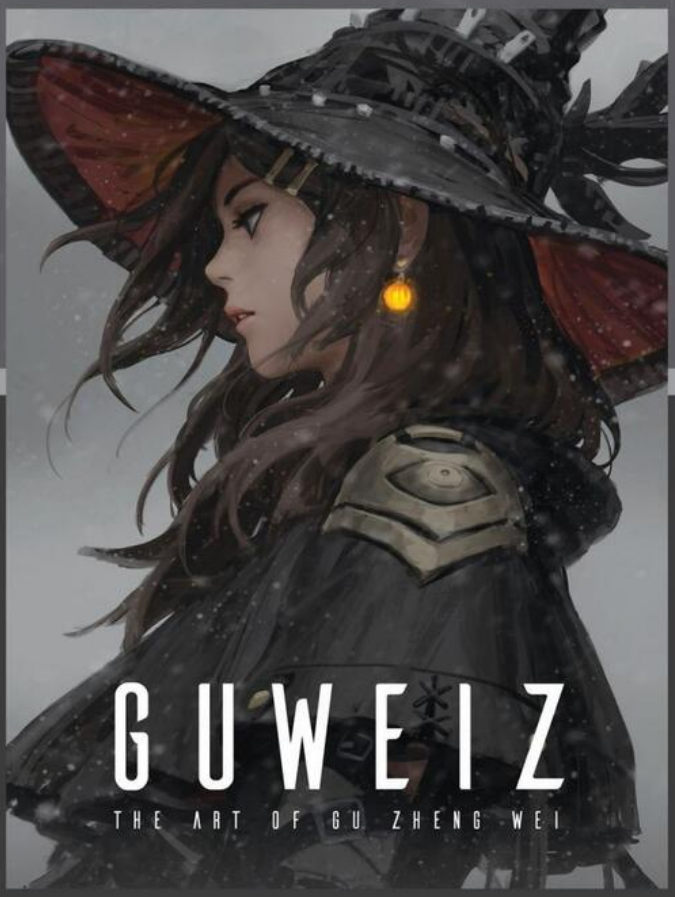
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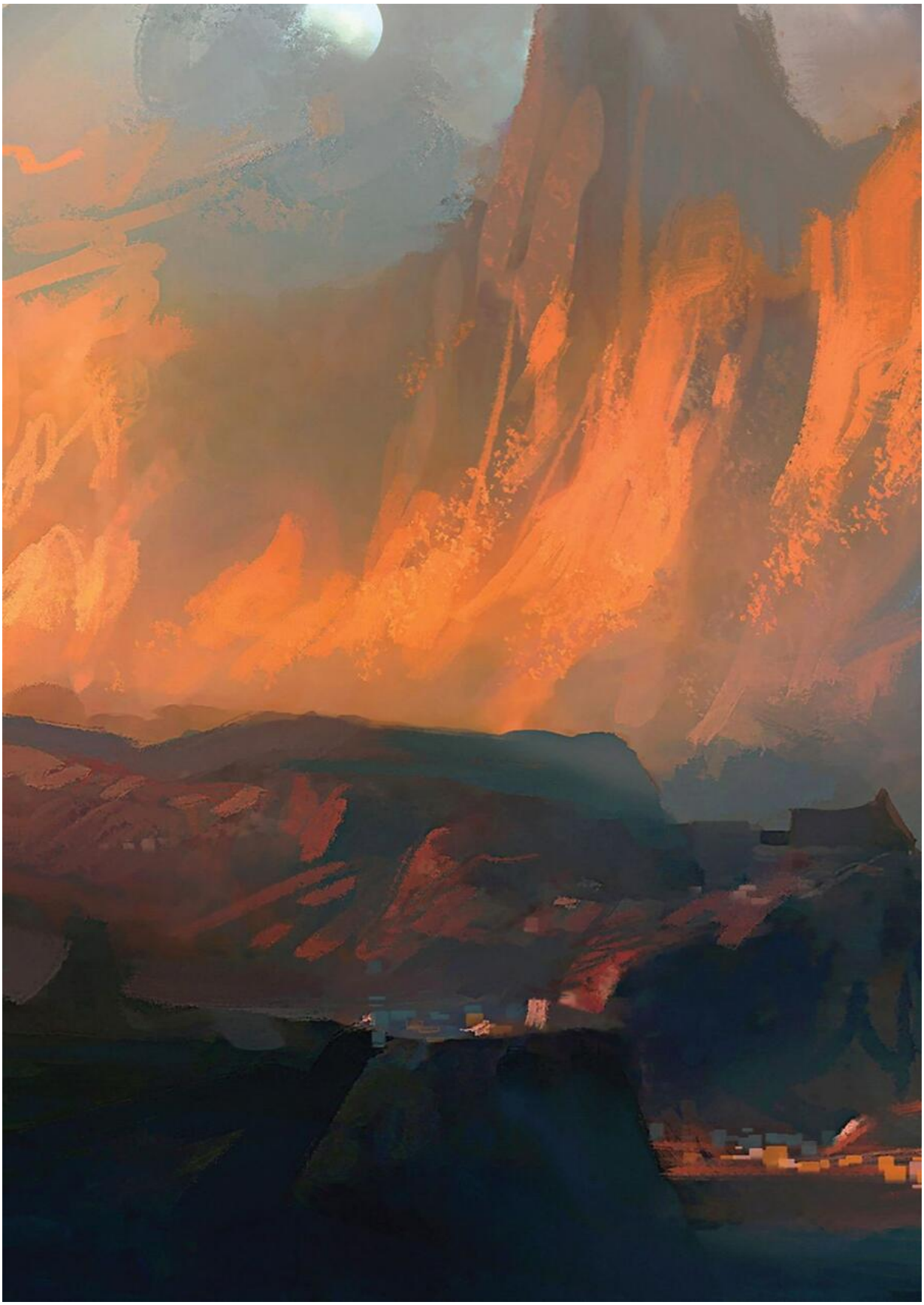
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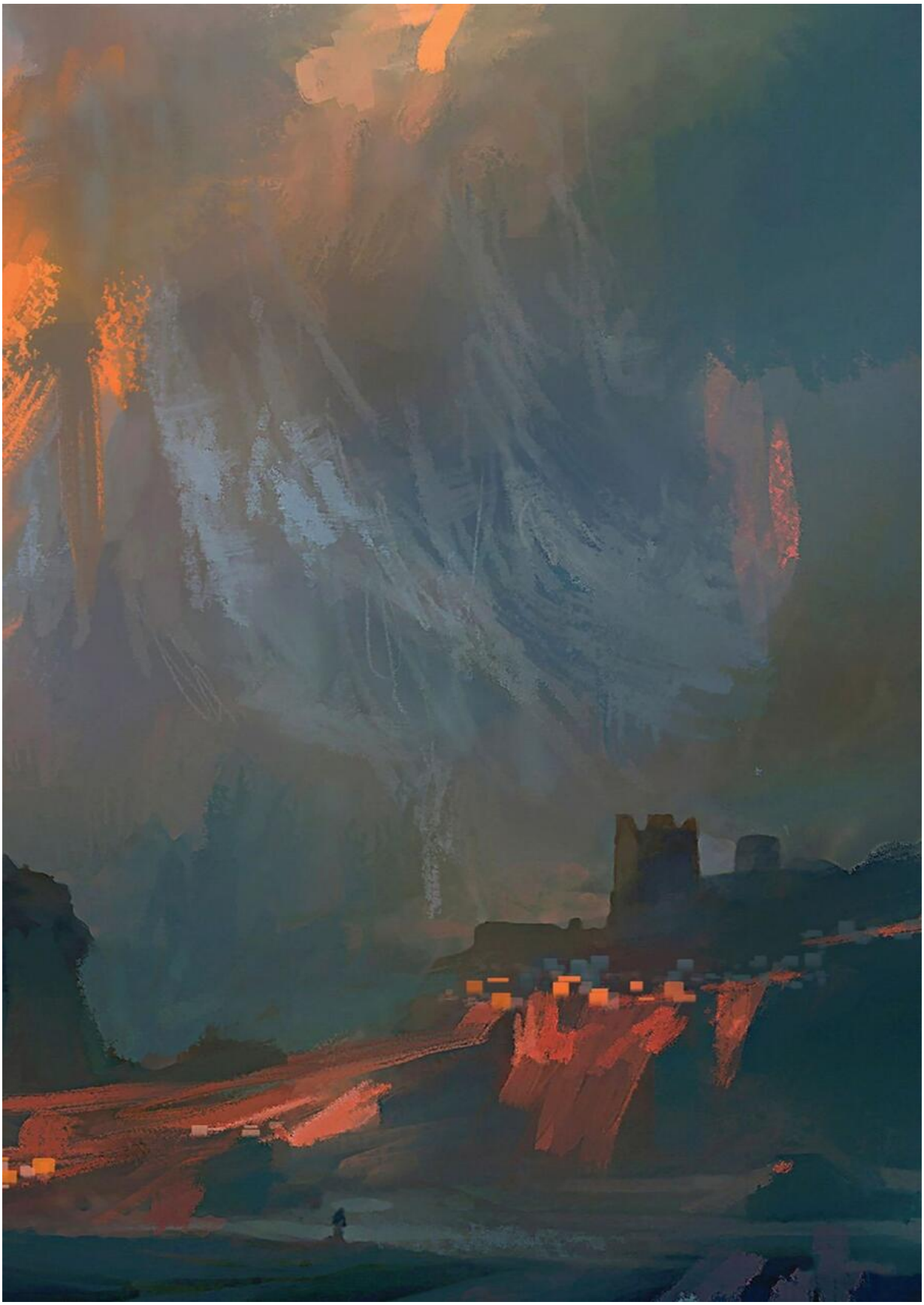
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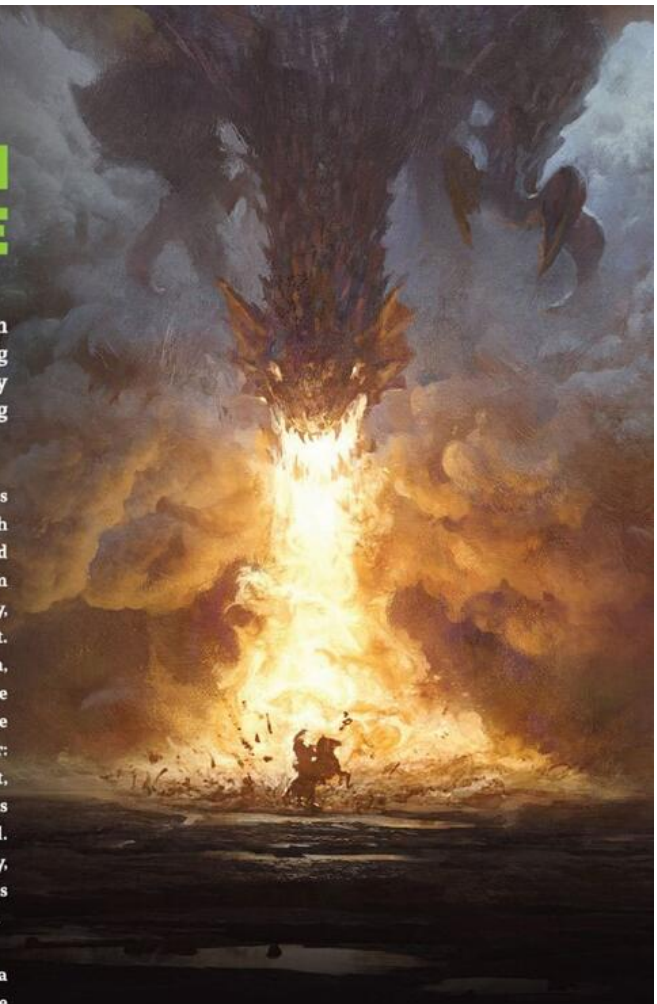
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ARTISTS' MASTER SERIES

COMPOSITION & NARRATIVE



The *Artists' Master Series* features experts from both the traditional and digital worlds. Drawing from a wealth of experience, in this book they fully dissect the theory and practice of using composition and narrative to advance your art.

Artist Greg Rutkowski, a master of his craft, explores composition in great detail in the opening chapters. With stunning visual examples, he looks at the methods used throughout art history to achieve good composition, from the mathematical rules that are thought to govern beauty, to more fluid tools, such as rhythm, balance, color, and light. Discover the theory behind various types of composition, from portraits to still life, then advance your art to the next level by learning to break all the rules. Next, we dive into the art fundamental that ties everything together: narrative. Looking at striking examples from the past, alongside Greg's own work, we can see how storytelling has always been a principal focus for artists around the world. Exploring diverse approaches such as humor, ambiguity, foreshadowing, symbolism, and exaggeration, these pages gift you the confidence to create a story on your own canvas.

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