

Watercolor Painting Newsletter

The Importance of Value

Over years of painting there are many things I've learned as an artist; perhaps the most important of these is understanding tonal values. I've found that you can take a lot of liberties with color if the tones are correct. On the other hand, one of the primary reasons I see for paintings not working is the lack of a good value plan. It's hard to pull off a good painting if you don't first work out its value plan.

What's a value plan?

I learned early in my career that there are six basic value plans or plots that work effectively when dividing paintings into three tones: light, middle and dark. Good artwork usually falls into one of these six plots:

1. A dark motif surrounded by lighter values.
2. A light motif surrounded by darker tones.
3. A large light with small darks in mid-tones.
4. A large dark with small lights in mid-tones.
5. A gradation in any direction.
6. An overall spotty pattern with a center of interest.

The percentage of space occupied by each value is very important. If each value occupies the same amount of space as the others, you get a static composition. A good rule of thumb is to have half of your space falling in the mid-tones, while the remaining half is taken up by lights and darks in unequal amounts.



The painting above, "Gerbera Still", is an example of a light motif surrounded by darker tones.

I often take time to do several tonal sketches to see how effective a value plan is before I begin a painting. If it works well in grey-scale or sepia, it will also work well in color.

Value in Landscape

When painting landscape, it's a good practice to divide your painting into three unequal areas where each area uses a different value. It's ok that a particular area have other values in it, but one basic value should dominate.

Mixing Colors

My students often have problems mixing paints. They want to paint with the same paint-to-water mixture all the time and fail to get rich darks.

Keep in mind that diluting pigment will create lights, while darks are best created by saturating the mixture with as much pigment as possible. It's important to vary your paint to water mixture throughout a painting.

When layering colors remember to go brighter as you go darker. Keep the colors rich and avoid neutrals if you don't want mud.



TIPS

- Create pencil sketches or use sepia to paint value plans.
- Make at least 4 value plans before evaluating them.
- Leave lights as white paper.
- To see the values: squint!
- When painting, remember to keep your colors in tone.
- As you paint, make adjustments to fit one of the six plots.

Painting Classes & Workshops

I offer workshops around the country and regularly teach classes in the Colorado Springs area

(check my schedule online). DVD painting videos are available by contacting the studio.

If you or your group is interested in hosting a workshop, please contact my studio via [Email](#)