

## Creating a Successful Painting

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### Introduction

Creating fine art is hard work. It takes discipline, patience and problem solving skills to complete a successful painting. Far too often struggling artists find themselves sitting at the easel, staring at a wet canvas wondering 'what do I do next?' Confused about what's gone wrong, and even more baffled by what to do about it, they needlessly quit because they don't know where to go. Below is a brief discussion on how to overcome some of the major problems that beginning and intermediate artists face.

### Expectations

Making any work of art is a process. I cannot emphasize this enough. Just like writing a paper, the first coat of paint is like a rough draft of a book. It needs revision until it becomes fluid and cohesive. The famous quote "writing is rewriting." applies so eloquently in creating fine art. Though I would change the saying to read, '*painting is revising.*' In other words, painting requires a due process of adjusting, correcting errors, and readjust forms, shapes, lines and colors until it all comes together.

### Doubt

The most common problem I see among new (and sometimes seasoned painters) is *doubt*. While useful when hearing a politician tell us they will solve *all* human problems known to man once elected, doubt is crippling to both new and season artist alike. So how do we get rid of it? The answer is *practice*. Not every painting you make needs to be a masterpiece. Some pieces are simply for practice.

For beginners I recommend choosing a simple subject matter and paint with the explicit intent of finishing a practice piece. Few, if any, first pieces come out perfect. We need to work up to perfection. Usually by the third or fourth painting students have a sense of confidence in their work which shines right through their canvases.

For the advanced artist, I recommend having practice painting on the side while starting your next big piece. Just like the beginning basketball players who practiced ad nauseum to make to the NBA, the pro-NBA players *still* warm up and practices for hours before each and every game. Below are a few examples of practice pieces made by beginners students at the *Raminfard School of Arts*.<sup>1</sup> While these pieces look very polished they all started out as practice pieces. Often, paintings that were meant for practice become finished works and visa-versa.



### Subjects

Picking something to paint can be as challenging as painting itself. In Fact, many artist know *how* to paint, they just aren't sure *what* to paint. I have a few guidelines to share with you. First, pick something that connects with you. A favorite park, the house you grew up in, your daughters favorite toy, are all excellent choices. Second, start with the end in mind. You have to envision your finished piece

before ever putting brush to canvas. Consider the size and finished look of your piece, and consider the level of detail that needs to go in before starting.

Next, find something with a clear direction of light. Lighting is key in all forms of visual arts, not just painting. So important is lighting to painting it can make or break a fine work of art. I recommend strong directional lighting to help create depth and dramatic details. <sup>ii</sup> (Below are two pieces of my own which I believe are good examples of paintings with strong directional lighting.)



## Clutter

Make sure the main subject is clear and will *read* well on the canvas. This means that it is obvious what the main subject is. You want to be sure that your audience is not confused as to what they are supposed to look at. Too many objects competing for attention will confuse the viewer.

A brightly colored wall behind the head of someone you are trying to paint can be equally distracting. This is why most artists opt to paint a muted grey or brown background behind a portrait. They understand that the background is intended to push the face or portrait out towards the audience. By doing this they get the main subject to *pop*.

Another issue to look out for is too many objects to paint at once. Let's say you attempt to paint a cityscape with five brightly colored trees or bushes surrounding the buildings you want to paint. Unless the title of your piece is going to be "Five trees and some buildings" reconsider and eliminate a few trees to help improve your piece's overall composition by not having too many objects competing for attention.

The opposite also holds true in choosing a subject to paint. Don't pick something with too *few* objects and not enough details. Make sure there is enough detail to entertain your audience. Remember that one way of really getting your audience's attention is to give them just enough to look at without overwhelming them. This means that you need to show a good balance of: (a) color variation without losing harmony, (b) details without making the piece confusing, and (c) numbering and positioning of objects without crowding the painting and thereby confusing your audience.

## starting

Most beginners start with oils and begin detailing and perfecting a certain area of their canvas and then move on to some other part. The problem with this is that they end up with all the right stuff in all the wrong place. Inevitably you will come across problems; this is why it is so important to start with an outline. Some artists choose to use oil paint then sketch out their basic framework with a pencil. I personally prefer to use a pencil. Neither technique is better over the other. My reason for picking pencil over oil in the initial stage is because I like to have the option of revising my work in oils.

When I sketch out my basic line drawing I now have something to work with. It is NEVER perfect the first time. So I use a second coat of oil paint to reshape and resize various parts of my composition until I get it just right. ( I like the famous carpenter's rule; 'measure twice, cut once.')

I can 'measure' twice this way before I do all my 'cutting.' See demonstration below.



Note that while I start with the main subject I immediately paint the surrounding area as best as I can. The reason for this is because I *always paint within context*. Lets say I choose only to paint the man and the horse, and in my excitement to see the finish product, I finalize all my colors, all my sizing, and all my detail only to find out that once I add my background my main subject is slightly off center, or the colors look way too yellow, or the details can't be seen because my background is too pronounce. I have to rework the main subject for no reason other than the fact that I failed to paint it within the context of the surrounding colors in the first place.

## Contrast

Many times students complain that their work is flat or dull. The reason for this is that their painting is not yet finished. The assumption is that a flat or dull colored painting is bad. But in truth it is a good thing! Why? Because now all that is left to do is highlight the parts you want to stand out most and darken or blend the parts you want to recede.

The key to making a colors pop right out of the canvas is *not* using a bright color. The key is the color next to it which determines how strongly the color stands out. Your viewer perceives colors with in the overall context of your work. If all your colors are dull but only one part of it is bright and vibrant then that part will stick out most. But, if every part of your canvas is brightly covered with painting then you lose the impact of color contrast and color vibrancy.

## Conclusion

As you can see so much of painting is about problem solving and this is an essential theme you will find among all artist. Very few, if any, creative talents simply create, and never edit or revise. It's hard work but well worth the price, since what you have created is a distillation of your best work on canvas. So next time you work on your canvas consider the foregoing and see if there might be something that could help you improve your piece. Remember slow and steady progress wins the race and will take time hammering your issue out, but be patient and good luck!

Below the final piece of my demonstration entitled **The Unknowns** a 24" x 30" oil on canvas original."



<sup>1</sup> To the left is the work of Kara Crisp. This original 22"x 28" oil on canvas painting is a depiction of a Santa Barbra, CA park view. The Middle piece is created by Ariella Kerendian who painted this California costal seascape on a 18" x 22" oil on canvas. To the right is the work of Elana Lo. Her oil on canvas painting measures 16" x 20".

<sup>2</sup> To the left is 'The Forgotten' painted is 1999, this 30" by 40" oil on canvas painting. To the right is a 12" x 16" depiction of two peaches growing in my father's backyard. This was made in early 1996.