22.5.20

Art Techniques and materials

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Dear Core Members,

Hope this handout finds you well and healthy during lockdown. For today we have a great and very comprehensive lesson on how to achieve more realism in your paintings! Hope you'll enjoy the lesson.

Take good care of yourselves and hope to see you soon,

Noel

How To Make Your Paintings Look More Realistic

I think it is always important to have some quality of realism to your paintings no matter what style you paint in. Otherwise, people will be left wondering what you have actually painted.

It is also important to note that painting realism does not mean mindlessly copying what you see. You can still use your creative license to change the subject in your painting whilst retaining a quality of realism.

These tips are not intended to help you create perfect recreations of photographs. Rather, these tips will help you create paintings which have a quality of realism but still look like paintings. That is after all that I believe to be true realism.

Anyway, here are 5 tips to help you create more realistic paintings.

John Singer Sargent, Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose, 1885-1886

Get Your Values Right

Value is the first and most important tip in this post for creating more realistic paintings.

Value is how light or dark a color is and it is widely considered to be one of the most important elements of a painting. If you are able to paint with accurate values, then your painting will have a quality of realism regardless of how accurate your edges, colors, shapes and other elements are.

Just look at some of the beautiful paintings by Sir Arthur Streeton like the one below. Notice how realistic it appears, without actually having all that much-refined detail.

Arthur Streeton, Still Glides The Stream, And Shall For Ever Glide, 1890

If I take colour out of the mix, you can see how accurate all the values are.

Streeton's paintings have an almost effortless feel to them. He was able to paint in such a relaxed style whilst retaining such a quality of realism due to his incredibly accurate values.

You should also note that when I say accurate values, I am usually referring to the *value relationships* (how light/dark a colour is compared to the colours which surround it) rather than the actual values which you see in life. The value relationships are what you should really be trying to capture, especially if you are compressing the value range in any way (painting in a high or low key). So instead of looking at a colour and asking yourself...

"Where is that colour on the value scale?"

... a better question might be:

"How light/dark is that colour compared to the surrounding colours?".

Utilize Hard, Soft and Lost Edges
Edge refers to the transition from one shape to another. This edge could be **hard**, **soft** or **lost**.

A hard edge means there is a very crisp transition between the two shapes.

A soft edge has some kind of gradation between the shapes. So the transition is smooth.

A lost edge is one where the edge is so soft that you can barely see it. This usually occurs when there are two shapes next to each other which have the same colour. Lost edges do not give you much information about the form of a subject.

The image below demonstrates the different types of edges in action:

There is a hard edge to indicate the transition from the dark background to the light building. There is a soft edge to indicate the change in the plane of the building wall. There is a lost edge where the ledge protrudes from the side of the building. Notice how the hard edge provides you with the most information about the subject, the soft edge provides you with some information and the lost edge provides you with basically no information.

Edges are incredibly powerful as they can tell you so much about the subject without having to use much detail.

For example, a soft edge might indicate that there is not much visibility. A hard edge might indicate that there is a strong light source pointing directly at the subject or that there is a significant transition from one shape to another.

A common problem I see with beginner painters is that they only use hard edges. This can give a painting a very unnatural appearance, even if you get everything else right.

Focus on The Important Elements And Simplify The Rest
I am a huge fan of simplification in painting. I think the decision to ignore or leave out detail is **much** harder than to just include every detail you see.

Simplification in painting works in two ways:

1. It can reduce the "noise" in your paintings.

2. It adds emphasis to the elements which are actually important.

My suggestion is to identify the few things which most interest you about the subject you are painting. Be extremely specific. It could be the way the light is bouncing off the grass or an interesting shape arrangement. Usually, there will only be 1-3 things which really interest you about a subject.

Then, just focus on painting those things. Try to simplify the rest.

If you are able to paint the important elements in your painting with accuracy, then you are 80% there in terms of realism. It is not as important that you render the other elements with complete accuracy as these areas will be out of focus.

If you cannot identify anything in particular which interests you about the subject, then maybe it is time to choose a different subject to paint.

In my painting below all I really wanted to capture was the subtle gradation from saturated yellows in the foreground to dull purples and blues in the background, whilst painting within a narrow value range. So I focused on that. I did not try to render every strand of grass or perfectly match the blue of the sky.
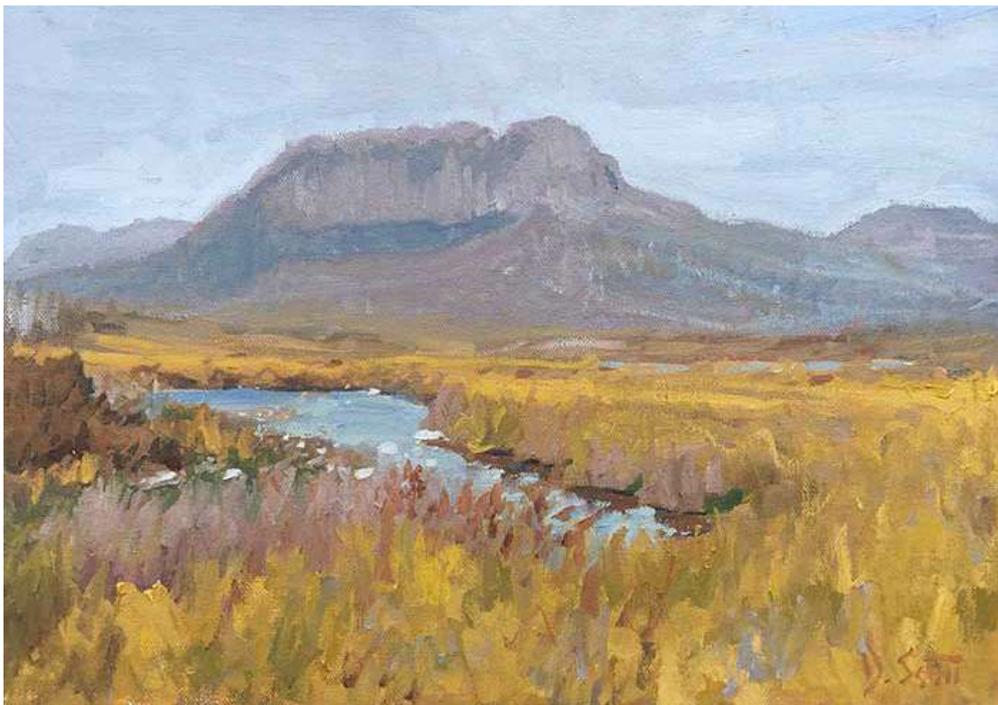
Take Advantage of Visible Brushwork
Visible brushwork is one of the most interesting aspects of traditional painting in my opinion. But so many beginners completely ignore it and, in some cases, try to relentlessly blend and smooth all the beautiful brushwork.

You can use visible brushwork in many ways including:

- To create physical texture in your painting.

- To create a sense of movement in your painting by using suggestive brushwork.
- To create a beautiful broken colour effect which looks like a mess of colour up close, but as you step back everything just seems to work together. The result can be a stunning vibration of colour.

Visible brushwork is what gives a painting that painterly feel.

The painting below by John Singer Sargent is a fantastic demonstration of brushwork. From afar, the painting looks incredibly realistic. But as you look closer at the painting, you can see these surprisingly bold strokes of colour and clearly visible brushwork. The painting is certainly not all blended and refined like what many artists think creates realism.


John Singer Sargent, An Artist In His Studio, 1904

Question What You See

Unfortunately, our eyes will often play little tricks on us and what we think we see is not actually what is there. This is most apparent in colour and value. For example, in the image below try to identify if square A is lighter/darker/equal in value to square B. The answer may surprise you.
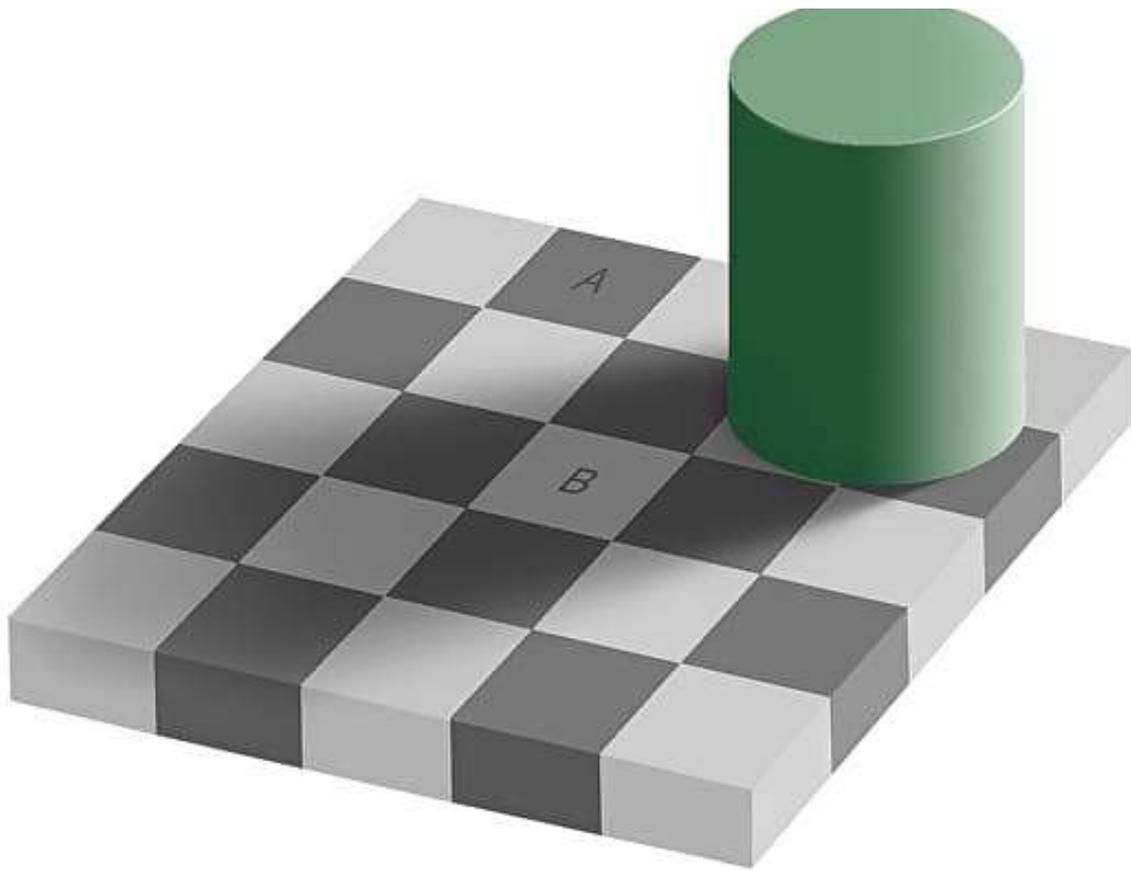
You most likely answered that square A is darker than square B. But in fact, they are both the exact same color (see the image below).

If you are seeing square A as being darker than square B, then what is happening is, your mind is making an adjustment for the apparent shadow created by the green object. I won't go into more detail on this here as it is a tricky topic. The point is that what you see is not always what is there.
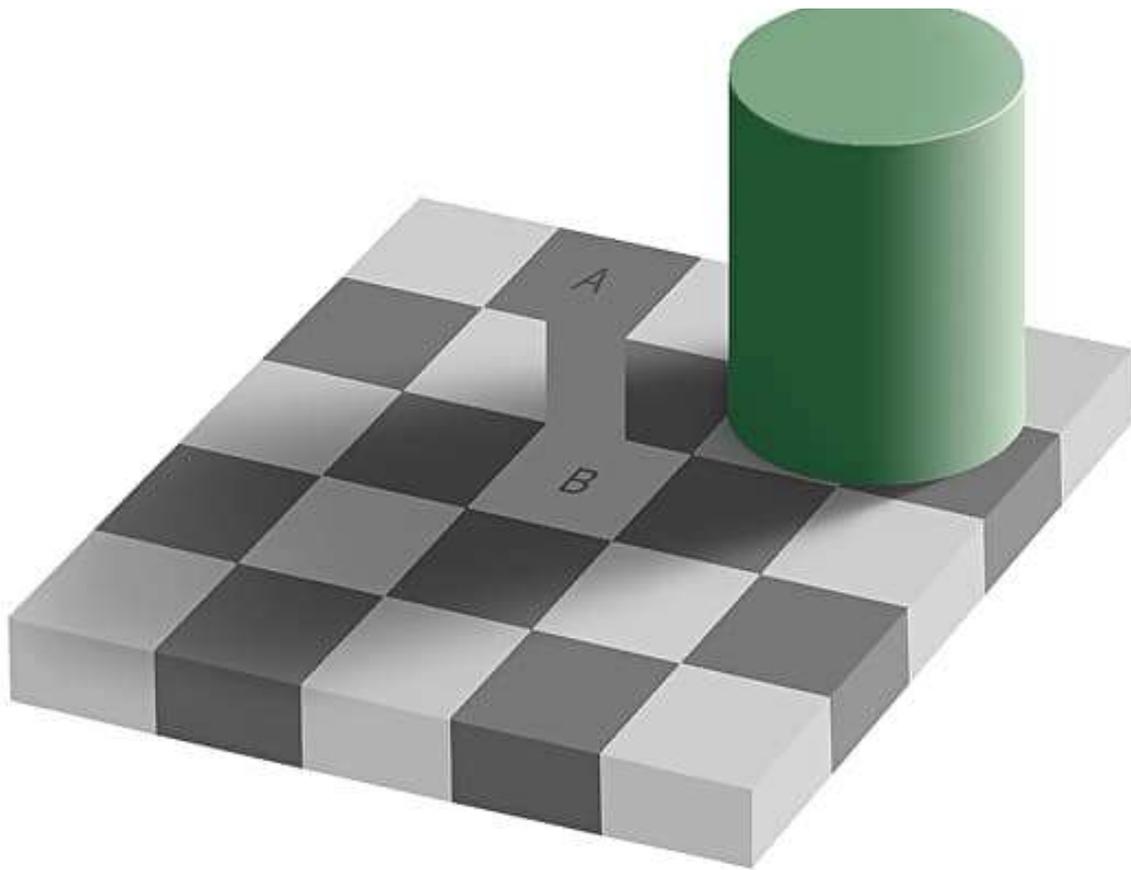
Also, what you see may be influenced by any preconceived ideas you have about a subject. For example, you might be inclined to paint a tree with a little bit greener than is actually there or the sky with a little bit bluer, merely because of your preconceived ideas about these subjects. It is also why we tend to draw the head slightly too large in portraits, as we subconsciously place more importance on the head over other parts of the body.

So it is important that you learn how to *see* like an artist. Break everything down into the basic elements like shape, edge, colour and line. For example, instead of painting a crab, paint the shapes, edges, colours and lines which make up that crab:
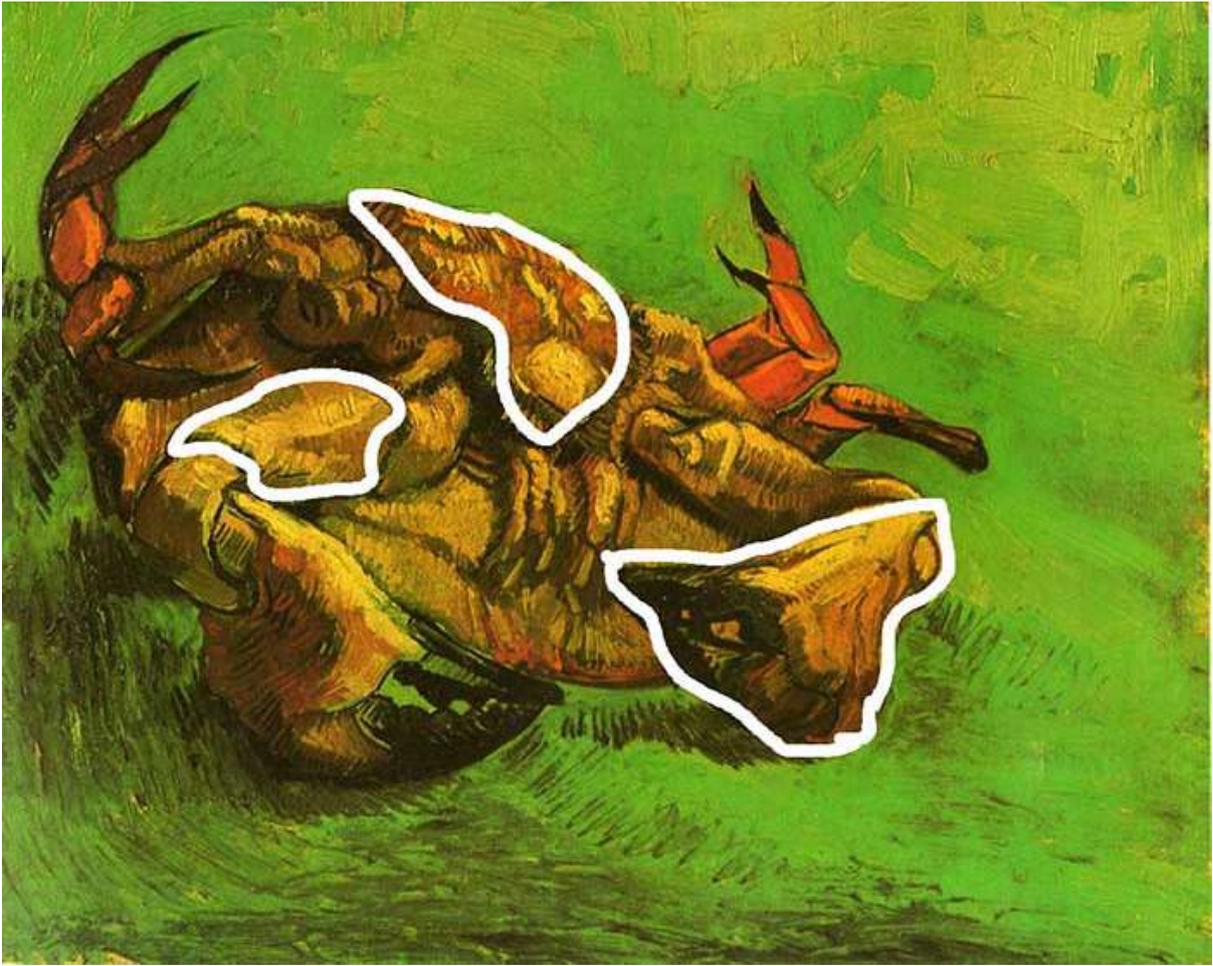
Vincent van Gogh, Crab On Its Back, 1889