

Painting
The
Visual Impression

By
Richard Whitney

Acknowledgments

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Studios at Crescent Pond
100 Chalet Drive
Stoddard, NH 03464
603-446-7476
www.crescentpond.com
studios@crescentpond.com
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Cover: *Morning Light, Surry* (detail), 1988, 39 x 37.
Private Collection.

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Isabelle, 1975, 20 x 16.
Private Collection.

INTRODUCTION

The young painter, who regardless of present popularity would leave a name behind him, must become the patient pupil of nature . . . What are the most sublime productions of the (brush) but selections of some of the forms of nature, and copies of a few of her evanescent effects: and this is the result, not of inspiration, but of long and patient study, under the direction of much good sense.

—John Constable 1

This booklet is a summary of the fundamental ideas that artists use to help them paint the look of nature and the effects of light and shadow. I have written these concepts in a concise manner so that they can be memorized. I have listed them in order of importance (with the essential ideas in bold type) so as to help the working painter logically solve problems. Learning to paint involves learning to see and guidance from a master craftsman is necessary. This booklet should be used as a supplement to studio instruction.

This overview was inspired by the teachings of R. H. Ives Gammell who studied with some of the most skillful painters at the turn of the last century. The ideas presented here have been passed down from master to student for many generations. While studying with Mr. Gammell, I wrote down much that he told me about these principles. I later organized my notes and added to them from my reading to produce this summary.

The first sections on composition and drawing contain many academic ideas that can be very helpful for all artists. The main section of the booklet emphasizes the impressionistic approach to painting. However, I do not mean to imply that this is the only way to paint. Nothing in this booklet should be viewed as absolute law. Advances in the field of painting have often come by breaking the rules.

The impressionist uses the principles of breadth of vision, light and shadow, values, color vibration, lost and found edges, modeling and paint handling. These concepts help him to paint what he sees, not what he knows. Rather than looking at each piece of nature and copying it in great detail, the impressionist looks at the whole subject at once and paints this visual impression of it a broad manner with only a suggestion of detail.

I also discuss how the artist can train his visual memory to help him successfully capture fleeting effects of nature. I have included a section on helpful advice to students and an extensive reading list for further research.

Finally, I have added an essay entitled “Masters of the Past” where I list some very famous artists and many others that I believe deserve to be better known. I have decided not to include living painters for fear of unintentionally offending those that I might omit. I have instead decided to illustrate this booklet with some examples of my oil paintings to show how academic and impressionistic ideas have influenced my work.

It has been the dream of Mr. Gammell and other classical painters that future generations will restore the craft of traditional painting. I hope my booklet will contribute to this end.

—R.W.

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Marion, 1978, 37 x 42.
Private Collection.

COMPOSITION

Selection and combination are learned from nature herself, who constantly presents us with compositions of her own, far more beautiful than the happiest arranged by human skill.

—John Constable²

Concepts

Preserve your initial idea, the first impression of the subject, which inspired you to paint it. Strive for **visual unity**. One idea, one kind of line and shape, one value, one hue and one texture should dominate the picture.

Effective **spotting** can elevate the trivial subject to the monumental. Placing the subject high in the painting can make it more important. Putting it to one side and balancing it with a large area of space can add distinction to the design.

The design should have **carrying power**. It should have a pleasing arrangement of light and dark masses that attracts the viewer's eye from a considerable distance.

Strive for **simplicity of design**. Alfred Stevens said, “Masterpieces are generally simple.”³ A few well-shaped masses should dominate the picture even if the subject is complex. If the composition looks wrong, subtract something from it. Elimination will nearly always improve design.⁴ George Inness advised, “Never put anything on your canvas that isn’t of use, never use a detail unless it means something.”

Divide the painting into **unequal areas** of light and dark masses so that they are pleasing to the eye in their **proportion** to each other. Avoid having equal intervals of measurement as it creates monotony. Try not to put objects in a row but if you have no choice, then subtly vary their shapes, spacing, colors, lighting, etc., to create **rhythm**. Try not to place anything of interest dead center as it cuts the picture in half. Rather, place the subject near the middle or more to one side. If you need to place the subject dead center (a painting of a saint), then make each half of the painting somewhat different from each other so as to create **variety**. Avoid having the outside edge of any object come to the exact corner of the frame. The width of the frame should not repeat any important unit of measurement in the painting.

Simplify the detail within the masses and give the silhouettes interesting and **expressive shapes**. An artist is a distinguished shape-maker.⁶

Check the picture for **balance**. If it is adequately composed, the masses on the left half will balance those on the right half. If it is beautifully composed the top and bottom halves will balance as well. A painting should be able to hang from its center.

Lines convey emotions. Horizontal lines suggest a calm and quiet feeling. Vertical lines convey strength and grandeur. Diagonal lines express energy and motion and dominate dramatic compositions.

Look for a **rhythmic flow of lines**, either real or imaginary, to unite remote parts of the picture.

Create an **entrance** to the picture for the eye to travel to the subject. Use a prominent curve or diagonal line to lead the eye to the subject. Or use a gradation (such as a shadow to light beyond) that gives great depth. The eye should travel in a circuit from the subject to secondary subjects before leaving the painting. Avoid placing an obstacle in the picture that prevents the eye from going beyond it. Don't provide more than one exit for the eye or make the corners of the painting too interesting.

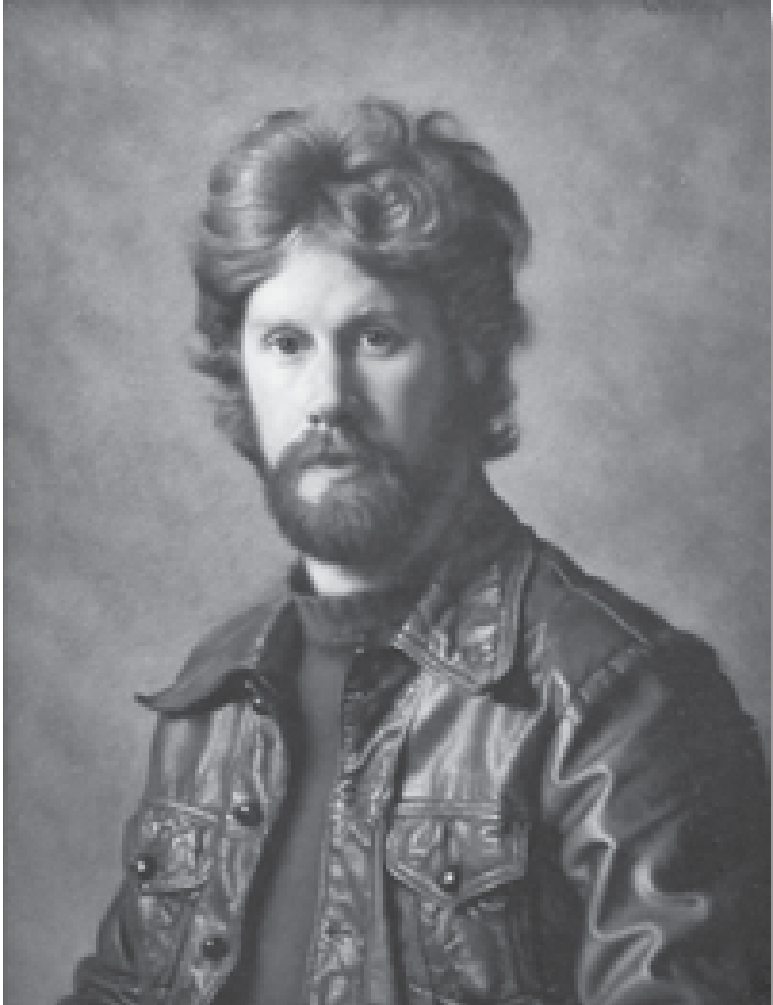
Cutting objects with the frame adds to the feeling of reality (the world continuing beyond the edge of the painting). It helps prevent a painting from looking too centered or composed.

Touch with light the things you wish to emphasize or put dark **accents** next to them. Some artists place the strongest contrast in values near the subject. Others put the source of light within the painting because the eye always seeks the light.

When two masses are very close either join them or clearly separate them. Otherwise, they will create a **halo effect**.

George Inness pointed out, “Don’t forget to put in the harsh note, the accidental. It makes the **contrast** that gives great interest and beauty to the whole.”⁷

A picture obviously composed is badly composed. In a good composition it is as though the parts had been carefully placed in rhythmic relation and then the picture jarred a little so that everything is slightly shifted out of place, thus introducing a play of life between the parts. This **concealment** is an essential element of a beautiful composition.⁸



Sandy, 1976, 9 x 7.
Private Collection.