

COMPOSITION

The traditional format for most painting is the rectangle and it is an artificial convention we accept. How the shapes, lines, tones and colours are arranged in that rectangle is fundamental to the success of the painting.

It is a good idea to take time to analyze the elements of composition in other artists work. In a good painting they are not accidental but as a result of careful thought and the experienced eye of the artist. When looking at a painting try to imagine the lines of the drawing beneath. Look at the proportions of the shapes produced in relation to the rectangle; this is the structure of the painting. Also look at the areas of tone in the composition. Darker areas provide more visual weight than the lighter tones and can therefore alter the proportional balance of the composition. Also look at the lines of perspective. These are often the main composition lines leading your eye into the painting and creating a feeling of depth. Try to identify focal points and work out what creates them. Do the lines of perspective take your eye to a focal point or is it receding layers of colour and tone or maybe a contrasting colour or tone at the actual focal point(s). These elements of composition are present in most paintings. The lines of perspective in Canaletto's paintings take you a wonderful journey along the canals of Venice or to the king's head in Uccello's 'Battle of San Romano'.

'The golden section' refers to an approximate 60% - 40% split in proportions which is visually pleasing. These proportions are often present in successful paintings. In landscape the horizon usually provides the line horizontally with maybe a building or tree providing another vertical divide. In still life these proportions can be manipulated with total control.

Composition is an important element in the artist's craft and requires careful consideration before starting a painting. The best way to develop awareness and the skill of good composition in paintings is by using a sketchbook to collect information and plan your ideas before you start. Quick sketches are often composition statements within themselves. Using different media will also make you aware of different elements eg. pen drawings will deal more with line. Tonal drawings with charcoal or paint wash deal with distribution of tone (light and dark).