

Everyone says they want to loosen up, but how? Here are three simple ways you can use shapes to make your next painting look fresher and more spontaneous.

Don't sweat the small stuff

By Eric Wiegardt

I am always puzzled when someone asks me how I developed my loose painting style, because the word “developed” implies intention. My painting style isn’t something I sought out; it’s simply a reflection of my personality and artistic taste. To me, painting represents the opportunity for emotional release, and in my work that translates into strong brush statements and simplified patterns.

I realized early on that the suggestion of a single stroke can have more visual impact than carefully boned-in multiple strokes. In fact, I found that the more time I spent on getting a painting “just right,” the more likely it was to go flat on me, losing its power and freshness. As I like to remind my students: A fresh yet slightly false statement is better than a tiresomely truthful one. And since watercolor demands freshness over exactitude, it’s the perfect medium for this type of approach.

One simple way I keep my landscape paintings loose and fresh is to focus on shapes, and there are at least three ways I do that: by combining shapes, concentrating on the outside edges of shapes and assigning distinct values to the shapes within the four planes of a landscape.

Try these techniques in your next painting for a more lively and spontaneous image.

Combine Shapes

By painting through the boundaries of adjacent objects you can construct new shape patterns and encourage a bold, free look. For example, the edge of a tree next to the roof of a house can be lost so there’s nothing separating the two shapes. Then, instead of two awkward shapes—the parallelogram of the roof and the circle of the tree’s foliage—next to one another, you now have one, more interesting combined shape.

At first, you may find it difficult to look past the boundaries of objects because of your strong subconscious desire to stop at an object’s edge. But as an artist, you’re about the business of creating your own sense of visual patterns. Don’t be afraid to make new shapes rather than simply render shapes exactly as they’re presented to you in nature. These creative opportunities are what make painting satisfying.

Remember: Lying in a painting is OK; logic and reason don’t necessarily make for good art. When I’m combining shapes I sometimes have to shift the value of one object slightly so that

it matches more closely the value of an adjoining object. I count on the viewer’s eye to fill in the boundaries of the tree and roof at their juncture.

In our example, the edge between the two objects is considered a soft, or lost edge. A soft edge can always be tightened up by painting a hard edge or line over the soft edge to create a beautiful painterly look. But it’s difficult to soften a hard edge in watercolor without resorting to scrubbing and lifting, so look for these opportunities to combine shapes into larger ones from the start.

Large shapes are the armatures of a painting; detail is built upon them. A painting tends to look fractured when you have too many small shapes. Be sure to construct a few large shapes for the foundation of your painting; you can always introduce detail later.

One other advantage of painting through the boundaries of your objects is that it creates the sense of reflected color and hence, natural light. In this case, the green wash of the tree mixing with the red of the roof create the effect of bounced light.



Cap hed to come Crab I (watercolor on paper, 22x30) is a great example of connecting shapes. Notice how not one crab stands alone. In the initial wash of red, I allowed the color to run through and outside the subject and then reconstructed the crab shapes on top later. This helped to unify the subject into one big shape, instead of crab, crab, crab, crab, crab.



Combined Shapes Create Unity In the upper right-hand corner of *St. Remy, France* (watercolor on paper, 20x16), I connected the two yellow buildings into one shape. Since this isn't the area of dominance, there's no point in commanding attention here, which two separate shapes would do. Also, the two red coats on the far left are done with the same wash of red, and the suggested figure on the far right under the awning is connected to the surroundings.

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This process can be frustrating for someone who wants a neat, completed look as the painting progresses. If you paint all over the paper and rapidly, as I do, the painting will tend to look out of control as you work. But as long as you haven't lost your pattern of whites, the painting should progress well. Painting this way takes some faith to see through to the finish, but it's well worth the effort when you add bits of detail at the end and see the final "snap" of the finished piece.

Focus on the Outside Edges of Shapes

As a Pacific Northwest native, I was in unfamiliar territory many years ago during a *plein air* demonstration in Florida: palm trees. The demo was taking a nosedive fast, when I heard one student softly remark to another that so-and-so (I recognized the name of the well-respected artist so my ears perked up) said, "Don't get lost in the middle of your shape; the outside edge is more important." Extricating myself with dignity, I acted as if I hadn't heard the

Dos and Don'ts for Combining Shapes



Don'ts

Disjointed Shapes Create Visual Discomfort:

Here the juxtaposition of the round tree and parallelogram roof leads to disunity.

Separation of Shapes Still Not Ideal: To solve the problem, I constructed a more interesting tree shape and overlapped it with the roof, but I still treated the objects as two separate shapes, evidenced by the white "halo" between them.



Dos

Mingled Shapes Add Energy: Here I ran the green wash of the tree directly into the red roof, allowing the two colors to mingle. Now I have one better shape, an indication of reflected color and a soft edge. I wasn't overly concerned about indicating the lost corner of the roof; the viewer's eye will subconsciously do the work.

Hard Edges Create Distinction: I could have easily stopped with the previous example, and been happy, but I took it a step further here by "pulling out" the roof from the tree with a darker value. Soft edges are easy to tighten up, as you can see here, but hard watercolor edges are difficult to soften.

Cap hed to come Created on location, this scene at my parent's home presented the dilemma facing all *plein-air* painters: a short time to paint before the light changed. I focused on grouping the small flower shapes into masses of flower patterns to strengthen and simplify the composition. I carefully considered the outside edge of the flower masses so as not to create a repetitive pattern. The inside was accomplished with flat washes. In general, the ground plane is darker than the sky to help it lie flat. The dark tree shapes rise vertically from the ground plane. Taking liberty with the model I present in the article, I lightened the value of the flowering scotchbroom for dominance in *Scotchbroom & Tideflats* (watercolor on paper, 16x20). Lies mixed in with truth make for a great painting.



of us work from are at best half truths—colors and value patterns are at the mercy of the camera's limitations and the dyes used in the photo lab. If you try to copy by rote the colors and values from photos, your paintings will wind up looking flat and lifeless. Understanding the proper value relationships of the planes in a landscape can help you overcome the shortcomings of your reference photos.

Generally speaking, the landscape can be divided into four planes: sky, ground, hill and trees. In order for these planes to have identi-

ties distinct from each other, they need to be assigned a separate value that doesn't infringe on the values of the other planes. If the ground plane is assigned the same value as the sky, for example, it can be confusing because there's no visual separation between the two planes.

In diagram B at ●●●●●, the sun is overhead, so the mass with the lightest value is the sky. An interesting note: On an overcast day, the value of the sky in relation to the other masses is lighter than if there was a clear blue sky. This is because the thin cloud mass refracts the

The Wrong & Right Way to Paint Shapes



Lost in the Interior: In my attempt to describe a palm tree, I searched within the shape for identity when I should have been looking to the shape's perimeter for guidance. The result is a tattered, explosive look.

Out of the Fray: Here I focused my design efforts on the outside edge of the shape while simplifying the inside with a flat wash. The shape's perimeter will sufficiently carry the character of the palm.

remark and concentrated on the outlines of the palm trees. By squinting at the subject, I was able to block out the extraneous interior detail and focus instead on the outer edges. Although the painting got off to a rough start, in the end, it was much improved thanks to the lesson I had learned.

Try indicating your subject using a very simple flat wash and just a suggestion of texture and detail. Know that the outside dimensions will carry the character of the object. You can then complete the picture, using bold, fluid brush statements within the shape for a loose effect or render the interior with more detail for a more defined effect.

Assign Values to Landscape Planes

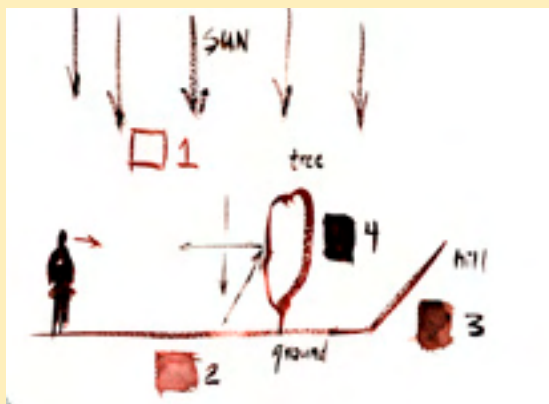
The next step in creating shapes for a loose effect is to define the shapes by assigning a value to each. A shape only has meaning when there is a value shift from one shape to the next, otherwise you have nothing more than a collection of calligraphic lines and textures. This same principle applies to the often overlooked masses of shapes of the landscape planes.

While conceptual artists enjoy creating their own unique value structures—those that give them the most visual pleasure—realist painters tend to feel more comfortable assigning representational values from the natural world to the elements in their work. What can make things difficult for realist painters in this endeavor is that the photo references so many



Cap hed to come The fish processing plant down the road from me offers an exciting number of shapes to design into patterns. Note how a unifying initial wash combined the rectangular totes and bins into larger shapes, setting the stage for the free, expressive calligraphic strokes that would help delineate one tote from another in *Jessie's, Ilwaco* (watercolor on paper, 22x30).

How to Assign Values to Landscape Planes



Follow the Light: In this simplified model, the light source—the sun—is overhead, so the sky is the lightest value (number one). Since the ground shape receives the light from above, it has a lower value (number two). The hill is at an incline and doesn't receive direct light from above, so it has a slightly darker value (number three). The tree receives bounced light from the ground and has the darkest value (number four).



The Plan in Action: Using the value plan described in diagram A, I assigned the proper values to the large shapes in each landscape plane. The distinct value shifts of these planes need to be easily recognizable, otherwise the distinction of the planes could be lost. This is what makes the sky go overhead, the ground lie flat, the hills incline, and the verticals, in this case trees, go up. (The same principle can work for buildings). Note that the sky, ground, hill and trees all read properly without any unnecessary detail.

Slight shifts in value give character and interest to each plane, but these value shifts should be kept within the assigned value range, otherwise you risk confusion as to where one plane ends and another begins.



The Wrong Way: In this example, the ground plane is not sufficiently darker than the sky, causing it to look like a continuation of the sky and not the horizontal plane that it is.

The trees and house float in space. Overworking the grass detail only compounds the problem.



The Right Way: In this example there is a proper value shift from the sky to the ground plane. Now the ground lies flat and comes forward, helped by a few, sparse details in the foreground. The sky goes up and overhead because it's lighter than the ground plane.



Cap hed to come I ran a wash over the boundary of the two boats in the bottom left-hand corner of *Madeira* (watercolor on paper, 22x30). By connecting the boats I created a large and much better shape, a soft edge and a sense of reflected color—all leading to the feeling of looseness. The palms are nothing more than flat washes of intense, unconventional red. I focused on the characteristic outside edge to give identity to the palms.

light from above, much like an opaque bathroom window catches the light from the bathroom and tends to look illuminated, while a clear window allows the light to pass through. But whether you're painting an overcast or sunny day, the sky is still the light source, so it's assigned our lightest value (number one).

The second lightest value (number two) will be assigned to the ground plane because it receives the full impact of the light source from straight overhead. In order for the ground to appear flat and below the sky in our model, the ground needs to be a darker value than the sky. For example, even though we think of yellow as a light color, in order for a field of sunflowers to lie flat against a blue sky, the ground plane of the flowers needs to be a darker value than the sky. Too often I've seen workshop students struggle with identifying a ground plane by heaping on loads of grass swatches, when the problem actually lies in the fact that their ground value is the same as the sky.

The other midtone (number three) goes to the hill mass. Since the hill—in this case, an incline in our midground—is at an incline and not re-



Cap hed to come To simplify the painting, the shadow of the building on the right is incorporated into the figures in *Montepulciano, Italy* (watercolor on paper, 22x30). Whenever I paint masses of people like this I do all I can to avoid the figure, figure, figure look. In this case, the figures are all interconnected so that no one stands alone, creating one large, simple shape. The outside edge of the figure mass shape gives identity to the figures while the inside splashes of color attract the viewers eye.



Cap hed to come When painting still lifes, I connect like flowers as much as possible. In *Roses* (watercolor on paper, 30x36) I especially simplified the dark foliage mass by doing the majority of it in one big wash. I focused on the outside pattern to carry the character of the leaves.



Cap hed to come Water is a wild card when it comes to assigning a value to its mass. Water typically becomes even lighter in value as it recedes than ground does, and even darker as it comes forward. In the distance water picks up the lighter reflection of the sky; in the foreground the darker value of the depths are realized. Generally speaking though, the value should fall somewhere around a number two, as it does in *The Derelict* (watercolor on paper, XXXXX).



Cap hed to come In this painting of a popular recreational activity on our beaches, very little detail is used to show the planes of the beach, sky and water. I made the sandbar darker than the sky so it would lie flat and used an even darker value for the figures (vertical plane) so they would appear to rise up from the sand (ground plane). The sky goes up and over because it is the lightest value in *Clamdiggers* (watercolor on paper, 18x24).

ceiving the full impact of the overhead sun, the value is a step darker than the ground plane.

The darkest value in this example (number four) is reserved for the tree masses. As light shines down from overhead, it hits the ground and then bounces onto the body of the tree mass, where it gets absorbed and dispersed. Assigning a dark value to the trees makes them appear vertical. Understanding how this principle works, you can make a large dark mass look like a row of trees without putting in a single branch.

Here's a little test to see how well you've assimilated these tips for assigning values to landscape planes: Which is darker, a black asphalt road or a white house in shadow? The white house in shadow is, because the asphalt is a horizontal plane receiving the most light and the house is in shadow, receiving reflected light from the ground.

As in the case presented above, the answers

in real life painting situations aren't always obvious, so you'll need to think through your value plan before you start. The best way to see these value mass relationships is to go out and observe them from life. Squinting makes masses easier to see. Since nature can be complex, deviations from the model I've outlined do happen, especially when the sun is not straight overhead. A sun low in the sky, for example, can easily make the ground plane lighter against angry thunderclouds.

In the end, painting loose involves more than a flick of the wrist. Understanding good shape construction by painting through the boundaries of objects and creating new shapes, defining the character of an object by focusing on the perimeter of the shape, and assigning the proper values to the landscape planes have kept me from falling into the niggling detail habit. With a little practice, you can use these concepts to loosen up, too. ▣



Watch Eric Wiegardt demonstrate his painting process at www.watercolorartistmagazine.com/wiegardt.