

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.