Details and "little bits"

Composition: Balancing Complexity and Simplicity

A few weeks ago, Fred McCormick, a friend and painting colleague, sent an email in which he wrote about how he had begun distinguishing between two kinds of details in a painting: the essential details and those he called "little bits." He suggested it could be a topic for a newsletter.

His timing was perfect as the topic is similar to a subject that has been of recent interest to me: using varied amounts and kinds of details to balance areas of complexity and simplicity in a painting.

The topic of details has been mentioned in previous newsletters (see box) but this newsletter is dedicated solely to the subject. I'll briefly review composition, define details, explain how to use them to create a hierarchy of complexity and simplicity in a painting, and will finish with several examples of paintings.

(You can see Fred's work at: https://www.fredricmccormick.com/)

All about details.

More information about details can be found in the following newsletters:

May-June 2017
July-Aug 2018
Nov-Dec 2020
Nov-Dec 2022

Previous newsletters can be downloaded or viewed on my website at:
http://jmacdonald.com/newsletter-contact

PaintTube Videos

Interested in my paintings process? In *"Dynamic Landscapes"* and *"Poetic Landscapes"* I describe it in detail. If you're interested in learning more about values–what they are, how to identify them, and how to use them in your paintings, check out the video, *"Mastering Values."*

For more information and to order the videos, click HERE.

If you've been enjoying these newsletters and are able and willing to make a donation, any contribution would be appreciated. If you've just begun receiving them, feel free to peruse them first.

To make a donation, click HERE.

To the many of you who've already contributed~ *Thank you!*

Composition and Details

The composition is the most important element of the painting. When composing, we first identify the two to five largest shapes, their overall (foundation) values, and the proper relationships between those values. Then we arrange the shapes in a pleasing design to create a balance of variety and unity which directs the eye to the most important area of the painting – the area that carries the message of the painting – the focal point or focal area.

Being the most important element in a painting, it's best to begin the painting process with the composition and save details until later, often until the very last few brushstrokes. However, this doesn't mean we don't need to think about details while composing the scene.

Assuming we've been successful in our initial two steps and are pleased with the composition, the next step is to determine a hierarchy of complexity and simplicity among the shapes. If there are five major shapes in a composition, each should have a different level of complexity determined by the subject matter, the mood, and the focal point. What creates complexity? Strong contrasts in values, edges, color, and yes, the amount and handling of details.

The composition is the most important element of a painting and details are the least important. But how you handle details can either strengthen or weaken the composition. After composing a scene, I don't begin painting individual details but I do spend time thinking about how I can vary them, in number and in kind, to ensure the major shapes of the composition vary in their complexity. Below is scene and the resulting plein air painting. Although I added most of the details towards the end of the painting, I had decided early in the painting process which details I needed to keep and which I could simplify or eliminate.
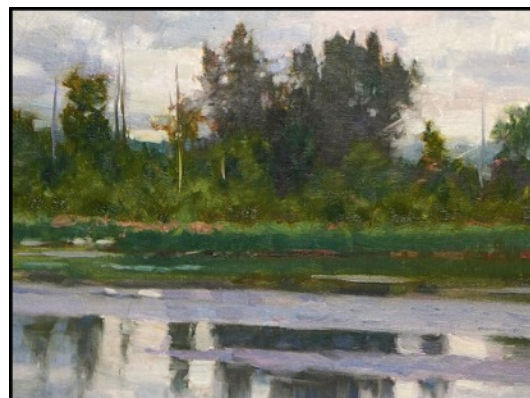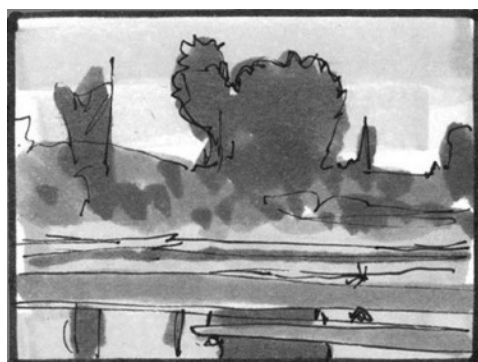
Details versus "little bits"

We tend to use the word "detail" to mean any small mark in a painting that represents an object or texture. Details can be subtly and loosely suggested or sharply and strongly defined. But not all details are equal. Highly descriptive, sharp-edged details with strong value contrasts will draw the eye with much greater emphasis than softly suggestive, loose details. Consequently, it's most effective to put descriptive details in or near the focal area and use more suggestive and ambiguous details (Fred's "little bits") in the periphery of the painting. Drawing the eye to the edges of the canvas by inserting multiple strong details there risks the danger of creating multiple focal points and leading the eye off the canvas entirely. Details at the edges must be subtle. They can be nothing more than a "little bit" of pigment, abstract in description, and simple!

Here are three details from Inness's painting. The tree trunk was taken from near the focal area, the figure from the mid ground, which is further from the focal area, and an unidentified object from the foreground. Each is painted differently. The tree trunk is tightly rendered with line and small variations of value and color. The figure is more loosely painted with few strokes of two hues. And the unknown object in the foreground is an abstract mark made with a single hue. This object is unrecognizable because it's *meant to be*. Being a single hue with broken edges and not far from the value of the background color, it doesn't attract the eye.

Below is an example from the contemporary Ukrainian painter, Denys Gorodnychyi. The detail of the cloud in the sky is the most loosely painted. It's suggestive and simple. Those taken from the foreground are only slightly more defined, with a greater variety of color contrasts and small notes of lights and darks within a narrow value range. The detail from the middle section (the structures) is the most tightly rendered. Gorodnychyi's and Inness's paintings were created more than a century apart but follow the same rule: details are tight and descriptive at the focal area but become looser and more suggestive towards the edges.

Denys Gorodnychyi, *(unknown title)*

A Hierarchy of Detailed Areas: Complexity vs. Simplicity

Nature (whether seen plein air or in a photo) usually gives us too many details and with too many areas with equal amounts of detail. If we copy those two traits into our painting, it will be visually overwhelming and the focal point will be lost. Occasionally, there are not enough details in a scene: if each major shape is equally simple–devoid of any details or small marks–and we simply copy that, the painting will appear unfinished and boring.

Details in a painting should vary in two ways:

1. The amount of details in each major (foundation) area in a painting should vary. Never put the same amount of detail in each foundation area.

2. How the details are rendered should also vary. The closer a detail is to the focal point, the stronger it should be, with greater value, edge and color contrasts. Near the focal point, details can be tightly rendered and descriptive. Away from the focal point, especially in the foreground and near the edges of the painting, details should be softer and suggestive with less contrasts. It doesn't matter if "little bits" are unrecognizable–just don't let them attract the eye too strongly.

Below is a simple example. The composition of this painting by George Innes can be reduced to three large areas: the upper sky, lower ground, and a band of bushes, buildings, trees, etc. The sky (#1) is the simplest area, devoid of details but containing subtle color contrasts. The snowy ground (#2) contains a few scatter, loose, and ambiguous little bits, attracting the eye only enough to bring it into the painting, to the diagonal of the fence and then to the busy background (#3), where the eye settles at the focal point. Three areas, each with differing amounts of details and varying in how they are rendered. It works beautifully.


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George Inness, 1892, *Home at Montclair*

Inness's painting is above. Below, using Photoshop, I've eliminated the details in the ground. It's now as simple as the sky. Notice how the equal simplicity of sky and ground confuses the eye–it doesn't know where to go first, sky or ground? And with the foreground empty of detail, the painting now feels somewhat unfinished and somewhat boring. It needs those "little bits."
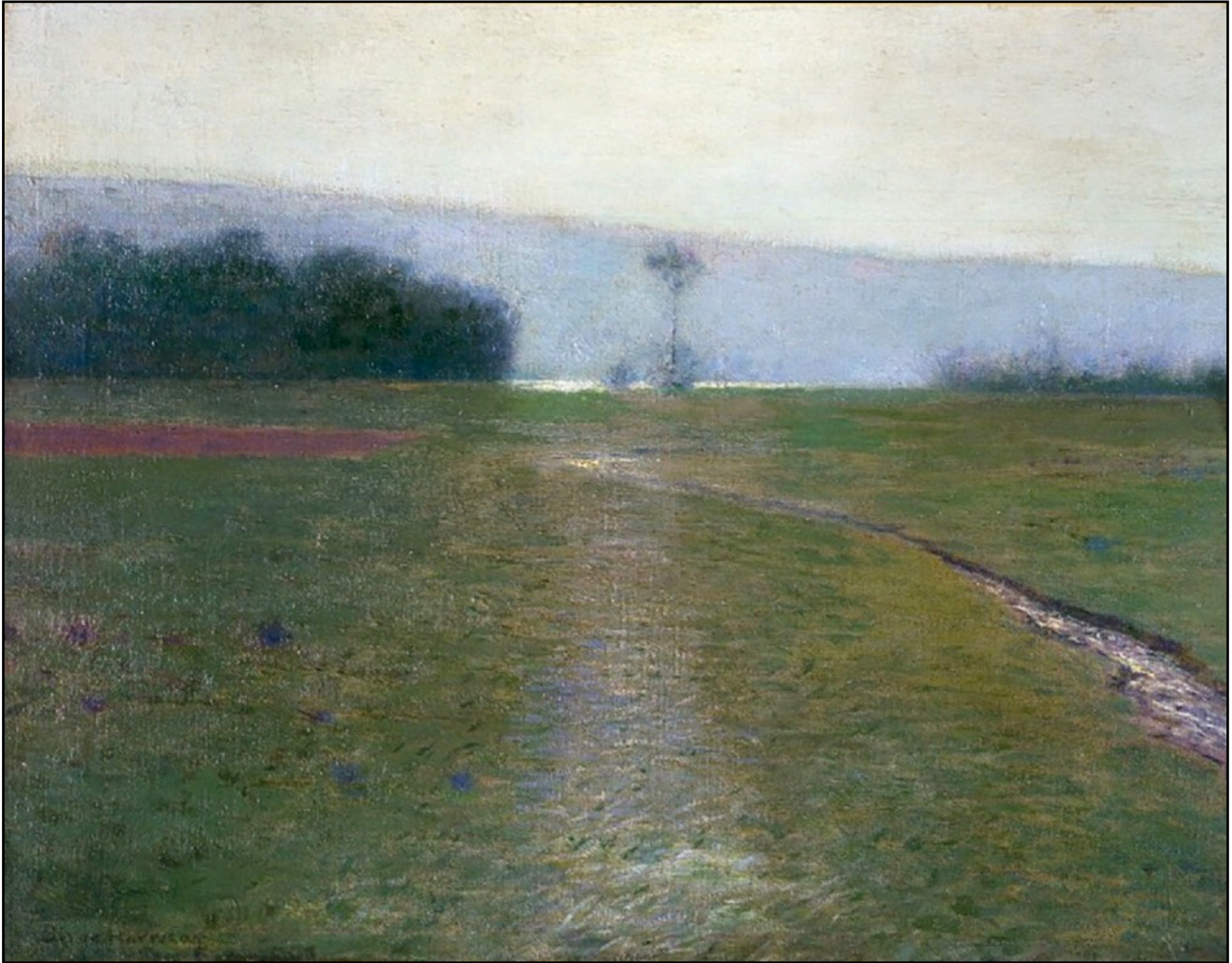
Birge Harrison, *Frosty Morning near New Hope*

In Harrison's painting, there's a dramatic difference between the handling of the sky, background hill and the foreground. In the foreground, by using suggestive details with soft edges and close values, Birge creates the illusion of much detail and texture without attracting the eye too strongly. The small area of detail on the far right and the subtle path in the center lead the eye towards the focal area in the background, where the greatest value contrasts and strongest graphic shapes reside. The sky is very simple. Any detail there could have led the eye up and off the top of the painting.
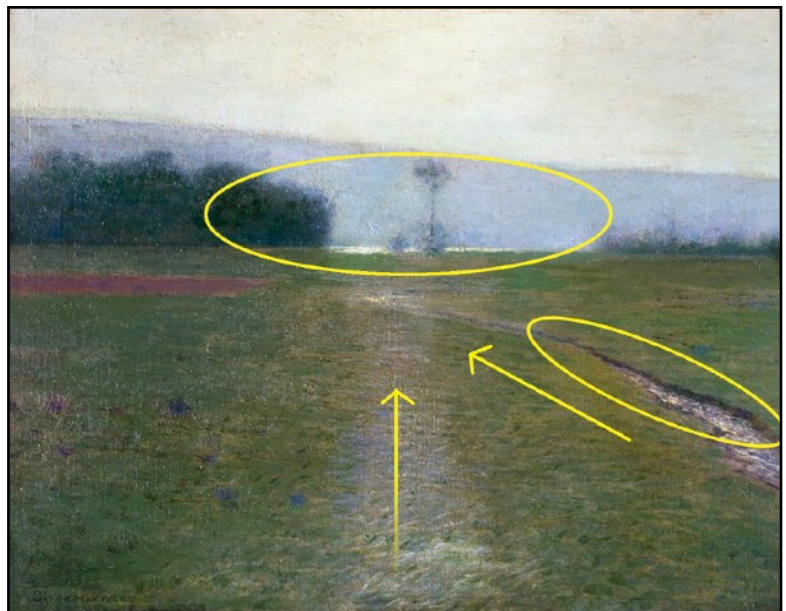
Vladimir Kirillov, *It's Time*

A similar example by the contemporary painter Vladimir Kirillov. Despite the detail in the grass and shadowed masses in the foreground, the values are simple with subtle color contrasts. The eye is ultimately drawn to the greater contrasts in the mid ground where the strong graphic shapes help create the focal point. Here, as in Birge's painting, the sky is reduced to a few hues of nearly one value–a simplicity that keeps the eye from being drawn up and off the canvas. Unless a sky contains the focal point, it's often best to keep it simple!

Photos or Plein Air: Simplicity and Complexity

When working from photos, we soon learn that the camera usually exaggerates value contrasts and omits subtle color relationships. But it excels in capturing details in every part of the scene. When every square inch of a photo is full of detail, it will need simplification to successfully be translated into a painting. And conversely (and more rarely), if too many areas are entirely devoid of detail, it may be necessary to add or invent some.

   The same principals apply when painting plein air. The eye and the camera BOTH give us far too much detail yet paintings need areas of simplicity to rest the eye and to make detailed areas appear stronger. (This is why squinting is so important–strong details are softened and subtle details disappear. Squinting helps us evaluate which details are important and which are not.) Of course, the *location* of the strong versus soft details in the scene are rarely exactly what the painting needs. Areas often need to be changed in the type, amount, and placement of details.

In the photo above, notice the overwhelming amount of detail, both in variety and strength. Detail will need to be simplified or eliminated in some areas to create a painting that works.

Below are three examples: two using photos and one created plein air, with an explanation of the choices that were made to establish a balance between simplicity and complexity.

Photo to Painting 1

Although there is far more sharply defined detail in the middle of this scene than the scene pictured on the next page, it has the same problem: a sky and foreground of equal simplicity.

In this painting, I kept the foreground as simple as possible, with a hint of a path, very close values, and subtle warm and cool color contrasts. The sky carries a bit more detail with stronger value and color contrasts. Whether the sky or foreground is the simplest doesn't matter; it's crucial that they *differ*. Equal simplicity or complexity–equal amounts of detail–is the problem.

Photo to Painting 2

All detail is confined to the mid-ground in this scene. The sky and foreground were nearly featureless. In order to differentiate them, (and break the monochromatic quality of the photo), I wanted to use both detail and color temperature contrasts.

In the painting, the sky was kept very close in value but featured a variety of color temperature contrasts.

Adding a distant hillside with suggested fields and trees and painting a few small, slightly more descriptive details in the upper foreground, created a subtle but noticeable difference between the sky and ground. It also created a greater sense of depth, a depth which the photo lacked.

Strengthening the value contrasts in the mid-ground building and trees was all that was needed to push the focal point to that area.

Plein Air – Painting 3

Like the woods photo above, this scene was overwhelming in the amount of detail. From the six cropped samples below, you can see that every area was busy with detail. In order to create a hierarchy of simple and complex areas and a strong focal point, I needed to make changes.
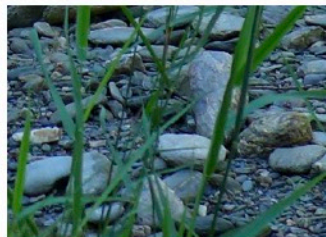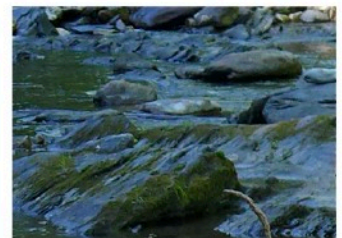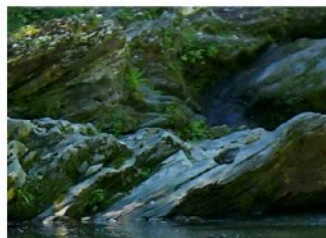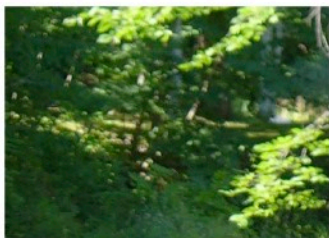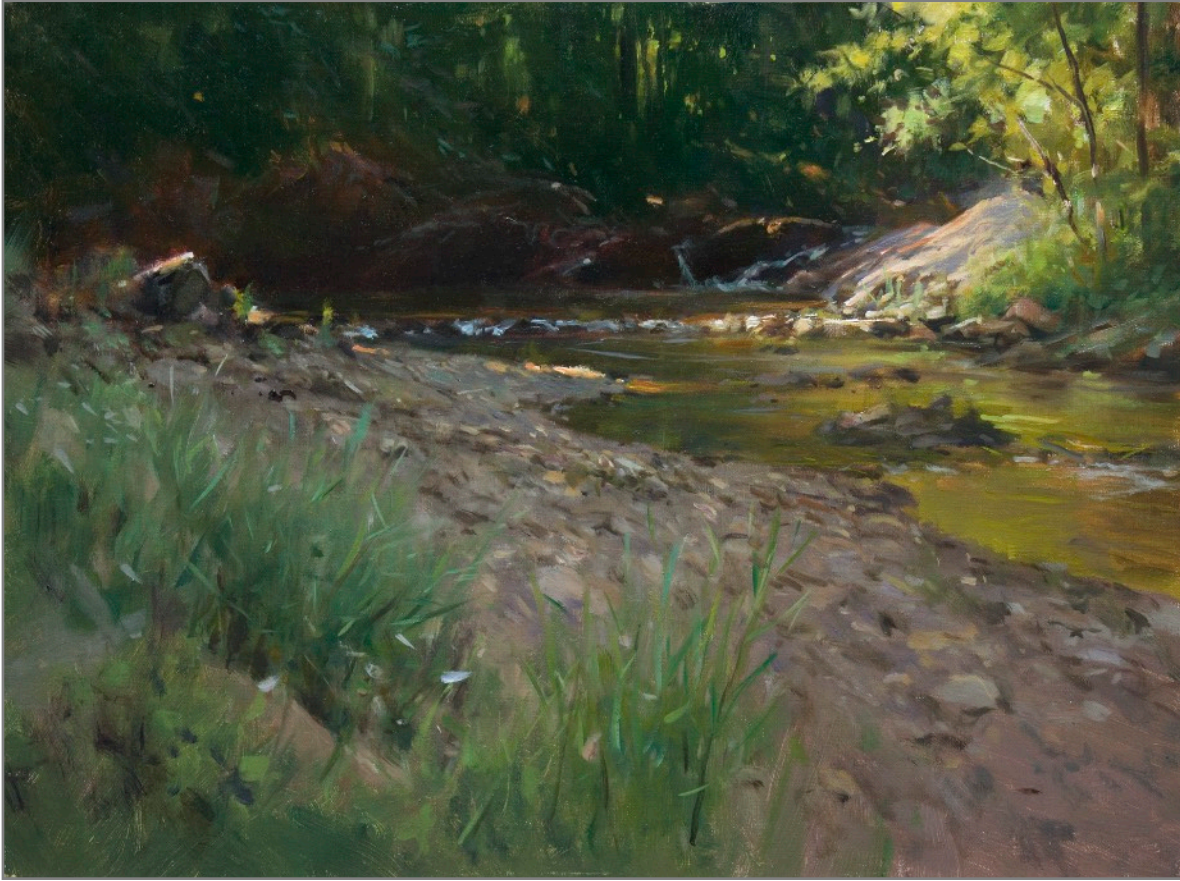
Placing the focal point in the background, the entire bottom half of the painting was simplified. I needed to suggest a beach full of rocks without describing each individual stone, which would attract the eye too strongly. The rocks, especially in the very foreground, were loosely painted with close values and a few details. The masses of grass were handled similarly.

In the background, the details in the top trees and the rocks below were dramatically simplified in the left side of the painting while only descriptive details were placed in the upper right hand corner and in the thin line of white water leading to the light on the rock at left. I simplified the water (eliminating many of the rocks) and created an overall value difference between the beach and the water.

Many of these changes were worked out in my mind while creating a tonal sketch.

Details and "little bits," complexity and simplicity: both are hallmarks of successful paintings!
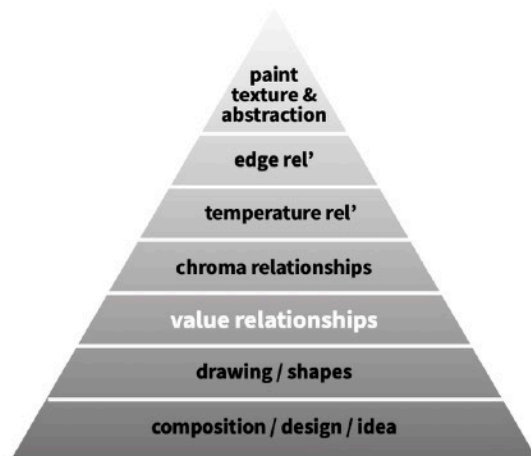
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An alternate version of the pyramid.

In response to the previous newsletter sent in early November of last year, I received an email from **Alex Kelly** (www.alexkellyart.co.uk), a British painter and instructor. He had noticed the pyramid in the newsletter (right) that illustrates a hierarchy among the components of a painting. He, too, uses a similar pyramid in his workshops to convey the same point. His version is below.

Details
Edges
Color
Values
Composition
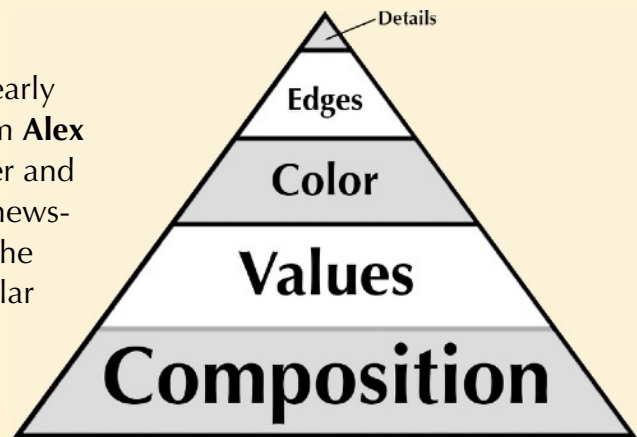
Values as a foundation

The pyramid hierarchy (see diagram right) is one way of breaking down the painting process into discrete aspects. In practice we are often applying these aspects all at the same time as we build a painting. This is especially true in the alla prima approach; working wet-into-wet paint in one session to complete a finished painting or area of a painting.

Value comes near the base of the pyramid as it usually has the most significance, visually, in conveying form and light in representational painting.

paint texture & abstraction
edge rel'
temperature rel'
chroma relationships
value relationships
drawing / shapes
composition / design / idea

Two ways of expressing the same concept. Take your pick! (Thanks, Alex.)

Words of Wisdom

"Can anything be sadder than work left unfinished? Yes, work never begun."
— **Christina Rossetti, poet**

"Use the talents you possess for the woods would be a very silent place if no birds sang except the best."
— **Henry van Dyke, poet**

A Happy (belated) New Year to everyone!

Happy Painting!