





BEYOND Picture-Perfect

Push past the boundaries of your photo references for more creative paintings.

By Eric Wiegardt



Expressive Line and Color *Best Friends* (watercolor on paper, 22x30) started with a very expressive drawing. Notice how I distorted the awnings above the figures in order to provide a more interesting pattern of shapes. To incorporate a surprising design element, I used the warmest and most intense colors on the periphery of the painting rather than at the focal point. I felt like the dynamic figures and strong value contrast around the center of interest more than compensated for the effect.

By definition, art reflects a conscious use of skill and imagination to describe a visual world as it could be, not necessarily as it is. Even the best photorealists inject their paintings with unique personal interpretations of their subjects. Too often, however, I see paintings that are simply renderings of photographs, without any evidence of the artists' self-expression. Although the camera can provide a great advantage, it also has the potential to mislead and stifle. If we can learn to free up our thinking when working from photo references, we'll have more fun and get better results. Here are seven ways to move beyond copying toward more creative painting.

1 Distort the Line

I don't think we should be overly conscientious about our draftsmanship. Indeed, many of the Old Masters' paintings show passages of reworking to find the "right line." Of course, the right line may be true to the subject or it may be a distortion.

In general, I like to see a bit of the artist in a painting, and the changes evident in the drawing contribute to this insight into his or her vision. As long as the overall message is skillfully delivered, these slight deviations in exactitude can be tolerated, or even encouraged. For me, personal expression is far more desirable in a painting than a precise rendering of a scene or an object. If I make an errant line in my own work, I leave it there as a guide for a better one. By the time the painting is finished, the line isn't a distraction; it simply adds character to the piece.

2 Adjust Shadows and Light

Whether we're painting from life or from photographs, values generally need to be adjusted from what we see in order to create a better design. When a camera is pointed at a scene, it takes a reading of the available light, usually measuring it at the center of the image area. All of the other light and dark areas in the scene are affected by this light reading. If the center of the image is a dark area, then light values in other areas will probably be too light in the resulting photograph; if the center of the image is lighter, the dark values elsewhere will likely be too dark.

A similar effect can occur when painting *en plein air*: Our pupils may constrict so much in bright sunlight that a shadow can look dark and colorless. When we move into the shadows, our eyes dilate, and we find that the values aren't really so dark after all and we're able to see more forms. In other words, values are determined by the viewer's perspective; they aren't constants. Painting values the way they appear in real life or from a photo can actually be detrimental to good design. It's OK to "lie" in our work and make a roof lighter than it truly is or make the sidewalk darker than it appears in order to make a more dramatic painting.





Value Play As you can see, the organization of values in *Villefranche France* (watercolor on paper, 22x30) doesn't reflect the values of the reference photo. Instead, I chose to make the ground plane the lightest value in order to strengthen the area of dominance around the figures. I also made the water a darker value than it appears in the photo. In addition, I distorted the drawing of the figures for a more lively effect.



3 Re-Organize Shapes

In general, photos contain too much information, accentuating more detail than we want to—or should—include in our paintings. One way to condense and organize the material is to make adjoining shapes the same value, simultaneously creating new, bigger and better shapes and eliminating smaller shapes that can be a distraction.

4 Pump Up the Color

Cameras distort color, not only in the light areas, but especially in the shadows. Resist the temptation to default to a blue-black color in the shadows, which kills the sense of light. Instead, add more color; in particular, turn to the warm side of the palette. Cadmium red mixed with a little burnt umber, for example, can make an unexpected, but beautiful, warm dark. In addition, lighten the values of the darks in the shadows to achieve luminosity.

Remember, as artists, we're in the business of entertaining ourselves first and foremost—not of documenting reality. The colors in our paintings don't have to be realistic in order to look natural; we should allow for more expressive color all around. By capitalizing on gray colors outside the area of dominance, we can give the more intense colors in our focal area greater meaning and power.



Unexpected Color Even though the reference photo for *The Suit Salesman* (opposite; watercolor on paper, 12x16) indicated black for the darks—the suits, in particular—I didn’t believe it. I took the opportunity to create a surprise by choosing unexpected colors instead. For example, the suit in the upper right hand corner has red mixed into the blue. In general, I opted for more color variety in all of the hanging suits and the suit of the salesman himself. Making the value of the suits slightly lighter allowed for such a range of color interpretations.

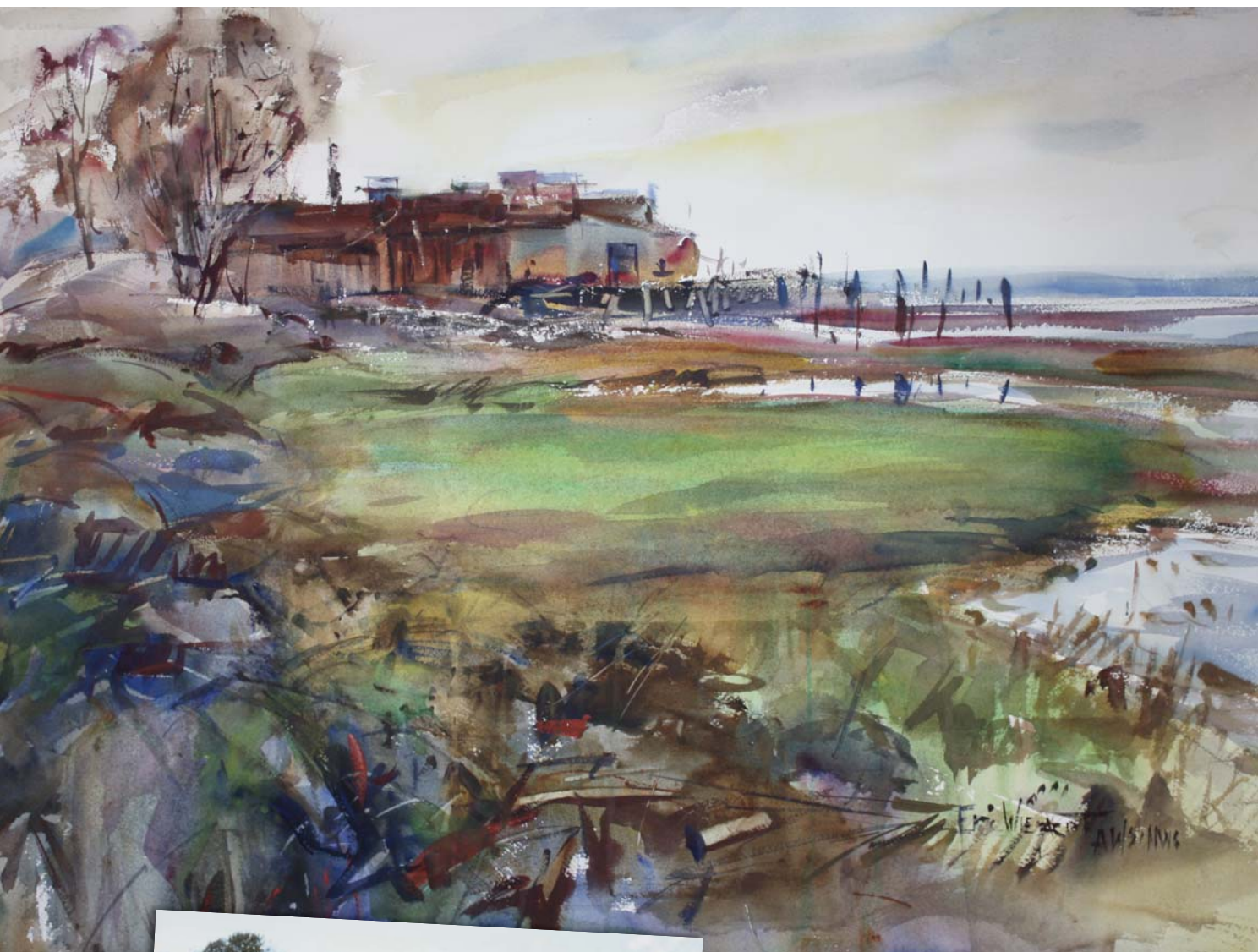
Hard Vs. Soft Edges In *St. Remy, France* (left; watercolor on paper, 20x16), the hardest, crispest edges were reserved for the figures. (Remember: figures don’t need to be anatomically correct to be credible.) The other hard edges represented in the photo were sacrificed in order to draw attention to the people—the center of interest. I left the corners of the painting to the imagination of the viewer, which can be, at times, better than anything I could paint anyway.

5 Vary Edges

The camera doesn’t see as the human eye does; it records details evenly across the surface of the photo so that every edge is hard. When we look at a scene in real life, however, we see sharp detail only at the point where our eyes are focused. Relying too heavily on their reference photos, many watercolorists paint hard edges across the entire picture plane, weakening their area of dominance. Hard edges should be reserved for the focal area, not used for every detail. Of course, hard edges mean very little by themselves. Soft edges not only provide a foil to the hard edges, they also encourage the eye to flow easily through the painting, allowing the eye to land effortlessly back on the area of dominance.



“As artists, we can alter reality, selecting only those elements in a scene that work to our advantage.”



Object Dominance In *Oysterville Cannery 2* (above; watercolor on paper, 22x30), I was painting the old cannery. I had to be careful not to let the foreground get away from me and compete with the building. As you can see, I took many liberties when painting from the reference photo, particularly in terms of simplifying the scene. Contributing to the effect, soft edges, lack of detail and grayed colors were used extensively in the foreground.

Conceptual Color In photos, darks often appear a lifeless gray, especially in the shadows. In *Drydock* (opposite; watercolor on paper, 22x30), I made the shadow values lighter, which allowed for a wider expression of color, including the introduction of warm colors. I made little attempt to replicate color from the photo throughout the painting; rather, I embraced conceptual color as a valid painting goal.




6 Establish a Hierarchy

When I was in art school, I witnessed Irving Shapiro critique a landscape painting. The barn was good, he said, and so were the flowers in the foreground. But overall the painting was weak because the elements were fighting for dominance. "Paint for one thing" he would say. "Paint for the flowers today, and for the barn tomorrow." Soft edges and grayed colors on the periphery of the painting can help to soften the impact of the subordinate parts of our painting and create a clear hierarchy of dominance.

7 Plan Surprises

We should always include surprises in our paintings. If the grass is green, throw in a violet passage. Incorporate an unexpected color, such as red, in the shadows. Distort a line or adjust values for a better design. A painting should entertain us and our viewers, as a copy of a photo never could.

Nature offers much to inspire the photographer and painter alike. As artists, we can alter reality, selecting only those elements in a scene that work to our advantage, bringing

our own aesthetic and unique personal responses to our paintings. Working from photos doesn't mean we're obligated to copy them by rote; we must infuse our work with all that we know about the elements of design, including color, value, line, edges and dominance, to make the scenes better and uniquely our own. 



See more paintings and the photos that inspired them at www.artistsnetwork.com/medium/watercolor/eric-wiegardt-painting-from-photos.