

# What makes a good painting?

by Karin Richter ©

This is a question I encounter on a daily basis in my classes. Students bring in magazines depicting a whole range of paintings wondering what makes them special. All of us artists out there, either marketing our art in galleries or entering shows, know that standards can vary tremendously which can be frustrating at times. Regardless of what is out there, your art is a reflection of you – a unique human being – so first and foremost be yourself, express your personality, paint what moves you! In order to do this success-

fully, however, you must be in command of your craft.

There are no shortcuts – without the basics and a certain level of skill you won't be able to effectively communicate your vision. To use a musical metaphor, you cannot play a concerto unless you have practised your scales. A good work of art has to show first that the painter could competently handle the medium and in watercolour that is no small task. We all identify with that rush we experience, excited at the prospect of painting that gorgeous landscape, the beautiful

floral or fascinating street scene. It is hard to slow down and figure out the technical aspects when juicy paint and vibrant colours are all you can think about. Will your ideas translate well onto paper or canvas? Why not take a few minutes to contemplate the way you are going to tackle your next masterpiece?

Ask yourself this question: **WHAT IS MY PAINTING ABOUT?** Your personal message is important but if you show your work, you are also trying to connect with an audience. There are

ways to attract a viewer, pull him in, let his eye move around the painting and keep him interested. If you are sure that the sky is what you want to emphasize, do not let the landscape be dominant. If you are interested in that gnarly tree, why paint the whole forest? If you are fascinated with a rocky slope, why not just zero in on that and let the rest of the scene be a backdrop? Less is most often more. Don't visually overload your audience.

## Thumbnails



Thumbnails let you determine composition and values - the foundation of every good painting.

Whether painting from life or from photographs, the importance of a thumbnail sketch cannot be stressed enough. Do a lot of them, they are non-committal and take only a few minutes. If you cannot work out your problems here, don't even waste a good clean sheet of paper or canvas. You want to be spontaneous, let it flow?

Do thousands of these little sketches before you embark on that spontaneous journey. You need to have it all firmly planted in your head, learn all the basics and rules, then you can be spontaneous!

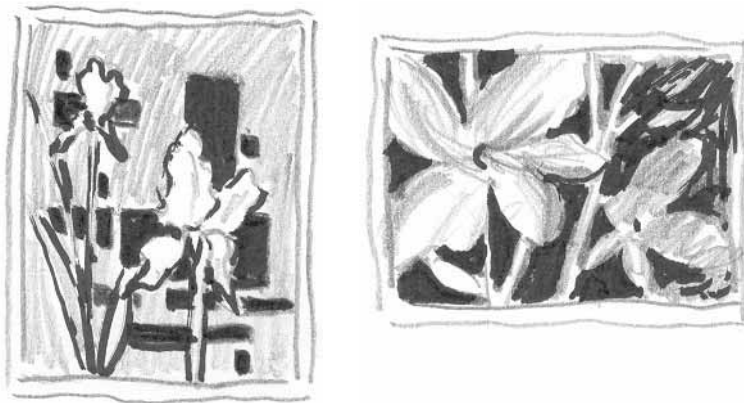
## Focal point



Placing of a focal point.

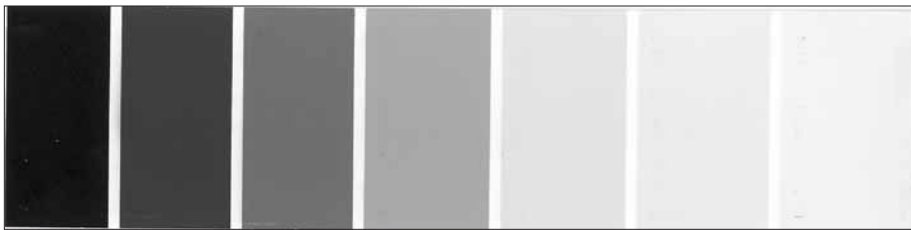
Make sure you have a focal point. Paint it first to see to it that everything else takes second seat or paint the centre of interest last by adding the needed punch or detail. A focal point is a place where contrast (value) should either be high or show the most detail or have temperature sizzle (hot/cold or simply hot colours). Having all of these components makes it even better.

## Composition



When you plan your composition, think of the big shapes first. Details enhance the painting but will not make or break your design. Are there interesting patterns, are there calm and busy areas? Does my eye have a place to rest? Organize your painting like you would furniture in your living room. Plan the big pieces first, accessorize later. It is all about a good variety of shapes and how they relate to one another. Rotate your painting. Look at it upside down. Obvious mistakes are easily detected that way.

## Values



A paint strip from a hardware store can be used to help you determine a correct value range

Values hold your painting together. There should be a minimum of 3 values: light, medium and dark and no more than 6 or 7. Keep a paint strip from your local hardware store next to where you work and see if you have a good range. Not everybody likes a 0-100 range but aim for at least 6-7 on a scale of 10 or the viewer will

lose interest. It is the darks that make your eye move around the painting but remember, values are also shapes – they need to be interesting and move you to interesting places. Distribute them so they create flow and give your composition weight where needed.

## Temperature

Colour temperature often evokes a mood or feeling and is of course also crucial in achieving depth, warm colours bringing the eye forward and cool colours defining distance.

Many artists have a natural inclination towards either hot or cold colour palettes. Remember, hot paintings sell better and even a snow scene can be made into a hot little number! Start your snow scene with a warm wash, lay your scene on top, glaze once it's finished or just choose warm reds, blues, and yellows instead of the traditional cool ones.

Of particular importance in the medium of watercolour is the mixing of clean colours. Make it your business to find out what is in your paint. Always buy the most simple formula containing one colour and mix your own combinations until

you know what the paint does for you. Let the white of your paper show. Let there be flow showing that "water" was involved in the process!

Ultimately, it does not matter what your medium or style may be. Nurturing your personal vision and unique perspective is very important – that is what makes art so exciting! However, adhering to certain criteria and working hard at your craft is necessary to take you where you are going. If you only like to please yourself and pursue painting as a hobby, then following these guidelines will make you happier with your work. If you aim for a career in the arts, subject yourself to juries and critics, then you must have all your ducks in a row because the competition is fierce. Assuming you have mastered your technique, you are then ready to follow your heart and share your unique artistic voice



### About the Artist

*Karin Richter lives in Calgary, Alberta and has been a professional artist for almost 20 years. She is an elected member of the Canadian Society of Painters in Watercolour, the Society of Canadian Artists and the Alberta Society of Artists. Her award-winning watercolours, acrylics, oils and pastels have been featured in countless shows locally, nationally and internationally. She is an enthusiastic teacher and workshop instructor to many aspiring artists. You may contact her at [karinrichter@shaw.ca](mailto:karinrichter@shaw.ca).*