

Designing a Composite Piece



An overview from a talk by Jenny Hyde-Johnson

Portraying one botanical specimen on a page can offer many positioning options, however more difficulties present themselves when additional elements are needed or desired. This talk was designed to highlight some pitfalls and to offer a few possible solutions when embarking on composite pieces.

Botanical Art the world over is pushing into new and exciting directions and John Rourke echoed this in his speech at the opening of the 2016 Plant Exhibition. Art works are getting larger, new angles of looking at a specimen are being portrayed and dramatic lighting is very evident especially in work produced in the Northern Hemisphere. There is a revival in the use of 'old' mediums such as Egg Tempera, Casein, Gouache, Silverpoint and Vellum and even drafting film is being experimented with. With all this in mind I feel that it is not always enough to just be seduced by a beautiful subject and start painting it. One needs to add value to a piece in order to get maximum effect for one's efforts, and one way to achieve this is to create a good design for the picture before beginning.

Bear in mind that there are many variations of compositions and the mark of a good composition is one which keeps the eye in the picture. The mark of a great composition is one that keeps your eye enthralled while exploring around the picture.

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Fig.1: Composition



Fig.2: Composition



Fig.3a: Circles



Fig.3b: Circles (Ethel Dixie, Leguminosae, 1925)



Fig.4b: Arrows (Augusta Withers, *Witsenia maura*, 1839)



Fig.4a: Arrows



Fig.5: Diagonal lines

Composition

As children growing up in the western world we were taught to read (and write) from left to right and from the top of a page to the bottom. This is never to be underestimated as it effects almost everything we encounter in both 2 or 3 dimensions (magazines, e-mails, phone messages, movies, paintings, sculptures etc.).

When one's subject matter works in this direction a soft and harmonious effect is achieved. However, when one works in the opposite direction a sense of confrontation often occurs. Use this to your advantage should you have a delicate piece or one you wish to slap attention onto. Even lighting in a botanical painting is deemed best if striking the subject from the left-hand side leaving the right side in shadow. (Fig.1 & Fig.2.)

Type

A very dominant element which always attracts one's attention in a piece. Never underestimate it and treat it with utmost caution. Remember to regard it as part of your design and not as an add-on.

Colours

Remember that warm colours seem to advance and cooler colours recede. Very bold-coloured objects can be a handful when designing composite pieces. Be careful where you position them and try and capitalise on their

power. Be especially mindful when working with objects such as tomatoes or apples as the rule below applies to them as well.

Circles

A circle is of the most powerful attention grabbing objects in any design. Be very mindful of where you position them. (Fig.3a & Fig.3b Ethel Dixie, Leguminosae, 1925. See how dominant the round Kiaat seed is despite being at the rear of the illustration and in pencil).

Arrows

Another very eye-catching element. When working with these be careful not to lead the eye out of the picture. They can be used to ground a subject or be flipped and lead one's eye up a specimen. When using an arrow shape pointing up, it is often a good idea to ground it with darker colour or heavier objects at or near the base. (Fig.4a & Fig.4b – Augusta Withers, *Witsenia maura*, 1839. Arrow shapes being grounded into the earth.)

Diagonal lines

These are lines of movement as opposed to horizontal or vertical lines which are more stable and placid. When placing an image/s on a diagonal one adds energy and action in a piece. (Fig. 5. which also has arrow shaped flowers and will need caution with placing as mentioned above.)



Fig.7: Squares



Fig.8: Diamonds



Fig.9: A figure '8'



Fig.10: Triangles

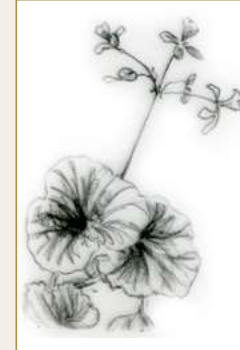


Fig.11: Rule of Thirds

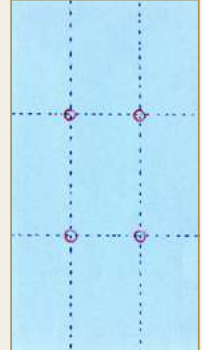


Fig.6: Negative spaces are as important as the positive ones

The Power of Nothing

Blank areas in a very busy piece can give your eye a place to rest and can be used most effectively to create dramatic compositions. Negative spaces are as important as the positive ones and need to be balanced accordingly in a piece. (Fig. 6.)

Traditional shapes which work for composite pieces

Here is a quick look at a couple of basic shapes that work for composite designs:

Squares

Safe, often used when working with even numbers of things, not very exciting. (Fig. 7.)

Rectangles

A little more exciting, but still quite stable.

Diamonds

A much more exciting and vibrant shape compared to a quieter square. (Fig. 8.)

A figure '8'

Two inter-linked circles, can be used quite effectively when painting a vine. A very powerful shape to keep one's eye in a composition. (Fig. 9.)

Triangles

Quite a common design shape often used on edge by landscape artists where all elements merge into a vanishing point on the horizon (Fig. 10.). I use this shape quite often in my pieces.

Lastly looking at the Rule of Thirds

This is one of the most fundamentally important compositional tools in an artist's tool box. Divide your picture plane into three on the vertical and then again on the horizontal. Rule these lines in on a sheet of tracing paper placed over your board. Where these lines intersect are the 'sweet-spots'. Whenever possible place your focal point (main flower, plant etc) on one of these sweet-spots and see how/if you can arrange the rest of your design around this placing. (Fig. 11.)

Tips

Odd numbers: A natural look is often more easily achieved if one uses odd rather than even numbers of things. (Fig 3, 5, 7, 9, etc).

Groupings: Where possible always do groupings. For 3 objects, group 2 and have 1 a little further away. For 5 objects group 2 and then 3 together etc.

Upside down: When the day has ended and you stand back to view your painting, turn it upside down as your eye will then not read the image, but rather the elements of the painting, such as shapes, colours, lighting, spacing etc.

Binoculars: If you have a large piece, place it on the floor or against the wall, and using a pair of binoculars look through the wrong end at your piece. This reduces the whole artwork and often helps in spotting areas which need attention.

Happy Creating!