

Painting in the Dark

By M.E. "Mike" Bailey

Find the mentor who will lead you to understand that painting is not about painting things

It was in the shower that I

remembered a skit performed in the Boy Scouts around a campfire burning in the dark of night. That skit always drew laughter because the ending was so absurd. The set up is to have a single 'actor' crawling about on hands and knees acting as though he is ardently searching for something somewhat near the campfire. Two more 'actors' happen by and ask the first actor "What are you looking for?" The reply is given, "I lost my car keys and have been searching for a long time!" The two immediately drop to their knees and begin helping the first person in the hunt. Two more fellows appear and repeat the same lines and fall into the hunt. It isn't long before other bystanders join the search until one guy enters and asks the obvious question, "What are you looking for?" "my keys" "Wow! Where did you lose them?" "Over there" says the first guy, pointing in the direction of the darkest area of camp. "Whaaaat?" "Why are you looking here?"

The answer comes as a shock to all observers, "Because the light is better!"

Yes, absurd. And it is funny. But it is a metaphor for how people go through life or attempt to solve problems. In fact, it is a perfect metaphor of people learning to paint. I include myself in this, too, so don't get the idea I am pointing fingers!

When we first begin painting, the big challenge is to get the paint onto the paper or canvas and to do it as perfectly as we can visualizeand that perfection we hope for doesn't come to pass. We instantly realize painting is some sort of magical skill of which we have little knowledge. So, most of us find someone to give us 'lessons.' And the lessons usually are aimed directly at what we want to do: How to paint a sky, or house, or tree, or pottery or my daughter's portrait. We think in terms of *things* we can name. And, for most of us, we think that all we really want to do is paint a 'pretty picture' of that - _____(fill in the blank) in the

photograph. (choices: dog, daughter, son, sunset, river, scene, etc).

Furthermore, we seem to convince ourselves that if we apply ourselves for a week or so, we can have a painting good enough to hang in the hall for all our friends to witness and drool over. (I am laughing to myself as I write this!)

Little do we realize that the reason we are so taken by the sunset in the photo we are trying to paint is a whole group of different visual relationships at work. First, how much space is occupied by the clouds or the dark portions. How the edges of the clouds grade from hot, bright color to cooler more neutral tones as the eye moves away from the source of light. I can remember one member of my first class asking the teacher “what color is that” as the teacher put her brush into her palette. “Red” was the answer. And we all began to look around in our palette for a red. Little did we realize that we might need a band of analogous, transparent reds that ranged from warm to cool, near violet! I mean wasn’t red just RED? Everyone knows what “Red” is, right?

Looking back, I was searching for the “keys” to painting where the “light was better.” I was looking for the fast, easy solution. . . .and I actually assumed there was an easy way to get to the goaljust search where the light was best. After all, all I had to do was look closely and duplicate what I saw. It seemed to me that if I could learn how to paint water, rocks, trees, buildings and skies, I could paint any landscape. In my mind shadows were all the same color, nature never lied and if I copied anything I was painting, my justification for error was always the same: “That is

the way it was!” To have it explained that one tree would have warm and cool greens, violets, blues and yellows, as well as reds was a total shock to me! Nature wasn’t like that! Or, was it that I wasn’t seeing it? My teacher was wonderful in explaining why the greens didn’t look right in my tree painting and I slowly awakened to the fact that I might have to study color for a weekend or so in order to get the “knack of it.” (did you catch that? . . . A weekend or so???? !!)

Little did I know then that paint is very different than nature or than actual light. I wasn’t aware enough then to realize that my naïve method of thinking about painting would never lead to accomplished work. I figured that it was all about how well I duplicated what I saw or “knew.”

It wasn’t until a very smart painter called my attention to “value dominance” and “color harmony” that I realized that my attempts to learn to paint “rocks,” or “mountains,” or “snow,” or (name something) was an effort to memorize formulas for each of those things. Moreover, I began to see that in my search for the “keys” to painting that terms like “color harmonies” and “unity” and “contrast” were things that I really did not understand, or even knew what they meant.

Furthermore, I was actually angered by non objective paintings or obtuse abstractions. To me, they seemed absurd! Why did they keep winning awards? It just didn’t make sense! How could something that didn’t look like anything be recognized as being so extra special? I didn’t get it!

There seemed to be a degree of “snobbery,” or so I thought, about the language of painting and the critiquing of same. There were those who would be discussing “space divisions” and “shape relationships” and “repetition” and all sorts of things that I thought were just plain arrogance of their education at some private school someplace. The magazines never talked about those things. They all concentrated on technique; how to make a tree look like a tree, or how to accurately draw a hand. If these were the things that the painting ‘intelligencia’ were talking about were so important, why weren’t they in the magazines and books with all the pretty pictures in them? I was still searching for the “keys” where “the light was better” rather than going into the ‘dark’ and feeling my way around to truly find the “keys.”

In tribute to her wisdom and ability to manage fragile egos, but never slacken the hand of the teacher, Jane Burnham, AWS, handled me with aplomb. I expressed my lack of understanding to her . . . and my anger . . . she smiled and said she had confidence that I would someday understand. I just wasn’t ready to understand it yet. Then she immediately introduced me to the idea of painting relationships. Firmly, she stated that I should look there and keep looking. For the answers I was seeking were within the relationships (known as the ‘principles’ of design. She opened Pandora’s box ! And I have been grateful ever since.

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It was in the dark, recesses of a library that I found a few books about design. It was there I learned that there is universality in painting and design. It was in “the dark” that I discovered that literature, poetry, drama, theater, sculpture, music and all sorts of art contained many of the same “relationships,” such as movement or rhythm or alternation or contrast or dominance or repetition or variation. The list is short, only 8 words actually, but their meaning and their subjectivity give us painters a thought pattern which helps the painter (or lyricist)(or potter)(or composer) assess what he or she is creating. It was that search “in the dark” which revealed that emotional mood and content could be created intentionally, even if we weren’t accurate at drawing. It was there that I learned that something as simple as a line could contain emotion and expression. That shapes could be restful

or full of tension. And much, much more. In fact, as I continue painting “in the dark” I am finding that I am learning more by discovery because now I know what I am looking for. Or, at least, I *think* I know what I am seeking. Maybe next year I will realize that what I thought was right *this year* was only partially correct! It is the trials and errors which are so important to locate the “keys” to painting. In fact, it is the stumbling in the dark, the errors and the failures that are so very instructive. Instead of staying in the “light” where looking seemed easier (and the most obvious), by only painting what I could see, I have found I can locate more than just painting *skills* in the dark. I actually found *someone* in there who could really paint . . . and I found someone who could say, visually, what was on his mind, in precisely his very own way . . . in his own style. I have become friends with him and don’t disown him to my friends when he shows up. In fact, now I introduce him to everyone: This is Me! Yes, that’s right. It’s me that is hiding in these paintings!

Are you looking to learn how to paint? Watercolor? Oils? Pastel? Are you seeking someone to teach you? Seek not a quick method or a formula. Find the mentor who will lead you to understanding that painting is not about painting *things, but painting visual relationships*. Understanding those relationships leads to mastery and to confidence in creating your own style. It is in the “dark” where the search should ensue . . . it those concepts that you don’t understand or cannot visualize or name that hold the keys to really painting. The answers you seek do not lie waiting to copied or mimicked. They are hiding in the deep recesses of failure,

where your mood is the darkest of dark. The answers lie in understanding something more *subjective than objective*. It will take focused, intellectual effort to understand them.

*Trust yourself.
Don’t be afraid
of the dark!*

Find out what Unity, Harmony, Dominance, Conflict, Repetition, Variation, Gradation and Balance each mean. Then apply each of these relationships to Line, Size, Shape, Direction, Color, Value and Texture. Yes, these are the 15 words that are what I call “the dark.” In other words, the dark is metaphor for not having specific formulas or specific answers to questions about a painting. No single painting has just one solution. Every stroke is a guess . . . educated or otherwise. Every action is a trial. Every decision is an act of **creating**. And creating is a long, long way from copying or reproducing what you think is there in front of you.

What comes out of learning to create relationships of design is sheer personal music which is as individual and special as your DNA. The big trick to the learning these elements and relationships and how to use them is this simple: Trust yourself. Pay more attention to them than to reality. Look where it seems it will be most difficult to understand . . .and keep looking!! Don’t be afraid of the dark!