

A Painting in Three Parts

By M.E."Mike"Bailey, NWS

Listening to people talk about paintings, one rarely hears discussions about the three parts that make up a painting. This isn't necessarily amazing if one is listening to lay people discuss the subject, but it is indeed startling to realize that a great majority of painters rarely consider these three parts of a painting in their commiserations, or even when they are painting!

What three parts, you ask? What other three parts are there?

Maybe I am using improper words or descriptions when speaking of "parts."

Most painters are so consumed by the subject that they miss completely the very components (parts) that, when well thought out, make *truly great art*.

Perhaps it is the graphic stuff and all of the pictures we are today exposed to in TV, Magazines, Internet and every other visual media we have around us photos! Photos! Photos! Even in the photographs, once a painter becomes aware, these three interdependent "parts" can be seen.

Here are the P A R T S. Or, these are the internal "organs" that make a painting into terrific art, versus just another picture.

Ready? Technique, Design and Content.

There they are, bare naked directly facing you, the reader. The truth is exposed. There are three parts that form the grist of truly good art.

*Perhaps it lacked
"soul" or it was
"lifeless" in some
way.*

Perhaps you have seen paintings copied directly from photographs. The painter became so enamored with replication of the (dirty word) S U B J E C T that the painting seemed out of kilter, somehow. Perhaps it lacked "soul" or it was "lifeless" in some way. Or, the painter was able to demonstrate that he or she could put the paint in the proper places to make it look "real." No attention was paid to the myriad of possible ways the subject *could have been painted*. . . .it was apparent the painter wanted the piece to be photographic. No 'character' of shapes . . .no specific color arrangements . . .no working about of values . . .no specific textures or patterns . . .no imposed contrasts. Just a photographic representation. Maybe the painter was proud of the

accomplishment (and probably was deserving of the pride because it really isn't all that easy to do!). But, did the painting stand up as being unique and/or powerful? In my mind, those that I have seen are simply *pictures*. Ordinary in every way, lacking design flare and certainly lacking any emotional content. Usually, such paintings speak loudly of technique mastery.

That's right. Technique. In any good art school, technique is hardly stressed as an endpoint of excellence. Technique is merely a means of transferring the paint to paper or canvas or other form of ground. Smudge it, rub it, smear it, slosh it, flop it, spit it, spray it, drain it or any other means you can dream up. The critical part of technique is simply this; ***it must be consistent with the content and the design of the painting.***

For example, if the painter designs a spectacular sunset with colors grading and changing in intensity and hue from top to bottom, chances are that slapdash, "splat it on any way you can" is not going to be consistent with the serenity and velvety feel the artist is after. Technique must follow the content and design intentions. Another example might be color choices in painting a funeral scene. One would not expect to see bright, zippy colors at a funeral. Instead the design and emotional content of the subject might call for subdued colors such as grays and neutralized colors along with black. That is a design choice that is dictated by the content of the subject. Technique choices will also follow that content choice.



"Janet's Backyard" Transparent watercolor, 22" x 30". Notice the color choices and shape manipulations at the base of the painting along with added textures. Combined, the elements project a mood or feeling.

What is design? Well, the answer to that question might well fill a book. Simply put, design is the arrangement and relationship of all of the elements (Line, Size, Shape, Direction, Color, Value and Texture) in keeping with the content intentions of the subject. In other words, what is the artist trying to *SAY* about this subject? What is emotional mood of the painting? What does the artist intend for the viewer to feel or sense? Does the technique fit with that intent? Does the design lend itself to that intention also?

You see, these three parts must always be in concert for a painting to stand up as excellent art. Need the content be political or emotionally confrontational? It might be. If it is intended to confront or shock or soothe, then value and color

design must follow and technique should be supportive of both the design and the content. A painting that is full of stark contrast would not fit the content aspirations of calmness or serenity. On the other hand, soft transitions and quiet harmonies may not be appropriate to use in a scene featuring the cacophony of a circus act.

“But wait a minute! What if I just want to paint a pretty picture of my flowers?” First, I would answer that question this way. Is it just copying the flowers that you are after? Or, is there something about them that is touching you in some way? To make a painting stand up proudly alone and be remembered as masterly, wouldn't you be more concerned with that which *moves you about the flowers*? Perhaps it is the texture of the petals or the deep, rich colors or the extraordinary masses of color and texture that reach you emotionally. Tune in to more than just the pretty picture. Get in touch with that which moves you, then paint that. A well designed piece of such content would emphasize and contrast that which moves you so the viewer would receive much of the same feeling. Indeed the viewer would probably be struck by the unusual approach you might took with technique and design to express your feelings

There are, literally, ‘bazillions’ of painting opportunities and plenty of painters to attempt them. Those ‘opportunities’ that materialize into great art and the artists that paint the great works are concerned with how well content, technique and design fit together to form the whole.

If you are a painter and are wondering what is meant by all this discussion, or if you have a teacher who only focuses on technique, then, hopefully, you will seek knowledge about how to manipulate the design elements and principles and how to create content. It begins with taking the first step of being curious. You will find your way, if you are curious enough!

Instead of looking for a workshop instructor who will teach you his or her formula of “how to paint like me,” ask if that instructor emphasizes technique or if that person teaches design processes. Some instructors are famous for emphasizing content and how that might lead design and technique decisions. If you are a beginner, don't be afraid to jump into the ‘deep end of the pool’ right away. You will learn more and be a much more aware viewer of fine art, too. Choose your learning path with goals in mind of what you want to learn. It is so worthwhile!