

# Thoughts on Creativity & Design

**P**ainting in series around a single idea opens doors to new

creative approaches. It is interesting to see how new paintings come out of a series. Watching that develop is always very entertaining and engaging. I have learned that unless I am connected to series work religiously for several continuous weeks, I lose the connection. It is almost like being a tennis player or golfer ... unless one is in the game daily, the muscles and the mind forget. One loses the edge. It is important to keep that edge because it leads one to develop progressively more creative notions as the series advances.



While painting in series it is those last few which suggest what to do with the next paintings. It is important not to take much of a break (in time) from the painting process, because one forgets those new ideas. All the work, and the ideas generated up to the point of taking the break evaporates. Then if one wants to re-enter painting the series, it seems one must re-travel the road that led to the last paintings. That is why painting daily, even if it is for just a little while each day, holds the connection to the work and keeps the muse hanging around.

If one treats each new painting in the series as an “experiment”, new, creative approaches fall out of the process. Because they are “experiments”, they can be improved upon. And the notions for improvement are the very things that lead to the next and next and next paintings.

**That seems easy enough to say, what thought processes does one use as one develops new paintings and seeks new ideas?**

Many painters, particularly those painters just starting out, or those who are 'intermediate' painters, are “subject bound.” That is they seek a new, different subject each time they want to paint. Many of those same artists regard the idea of working in series as ‘boring.’ (The reason I am certain of this notion is I was exactly that kind of painter.) They mistakenly

believe that the subject is what energizes the viewer.

The elements of design: **Line, Size, Shape, Direction,**

**Color, Value and Texture,** are the tools painters use to construct an image . . . or the stuff we put on the canvas or paper. How the painter controls and manages how these elements relate to each other is the backbone of the painting. Those relationships are always being evaluated and measured as the progress of each painting moves forward. How the elements relate are referred to as the 'principles' of design and they are;

**Unity, Harmony, Dominance, Conflict (contrast), Repetition, Variation, Gradation and Balance.**

Yes, these are called the “formal” elements and principles of design. Many academics defend them while many ‘intuitive’ painters even shun them. These elements and principles provide a way to plan or to think about one’s work as the work develops. They make for very solid ground on which to critique an artwork. They remove subject from the discussion and focus on what is emphasized in a painting and how that emphasis is accomplished ... or not. They provide the channels of thinking or consideration of the different alternatives that may come to the painter’s mind as he or she paints. And they may suggest new, different alternatives as a way to make their artistic statement.

For example, changing color dominance from bright, intense colors to more neutralized tones could completely affect the mood of the painting. Or, changing an arrangement of the pattern of values in the painting could similarly affect mood or shift emphasis or both.

Design is a deep, elusive and thought provoking subject that many artists study for their lifetimes! For purposes of this article it is easiest to say that every painter has his or her “favorite” design element. That is to say, every artist unconsciously does the same things over and over ... we call it *style*. For



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example, one artist may favor harsh, blasting color, while another may opt to paint in neutral and semi-neutral colors and insert strong value contrasts. Still another may find that line work is his source of fascination, while another will go out of her way to layer on and manipulate texture.

If an artist has a bent to feature line work in her paintings, then it will become obvious from one painting to the next in a series. Line (or edges) will have a prominent place in that painter's work over and over through the series. It simply will not fade away and be unnoticed.

But, what if the artist wants to learn more about color? Or, the artist wants to subdue value contrasts or wishes to express emotional content in her paintings. Then, subject is not the answer.

**The artist must make conscious choices in terms of design elements and principles, then experiment to assess how exactly are they affecting (relating to) each other and, ultimately, the viewer.**

In an effort to cause class participants to lift themselves from detail minutiae, a challenge was issued to them to paint a series of twenty paintings about a single still life set up. The set up should be no more than five items and the configuration of them must remain the same throughout the series.

Instead of changing the set up for every painting, focus instead on value patterns or schemes. Try different shape modifications. Work with line or feature texture or pattern. Stop thinking about subject and look at how each painting will feature specific elements of design. Each painting will provide ideas for the next ... focus on **Unity** and **Harmony**. Establish **Dominances** and provide different kinds of **Contrasts** through the paintings. Repeat things and provide **Variety** and **Rhythm** in the **Repetition**. Find ways to make the painting exciting, but let the subject only be the framework. Change **Sizes** and **Directions**. Make every painting an experiment and don't worry about the outcome or what others will think. Just fool around with these different categories of design elements and principles. **PLAY!**

**The following paintings are works I have done in my studio** with the singular intent of working through such a challenge and coming up with as many different results as I can muster ... just to exercise my painting muscles. So far, approximately 30 paintings (15x22

inches) have been produced. Not that they are anything special, but they certainly are opening doors for ideas for other paintings!

Here are 6 such paintings ...



“Still 1” Was the first in the series. This painting shows the details of the pottery and the tree. The design is a ‘charming,’ but trite watercolor.



This is “Still 7.” Over the first 6 attempts, I introduced the use of line and flattened shapes versus the illusion of 3D form. The line work becomes fascinating in itself and is set off by the color choices. Also, I used strong warm-cool contrast as a big part of the theme. This piece introduces the idea of using pure, intense color. It also mixes curvilinear line and angular edges which gives a pleasant contrast.



“Still 11” This piece involved still more flat shapes, modified the shapes and reduced

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use of line. The use of line has been reduced but now is used as a basis for texture (foreground). Color wise, neutrals are introduced in this piece and the entire picture plane is flattened.



“Still 12” I took much of the staccato out of the foreground from the last painting, but held on to line to affect a little bit of texture and “reflection.” Also I stuck to the idea of a very flat picture plane, and used line to *suggest* the shape of the tree and to cut into the green vase. There is more shape exaggeration. The use of black inside a intense color dominance with contrasting green/red drills the viewer's attention. Angular dominance of the line and edge also affects the mood of the piece.



“Still 13” embellishes the use of blue line as used in “Still 7.” In a previous piece, a diagonal shape of dark value was used to hold the composition together. Here, that same idea was used, but the entire arrangement was completely flattened. The angularity of the shapes was calmed in this piece, though still

held for some emphasis. Neutrals are used in this piece again, to force the eye. Notice the tree shape now looks like it is bearing the weight of the yellow negative space. More concave shape would have prevented that sense of compression.



“Still 21” In this following piece, shape still plays a part, but this piece really shows the contrasting effect of a soft, neutral, organic shape against a colorful geometric pattern and how the pattern nearly takes the attention. Personally, I find this piece to be riveting.

There is so much variation in the background and the shapes of the still life elements are pleasing in contrast. I happen to like the ambiguity of the flat violet shape consuming some of the pottery.

One can still see the same diagonal dark shape as seen in “Still 13”.

As anyone can see, each painting has it's own personality and mood. There are plenty more where this came from as the series is moving along every day. It is redundant to say, but as the series progresses, I am constantly amazed at what sort of pieces come out. Every one is different . . . and certainly, not all are good or great. But the fact that each one suggests another or more is a terrific access door to creativity!

Now, go to the studio and PAINT!!!

M.E. “Mike” Bailey  
PH 831-438-6142  
[www.mebaileyart.com](http://www.mebaileyart.com)