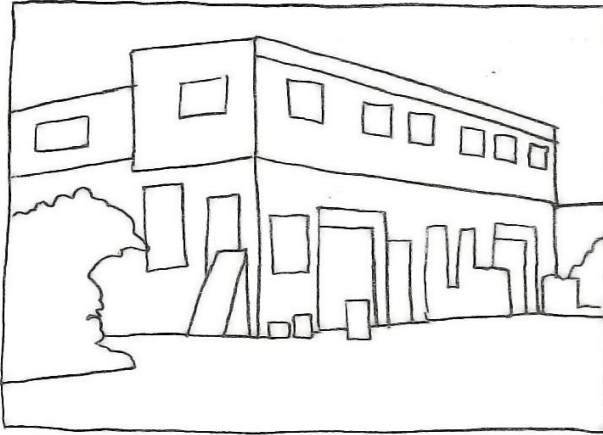


# seeing your subject as a pattern of values

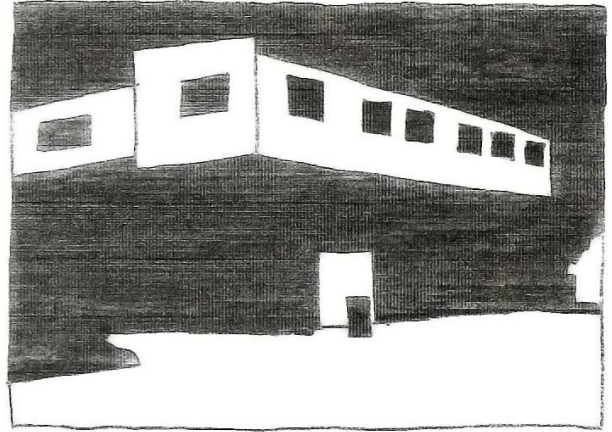
Before you can make the most of the tonal values in your paintings, you need to develop an awareness of them in your subject matter. The first step is to start looking through (or past) the surface details of your subject, seeing it as a simplified pattern of lights and darks.

To see your subject as a pattern made up of value shapes, you have to look at your subject not as a group of things that can be named, but as a pattern. Instead of thinking *tree* or *vase*, think *dark shape* or *light shape*. What an object *is* is not as important as its shape and value.



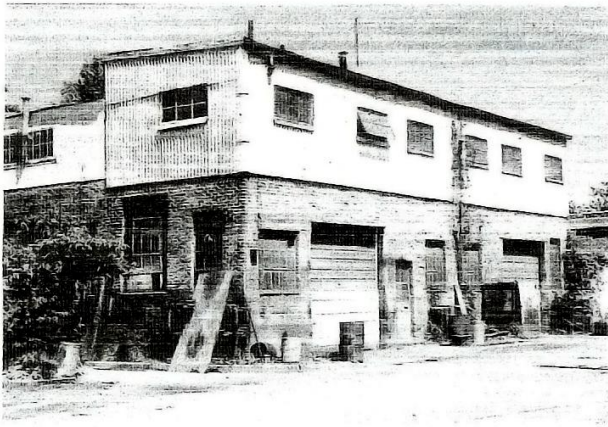
## **Simplify the shapes first**

Use a pen or pencil to create a simple drawing, reducing your subject to a few big shapes. Eliminate details and combine small shapes into larger shapes. Link shapes of similar value or combine them into larger shapes. Think big shapes; don't think detail.



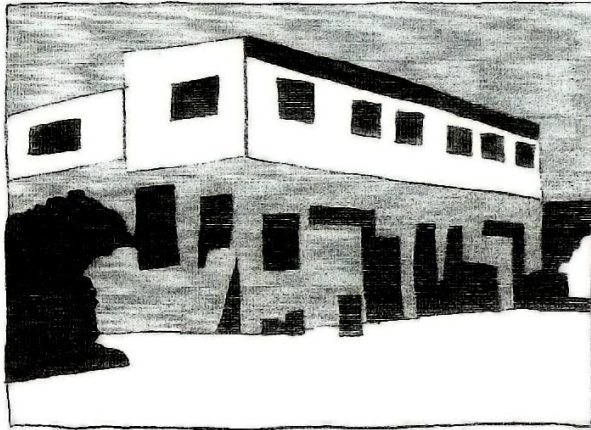
## **Reduce the values to a few**

Once you have simplified it, use black and white to make this pattern of shapes into a pattern of tonal values. Although the eye can see an almost unlimited range of tonal values and is capable of perceiving subtle distinctions, you need to use only a few contrasting values.



**Reference photo**

This way of seeing can be learned with a little practice, and the best way to practice developing an awareness of tonal value patterns is to make drawings that simplify the subject into a pattern of *shapes*, then turn the pattern of shapes into a pattern of *values*.

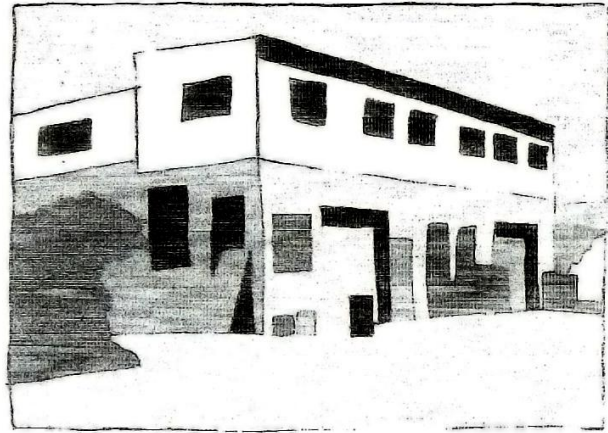


#### **Using three values**

Reduce your subject to three values: black, gray and white. All light shapes become white, all dark shapes become black, everything else is gray.

Most subjects will lend themselves readily to a reduction of three values. You'll find that you will have to make some judgment calls when assigning labels, but less so than with only black and white. If using only three values, your first impulse might be to label everything gray because nothing is totally black or absolutely white. Instead, you'll have to exaggerate the differences by making the darker shapes black and the lighter shapes white.

Try labeling the shapes *B*, *G* and *W* (black, gray, white) like a paint-by-number. Doing so encourages you to see the larger pattern of tonal values—the shapes that will be the strongest in your composition.



#### **Using five values**

Reduce your subject matter to five values: white, light gray, middle gray, dark gray and black. This value reduction still keeps the pattern simple, but allows for enough value distinctions to make the identity of your subject matter clearer.

If adjacent shapes are close in value, you may need to assign them different values to distinguish them from each other.

Five is a comfortable number for practicing with value patterns. It is easy to mix three grays that are sufficiently different for this purpose. Using more than three grays with the black and white requires careful mixing and renders little benefit for the extra effort.

## basic value patterns

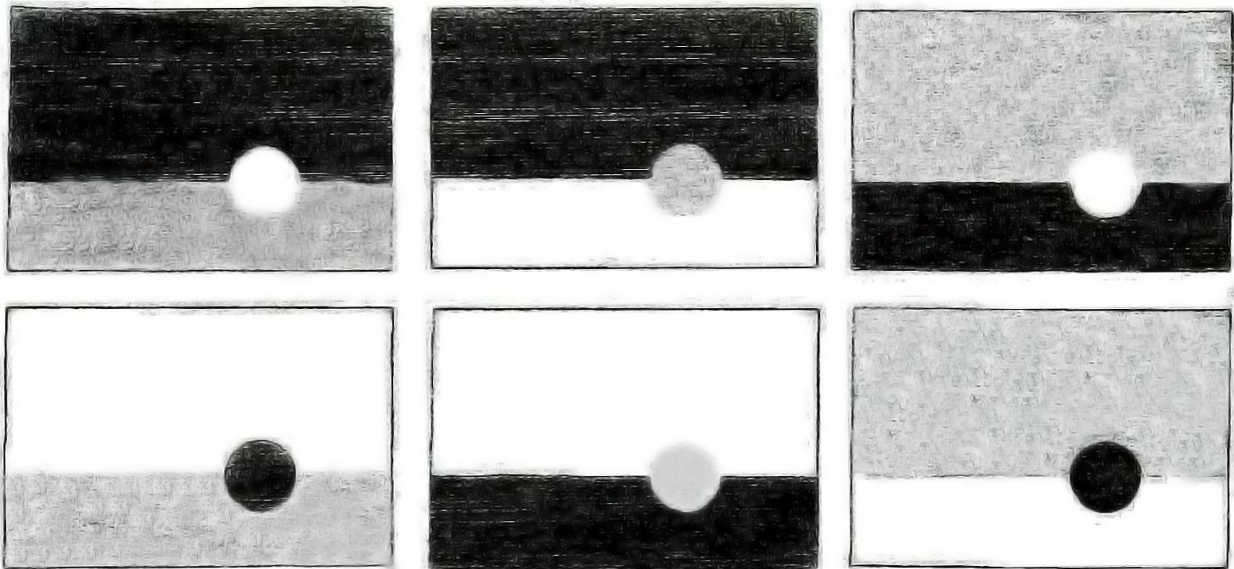
Once you start thinking about your picture as a pattern of value areas, you can check to see if that pattern forms an effective composition. Some patterns are more effective than others. In fact, there are some models that are almost guaranteed to make your pictures more effective.

Simple to remember and use, these patterns consist of only three values: dark, middle and light. (Since we rarely use pure black or white when painting, it is easier to think of dark and light.)

By varying the proportional amount of area occupied by each value, you will naturally comply with the **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION**. Varying the values this way is much more interesting than dividing them equally. In

each case, the smallest area naturally becomes the center of interest. The largest value area becomes the dominant value group. (If the largest value area is light, the painting is said to be in a high key; if the largest is dark the painting is in a low key.)

When there is an equal distribution of values, it is more difficult to create one spot with enough contrast to act as the focal point. All three values compete for attention. When unequally divided, the smallest area, because of its contrast in both value and size, wins the battle for the viewer's attention and becomes the "star."



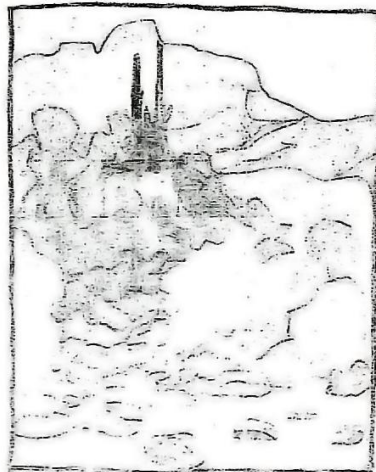
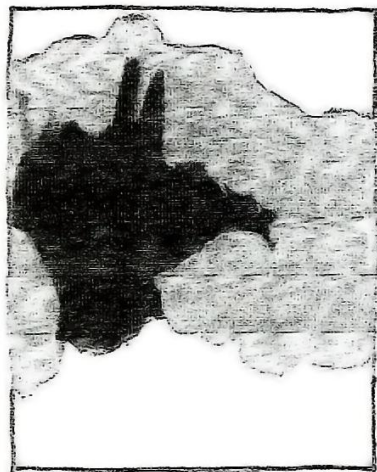
### Vary the intervals between values

Each of these two basic value patterns is divided into three areas of different sizes and values, resulting in six possible variations. The smallest area, located at one of the sweet spots, is the natural center of interest.

## turn the ordinary into the extraordinary

This elegant landscape painting is a good example of how a strong, simple value scheme can make a powerful picture of an ordinary scene. Although the colors are clean and the brushwork is descriptive and economical, the lights and darks are what makes the piece so compelling. There is minimum detail, but maximum impact. The focal point is located at the bottom of the dark

shape of foliage on the left. The sunlit rocks against the deep shadow create an eye-catching area of contrast. The secondary focal point is the cactus silhouetted against the distant mountain. Because the contrast there is less stark than at the rocks below, the cactus becomes a subordinate attraction for the eye and provides an interesting balance.



**Table Mountain** • Kurt Anderson • 14" x 11"  
(36cm x 28cm) • Oil on canvas

# intensity dominance

The dominant and subdominant colors in your painting should not be of the same intensity or saturation. If both are pure, saturated colors, the painting will be harsh. If both are neutralized or grayed, the painting will be dull.

To maximize interest, you should use a range of color saturation. The colors should be neither all pure nor all gray. Save the pure, or high intensity, colors for the focal point.

## a quick refresher

The formula—*Mostly, some and a bit*—can be applied to all of the characteristics of color. Whether applied to hue, temperature or intensity (and value as will be seen shortly) the *Mostly, some and a bit* formula almost automatically guarantees a pleasing variety in your paintings.

In fact, if you only remember the *Mostly, some and a bit* formula when you paint, you will be following the **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION: *Never make any two intervals the same.*** Either concepts will give you good results, and both are easy to remember and apply.



Low-intensity, neutral colors



Pure, right-out-of-the-tube, high-intensity colors



A mix of pure and grayed (high and low-intensity) colors

# make use of photographs

A great way to practice applying the **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION** to landscapes is to use photographs and an adjustable composition finder made up of two cardboard *ells*. Most artists take advantage of photographic sources for information for their studio work. Time is often too limited to allow for recording all we need to paint from in a sketchbook alone.

Back in the studio, use photographic references judiciously lest they become a hindrance to your progress as

a painter. Simply copying from a photo teaches you little and renders disappointing results.

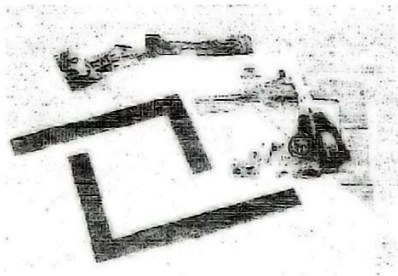
## Use your own photos

If you use your own work to begin with, you won't be tempted to plagiarize. This exercise will make you a much better photographer because you'll quickly see how to improve your photos while you are looking through the viewfinder. Because you are using images

## frame your subject

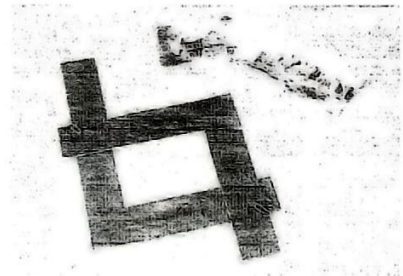
try different ways to

- Are there any lines or edges that divide the picture in half or in equal units?
- Does your picture have a primary center of interest?
- Is the center of interest also a strong focal point?
- Is the center of interest at a sweet spot?
- Are there any lines that lead the eye out of the picture?
- Are there strong value contrasts in your picture?
- Are the shapes in your pictures interesting?
- Are there any strong obliques?



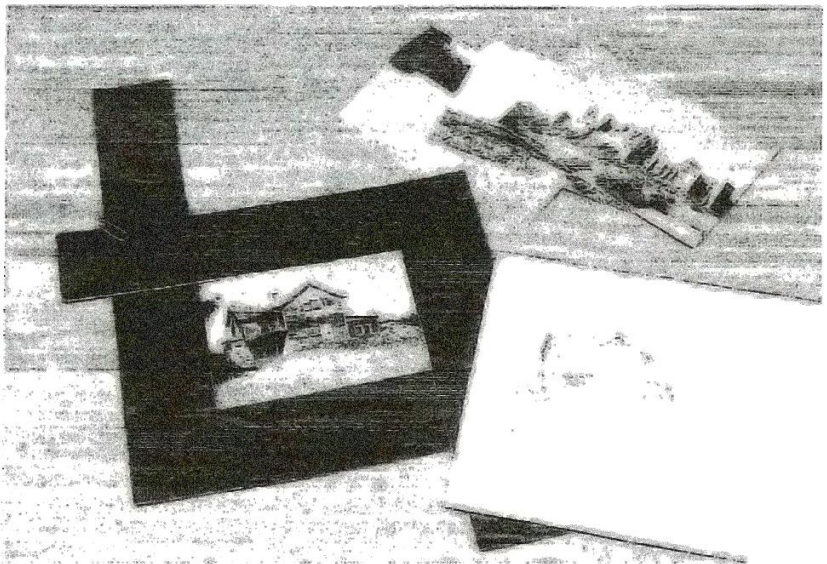
**Two cardboard ells**

Make two ells out of black cardboard or poster board. Use a ruler or protractor to get reasonably accurate right angles. Cut the ells  $2\frac{1}{2}$ " (6cm) wide, with each leg about 10" (25cm) long.



**The two ells clipped**

Paperclip two homemade ells together to make an adjustable frame for finding the best composition on a snapshot.



**The two ells on top of a photograph**

Use the ells to frame your photographs in various ways. Snapshots are fine; no fancy cameras or equipment are needed. Experiment with different placements of the frames to find the most interesting composition. You'll probably find several that work well. Keep adjusting the ells to find the best (that is, most interesting) placement of lines or objects in the picture. Make a quick sketch of the ones you like.

# an alphabet of landscape composition

An easy way to remember some handy patterns for your landscape compositions is to think of composition based on letter forms. Almost any letter form can be the

basis for a good design if you remember to apply the **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION**. However, the most useful letters are J, O, T, X, C, L, U, and S.



## **J Composition**

Think of this as a lazy J or swoosh that can appear as shown, backward and upside down. The curved bowl of the J is a good place for the center of interest. Here, the bowl is located at one of the sweet spots.



## **O Composition**

This composition is more or less circular, but not centered exactly in the middle of the painting rectangle.



## **T Composition**

A vertical and horizontal crossing in a composition creates a natural focal point at the point of intersection. The quadrants created by the crossing should vary in dimension to maximize visual interest.



## **X Composition**

Compositions based on the letter X include those that have lines radiating from a single point. Make sure that linear elements radiating outward do not go directly into a corner, forming in effect an invitation for the viewer's eye to exit the picture.



**C Composition**  
The letter C can be thought of as a half or open O. Don't situate the opening right at the center.



**L Composition**  
The L can be turned around or upside down. It's important to keep one side of the L longer than the other. Equal lengths would be boring.



**U Composition**  
The uprights of the letter U (or V) can be used to frame a center of interest. Be careful, however, to avoid making both sides equal, which is boring. Make one side larger, more dominant or dynamically balanced than the other.



**S Composition**  
The letter S, as written or as its mirror image, is a natural lead into a composition. The classic example is a road curving into the picture.



# basic value patterns for landscapes

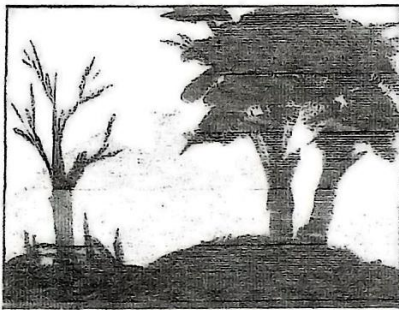
A successful landscape, like all good compositions, will be based on a strong pattern of values. Because nature doesn't always present us with easy-to-recognize patterns, it helps to know what to look for. Look for patterns based on the alphabet of landscape compositions (see previous pages), which are all based on strong shapes of contrasting tonal values. Contrast and variation are the inevitable products of the application of the **One Rule: Never make any two intervals the same.**

Tony Couch, a well-known contemporary watercolorist and master of applying the rules of design to create effective composition, noted in his best-selling book, *Watercolor: You Can Do It!* (North Light Books, 1987), some very useful value patterns for landscape composition.

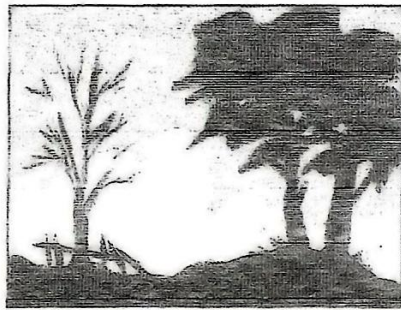
## Creating areas of value contrast

Couch identified six basic patterns for landscapes (see art below). These patterns help you simplify a landscape into three distinct areas of value contrast. Each has three grounds: foreground, middle ground and background.

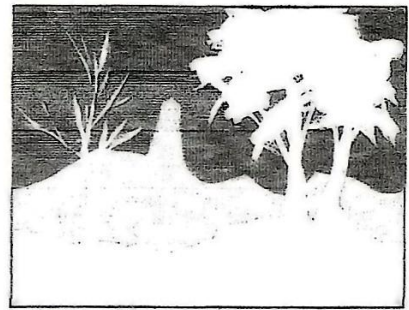
- Two have light foregrounds, two have light middle grounds and two have light backgrounds.
- Two have mid-value foregrounds, two have mid-value middle grounds and two have mid-value backgrounds.
- Two have dark foregrounds, two have dark middle grounds and two have dark backgrounds.



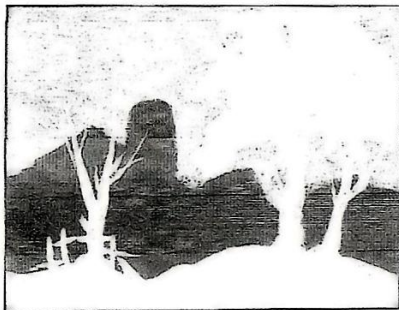
Dark foreground, mid-value middle ground and light background.



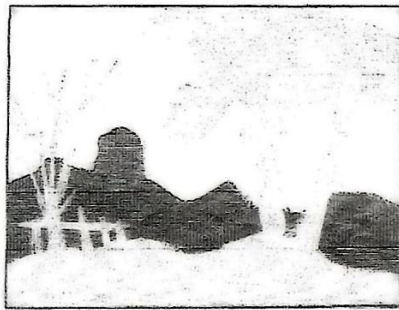
Dark foreground, light middle ground and mid-value background.



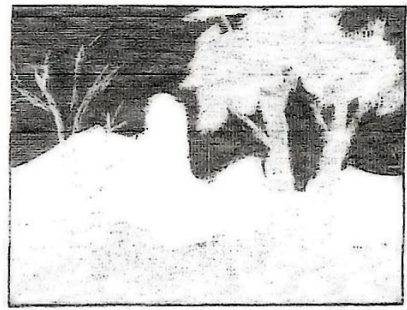
Light foreground, mid-value middle ground and dark background.



Light foreground, dark middle ground and mid-value background.



Mid-value foreground, dark middle ground and light background.



Mid-value foreground, light middle ground and dark background.

# color in landscapes

When applied to color, the *Mostly, some and a bit* formula almost automatically creates a color scheme that complies with the **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION**. If the colors in a landscape are distributed equally, that is, if there

are equal quantities of warm and cool colors, light and dark colors, pure and neutralized colors and so on, there will be no dominance and no variety—and therefore, no interest for the viewer.

## keep an eye on color

All the color theory in the world won't help if you can't remember it! Think *Mostly, some and a bit* and your paintings will have a satisfying color scheme.

- Is your landscape mostly warm or mostly cool?
- Is it mostly dark or light?
- Do some of the colors and values contrast sufficiently with the dominant colors and values to create interest?
- Is there just a bit of strong contrast to make one part of the picture a good focal point or center of interest?



### Follow the formula

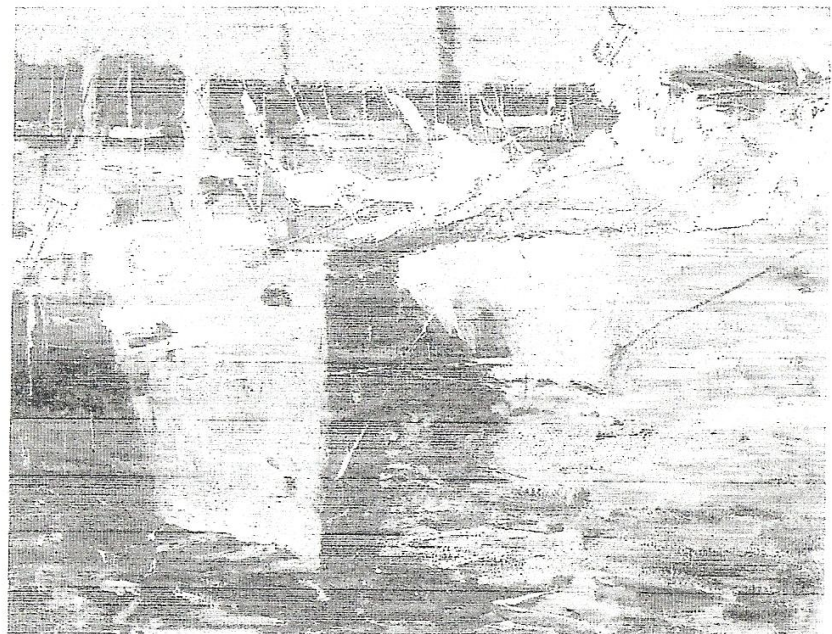
Frank's painting is a good example of the *Mostly, some and a bit* distribution of color in a landscape. The picture is mostly cooler pastel colors, with some rich, bright blues in the mine buildings, with a bit of dark green in the trees for a contrasting accent.

**Gold Mine** • Frank Webb • 22" x 30" (56cm x 76cm) • Watercolor on paper

### A bit of contrast

This low-key painting features dominant colors that are dark and cool. In sharp contrast are the bold strokes of almost pure orange and red on the hull of the ship on the right and in its reflection, as well as the bright whites nearby. These strokes form a strong focal point, located at one of the sweet spots.

**The Mimi and the Rana** • C.W. Mundy • 16" x 20" (41cm x 51cm) • Oil on canvas



# placing the head

The **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION** tells us not to place the center of the head so it is in the exact center of the picture, especially if the head is facing straight out. Place the head and face in one of the upper sweet spots. If the head is near the center, use areas of lights and darks in the background to alleviate the static formality of this kind of placement.

With a three-quarter view, allow more space on the side to which the face appears to be looking to avoid a claustrophobic closeness and give the subject room to breathe. In general, don't let the top or back of the head form a tangent with the edges of the picture.



**Boring composition**

The head is exactly centered and looking straight toward the viewer. The distance of the face from top to bottom and side to side is equal.



**Better composition**

When the head is off-center from both top to bottom, the portrait is more intriguing. The center of the face (both focal point and center of interest) is now located in a sweet spot.



**Good composition**

With a three-quarter view, the center of interest is right between the eyes at one of the sweet spots.



**Boring composition**

This profile is centered and boring. Eye level is near the horizontal center. The face appears cramped by the right edge, and the subject's eye directs your attention to and beyond the frame.



**Better composition**

This profile is off-centered and more interesting. There is more room to breathe on the right, so it feels less cramped.



**Good close-up composition**

This profile is cropped close-up, which generates some interesting abstract shapes. The eye is now in a sweet spot.

## placing the head and upper body

When including the head and torso, again place the face in one of the sweet spots, with the face toward the center and the rest of the body dynamically balanced with the edges.

Avoid placing the head in the center, especially if it places the rest of the body in an unbalanced position to one side.

Wherever the head is placed, avoid any element that is crowded in or points to one of the lower corners.

The hands will be a natural secondary focal point, so check to see that they are at varying intervals from the edges. Also, beware of awkward cropping, especially at any body joint such as the elbow, knee or hands.



### Bad composition

When including the head and shoulders of your sitter, place the head near one of the upper sweet spots. Placing the face in the exact center will usually leave dead space above the head. In this example, the knees not only point into the corner, but are awkwardly amputated.



### Bad composition

The head is located in a sweet spot, but the composition is unbalanced because the subject is looking out of the picture, making the right half appear dead.



### Good composition

The head is located in a sweet spot, but the picture looks balanced because the subject is looking toward the center, activating that part of the composition.

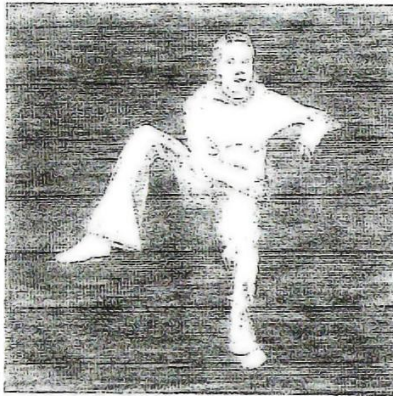
# placing the figure

When depicting the figure, consider its shape in relation to the edges. Placing the figure so there are wide margins between it and the edges of the format generates little compositional interest. Distances between various parts of the figure and the frame are not dramatically different and therefore boring.

When the figure is enlarged so it fills the frame, or the edges are cropped more closely to the figure, the relative distances from figure to frame are more varied and, for that reason, more interesting.

## watch out for these pitfalls

- Placing the center of interest too close to the middle, an edge or a corner.
- Crowding the figure to one side or directing limbs into a corner.
- Inadvertently creating a band or stripe-like shape parallel to an edge; for example, a chair back lined up with the edge of the painting can be very distracting.
- Awkward tangents where the figure just "kisses" the edge.
- Background objects above or close to the head that might look like funny hats or strange growths on the head.



### Lots of background, no interest

When there is a lot of room between the shape of the figure and the edges, there is little compositional interest.



### Tangents identified

Avoid awkward tangents. Body parts just touching an edge will attract unwanted attention.



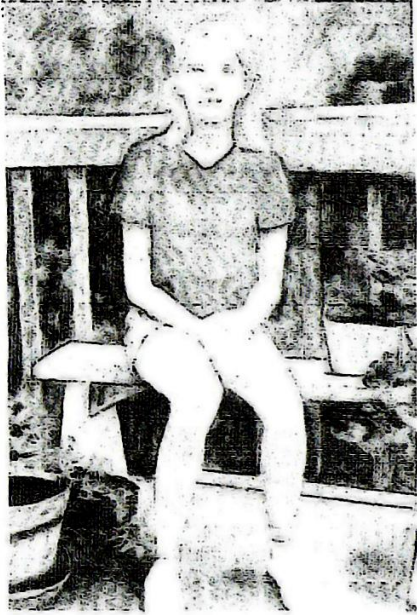
### Tight cropping, more interest

Tight cropping is more interesting because the resulting intervals differ greatly in measurement.



### Background shapes identified

If you examine the intervals generated by close cropping, you can see that the shapes are interesting and varied in dimension.



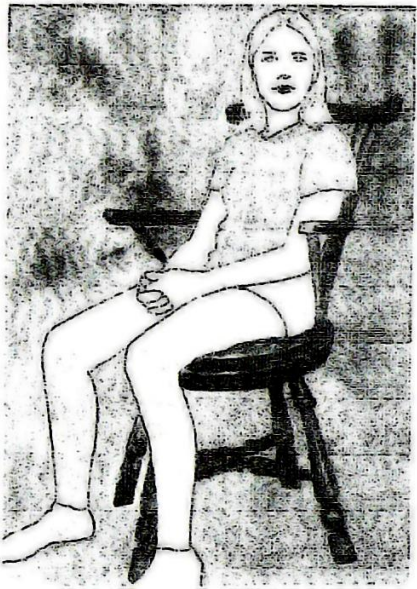
**Too symmetrical**

The human body is bilaterally symmetrical. In this example, the sitter is placed right on the vertical centerline, a violation of the **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION**. Notice how the dull composition is divided into three nearly equal vertical sections.



**Divided in half**

In this example, the head is now in a sweet spot, but the composition is divided in half vertically, also violating the **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION**.



**Awkward composition**

Avoid tangents. Tangents often direct the eye out of the composition.



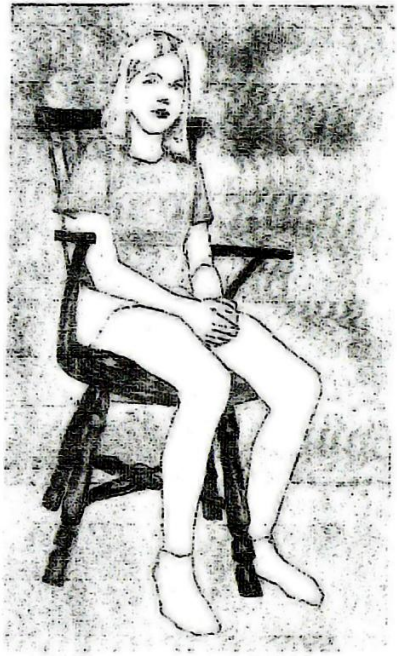
**Good composition**

Place the subject in a relationship that generates an interesting variety of shapes and intervals.

**points in mind**

keep these additional

- Do you want a formal or informal view of your sitter?
- What will be in the background and how much of it will be included?
- How will the figure relate to the format? Will the cropping be close?



**Good composition**

A useful compositional device to keep in mind for portraiture is balancing an *active* side with an *inactive* side. The left side of this painting has less visual energy because it is strongly vertical. On the right, there is greater complexity and energy.

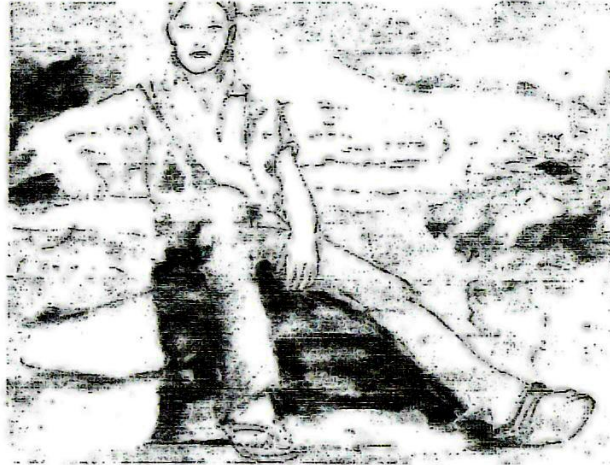
# cropping the figure

Cropping presents a great opportunity for increasing the energy in a composition, so it should be done with thought and deliberation. All too often, cropping is

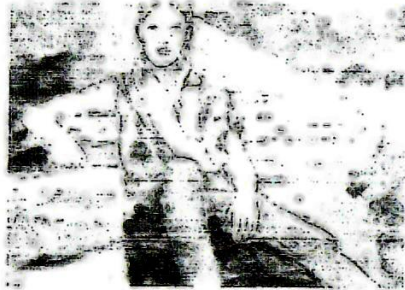
almost accidental because the figure "just didn't fit" when it was drawn on the paper or canvas.

## considerations when cropping the figure

- Consider cropping the figure with one edge only.
- Be careful when cropping with two opposite edges—top and bottom or right and left—because it may look awkward or artificial.
- Don't crop the figure at joints, which suggests amputation.
- Crop boldly, but be mindful of all the shapes created, both positive and negative.



**Crop and float**  
The figure can be cropped by one of the edges or several. One successful formula is called *crop and float* (by Bert Dodson in *Keys to Drawing*, North Light Books, 1985). If you crop at the top edge, don't crop at the bottom edge—let the figure float.

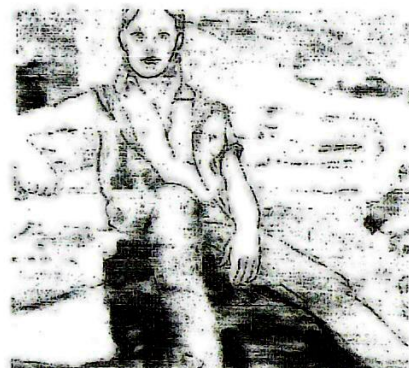


### Avoid artificial cropping

It's difficult to crop effectively with opposite edges only. The result often calls too much attention to the cropping and looks artificial.



**Crop at the right or left, but not both**  
When the figure is cropped on opposite sides it looks trapped; it cannot "float."

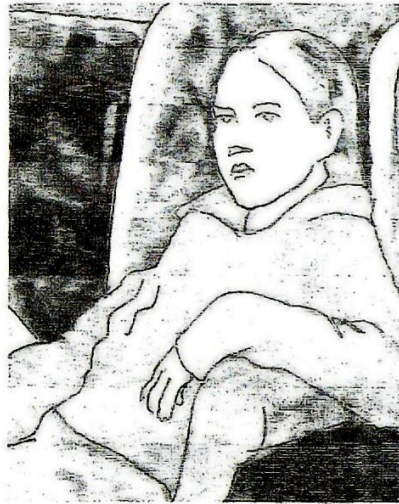


**Don't crop at body joints**  
These "amputations" direct attention outside the picture.

# cropping a portrait

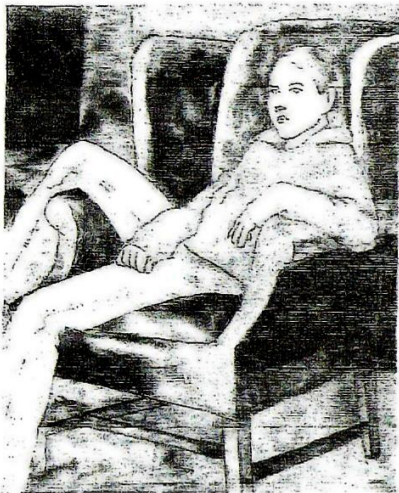
There are two considerations when cropping a portrait. First, the cropping should be appropriate for the subject matter and should support what you are trying to communicate about your sitter. For example, a portrait of a public figure meant for public display might include the torso and the trappings of the subject's duties or office. A portrait of a family member meant for display in the home might be a more intimate close-up.

Good design is the second consideration for cropping. Regardless of whether you show the full figure, the head and shoulders, or an extreme closeup, the cropping should create interesting shapes, maintain a single focal point that is also the center of interest, and have dynamic balance.



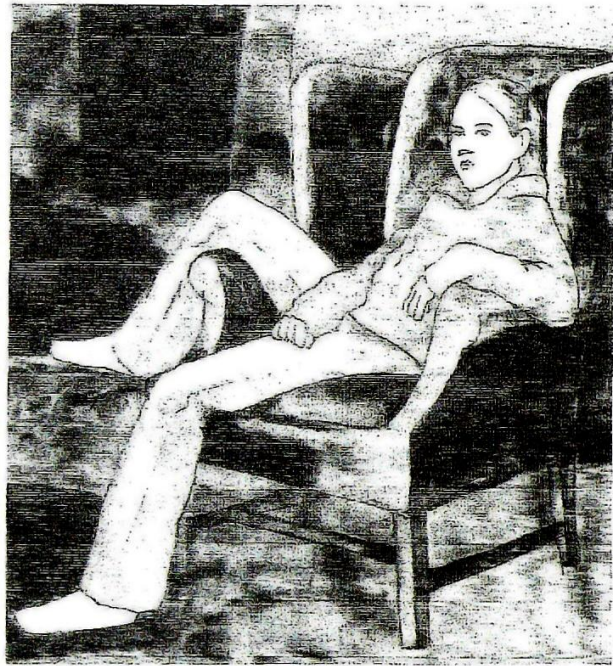
### Create intimacy with the subject

Cropping in close and eliminating most of the background produces a much more intimate approach. The closer you crop, the more intense an encounter the viewer will have with your subject. An extreme closeup of a face could be intimidating or uncomfortably confrontational.



### Provide a setting for the subject

Cropping to include most of the sitter and some of the background is an opportunity to reveal more information about the subject and create the desired atmosphere—while generating interesting shapes.



### Focus on the whole figure

A looser cropping provides fewer dynamic shapes; the figure here forms a strong shape on an oblique axis.



# value patterns

As in all compositions, the values in a portrait are vital to success. The principle consideration is making the face the focal point as well as the center of interest. Through contrast, the values in a portrait should help establish the face and head as the strongest eye magnet.

The greatest value contrast should be concentrated around the head and face so the viewer's attention is attracted and retained. If there is another area in the picture with strong value contrast (or sharp detail, bright color or busy patterns), a competing focal point will be created. The viewer's attention will be divided between the face as center of interest and a rival focal point.



### Strong value contrasts direct the eye

This sketch is a great example of playing light against dark. The face is contrasted with a dark background, and the back of the head is contrasted against light. The strongest area of contrast is along the contour of the face, making it both the focal point and the center of interest.

Phil \* Ned Meuller \* 16" x 13" (41cm x 33cm) \* Conté crayon on paper

A classic strategy often employed to create this value contrast around the head and face is to make the background dark behind the illuminated side of the head, and make the background light behind the shadow side of the head.

## in your portraits

evaluate the value patterns

- Does one value dominate, or are the lights and darks too balanced?
- Do the light and dark shapes vary in size, shape and distance?
- Do the lights and darks in the background work well with the lights and darks in the subject?
- Does your painting make use of the formula: *Mostly, some and a bit?*



### Mostly, some and a bit

Apply the *Mostly, some and a bit* formula to this portrait. The strong value pattern of this painting makes it irresistible. The pattern forms a pleasing configuration as a purely abstract design. Notice how the frames and the tie direct your eye to the picture's center of interest, the subject's smiling face.

Terry Tollefson \* Tom Browning \* 24" x 30" (61cm x 76cm) \* Oil on canvas

# group portraits

The **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION**: *Never make any two intervals the same* can readily be applied when there is more than one subject, as in a double or group portrait.

## Double portrait

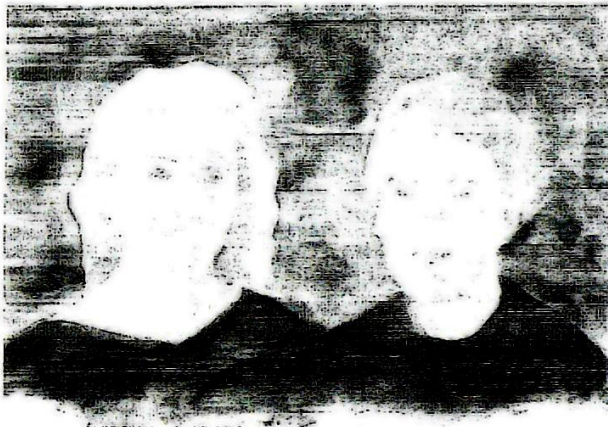
In a double portrait, it's more interesting if the heads are not equally spaced or on the same level—both violations of our **One Rule**. The relative heights of the heads may imply prominence of one over another, so be mindful of that significance to your sitters.

Watch for the direction the sitters are looking. If they are looking in different directions, or if one or both are looking out away from the center, a distracting pull out of the picture can be created.

## Group portrait

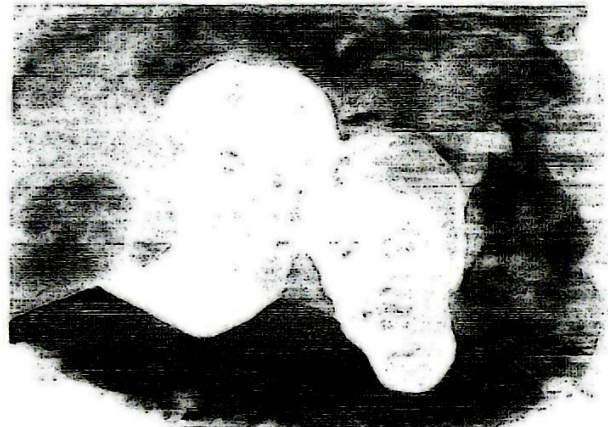
In group portraits, usually family groupings, keep in mind the principles of placement derived from the **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION**. Do not allow the heads and faces to line up, be equidistant or form a boring configuration like a regular triangle or square. The heads should be at different levels and distances. Think of how boring it would be if all the heads were lined up equally on Mount Rushmore.

If you are painting a portrait of an entire family, make all the sitters look in more or less the same direction, or all of them looking in toward the center. If one or more of the figures is looking out of the picture, it attracts the viewer's attention out of the frame.



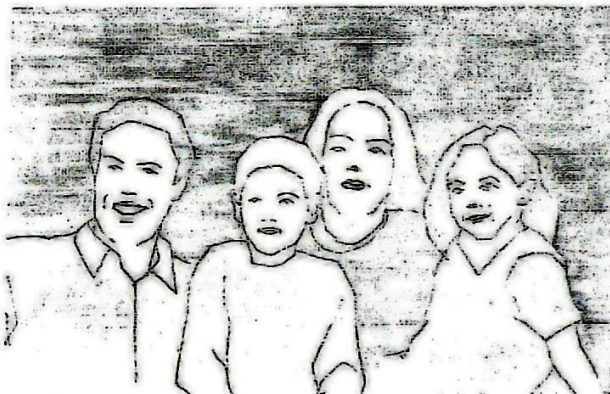
### Boring

Don't line up two (or more) faces at equal distances or along any central axis.



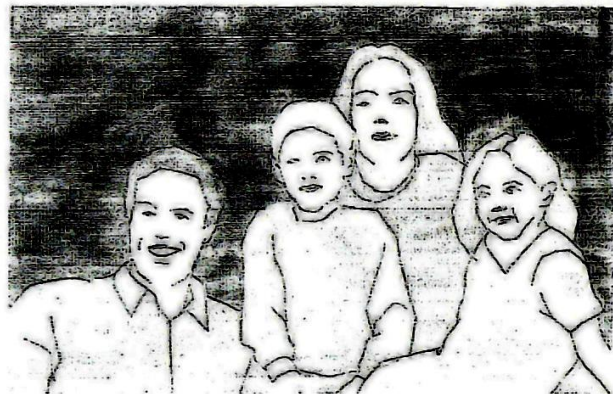
### Better

In a double portrait, place one head at a different level and different angle for greater interest.



### Boring

The heads are all at the same level. The lack of variety in their placement engenders a lack of interest.



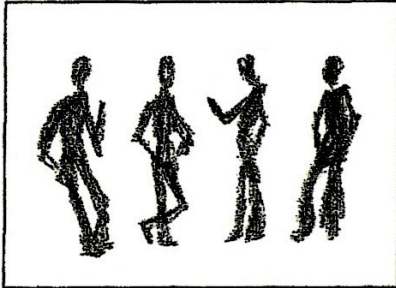
### Better

The heads are dynamically arranged with eye-pleasing variety.

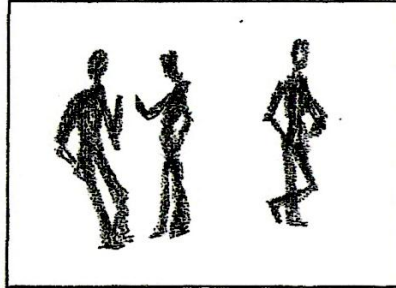
# multiple figures

To maximize eye-pleasing variation, groups of figures should be arranged according to the **ONE RULE OF COMPOSITION**: *Never make any two intervals the same.*

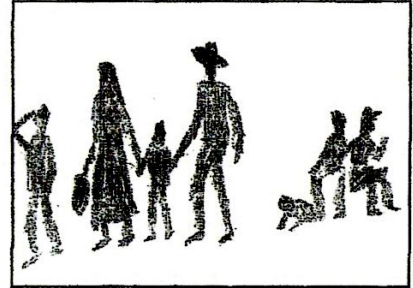
By changing the size of the figures, and the spacing between them, you can create varying intervals that work to create interest in your painting.



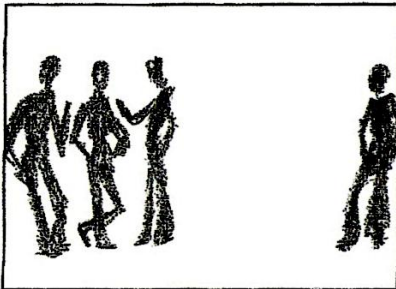
**Even spacing is boring**  
Equally spaced figures of the same height are boring and look unnatural.



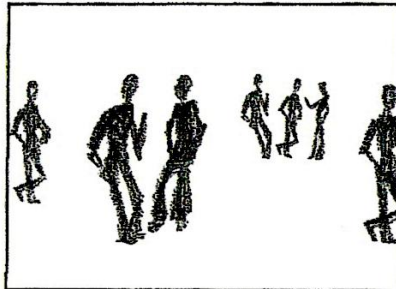
**Varied spacing is better**  
Unequally spaced figures are more appealing and suggest more interesting social dynamics.



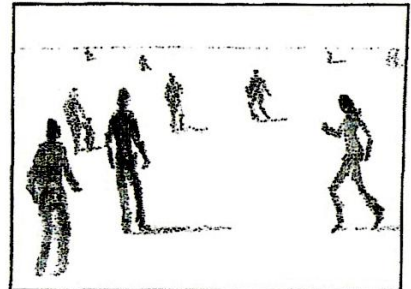
**Ground level placement is unexciting**  
Unequally spaced figures of different heights and eye levels is more interesting, but the ground level is parallel to the bottom edge.



**Asymmetry suggests tension**  
The eye and mind group proximate figures together. The three figures on the left form a unit; the figure on the right is isolated. This arrangement is not only attractive to the eye, but interesting to the mind because it suggests some sort of social tension.



**Scale variation creates depth**  
Varying the scale of figures creates spatial depth and increases interest. Note that all the figures share the same eye level, which coincides with the horizon line and eye level of the viewer.



**Variety creates visual energy**  
When figures in a scene are at different heights, sizes, eye levels and distances, the visual energy is maximized.