

# The Power of Placement

*If you want to create a good painting, you'd better start with a good composition*

By Donald Clegg

Painting well can mean different things to different artists, but it's a difficult task no matter what you paint. As you gain experience, however, and as your expectations rise along with your skill, one universal truth of painting becomes clear: A successful image is dependent not only on accomplished technique but on dynamic placement, as well. Though I've been painting more than 20 years, the dominant consideration in evaluating my work has always been good design.



## **Mix & Match**

*As I arrange my subject matter, I often push extra stuff (the "flotsam") to the side. Eventually, these leftovers begin to look interesting, so in *Still Life with Studio Flotsam* (watercolor, 15x30) I paired them with the traditional fruit bowl for one of the easiest compositions I've ever arranged. The placement of the silver dollars is the key to breaking up the negative space of the upper half of the painting*

## **Design Rules**

Across the spectrum of styles, genres and media, composition remains the one common signifier of quality. Look at a variety of exhibitions of outstanding paintings and you'll see that despite their diversity, design is always a strong point of the individual pieces. For artists, then, the study of good design can't begin too early. As I tell my workshop students, if everything else fails except the composition, at least you'll have a visually interesting mess!

As a beginner I obediently followed the basic rules of composition such as placing objects one-third of the way across the paper and avoiding circular shapes at the center of the composition, to name just a couple. The rules didn't fully make sense to me, though, until I started studying and diagramming the work of compositional masters such as Winslow Homer and Andrew Wyeth. It was here that my real design study began, and as I started to consciously feel how my eyes moved through their works, I began to recognize the reasons for the compositional choices—the "why" as well as the "how." It was exciting to realize that abso-

lutely nothing was accidental. Every angle, curve and edge reinforces the design of a great painting. (For an example, see *Everything in Its Place*.)

Now I understand that every composition rule can be successfully ignored. I don't mean that we *should* ignore them, only that we *can*.) I still loosely follow the "rule of thirds," but I also often place areas of interest near the center of the painting, or have strong darks or lights near the edge of the paper. Remember, every composition idea is a problem waiting to be solved, and breaking the rules isn't necessarily a mistake if it helps you find a solution.

## **The Right Subjects**

Though I've painted all kinds of subjects, still lifes look over after my studio addition was completed seven years ago, giving me a stable light source. I love gardening, and so my paintings began to incorporate that theme. Silver bowls, clear vases and other decorative objects continue a fascination with the surface and depth I've always had.

Since I paint only from life, seasonal changes greatly affect my choice of subject matter; the core idea for a composition often comes from what's in season. I love to paint cherries, for instance, and I look forward to their arrival, first at the market, and later from our own trees. During the winter, dried twigs, berries and silver dollars provide opportunity for less hurried study, and as subjects, they reflect the quieter mood of the season.

## The Work of the Composer

In my studio, I work under a north-facing skylight with a blind that I can raise and lower to control light intensity, and I arrange my subject matter on a variable-height shelf. My setup times varies—two or three hours is about average—and my larger paintings are generally more intricately structured, giving me the opportunity to orchestrate a fully symphony of color, shape and texture. For example, a small bowl of fruit placed next to a larger one begins a nice pattern of dominant/subordinate movement, or a large vase of flowers can be echoed by a smaller one. In this way, I fill out the composition, always thinking in terms of shape, color and value.

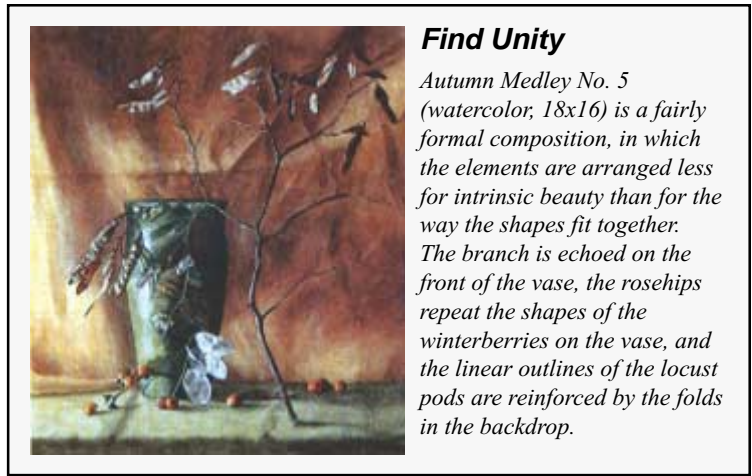
I said earlier that compositional rules can be successfully broken, but objects standing in a composition still have to be placed just right. A strong preference of mine is to link and overlap them to form a rhythmic flow. This allows me to place a dominant element in the middle of a painting and use the overlapping shapes to provide movement away from the center. I try to repeat shapes as much as possible without being too obvious—like an echo, a shape can start off loud and then repeat more softly. Arranging bows or bases is a start, but I also look for more subtle interactions. A twig placed at an angle might echo the edge of the bowl, a leaf or a fold of cloth in the background.

The light falling on my arrangement is of key importance, too, and sometimes I partially block the light to design an interesting shadow. I often spend as much time moving my lap to arrange the light and shadow as I do setting up everything else. Finally, if I'm using a cloth backdrop, I try to place the folds in a way that strengthens the movement of the arrangement.

## The Re-creation

I prefer to paint life-size pictures, and my paper of choice is Strathmore Aquarius 2, partly because it needs no stretching and I can cut it to size, but mostly because it's tough, flexible, and has a pleasing surface quality. Along side brushes, paints, water and a sponge, I keep paper towels handy for lifting, and that's it for my materials. I don't like masking; I prefer to working around my negative shapes.

Such objects as vases and bowls require a very accurate drawing because of their symmetrical shapes, but increasingly I paint most other elements directly, with little or no preliminary drawing. I usually erase most of my pencil lines to give myself the freedom to change things as the work develops. For the most part, I paint wet-into-wet, but I nearly always use multiple glazes to get the right value



### Find Unity

*Autumn Medley No. 5 (watercolor, 18x16) is a fairly formal composition, in which the elements are arranged less for intrinsic beauty than for the way the shapes fit together. The branch is echoed on the front of the vase, the rosehips repeat the shapes of the winterberries on the vase, and the linear outlines of the locust pods are reinforced by the folds in the backdrop.*

and color variations. For a cloth backdrop, I usually lift the pattern with a clean brush, clear water and a paper towel. Then I enhance the effect (of a brocade cloth, for instance) by applying subtle touches to the edge of the pattern to give it a more dimensional appearance. I prefer to work from light to dark, but I don't have hard-and-fast rules; if something is likely to ripen, move or wilt quickly, then that's what I'll paint first. In *Arrangement in Red, Green and Maroon*, for example, I painted the orchids first because I'd never painted them before and had no idea how long they would hold their form.

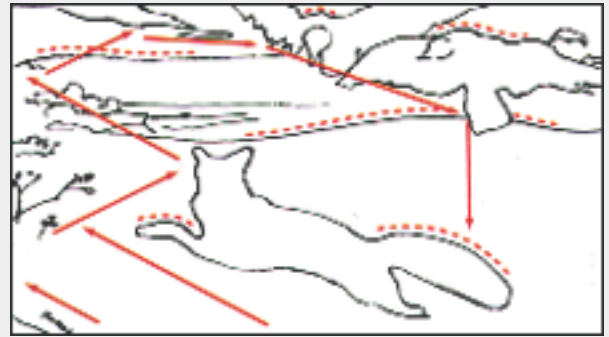
Finally, try to make the background an integral part of your painting. Too many artists focus on the foreground and call the painting finished, forgetting that the background is a vital part of any design. As the environment in which your subjects rest, it can provide light, shadow and space, and with something as simple as the fold of a cloth or the direction of a shadow, it can complete the compositional unity of your painting. Placement isn't everything—you still need good technique for a good painting—but compelling image will always have a solid design as its foundation.



### About the Artist

*A painter for more than 20 years, Donald Clegg has been part of the 100-plus juried and invitational exhibitions, including those of the National Water Color Society, the Northwest Watercolor Society and Watercolor USA.*

*He's a signature member of the National Watercolor Society and has received many awards for his watercolor, oil and egg tempera paintings. He lives in Spokane, Washington, and travels to fine-art fairs across the country.*



### **Everything in Its Place**

Winslow Homer's *Foxhunt* (above; oil, 38x68) is both a masterpiece of start imagery and an excellent example of how to control emphasis and movement through design. As a general rule, the eye enters a composition at the area of highest contrast and sharpest edge. Here I find myself entering either at the raised left paw or the ears of the fox, and from either point Homer has provided a movement through the painting, allowing us to enjoy the composition in more than one way.

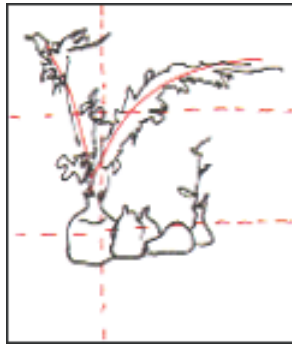
Following the strong diagonal set up by the entire mass of the fox shape (see the solid arrows in the diagram at right), the paw sends the eye over to the sparse shape of the winter berries, which directs the eye back to the fox's ears, effectively catching up to the other point of entry. The left ear directs us into the diagonal of surf and rocks, eventually reaching the small accent of the white gull, which provides an entry into the soft curve of the distant clouds and the strong diagonal of the white clouds, which function largely as abstract indicators of movement. This

leads us to the wonderful mass of the crows, which bring us back to the lower half of the composition through the device of the dark tail intersecting the curve of the snow-covered hillside.

Along the way, Homer has provided many wonderful and subtle complementing echoes, even including his signature, another repeated diagonal. All this energy, however, is balanced beautifully by the long, horizontal curve of the hillside, which adds stability and a restful alternative to the movement of the diagonals, and that curve is then repeated several times throughout the painting (see the dotted lines above). Nothing in this composition is accidental, and nothing is dispensable. Notice how the crows' beaks point back to the fox's head, for instance, or how the taking away the small twigs at the left would create a hole in the painting that leaves the eye in limbo. What you see here is a great artist, at the height of his powers, doing everything he can to reinforce the visual impact of his composition.

# Designing at Every Stage

## 1 Bending the Rules



## 2 Starting with a Flourish

## 3 Establishing Color

## 4 Pushing Through

## 5 Finish with Style

1 Although I conceived this painting as structured around the “rule of thirds” (which dictates placing the focal points at any of the four intersections among lines dividing the picture into thirds both horizontally and vertically), both the upper left and upper right masses of the flowers are placed well into the top third of the picture, as you can see in this sketch. This makes the composition less predictable, though in the painting process, I’ll use case shadows to help bring the viewer’s eye back out of these areas to complete the design. Note also how the linking of forms at the bottom (the vases and fruit) creates one large mass and a pleasing array of negative shapes.



4 The painting is now probably at its ugliest state. I’ve filled out the pears and begun laying in the warm background with a maroon mix to enhance the green accents, but there’s still some experimentation going on. You can already see, however, how the placement of the shadows and building up the darks in the background will fix things up, but I’m always glad to get past this point.

2 Carefully painting around the negative shapes created by these orchids helped me to depict them accurately, and I used mainly quinacridone and cadmium reds because they were so intense. Here’s an example of how good design is evident even to the earliest states of the painting process: “The dominant sweep of the flowers to the right is nicely balanced by the diagonal movement to the upper left.



3 Here I started the bottle with a melange of colors that reflect everything around it, and I put down a foundation wash for the pears in a dirty brown mix including cadmium red, ultramarine blue, and some orange and sienna notes. The bottle with need a lot of adjustment later on, but getting it started gave me a sense of how the colors relate and how they would affect the balance of the composition.



5 To complete Arrangement in Red, Green and Maroon (watercolor, 24x21), I finished out the background and adjusted the colors throughout, and the attention to small details in the bottle really make it pop. Plus, a little restraint turned out to be helpful because the relatively undeveloped foreground is a nice foil to the activity elsewhere.

