

Landscape Painting *for Beginners*



**Tips on Composition,
Painting Trees, and More**



LYING IN GREEN PASTURES | Claudia Nice | 10" × 14" (25 × 36cm), watercolor on paper

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How do I determine **WHAT TO INCLUDE?**

Once you have determined what part of a landscape interests you most, keep your focus—both visual and mental—on what attracted you to that subject in the first place. Your painting should “be about” one thing, making one and only one “statement.” Perhaps it’s the way the shapes and colors of the trees pull your eye into the scene, or perhaps it’s the dramatic pattern of shadows and sunlight. Include elements that will enhance your subject, and leave out anything that will detract from the statement you want to convey.

Q How can I get better at editing my compositions?

A Making several sketches and paintings of the same subject or landscape is great practice. The more you depict the same scene, the more you will discover about its character. You can experiment with different points of view, different areas of emphasis, and different selections of details until you discover the most powerful combination.

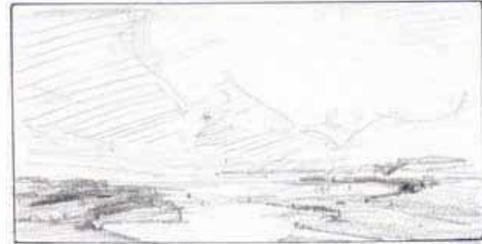
Start by sketching the same scene several times, altering the composition each time. Eliminate an object or emphasize another, noticing how this changes the painting’s impact. You will quickly see how to improve your paintings by selecting and simplifying key elements.



COMBINE REFERENCE PHOTOS TO GET THE COMPOSITION YOU WANT

The more you work with your design the more you will be able to find creative solutions.

The clouds in the top photo at left were too horizontal to create the movement that would enhance the meeting of the river and ocean, so I used the cloud formation from the bottom photo. By trying different formats and using different reference materials, you can explore options and come up with a satisfying composition.



SKETCHES FROM PHOTOS

In the sketches at right, the top design has nice movement within the long horizontal rectangle. The middle sketch seems more ordinary, although the line direction takes the eye to the sunlit land. The larger format of the bottom one allows more room to repeat the curvilinear shape of the land in the sky. The land forms in the top sketch will be good with the cloud forms in the bottom sketch. Together they will provide good shapes and good direction for an interesting painting.

What is an

INTERESTING SHAPE?

An interesting shape has no two dimensions the same and has concavities and convexities (“innies and outies”). Shapes with similar sides and angles such as squares, regular triangles and circles are boring shapes. Symmetrical shapes are less interesting than asymmetrical shapes. Several shapes of the same size are less interesting than shapes that vary in size.

Pay particular attention to the silhouettes of the shapes in your picture. The silhouette should immediately identify what the shape



USE REFERENCE PHOTOS TO RECORD INTERESTING SHAPES

This is a beautiful scene, especially when the afternoon light comes down the back hill and illuminates the old trailer park against the trees. On the other hand, the photograph is not very exciting because the space divisions are pretty much the same size and the shapes are static. The basic forms are simple and strong, however, so with some creative alternation, this scene can become a dynamic composition.



SKETCH TO DETERMINE THE BASIC SHAPES

Break the scene into dynamic abstract shapes. Learning to see and work with abstract shapes will help you create strong abstract compositions to provide solid foundations for your paintings. Don't worry about details at this point.

is. This outside shape is much more important to the composition than the details within.

Look at the shapes in your painting as an abstract pattern rather than as representations of things. A good painting should be based on an interesting pattern of interesting shapes, regardless of what the shapes are supposed to be. Your painting should read like an abstract painting in the beginning; then, as you continue to paint, it may become more and more representational.



COMMIT THE DESIGN TO PAINT

I eliminated most of the sky so the mountain becomes more powerful. In the reference photo, the water and land divided the composition about in half, so I needed one shape to be dominant. To achieve this, I emphasized the hill by making it larger. The horizontal rocks that jut into the water stabilize the composition, while the vertical trees slow the diagonal action of the mountain.

Summer Light, Avila Cove

*Oil on linen on board
20" × 30" (51cm × 76cm)
Collection of the artist*

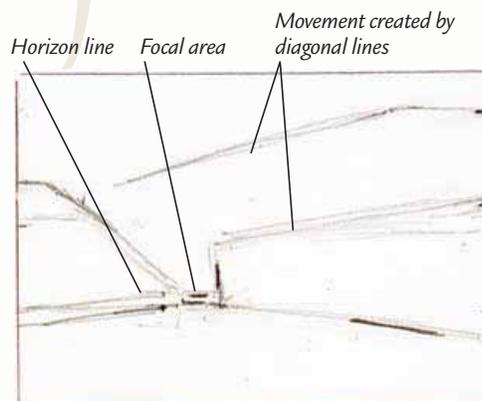
What are ACTION LINES?

Action lines are the directional lines of the painting that indicate movement. They may conflict with each other or they may echo each other. Establish action lines early in the design process to indicate how the viewer's eyes should move throughout the painting.

The action lines in your painting should direct the viewer's attention around the picture. You don't want any lines that stop the viewer's eye from moving or lead it out of the picture. Follow these guidelines for creating effective action lines.

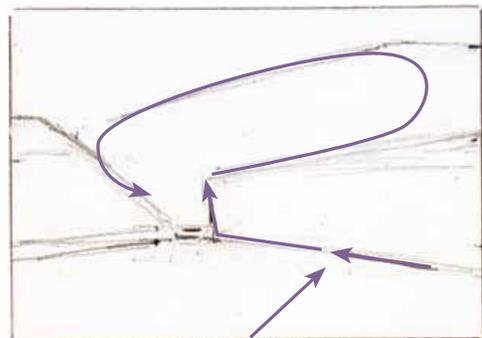
- ✎ Avoid lines that point directly to the corners of a painting—especially the lower corners. The viewer's attention will go right out of the painting like water down a drain.

PLANNING ACTION LINES



1 Divide the Scene Into Large, Abstract Shapes

Break up the canvas with large abstract shapes. Direct major lines toward the center of interest.



2 Plan the Movement

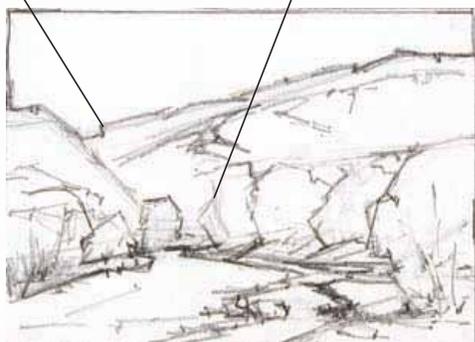
Put some marks on your sketch to indicate how you want the viewer's eye to move through the painting.

- ⌘ Avoid placing important elements in the exact center of the picture. There is no movement in the center; remember that the axle is the part of the wheel that rotates the least.
- ⌘ Vary the spacing of your elements so the distance between them doesn't look artificial. Avoid placing objects equidistantly.
- ⌘ Avoid lines that direct the viewer out of the picture.

Once you have become comfortable with design, however, try breaking the rules. This will help you find out what works and what doesn't—and why. Use a sketchbook for thumbnail drawings to help you become more familiar with your subject and to work on the design of your painting. Sketches help you visualize your painting and work out problems before you get to your canvas.

Jagged edge slows movement of diagonal and interlocks the mountains to the shape of the sky

Vertical and horizontal lines stabilize the diagonal lines



Adding tonal value and detail to the sky creates additional movement



3 Define the Subject Matter From the Abstract

Carve the scene from the abstract shapes you created. Use the creek to move the viewer into the painting and up into the hills toward the sky shape.

4 Lay In the Values

With the addition of the values, the sky shape now has movement as well. The viewer can return to the painting.

How do I DIVIDE SPACE in my painting?

Divide the space unequally giving dominance to one of the divisions. Unequal divisions make the larger space dominant.

- ✘ Avoid placing the horizon in the exact middle of your landscape.
- ✘ Avoid dividing your picture in half vertically; for example, don't place a tree trunk or telephone pole right in the middle.
- ✘ Avoid lines that go diagonally from corner to corner. This divides the composition into two equal parts and directs the viewer's attention right out of the picture.



Embraced by the Light
Oil on linen on board
36" × 48" (91cm × 122cm)
Collection of Pete &
Jeanne Vander Poel

A HIGH HORIZON LINE EMPHASIZES THE LAND

Here, the land is definitely the dominant area because it is so much larger than the sky area in the painting. The water in the marsh forms an action line that directs the viewer into the painting.

Q How do I use the horizon line to divide space?

A The placement of the horizon line determines whether the painting will be primarily about the land or the sky. Are you planning to paint a large foreground? Then you will need a high horizon. If you want to concentrate on the background hills or the sky, then you will need a low horizon.



Passing By
Oil on linen on board, 24" × 24" (61cm × 61cm), Collection of Jeff & Sara Colodny

A LOW HORIZON LINE CREATES A LARGE SKY

In this painting the large sky area gives the painting a feeling of expansiveness. The viewer's eye is drawn to the larger barn in light because of the action lines and contrast.

How do I create a center of interest or FOCAL POINT?

Every painting needs a center of interest, or focal point. Consider what you want the painting to communicate to the viewer: the subject or concept that will engage the viewer's mind. Subjects in landscape paintings that tend to engage viewers include:

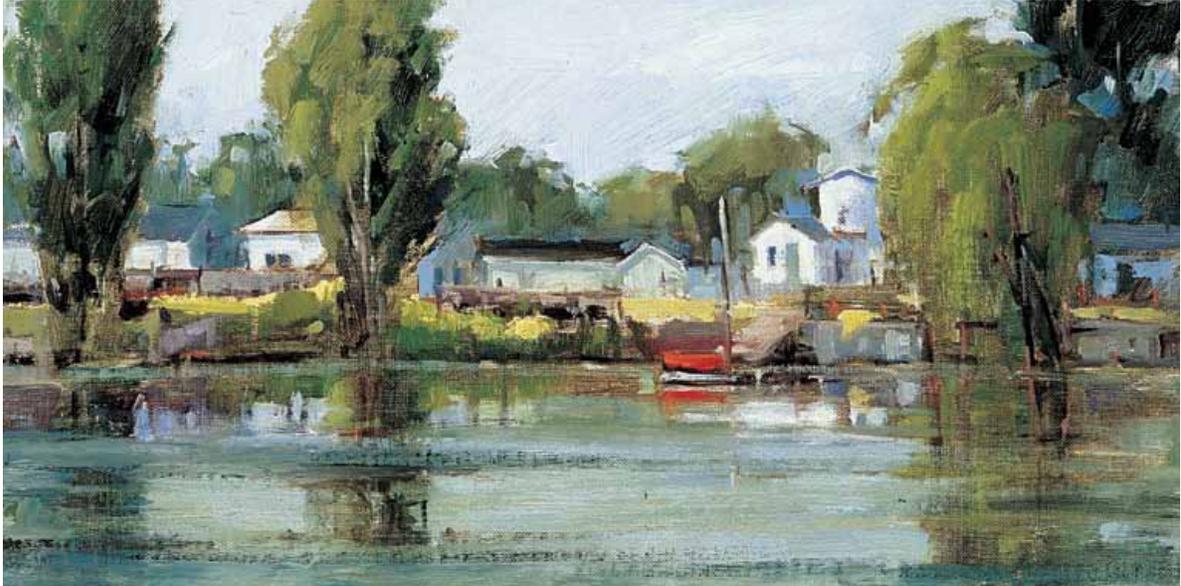
- Figures
- Animals
- Structures such as buildings or vehicles

Next, consider how you can attract the viewer's attention toward the subject you want to emphasize. These characteristics will help you create a center of interest to draw the viewer's eye:

- Stark contrast, especially very dark against very light
- Bright, saturated color (see page 87)
- Hard edges (see page 122)
- Straight lines or regular forms
- Small details
- Repeating patterns

Be sure that your focal point supports the main idea you want to convey so your composition remains in harmonious balance. For example, buildings in a landscape can attract the viewer's eye if they are the focal point. This is a good place to use stronger color and contrast. However, if the buildings are there only to support the idea, for instance to show scale, they need to be less commanding in contrast and in color (see page 63 for an example).

Avoid creating a busy pattern or sharp value contrast in a part of your painting that is not the center of attention. All elements should work together in harmony to focus the viewer's eye and mind.

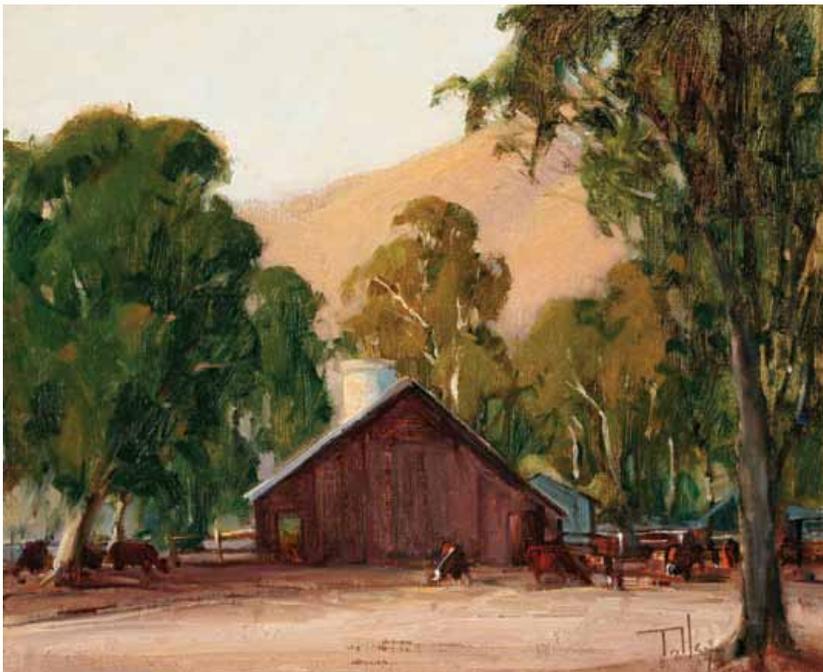


COLOR ATTRACTS THE EYE

In this summer painting the dominant color is green. The red provides contrast to the greens and helps draw the viewer's eye to the focal area of the white houses and their reflections.

Summer Morning on the Lake

*Oil on linen on board
8" × 16" (20cm × 41cm)
Private collection*



Golden Evening on the San Geranimo

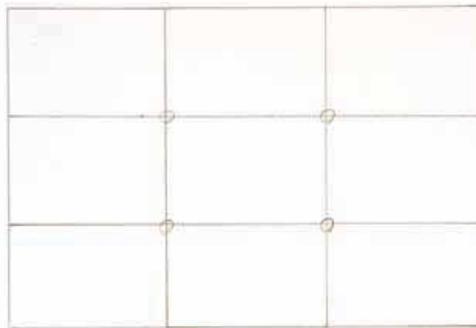
Oil on linen on board, 10" × 12" (25cm × 30cm), Collection of the artist

CREATING A CENTER OF INTEREST

The viewer's eye is first attracted to the cattle and the barn, which lead the viewer's eye toward the focal point of the trees in light. The barn, the cattle and the trees all function together to create a center of interest.

Where should I place the CENTER OF INTEREST?

The center of interest should be located at a point that is not in the exact center of the picture, not too close to any corner, and not equidistant from either the top and bottom or the right and left borders. A good way to determine such a point is to divide your picture into three sections, both vertically and horizontally, much like a tic-tac-toe board. The four intersections are points that fit the requirements.



USE A GRID TO DETERMINE THE FOCAL POINT

Many landscape artists place their focal points in the areas circled. To find these points divide your canvas in thirds both horizontally and vertically.



Morning Clearing Cayucos

Oil on linen on board, 16" × 20" (41cm × 51cm), Collection of Mark & Elisabeth Sarrow

BALANCING THE CENTER OF INTEREST WITH THE SECONDARY CENTER OF INTEREST

Here the center of interest (the houses along the bluff) is the area where the most color and activity takes place; however, the eye can move away and through out the painting. The rocks on the left help balance the composition. The horizontal of the far bluff help stabilizes the painting. Using strong directional lines keeps the viewer's eye moving back to the houses on the bluff. The figures are kept simple and create a secondary center of interest.

Any of these four locations are good places for locating your center of interest. There should be only one main center of interest. There may be others in your picture, but they must be clearly secondary. Two equally attractive focal points divide and weaken the viewer's attention.

If you do have a secondary center of interest, make that area subordinate to the main focal point by using less contrast, less intense colors, fewer details, soft edges and little or no patterning. In other words, use less of each device that make the primary center of interest a powerful "magnet for the eye."



LEAD THE VIEWER'S EYE

The focal area is in the lower third of the composition. In order to keep the eye moving through the painting, repeated colors and shapes are used. The sky is an expansive area of clouds filled with subtle lines that return the eye to the focal area.

Morning Glow

Oil on linen

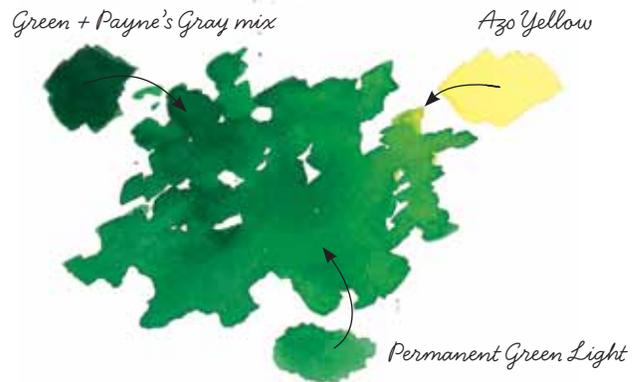
24" × 24" (61cm × 61cm)

Collection of Vartan & Nora Milian

Painting a shade tree in watercolor

Mature shade trees have lofty, spreading branches and heavy foliage that casts rich, dark shadows. When the summer sun climbs high overhead and the air shimmers with heat, both man and beast seek the coolness found beneath the boughs of the shade tree. In this pasture landscape, it's a flock of sheep that have found comfort beneath a grand old tree. Here are the steps for painting this pastoral scene in watercolor.

1 Prepare three ample, pigment-rich watercolor puddles on your palette. The base color is Permanent Green Light. Make this puddle large. The second color is Azo (Lemon) Yellow, and the third is a dark mixture of Permanent Green Light and Payne's Gray.



2 Sketch out the crown of the tree lightly in pencil on a 10 x 14 inch (25 x 36cm) or larger piece of cold press watercolor paper. Using a no. 6 (or larger) round brush and Permanent Green Light, begin to fill in the foliage areas in the crown of the tree, leaving plenty of paper-white "peek holes." Apply the paint generously and quickly to the dry paper surface. Do not work the paint into the paper, but allow it to absorb slowly. Work one foliage grouping at a time. As the paint begins to settle against the paper, charge Azo Yellow into sunlit areas and the darker green mixture into the shadow areas and let the paint flow where it will. When the foliage areas are dry, block in the trunk and limbs in Sepia or a similar gray-brown mixture.

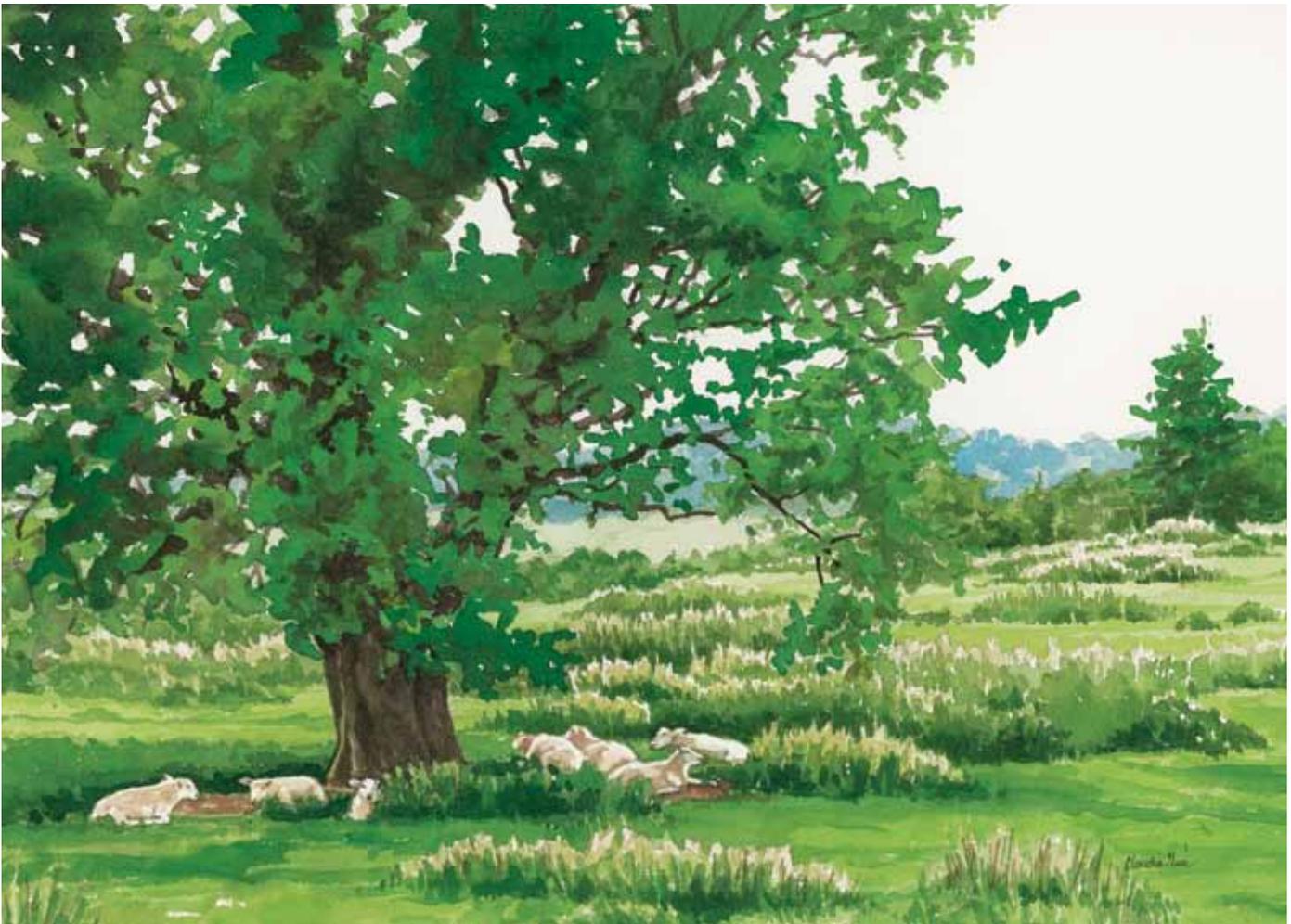


3 Create a darker mix of Permanent Green Light + Payne's Gray and make a thin wash of medial red and water as shown.





4 Work the deep green into the darkest shadow areas, creating both blended and abrupt edges. Glaze the red wash over the lighter foliage areas where you wish to create subtle shadows. Add a second layer of Sepia paint to darken the trunk shadows. The greens and browns used in the tree are repeated throughout the rest of the landscape.



Lying in Green Pastures | 10" x 14" (25 x 36cm), watercolor on paper

10 Techniques for Trees

Nearly every landscape contains at least some trees—even the desert has Joshua trees. And there are almost as many ways to paint trees as there are artists to paint them. Graceful, verdant and varied, trees are endlessly challenging to paint. Here are some approaches you might try to give variety to your work.



1. Spatter color to suggest a tree in full flower. A stencil brush or other bristle brush works well; just be sure to protect the areas where you don't want the droplets to go. Use delicate greens and this same technique will appear to be a tree just budding with new leaves.



2. A natural sponge makes a nice, lacy tree. Pay attention to where the lights and shadows are for the best effect. Leave some areas open rather than making a solid mass.



3. A round bristle brush works well for a variety of trees. By rubbing it sideways or jabbing the paper with it, you'll get an open, ragged effect. Connect the masses with branches that get smaller as they get farther from the trunk.



4. The same bristle brush will let you mimic an evergreen tree, just by changing the direction and length of your strokes.



5. Lay in irregular splotches with a large flat brush to suggest foliage. When that's dry, add a few dots to suggest individual leaves or leaf masses.



6. Quick linear strokes with a round brush make great palm fronds, a la Winslow Homer. When that's dry, add some smaller, darker strokes for texture.



7. Drybrush is effective for painting foliage, especially if your paper is cold-pressed or rough.



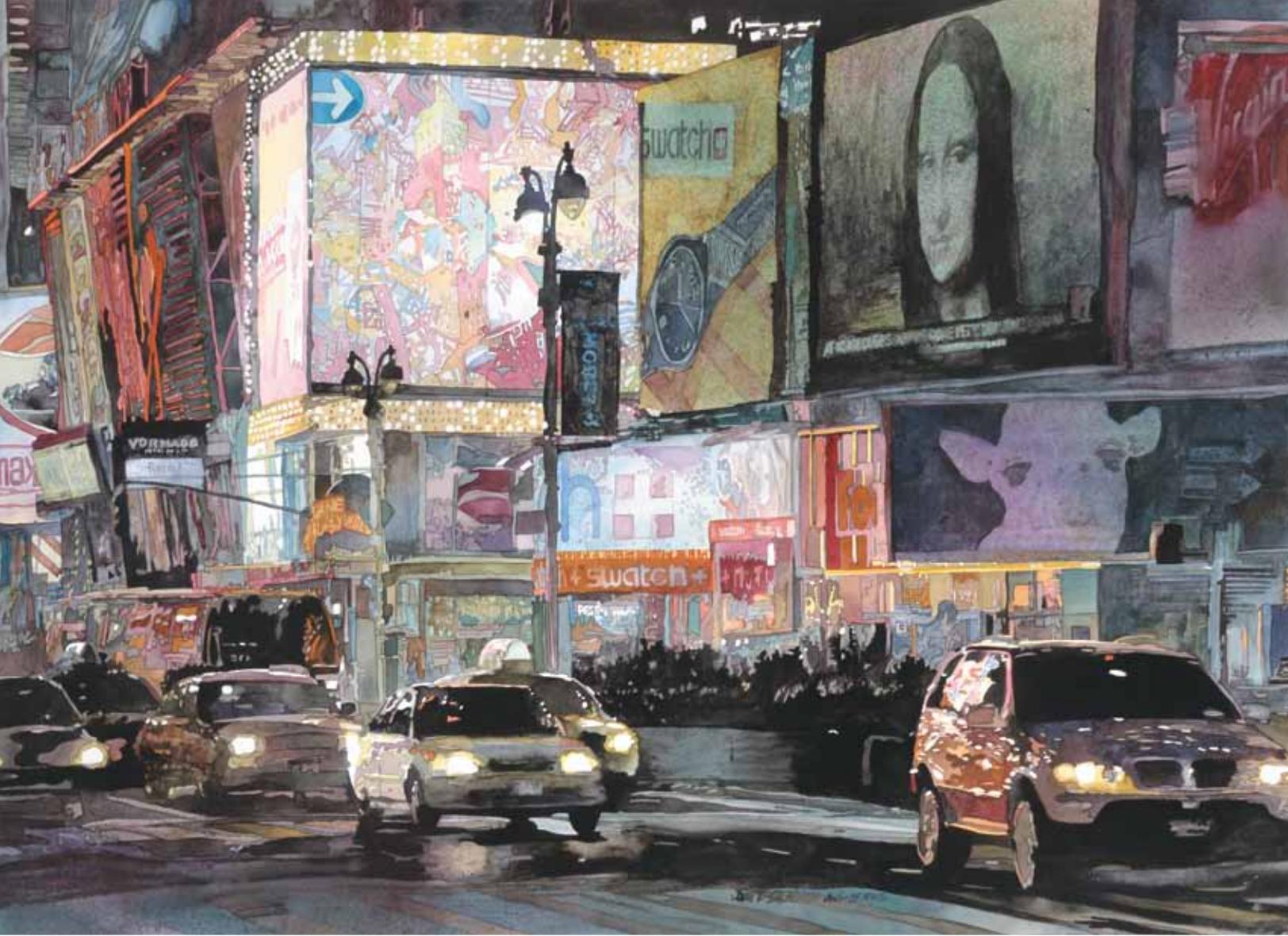
8. Let your brush tip dance, barely touching the paper, to make open, lacy foliage. You can see the variety of strokes where they escape the tree on the right.



9. Draw a tree with ink then lay washes loosely on top. (You can use pencil or colored pencil for this technique, as well.)



10. Use a rough natural sponge to suggest pine trees. If it's too big, tear or cut off a piece of the sponge so that it's easier to handle. Wet the sponge, wring it out, then dip it in a strong mix of color and apply it to the paper. In this detail, phthalo blue and burnt sienna made an intense, dark pine color.



“One goal in *Swatch* (watercolor, 22x30) was to capture the quality of those fabulous illuminated billboards and the varieties of artificial light at Times Square,” says Salminen, who directs the viewer’s eye to the cars’ headlights by making the areas around them more detailed.

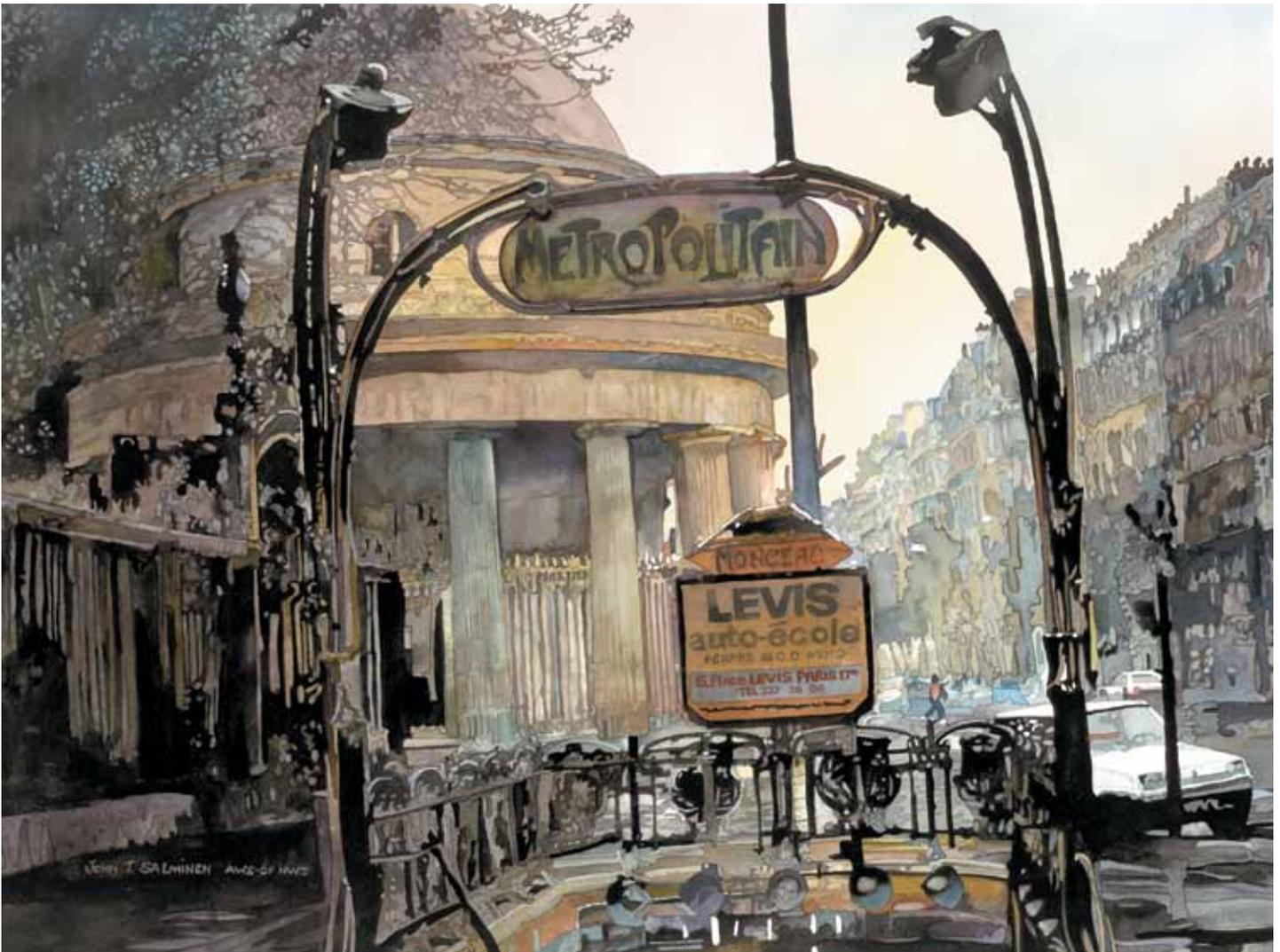
An Intricate Illusion

■ **Maureen Bloomfield** is editor of *The Artist’s Magazine*.

Focusing on value rather than color in transparent watercolor, John Salminen depicts the rhapsodic chaos of the city—in controlled stages.

■ By Maureen Bloomfield

Constable’s clouds, Turner’s mists—the English tradition of watercolor is marked by transparent skies and turbulent seas, evocations of nature rendered with sweeping washes that make the most of the white of the paper. How different is John Salminen’s work! In place of a simple landscape executed with the speed of a sketch are crowded streets, where the viewer is confronted with a ravishing surface that dissolves to a palimpsest of beautiful fragments. This stirring visual effect simulates the cacophony of a city—swirls of sirens, signs, smells—in a setting where



The beauty of lampblack, the darkest tube black—as it’s set against areas of less intense blacks and grays (mixed from color complements)—is apparent in *Paris Metro* (at left; watercolor, 22x30).



To see more of Salminen’s work, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/article/john-salminen.

the buildings, bridges, streets, as well as the city-dwellers, are shades of black and gray.

Watercolor, in Salminen’s hands, in fact has more in common with Chinese sumi-ink painting than with the English tradition. Salminen considers his preference for value over color, in part, as a consequence of having studied watercolor 30 years ago with the Chinese-American painter Cheng-Khee Chee. (At the time, Salminen was painting abstract expressionist works in acrylic.) “Chee told us that color takes a backseat to value,” says Salminen. “If you organize your painting, and if you have a success-

ful value statement, you can use color in a limited fashion.”

Another connection with the Chinese tradition is Salminen’s emphasis on the vastness of the scene. Instead of mountains, Salminen paints skyscrapers, but the effect is the same: to point to man’s smallness against the expanse of the universe. That man is isolated is a tenet of Modernism, as well. “What I’m trying to convey is, of course, visual, but my themes come from novels I’ve read, particularly about New York City and Chicago,” says Salminen. “This concept—being alone surrounded by mil-

lions of people—is a recurring theme in literature.” Citing John Updike and Saul Bellow who “painted portraits of the city,” Salminen recalls a moment in one of the latter’s novels, when “the hero has to take the Staten Island Ferry in the middle of an oppressive heat wave. The narrator describes the level of humidity and pollution as having ‘a palpable green quality.’ Often when I’m in New York City and it’s raining, that color is what I look for through the lens of my camera.”

In fact, Salminen’s complex watercolor paintings have a simple origin: The artist walks around with a camera around his neck. He takes hundreds of

pictures; then he retires to his home studio within 40 acres of woods in Minnesota. “If you walked out our back door and headed north,” says Salminen, “you’d only cross three or four roads before you hit the Canadian border. My wife Kathy and I can’t see the road or hear our neighbors; we’re in the middle of as natural a setting as you could possibly ask for.” The disjunction between the solitude in which he works and the crowded city that inspires him is a beneficial one. “The two lifestyles complement one another,” the artist says. “I go to New York City with an unjaded eye that enables me to find subject matter everywhere. When I have work on display in the city, I’ll meet artists who live in Manhattan, and they’ll comment that I paint what they walk by every day and have never considered a subject. It’s commonplace to them, but it’s exotic to me. An important aspect is that I come back to relative isolation to produce these paintings.”

The artist works flat, on a piece of Arches 140-lb cold-pressed paper. He describes composition as if it were primarily a matter of organization. “I work from hundreds of photographs. If they have one thing in common, they are all verging on chaos. In my opinion some photo-realist painters make the mistake—because they have the technical ability to paint every vein on every leaf on every tree—of thinking that exact detail, to the extent that it represents reality, will create a realistic impression. The reality is that what we artists are creating is an illusion, so when I decide I’m going to paint a scene, it becomes an exercise in prioritizing. What I have to do is *stage* the painting, organizing it in such a way that it does not read as chaos.”

Stagecraft is what he likens

his process to. “When I create the painting, I’m building the set. In the process of building the set, I build the bookshelf and put the books on it; then I painstakingly paint the titles on all the spines of the books. Basically I paint every brick on the wall. I do that in order to establish credibility. But the problem in terms of the overall impact of the painting is that all of those little details can become distracting, and the viewer can get lost



On color, water, masking and painting with mud

■ By John Salminen

My paintings appear more value-based than color-based, although I use every color in my palette throughout the process. Once I start a painting—for example, *Fifth Avenue* (above; watercolor, 32x39)—I never clean my palette. Oftentimes those colors are just in this huge puddle of mud in the middle of my palette; I pull various values out, as I want them. If I want a color to be a little warmer, I’ll pull out a little orange; if I want it cooler, I’ll add a little blue. There are colors I couldn’t tell you the composition of, because they’re made up of every single color I have on my palette. Often I have no idea how a color came about; I would never be able to go back and duplicate it.

I clean the palette and change my water only after I’ve finished a painting. I use a coffee-can-size container for water; it’s always surprising to me to see how much water actually goes into a painting; up to a quart gets applied to the surface. If the consistency of the wash is important, I’ll wet the paper first in that area, which usually means I’ll mask around an area to isolate it from the rest of the painting. Then I’ll just brush clear water into it—in part to make the surface of the paper more receptive to the paints and also in order to even out any potential irregularities in the sizing, if a smooth, uninterrupted wash is the effect that I’m after.

If at all possible, I will paint around the white, rather than mask simply because the quality of the masked edge can be harsh, although there are applications where that’s advantageous. If I’m painting stripes on a street—as in *Fifth Avenue* (above)—the masking fluid works very well, because in reality the stripes, arrows and lettering you see on a street are no longer painted on; they’re actually vinyl decals that have edges very comparable to the edges that masking fluid leaves.

“Some photo-realist painters make the mistake ... of thinking that exact detail, to the extent that it represents reality, will create a realistic impression. The reality is that what we artists are creating is an illusion.” John Salminen

in the minutiae. So once I've built that set in painstaking detail, I go up in the lighting booth and start putting a spotlight on the portion of the painting that I feel is the most important—either in terms of design or in terms of content. This is the part of the process where I guide the viewer through the painting, so he enters the painting and reads the painting in the way that I intend him to, and yet I still maintain all the credibility that the detail provides.”

If detail and light define the focal point, ambiguity and darkness throw it into relief. “Since I don't have the option of brightening part of the painting once the painting is at the stage where all the detail is in, the only option I have is casting the less important parts in shadow, and I do that with washes. The part of the painting I deem the most important, the part I essentially want to illuminate, I leave as is. I darken the surrounding areas with washes that reduce the intensity, as well as the degree of contrast and detail. The center of interest, the area of greatest clarity and detail, is determined by “what I felt at the time I initially took the picture.” Accordingly, the center of interest can be anything; for example in *Fifth Avenue* (see page 47) it's the succession of yellow stripes on the blacktop.

While his subject matter may be outside watercolor's pastoral tradition, his technique is classic. To convey

light, the artist relies on the white of the paper. “Pure transparent watercolor has the potential to give a luminous glow that arises from the relationships between closely attuned values. We watercolorists can do wonderful things with light.”

Because his paintings depend on a full range of values, he is adept at mixing blacks from standard combinations: alizarin crimson and phthalo green; ultramarine blue and burnt sienna; ultramarine blue and burnt umber. He also uses lampblack, traditionally produced by collecting soot from oil lamps. “I go from the intensity and luminosity of the white paper,” says Salminen, “all the way to as opaque-appearing black as I can create with a transparent medium, lampblack. Where the dark values—those mixed blacks and mixed grays—really have the potential to come to life is when I juxtapose them against a tube black that's absolutely devoid of any color at all. Putting up a passage of that darkest value black (lampblack) into a very dark area really breathes life back into the painting.”

In contrast to artists who have a number of works in various stages in their studios, Salminen concentrates on one painting at a time. “Once I start a painting, it becomes the total focus of my existence.” This joyfully obsessive habit of mind has served him well. For the last seven years, he's devoted himself to his art; prior to that, he taught black-and-white photography, drawing and paint-

ing for 33 years in public schools. “Ten years before my target retirement date, I decided that I wanted to become a full-time artist when I quit teaching, so I had to be fairly analytical about where I had to be in order to make a seamless transition. I decided that signature memberships in some high-profile organizations were critical, and I felt I needed a substantial volume of work so that if attention were focused in my direction, I'd be ready.”

He soon was painting between 30 and 40 hours a week, all the while maintaining his teaching schedule of 40 hours a week. “The last 10 years I was teaching, I'd developed a beneficial routine that gave me the discipline and structure that enable me to paint every day now,” he says. “I'm at a point when I don't think I could stop; it's not really a choice anymore.” As a result of his discipline and the mastery that follows from it, Salminen is steadily prolific, avoiding highs and lows. “Every day I know when I get up that I'll go down to the studio to take up the process where I stopped it the day before, and the knowledge that I have a painting in progress is a comforting one. I have this vague feeling of discontent if I don't have a painting in progress. What I say jokingly, but not completely jokingly, is I'd be very happy if I had a painting that never ended.”



“Cities at different times of year have very different atmospheric qualities that affect the light,” says Salminen. *Clay Street, San Francisco* (watercolor, 38x33) shows how fog and water influence our perception of space.



Meet John Salminen

“Once I work out the composition, I have a good idea of how I want the painting to look. The painting process becomes a slow march toward this known goal,” says Salminen. Having won more than 175 major awards in national and international exhibitions, including the American Watercolor Society Gold Medal and the National Watercolor Society Silver Star Award, Salminen often serves as a juror for prestigious contests like our own *Artist’s Magazine’s* Annual Competition. His paintings have been showcased in more than 20 magazine and book articles, as well. To learn of upcoming exhibitions and to see his workshop schedule, visit his website at www.johnsalminen.com.

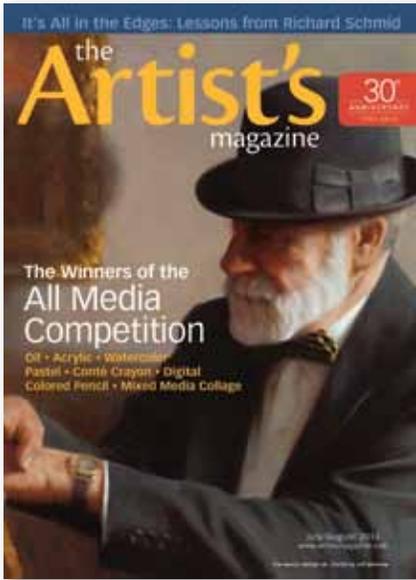


To learn about Salminen’s abstract work, go to www.artistsnetwork.com/article/salminen-abstracts.

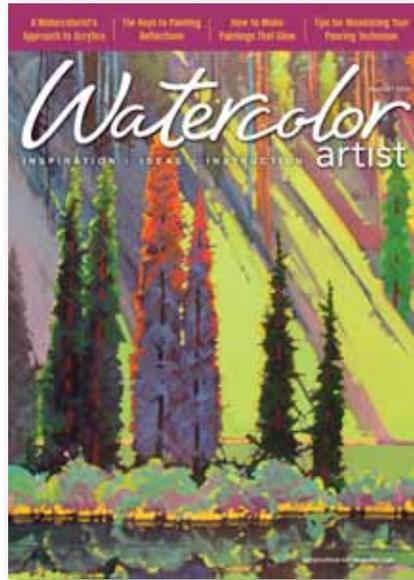


In *Lake & Wells* (watercolor, 32x36), Salminen creates the illusion of infinite space by making the foreground more detailed than the background. Note how the dark figure is surrounded by muted, grayed colors.

MORE RESOURCES



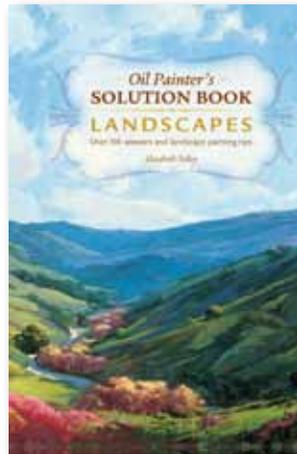
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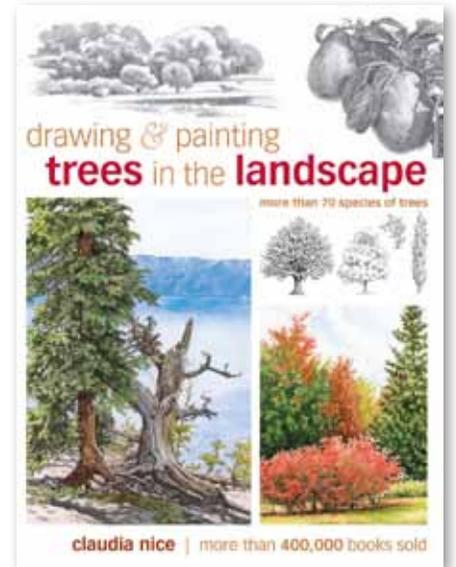
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