

HOW & WHEN TO FINISH A PAINTING: A checklist for students (Advanced Level)

Margaret A. Saul, © 2006 (Updated 2014)

Proceed past the point when the creative energy that initially motivated you begins to wane after many hours spent diligently drawing and painting (in finely applied watercolor): a point where you may start doubting if your painting will meet your initial expectations. This is when to stop, step back, take a break (a few days) and on return follow a fine-tuning process laid out below to guide you through the final steps of your creative process (BGSBAI Handout – *Creative Process In Four Stages*) and that will enable you to be confident you have indeed completed the art piece to the best of your ability.

To begin: Once the painting has thoroughly dried view it in a vertical position and at about eyelevel by adhering it with removable tape to a well-lit, neutral colored wall or other vertical surface. If you are not chasing a deadline, afford the luxury of putting it away for a few days and store it flat between sheets of acid-free cover paper in a rigid folder. To facilitate the disengagement process tidy your work area, and attend to tasks that have lapsed, or consider that next painting. A break from the constant up-close encounters with your art sees you better able to make an objective appraisal.

❖ CHECK AGAIN FOR BOTANICAL ACCURACY

Stems:

- If reworking stems against white backgrounds – do not make darker than initially intended.
- Check diameters of stems are correct and that they are uniform or taper correctly.
- Are subtle adjustments required to align a stem after it re-appears from behind a leaf?

Leaf/stem attachment:

- Three-dimensionality + finer detail correctly interpreted – check fresh material using a magnifier, or refer to original reference drawings and photographs.

Leaves (also applies to petals): Leaf shape is a key element used for describing a species.

- Foreshortened leaves are convincing but also, not over-emphasized.
- Refer to original sketches to check subtleties in venation, margins, tips and bases. Over-emphasis of venation patterns can change the character of a leaf.
- Check three quarter views where a leaf “twists” and partially obstructs its rear margin –
 - the line drawn for the uppermost *rear* edge correctly aligns with the same edge but viewed from the underside? Test by reversing the action on tracing paper, (D2).
 - subtle intersecting of surface planes where leaf (or petal) appears to curl or twist have been correctly interpreted – can you follow the three dimensionality you have illustrated?

Hairs: The structure and angle of hairs - should be viewed under a magnifier.

- Check general angle of growth, shape, length, thickness and color.
- Pale hairs appear dark against a pale background and light against a dark background.

❖ FINE TUNING THE COLOR COMPOSITION

Focal point: The main *point of interest* or entry point to that also works as an effective visual resting place to return to after exploring other parts of the picture. (Continued next page)

- Has this focal point that seemed so effective in preparatory work maintained its effectiveness?

- Check if further definition of surface textures + structural details in this area can be enhanced?
- Are colors sufficiently prominent or could color dimension (value contrast and color intensity) be enhanced to create a greater sense of prominence in this area (lifting-out for sheen, deepening shadows etc).

Color dimension: Manipulate color to enhance the perception of depth. (Color dimension is also influenced by surround color.)

- Is there a logical progression of color dimension in the picture? Adjust by applying subtle transparent tints of relevant color or by lifting out color.
 - Prominence – apply major value contrast, juxtaposed complementary color and bright or saturated colors.
 - Recession – apply minimal value contrast, and dulled color (by mixing with the complementary).

Unified color: Whether the color of a plant is subtle or striking, unifying color creates a sense of beauty in a botanical painting.

- Is their related color found in various elements within the painting?
- Consider if flower or fruit color could be legitimately and subtly applied across appropriate surfaces by lightly glazing with paint or transparent colored pencil (or by fine dry-brushing) the stems, reflective surfaces and/or subtle color-changes in leaves or shadows.

❖ EDGES

Fine brush corrections:

Untidy edges in an artwork presented as a detailed painting are an instant turn off.

- Check all edges with a magnifier, particularly edges set against a white background.
- Only dampen in and around “missed” areas inside an edge before delicately applying a matching, medium PW mix with the tip of a moist brush. The color should disperse back away from the edge into the main color so as not to leave any trace of a correction.

Pencil lines: Unless a vital part of the finished art these should be carefully erased while viewing edges under a magnifier. Take care not to interfere with the pigments.

❖ FINALIZING THE PROCESS

When to stop: How much detail? Would further embellishment ultimately enhance an ephemeral quality or the three dimensionality you wish to capture? Add further detail to clarify certain features? (Avoid cloggy paint applications to fix problem areas.) Excessive detail, if not done sensitively can make a painting look overworked. Do you want the painting to appear as if copied from a digital photograph? Beware of improvisation of botanical elements to improve the composition.

Final appraisal: Having methodically worked down through the checklist, return your painting to the wall. If not satisfied calmly revisit the checklist to see if the problem lies in the lack of “finish” or the placement of the primary structural elements of the composition. Usually the later cannot be adjusted at this late stage, in which case realize it has been a valuable and absorbing creative experience – and go for a brisk walk!