

## **Thoughts on how to finish a painting**

I've been painting for many years and I've over-painted many paintings! I've also under-painted a few. Through trial and error, I have developed a system to help myself come to the conclusion as to whether or not a painting is complete.

It's pretty simple. While I am working on the finishing stages of a painting, I take the time and effort to stand back from it more often than during the middle working stages. I use a mirror to look at my painting in reverse and see it with fresh eyes.

Sometimes I make a move with my brush and then quickly decide that it is not moving the painting forward. If I do that 3 times in a row, I know it's time to stop and take a break for at least 10 minutes. After that I will work on the painting a little more.

If I make any more mistakes, then I put my brushes down and decide that it is finished!

An exception to this rule is that if the painting is a very large work, I will give myself the time to look at it again the next day and re-evaluate.

I have a "virtual toolbox" that I use to analyze my own work and the work of my students. I'd like to share it with you so that you can use it to self-evaluate your own work and thus help you with your artistic journey.

I often state that my "toolbox" is Lines, Values, Color, Design and Edges. Put those things into play from the start and use them to re-evaluate your work again during the finishing stages. The middle part of working on a painting is my favorite! It seems to be where the "magic" happens, a time where you allow yourself to let go of the technicalities and subconsciously drift into a state of working from your heart.

The finishing stages in my opinion are the hardest. They require dedication, patience and some critical analysis.

During the finishing stages of my painting, I go through a series of silent questions. I ask these questions from a viewing distance of approximately 6-10 feet from my painting. kThis is because that distance from your work is the approximate distance that any viewer will be seeing your work for the first time. In addition, it is a good distance to see the design of your work and to prevent yourself from getting caught up in the details.

1. Have I achieved the feeling or intention I am trying to communicate with the viewer?

2. Does my eye keep moving around the painting and never leave? Am I constantly moving around my painting while discovering new things? Or, do I get stuck in certain places here and there?

3. If I get visually stuck, what is the cause? Is it due to a light and dark value or complimentary colors side by side? Am I okay with that or do I need to make some adjustments?

4. Is my basic design still holding together or have I “run over it” with my details?

5. Are my colors balanced? This is actually a complicated question. I look for a balance of transparent and opaque, a balance of pastel and bright. Colors get grayer as they recede, so I check to make sure that my colors are brightest in the foreground and softer as they go back in space.

6. Are my temperatures balanced? i.e., does my painting feel overall cool or warm? Sometimes it's helpful to place your painting in different

locations so that they are in different lighting situations. This will sometimes reveal that temperature adjustments need to be made.

7. Is there a sense of mystery in my work? This is often a defining feature of works that we deem “classic or timeless.” Does the viewer get to participate visually in finishing the painting? Is there too much detail perhaps, for not enough?

When we look at a painting, we see it with our eyes physically of course, but that experience is also combined with our years of visual knowledge, which is comprised of years of our own experiences. Incidentally, this is also what contributes to our sense of taste.

8. Do our lines take us visually where we want to go? Is the perspective correct? Often, we start out with a drawing or underpainting that has perfect perspective but along the way as we paint, we loose the perspective or lines get “bent”. It’s important to use a mirror to check for this as seeing your painting in reverse will immediately show any perspective that isn’t right.

9. Are our values correct in defining atmospheric perspective? Typically: a value range of 1-10 in the foreground, 2-8 in the middle ground and 3-7 in the background.

10. How are the relative edges? This requires looking at and comparing edges from the foreground, middle ground and background to one another with the thought in mind that edges get softer as they recede. Edges also get softer as they meet the edges and corners of the canvas.

I hope this helps you to evaluate and finish your paintings with confidence.