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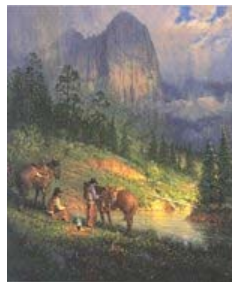
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# Landscape Composition Rules

by Johannes Vloothuis

[www.cyberartlearning.com](http://www.cyberartlearning.com)

I have put together a series of "rules" (I'd prefer the word, tips) of composition that when used properly should reduce the flaws in your landscape paintings. These are a compilation of what appears in most books on composition plus some of my own ideas. A word of caution; do not allow these to hinder your work. They are to help you out when you are in doubt on where to place diverse elements in your work. Rules are made to be broken, in which case you should at least know what rule you are breaking and why and not err due to insufficient knowledge. There are 23 pages so get a cup of coffee and prepare yourself for a long haul.



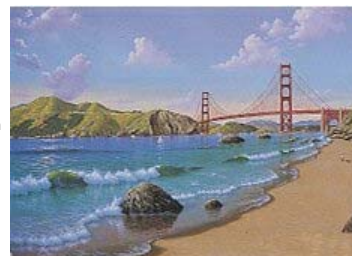
**1. Look at the picture above. A Landscape painting should contain a center of interest, which is the most predominant and beautiful area in a painting. The center of interest can be further enhanced when it contains a focal point creating a "bulls-eye" effect by adding a touch of purer color, and/or value contrast. This area will become the star in your play. The surrounding area should be subordinate. A well developed center of interest contains:**

- The strongest color and if possible complementary colors.
- A strong shift in value contrast (Light-dark or vice versa)
- Preferably, not essentially, it should take up a good portion of the picture plane and gradually become subdued while withdrawing.
- Man made structures, animals or human figures will further enhance the center of interest. They take the role of main actors.
- The subordinate and surrounding elements should direct or lead the viewer to that center of interest by means of pointers and visual paths. See fig 1 & 2.
- It should not be placed in the center nor halfway in the picture, preferably in any of the 1/3 portions.
- This area should not be blocked, not even partially. This will diminish its importance.
- An effectively designed center of interest will grasp and hold the viewer's attention.



Fig 2. The logs correctly placed are great pointers that lead the viewer's eye to the area the artist prefers.

Fig 3. The shore serves as a visual path that leads to the bridge which is the center of interest.



## Highlights



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**2. You may want to include a second center of interest. This will add another chapter to your story. I don't condone this practice though unless you are very skilled. There is a risk that they will compete with each other.**

Do not place one on top of another. Only one should predominate in size. The best way to place them will be across each other in a diagonal format. In case this can't be done then placing them horizontally is the second option.



Fig 4. This painting didn't need the flowers in the foreground. However, the artist decided to add a second center of interest.

**3. Avoid pushing the viewer out of the painting. This can be avoided if the elements don't point towards the edge or run out of the picture, such as tree trunks, roads, and rivers. You can add "stops" to avoid the viewer from exiting. A rule of thumb; animals and people should be facing and looking inwards.**



Fig 5. Observe the horse on the right. The artist subdued the value. Squint your eyes. See how it merges with the trees. If this horse were lighter in value the viewer would mount the horse and ride right out.



Fig. 5a. Observe the first painting. See how the log is too straight and pointing towards the edge. The one in the middle has been edited. Some broken off branches were extended to slow down the speed as well as a branch added at the end (a stop). (Last picture) A better alternative might be to remove the log completely. Now the viewer will follow the shore line.

**4. Rivers, streams, roads, etc. should enter the picture with an "S" movement. The second option, not as good, in a curve. Straight lines should be avoided at all costs. The velocity is too fast. Allow the viewer to take a slow visual "walk".**



Fig 6. This stream in this composition has a nice lazy "S" shape".

Fig 7. The visual path is a curve. Compare the both pictures and see which one takes you for a slower ride, more enjoyable ride.



Fig 8. Incorrect: The road enters in a straight line. The visual path is too fast.

Fig. 9. The image to the right shows a much better approach.



**5. Logic doesn't apply to art. What counts is the visual impact. Sunlight on a field of grass may appear even if it is a cloudy day. Linear and atmospheric perspective can be distorted if the result is a better look. Cast shadows can be longer than they would appear at a specific time of day. Feel free to use your artist's license..**



Fig. 10 Observe how the trees give the appearance that the wind is blowing from right to left. However the direction of the rain shows the opposite direction.

**6. Group your subjects of importance within the center of interest. Don't scatter them around where they would compete for attention.**

Fig. 11 . All the people appear in the same radius within the center of interest which is located at the bottom right.



Fig. 12. The horse is wrongly placed. Had the artist positioned it near the bench, the composition would've improved.

**7. You may wish to allow the viewer to interact and become a participant. Let him look for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow instead of you providing all the visual information. Set your painting up for the viewer to wander around using his own imagination.**

Fig. 13. What is around the bend? Will there be a lake? What about a town? Here the artist left it to your imagination. The path doesn't go anywhere. You tell me.



**8. Depth. An artist is limited to creating the illusion of three dimensions on a flat two dimensional surface. We are to trick the people who see our paintings to believe that what they see looks real. Sometimes I have heard people ask me when they see my paintings. "Is it a photograph?". How far from the truth they are! There is nothing real about my work, just a representation of reality. Here are a few gimmicks that will work to create the illusion of depth.**

- Place objects so they overlap.
- Atmospheric perspective. Colors get cooler (bluer) and lighter in value as they recede into the background. They get warmer and the dark values become darker as they get closer. *Note. In nature this doesn't always prove to be right. When we look at a tree that is 100 yards away it will still be dark and a warm green. The value shift will be very subtle in comparison to a tree right next to you. This slight difference wouldn't even show in a photo. If you paint it this way you won't be creating the illusion of depth. However, If you add more mauve or blue to your greens as well as lighten them, this will push them farther into the distance. The more you apply this concept the further they will recede. Simulate it is a humid day with a lot of moist in the air.*

*This has to be exaggerated to a point.*

- Elements are smaller and less defined in the distance than in the foreground.
- Create at least three planes. Each should have a predominant value. Usually known as foreground, middle ground, and background.
- Linear perspective.
- Subtract texture from objects that are in the background. See Fig 13 on the previous page. There is a good feeling of distance. The pine trees are placed in front of the mountain which in return is behind telling us they are farther away. The intensity of the yellow that appears on the highlights in the foreground is much warmer, whereas in the background some mauve was added to cool them. The shadows in the far mountain are lighter and bluer than in the middle ground. There are three planes.



Fig. 14. You can add more planes which will enhance the feeling of distance if you darken the foreground.

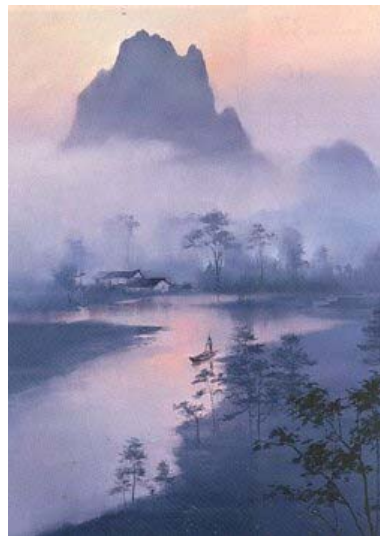


Fig. 15. Fog is a great way to create distance.

**9. Reserve your strongest value contrast for the center of interest, very dark against very light or the reverse. Keep the contrasts subdued everywhere else so as not to compete for attention. That is mid values against darks or mid values against lights.**



Fig. 16. Wrong The tree on the left is competing for attention. There is a dark against light contrast on the left.



Fig. 17 Better. The tree was cropped out and the value contrast is now reduced. It is easier to focus on the buffalo now.



Fig. 18. The dark clothes on the man readily make him stand out. There is a dramatic value shift. The door on the shadow side of the house is also dark but it is surrounded by a mid value so it won't attract the viewer to the wrong area. Think of the spotlight shining on the actor on a theater stage

**10. Your painting will look less busy if you include a rest area, preferably just before the center of interest. This will allow some breathing space.**



Fig. 19. The snow bank just before the pine trees provides for a nice rest area.

**11. If possible include a vertical, horizontal and diagonal movement in your painting. Only one should be predominant in length though. Diagonals are the most preferable because they never run parallel to the frame. These contour lines should not be straight rather just give the sense of direction.**



Fig. 20. The pine tree trunk offers the vertical. The grass is placed diagonally. The shoreline is the horizontal. Note: The smaller pine trees help break up what would be otherwise a blue triangular shape.

**12. When including elements whose nature is usually in movement, if possible indicate their movement but without putting them into compromising positions that would make them feel that they are posing.**

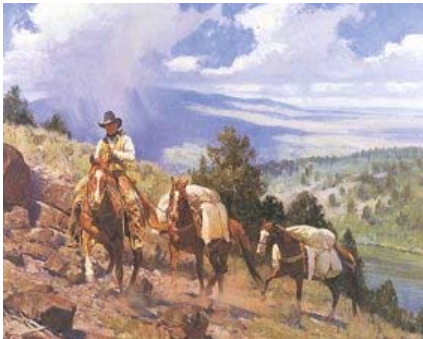
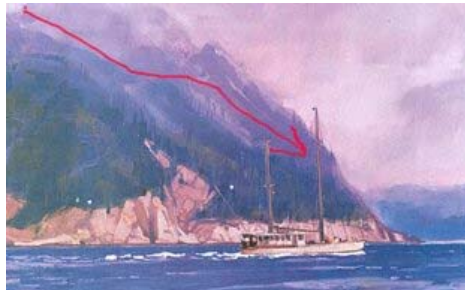


Fig. 21. The artist is indicating that the horses are walking. This was achieved by showing the dust they would kick up by dragging their hooves. Also observe fig above. None of the horses are in midair in which case would make them appear that they are flying. The latter would be captured on a photo but don't paint them this way. The same concept appears to a waterfall. When viewed in a photo it will appear that the water suddenly froze. Some painters copy this from the photo giving an unrealistic hard look. It is better to paint running water blurred. This will give it movement.

13. If you are uncertain from where you want to start your visual path such as a river or road you may want to consider this concept. Most of us read from left to right, so by sheer habit the eye will follow this sequence.



14. The visual entrance may also begin at the top left much like reading a book.



15. Do not start your visual path from a corner.



Fig. 22. This is bad design. As you can see, the river originates from the bottom left corner of the canvas.



Fig. 23. By widening the mouth of the river, we've solved the problem of originating from the corner.

**Common Errors and How to Avoid Them**

16. Avoid duplicating forms, lines, movement, and size. This will make them compete and conflict with each other.

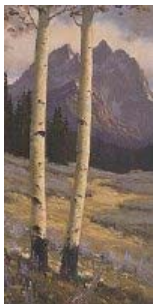


Fig. 24 .Observe these two paintings. (Left)The birch tree on the left has a twin. One of them should've leaned a different way and their width should vary. Fig. 25. (Right) the two horses are the same size and in the same position.



17. Avoid grouping animals and people in even numbers. In case you wish to depict a pair, change their size and position.



Fig. 26. Incorrect. Here the deer compete with each other because they are placed in similar poses. They are also about the same size.

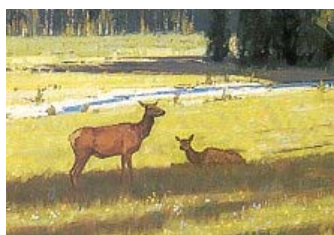


Fig. 27. Better. The deer on the right is different in size and is in another position.



Fig. 28. The painting looks even better when a third deer is added to the background.

**18. Never lean your objects outward. Always have them lean inwards. Do not line them parallel to the frame. That applies in vertical or horizontal format.**

Fig. 29. Incorrect. The telephone pole is leaning in the wrong direction.



Fig. 30. This is bad design, as well. The telephone pole is now parallel to the frame.



Fig. 31. This is a much better design. The telephone pole leans inwards, keeping the viewer in the painting.



▷

**19. Avoid straight lines unless they are quite short. Disguise them or modify them to curvatures.**



Fig. 32. Most of the straight lines have been concealed with flowers. Observe the curved stone wall.

Fig. 33. The tiled roof houses are curved. This is very common on American barns. After all, wooden beams sag over time.



**20. Do not show geometrical forms such as, squares, rectangles (doors, windows) triangles, (pine trees) ovals, or circles. (Trees, clouds) Even when these appear in nature. For example, if you include a window, break up the form with an overlapping tree branch or a flowerpot.**



Fig. 34. Incorrect. The shadow at the bottom is in a triangular shape



Fig. 35. This is much better! By breaking up the shadow, we've solved the problem easily.

**21. Never divide your painting into equal parts. This will make it look too deliberate and artificial. The horizontal line should not go across the middle.**

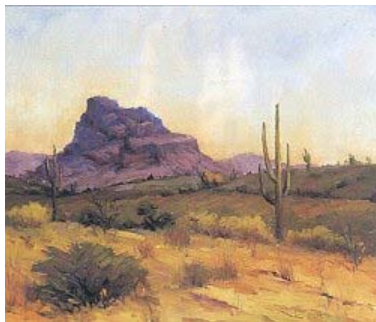


Fig.36. Left. The horizon line runs right through the middle. Fig.37. Right. Better. A portion of the sky was cropped.



**22. Avoid "kissing" the edges.**



Fig. 38. Left. Incorrect. The cowboy's hat touches the top of the background hill. Right. Fig. 39. Better. Everything fits in place now.

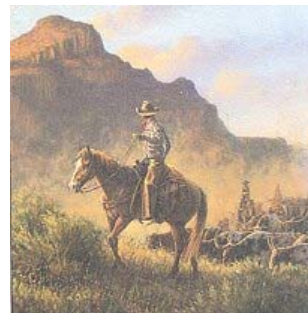




Fig. 40. Incorrect. The tip of the pine tree is touching the top. Since you can't add more canvas, you'll have to lop off part of that tree! :-)



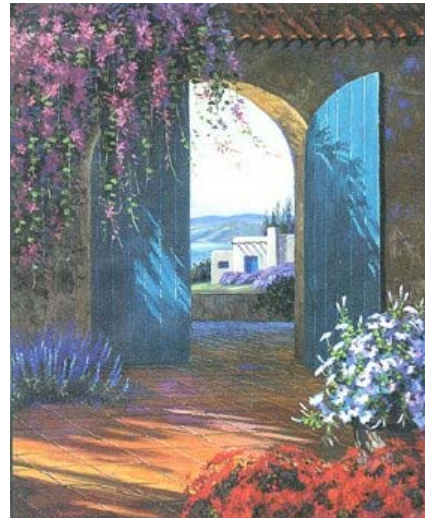
23. "X" forms are unpleasant.



24. Do not close the viewer out. Invite him in. A do not trespass sign does not apply to paintings.



Left Fig. 42. Incorrect: The artist by closing the door is telling us that we are on private property. Right. Fig. 43 . Better. Doesn't this composition make you feel more welcome?



**Recommendation. When you depict an area with no light such as a entrance to a building with the light off. Don't use black. The color of absolute darkness is purple.**

25. It is not necessary to indicate every brick, stone, board etc. unless you are into hyper-realism. By suggesting a few will convey the idea. It is better to do this in an impressionist manner.

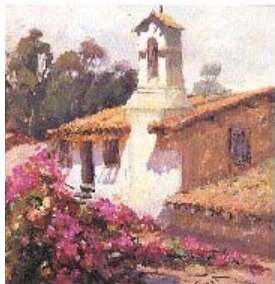
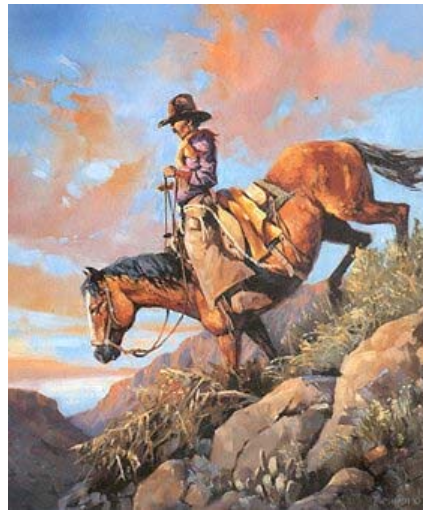


Fig. 44. The viewer easily reads the texture of the chapel's roof.

**Recommendations on How to Improve Your Landscape Paintings**

26. Keep the corners subdued with little texture and the values dark.

Fig. 45. The both bottom corners are dark with minimum texture.



27. When painting cast shadows add holes where the light peeks thru, otherwise the shadow will appear pasted on.



Fig. 46

28. It is preferable not to place animals sideways to avoid a flat pasted on look. When positioned at ? they will have a three dimensional volume.

Fig. 47. Preferably not.



Fig. 48a and 48b. Better



29. Buildings and other man made structures such as concrete, wood, etc. will be more interesting if you make them look weathered by adding texture such as cracks, parts peeling off etc. After all they would have more of a story to tell.

**Recommendation.** Only indicate texture closest to the viewer's stand point. Texture diminishes in the distance.



Fig. 49. The artist used the dry brush technique to make the side of the building look old.

**30. Add some drama to your landscapes by creating a mood. Late afternoon paintings with orange colors in the sky are much more interesting to see than the average blue sky. Examples of this could be rain, wet streets, wind blowing, leaning palm trees, etc. All these special effects will enhance your work.**

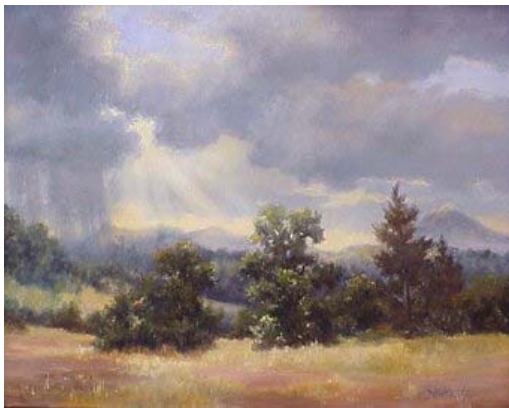


Fig. 50. This simple composition looks more interesting because of the rain and the sun peeking through the clouds. It even looks mystical.

**31. Unless your intent is to create hyperrealism, paint the landscape as if you were looking at it with a squinted blurred vision.**

Fig. 51. Surely the real life subject material has much more detail in the foreground than the final painting. The artist picked the most essential elements and simplified to the utmost.



**32. Soft edges in the background will enhance the illusion of distance. Leave hard edges in the foreground and/or within the center of interest.**

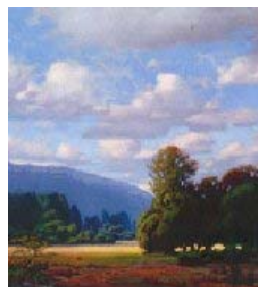


Fig. 52. The trees behind this convent were done on wet on wet watercolor paper. This technique diffused all the edges, making the foliage appear way back in the distance. The foreground tree was painted on dry paper resulting into hard edges, bringing it much closer in the picture plane.

**33. Don't abruptly end a portion as it runs into another area.**



Fig. 53. Left Incorrect. The highlighted grass suddenly stops when it reaches the foliage. Besides, the picture plane is divided in half in this area. Right. Fig. 54. Better



**34. Vary your forms. If you have round summer trees don't have round clouds in the sky. On another note, the peaks of a mountain or pine trees will look nice when surrounded by round clouds.**

**35. Balance is another key factor. There shouldn't be that much difference of mass on any of the four sides of the painting; either right, left, top, or bottom. This will make it feel like it's leaning. The painting will appear it is hanging lopsided.**



Left. Fig. 55. Incorrect. The heavy mass on the right tends to make the painting want to lean towards that direction like a see-saw. Right. Fig. 56. Better. This composition is more balanced now that some weight has been added to the opposite side.



**36. Brush strokes should be done with an inward motion and towards the center of interest.**

**Some advice on color**

**The color palette is to the artist like the music notes to a musician. They should play harmoniously.**

**37. Don't waste time mixing pigments on your palette; rather mix them on canvas or watercolor paper. This will give you many more variations of color instead of a dull premixed outcome. Allow the colors to mix in the eye by variegating them. Avoid having more than three hues in one area.**



Fig. 57. Observe all the variations of color that appear in the stone shadows. Instead of mixing blue, sienna, and orange on the palette, the artist slightly decreased the chroma from the colors that come directly from the tube and applied the colors to the shadow part of the rocks.

Fig 58. The blue door is practically the only place where this color appears. This creates the focal point in the center of interest.



Recommendations: I won't go into color harmony deeply because that takes a whole book to cover. If you intend to take art seriously, it will be extremely helpful to read up on this and apply it to your work. I personally prefer to intermix colors with their complements instead of black. The more colors you mix together the muddier they will get. This will happen after three colors are intermixed and will worsen as more colors are added to the pool. Vary the color slightly every 2 inches to avoid monotony. Most people prefer paintings with predominant warm colors rather than cool ones. Only one hue and temperature should predominate in your painting. Reserve the strongest chroma for the center of interest and add a touch of its complement to make the surrounding color stand out more. Do not repeat the same color that appears in the background in the foreground. This will give the feeling there is a hole in the painting. Place warm colors against cool colors (also complements) because they enhance each other. (See fig. 61) Cool colors recede warm colors bring things closer. Leave your blues or violets for the background. Use this concept to create depth. One way to help balance your painting and make it harmonious is by repeating the same hues in all areas. (See fig. 57) For those who do know about color harmony, I can offer this piece of advice as a trick to create a bull's effect in your center of interest. If you add small touches of color that are out of your color scheme it will strongly draw the viewer's attention to that area.

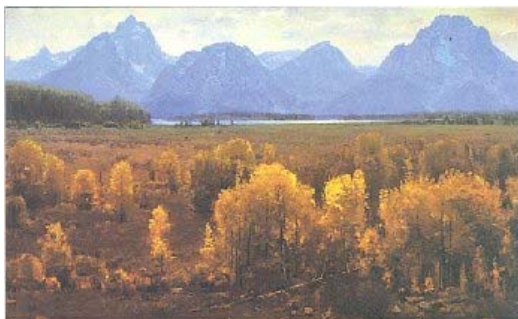


Fig. 59. The color harmony is off in this painting. Don't you feel that the mountains belong to another picture? The blue-violet color only appears in the mountains and not repeated anywhere else.

Fig. 60. In order to intertwine the colors, the artist was wise to bring the blue from the sky into the puddles. Observe the amount of variegation of ochres and greens in the tree highlights.



Recommendations: If your painting is predominantly green, a bluish green sky is better than a blue one. Here are a few gimmicks to bring down the sky colors onto the bottom portion of your painting: Bounce these colors on the shadow sides of rocks and tree trunks. When leaves in the shadow portion of a tree are at a 90 degree angle to the sky they will reflect the sky colors due to their shiny polished looking surface which act like mirrors. Some discrete hard to detect with the naked eye touches of green in the shadows of clouds will further ensure color harmony. Bounce colors that result from direct sunlight hitting an object into its surrounding objects. It is uncommon to apply white paint straight from the tube. This would be a cool white and unpleasant to look at. Add a touch of orange or yellow to warm it up. That's the reason why manufacturers of watercolor paper add an orange pigment to their product so the areas left blank will be warm whites even though no pigment has been applied.

Fig. 61. Observe the green added to the shadow side of the wall. This avoids the house from looking pasted on. If anybody asks him why that area is green he can say the foliage in front is casting green light into that area.



Fig. 62. Purple and ochre are complements on the color wheel. They enhance each other and help separate the background from the foreground. Observe that the mountain in the middle ground is warmer because it contains more red than the very far one, which is bluer. The cooler (and lighter) the color, the more it pushes the subject into the distance.

**38. One way to make a color even brighter is to apply it thick (called impasto). This blob of paint will receive more light from the gallery light making it even brighter than if it had been applied thinly.**

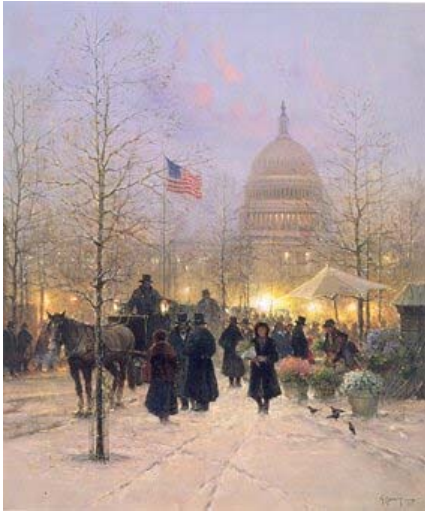


Fig. 63. Harvey is a master at depicting light emanating from street lights. The paint in the light area is applied on very thickly. By contrasting it with darks you get a strong contrast thus the illusion of light. You need the darks to get the lights.

**39. When painting we can only rely on a few values. In nature there are many more values because of the intensity of sunlight that can never be imitated under studio conditions. Three ways to create the illusion of sunlit areas is by contrasting those areas with exaggerated darks. I.e. It will be necessary to darken the cloud shadows more than they would appear in nature to create the effect of the sun peeking through the clouds. Or the cast shadow over grass will have to be much darker in your painting than in nature to make the sunlit areas appear bathed in sunlight.**



Fig. 64. When applying color visualize they way they would look on a gray scale. These values are enough for landscape painting. The differences of the in-between values are so subtle that it wouldn't make much difference. There are actually 10 values on the value scale but it is a very hard task to paint in color and match all those values.

If any of you would like to add another brick to this tutorial, please email me. There could be a rule or tip that I have overlooked.

**40. On a last note, it has been said that nature is the best teacher. This is true for textures and forms. When it comes to color and distance however, sometimes nature fails to come up with a good lesson. For example, trees can be very round or triangular in shape. When copied from nature will result look amateurish. Many colors in nature are quite monotonous such as foliage and rocks being the same color. Some trees grow the same height. Nature has several big advantages over us. The sunlight will give us a much wider value range than a gallery light. Nature's paintings are huge and three-dimensional. We have to give an appealing equivalent on a flat small surface. In conclusion we should take from nature what looks good and improve what doesn't. I believe talent is not essential to be a good artist. Hard work is. My definition of talent is the following. Talent is the ability to spot what looks right or wrong in a painting. Knowledge is knowing out to correct what doesn't look right.**

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