

make a statement

Do more than just describe a scene. Look past the details to create paintings that say as much about your unique creative vision as they do about the subject.

By Donna Zagotta

I open every workshop I teach in the same way—with a question: “How many of you want to make your paintings more personal and creative?” Invariably, everyone raises a hand. But even though it may be the very thing we desire most in our work, it can be daunting to move from a literal to a more inventive painting approach.

That’s because painting seems easier when we have certain “rules” to follow. One such imperative is getting a correct likeness. It’s comforting somehow to hold onto the belief that if we simply get everything right, a successful painting will be the result. With a creative approach, however, we’re basically on our own. There are no guidelines, rules, recipes or formulas that will guarantee successful results (not to mention the fact that “getting everything right” will no longer work). With a creative approach, the only thing we have to rely on is our own inventiveness and imagination.

The strategy I use for emphasizing creativity over accuracy in my paintings is what I call “plugging my subject into design,” which means that I consciously ignore the subject’s details and descriptive aspects and look at it formally—as a configuration of shapes, values, colors, lines and textures. Once I’ve translated the three-

dimensional subject into a two-dimensional design, I stamp the image with the marks of my unique creative vision. With the following suggestions, you can learn to do the same in your paintings.

Get Bent Out of Shape

While it’s true that the element of shape plays a major role in describing a subject, shapes can also be creative. Think of shapes as being as pliable as clay. They can be stretched, squashed, distorted, stylized, and their size and scale can be changed. For me, shape is the starting point for getting creative.

In *This Way* (on page 56), I slightly altered the forms, ignoring the descriptive details of the subject, which generally occur on the interior of individual shapes, and focused instead on the design elements in my painting. When I’m

Know It When You See It More often than not, I improvise the colors in my paintings by putting them down on the paper and then responding to what’s there. If I like the colors, they stay. If I don’t, I change them. I work this way—responding to and adjusting the colors—until the whole thing pleases me and I get “butterflies in my stomach.” That’s how I know the colors are right in paintings such as *Evening Conversation* (watercolor and gouache on paper, 15x11).



get inspired by these masters of shape:

Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920), Édouard Vuillard (1868-1940), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Henri Matisse (1869-1954) and Milton Avery (1885-1965)



In a Good Mood I exaggerated the colors in *Golden Day No. 1* (watercolor and gouache on paper, 6x8), making them brighter and fuller in order to express an upbeat and cheerful mood.

manipulating shapes like this, I tend to flatten the forms and then “decorate” them with colors, value shifts, brushstrokes, patterns, textures and colored or black lines.

Define Your Values

Values help create the illusion of form and space, but they can also express a mood, create a feeling or provide the structure for a dramatic design that turns an ordinary subject into an extraordinary painting. A painting's values can be based on the actual values present in the subject

or they can be a completely non-representational creation imposed upon the subject by the artist. By orchestrating rather than copying the values in your subject, you'll make more creative paintings.

A case in point: The room that inspired *The Mission Inn* (on the opposite page) was backlit, which made everything that was in front of the window dark, colorless and shadowy. I emphasized the effects of backlighting by choosing not to indicate the individual objects in the scene with different values, but to use value to

mass together background, middle ground and foreground objects, which created one large, dark, blue-grey shape. This also flattened the picture plane and created a dramatic U-shape composition.

Break Free With Color

Thanks to Henri Matisse and the painters known as the Fauves, color was liberated from purely descriptive duties in the early 20th century. Because of the groundbreaking work of these artists, contemporary painters now have unlimited freedom in their use of color. Color can be used emotionally, expressively, symbolically, creatively, arbitrarily, even wildly!



Drama of Light and Shadow In *The Mission Inn* (watercolor and gouache on paper, 19x21), I ignored the local values and focused instead on creating an eye-catching pattern of lights and darks that would turn this ordinary scene into a dramatic painting.

get inspired by these masters of value:

Rembrandt (1606-69), Andrew Wyeth (1917-) and Edward Hopper (1882-1967)

Design Ideas for Maximizing Creativity

A few years ago, I attended a workshop with a friend who's an experimental painter. The goal of the workshop was to help us identify our strengths and find ways to move our paintings to the next level. The instructor gave my friend the task of listing all the ways she could use line creatively in her work. I decided to make my own list, too, even though my work is more representational than my friend's.

Ultimately, I made lists of all the creative ways I could use shape, value, color and texture, as well. What I discovered in the process is that the subject is the starting place; it's not the destination. The real destination is finding an authentic and creative expression, and plugging the subject into design is an excellent strategy for finding your way on that path. Here are some of the ideas on my lists. What would you add?

Shape: real, simplified, flattened, stylized, distorted, as a symbol

Value: local, orchestrated, exaggerated, high-key, middle-key, low-key, full range, to illustrate light and shadow, to suggest three-dimensional form, to move the eye through the painting

Color: local, personalized, flat areas of, modulated, bright (Fauve), pastel (Impressionist), wild (Expressionist), grayed, warm, cool, limited palette, full palette, of light, “mother” color, no color

Line: thin, thick, scribbled, calligraphic, stamped, curved, straight, broken, solid, lost and found, stitched, grid, dividing the insides of shapes (Cubist), outline

Texture: painted patterns, brushstrokes, stencil patterns, accidental (drips, spatters), lifted out, drybrush

get inspired by these masters of color:

Henri Matisse (1869-1954),
André Derain (1880-1954),
Raoul Dufy (1877-1953) and
Georges Braque (1882-1963)

In *Big Yellow Taxi* (below), for example, I changed the dull, neutral colors of the buildings to a bright red and generally intensified all of the colors in the scene in order to convey the exciting hustle and bustle of New York City. I also simplified the background buildings and contrasted that simplicity with the busier “patterned” middle ground area.



Big City Symbol For me, the taxicab symbolizes the hustle and bustle of New York City, so I exaggerated the size and color of the subject in *Big Yellow Taxi* (watercolor and gouache on paper, 21x21).

Step-by-step: Painting Creatively



Step 1: I always begin with a small drawing (no more than 8x10 inches) to work out the composition. To find the important shapes in a busy scene, I suggest squinting to help blur out descriptive details and keeping your eyes off the center of shapes, where all that descriptive detail is located. Instead, follow the object’s outside edge. Imagine that you’re cutting out the object with scissors.



Step 2: I establish the two-dimensional relationships of values and colors at the start, rather than get caught up in the details of the figures or objects.



Step 3: With the two-dimensional color and value relationships in place, it’s time to “decorate” the painting with shape, value, color, line and texture. By the time I’m done, I’ve gone back into each and every shape and “decorated” it in some way or another to create an exciting painting surface.



Step 4: Most of us have been taught to finish a painting by adding details, but if you “plug the subject into design” instead, and focus on using the design elements as your personal visual language, you may find that you need less description and detail in your paintings, as I did in *Heart to Heart* (watercolor and gouache on paper, 22x30).

get inspired
by these masters of line and texture:

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901), Jackson Pollock (1912-56), Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), Édouard Vuillard (1868-1940) and Vincent van Gogh (1853-90)



Persistence Pays Off I did a series of paintings on this subject with the goal of focusing less on description and more on finding personal and creative uses of shape, value, color, line and texture. It took a few tries before I was finally able to get the realistic versions out of my system and paint *This Way* (watercolor and gouache on paper, 8x8). I learned not to stop with the first attempt and that sometimes it takes awhile before the more creative versions start to appear.

Testing Value Patterns

I'll sometimes make several different value sketches to experiment with a variety of patterns of light and dark before I begin painting. By comparing the finished painting to the reference photo, you can easily see that I flattened and simplified shapes, and used color, value, line and texture for creative, rather than descriptive, purposes in *Ice Cream*.



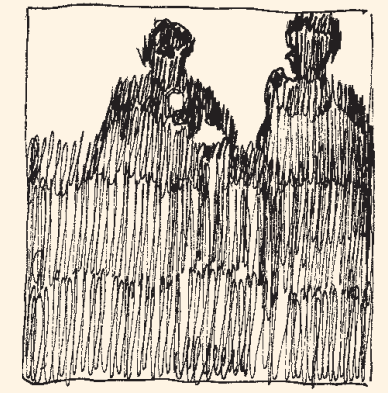
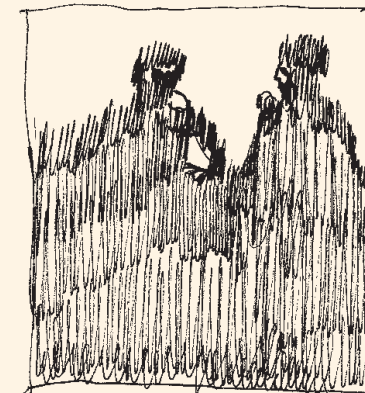
Reference photo



Ice Cream (watercolor and gouache on paper, 22x30)



Value sketches





Edging Toward Abstraction Flattening and stylizing the shapes in *Tan Chair Series No. 2* (watercolor and gouache on paper, 7x7) moved this painting beyond pure representation and a step closer to abstraction.



Color Improv The colors of the walls in the room that inspired *Chair Series Red and Green* (watercolor and gouache on paper, 10x8) were actually white. I improvised the color scheme on the fly, reacting to the effects of backlighting, which I emphasized by massing shapes and shadows into a large, colorful, dark shape that I contrasted with the shapes of sunlight.

Decorate With Line and Texture

Édouard Vuillard has been a major influence on my work. An academically trained artist and realist, he struggled early on with the Modernists' concept of flat painting. Ultimately, he got on board and learned to emphasize the decorative, rather than the descriptive, aspects of his subjects by reducing objects to flat shapes and filling them with masses of glorious patterns.

I tried to do the same in *Evening Conversation* (on page 51) by flattening the shapes of the figures and abstracting the background forms, then filling those shapes with modulated color, textured brushstrokes, lines and patterns.

Put It All Together

To make the most of all the design elements, I always begin with an 8x10-inch or smaller drawing to work out the composition, focusing on the basic shapes. Sometimes I'll follow up by making many different value sketches (see the reference photo and value pattern sketches I did in preparation for *Ice Cream* on the previous page), especially if I want to experiment with, or expand upon, an existing value pattern, or to find a more creative value presentation than exists in

real life. Other times I start right in with a small (8x10-inch or less), full color painting, improvising the values and colors as I go. In those cases, I'll typically do a whole series of paintings using different color schemes. I don't think of these small, full color works as preliminary sketches but as finished pieces in their own right. If one of these small paintings especially speaks to me, I'll do a larger version of it.

It may sound like overkill, but working out a variety of scenarios in advance gives me the confidence to know that I can (and will) do whatever it takes to finish a painting (even if it takes me three weeks to finish a 4x6-inch painting). By making a commitment to keep going until I solve all of the problems that will inevitably show up in the painting process, I usually end up with a finished piece that satisfies and often surprises me.

Fortunately, our artist forebears paved the way for us to be able to use the elements of design in any way that we desire. Because of them, we're no longer bound by accuracy, perspective, *chiaroscuro* or other academic rules. Regardless of whether your style is closer to the representational or abstract end of the scale, you have unlimited options for how you express yourself in your paintings. 