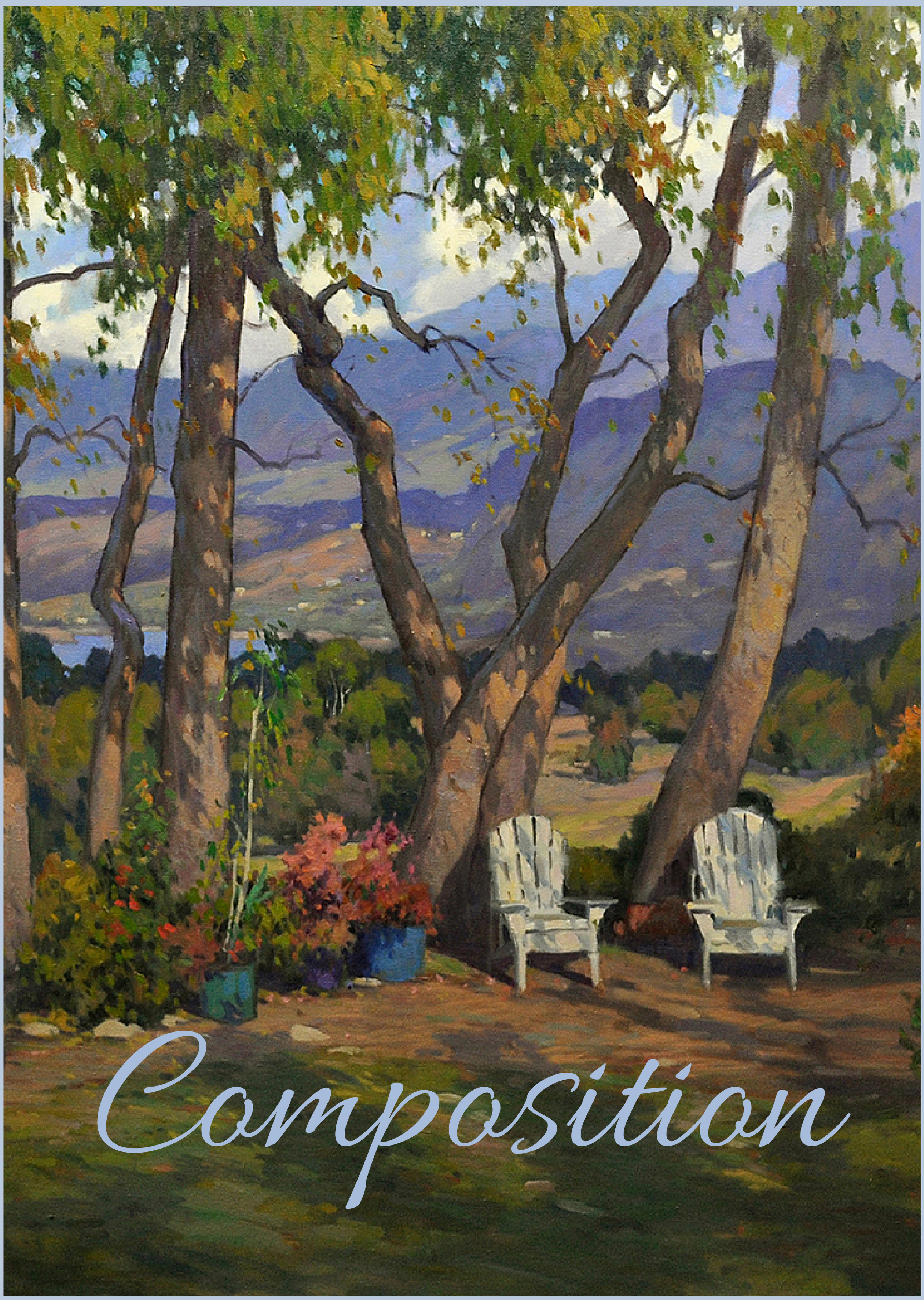


# Composition

## Putting It All Together

by Phil Starke

www.PhilStarkeStudio.com

copyright 2015

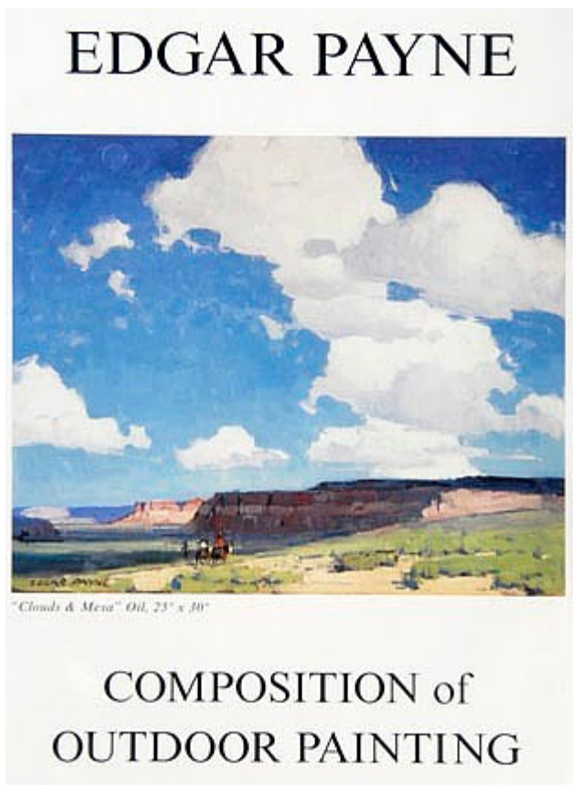
# Composing Your Canvas

While composition can be complicated, involving mathematics and diagrams, it can be as simple as “making the painting look good”.

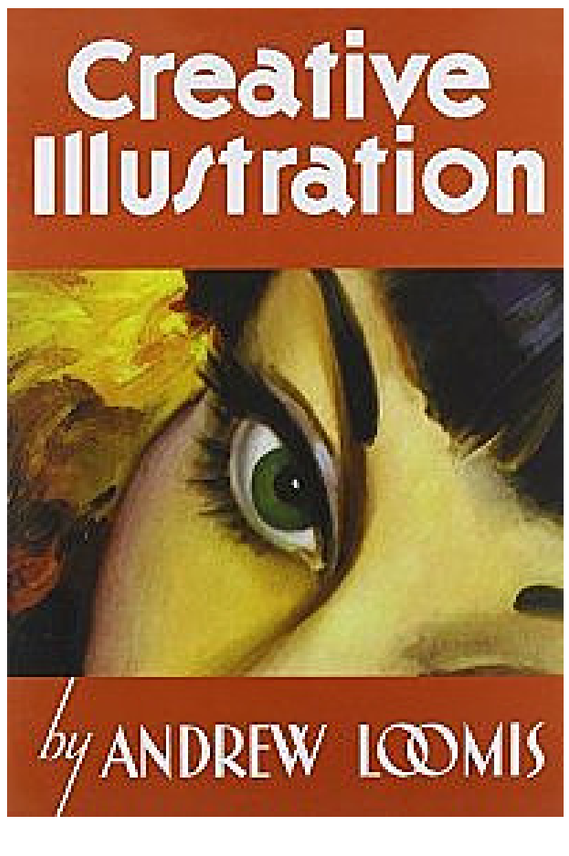
As with color it involves seeing the right things, or seeing correctly. So in this brochure I want to talk about a few simple rules that can make composition a bit more natural instead of formulaic.

There are some good books that talk about composition and go into more depth, showing diagrams and formulas and styles.

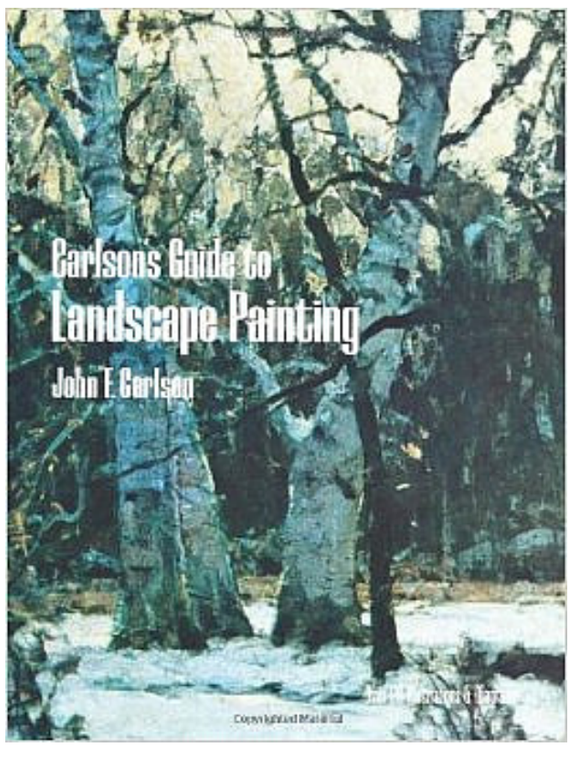
Click the links below if you'd like to check any of these books out.




"Composition of Outdoor Painting" by Edgar Payne




"Creative Illustration" by Andrew Loomis




"Carlson’s Guide to Landscape Painting" by John F. Carlson



©Phil Starke www.philstarkestudio.com

# Arranging the Composition with Abstract Shapes and Patterns.

Composing your painting starts with being able to “see” your subject differently.  We need to get away from seeing in terms of objects, rocks, grass, and trees.  We need see in terms of abstract shapes that flow together into a good design.

If I'm using the large dark pattern to set up my composition then I want the pattern to flow throughout the painting. Below are a couple of images where the shadow pattern is evident and holds the picture together.

©Phil Starke www.philstarkestudio.com

# Using Line in Your Composition

When I speak about using line in our composition I'm not talking about a contour line, or outline. I'm talking about the way I line up the edges of shapes to create a line that pulls the viewer's eye around the composition. The viewer should enter the picture at the bottom and flow through the painting and exit on the top.

I want to create a pathway for the eye to flow to the focal point and around the painting. I also want to put up some shapes to stop or keep the line from going off the side of the canvas.



©Phil Starke www.philstarkestudio.com

©Phil Starke www.philstarkestudio.com

# The Importance of Balance

The balance we're looking for in painting isn't symmetrical balance -- equal weight on both sides of the canvas. That's static or boring. What we want is a large shape that is close to the center on one side of the canvas and a smaller shape or mass that is closer to the edge of the canvas on the other side of the canvas.

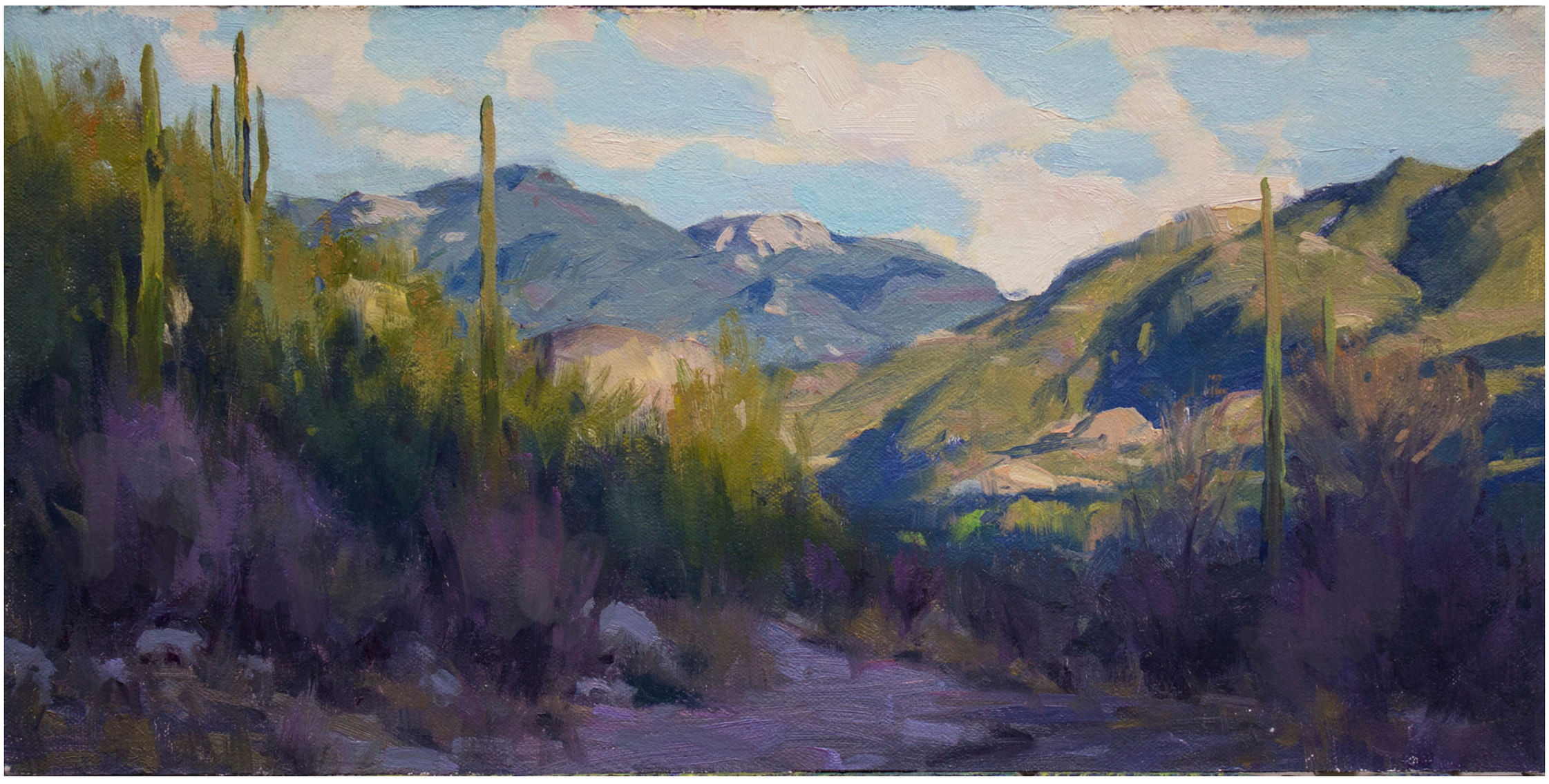
The key is not to have equal weight on both sides. We need to arrange the shapes and negative space so that the viewer doesn't feel like the painting is uneven or have a sense of unbalance. Here are a couple of examples of distributing weight so that the canvas feels balanced.

©Phil Starke www.philstarkestudio.com

# Shape and Variety

A good composition is made up of large shapes and masses, so if we see too much detail, we'll loose the large shapes, so be careful not to break them up into smaller shapes and details that make the composition confusing and hard to follow the flow of line throughout the canvas.

It's also important to have a variety of sizes and shapes in our large shapes. A landscape with all the trees the same size and shape is boring and static so we have to plan the sizes of our shapes to show variety.  Also stay away from lining trees or mountains up from biggest to smallest, again variety is best when it comes to shape and size.





©Phil Starke www.philstarkestudio.com

©Phil Starke www.philstarkestudio.com

# Overlapping

Since I work on a 2-dimensional canvas, I have to do things in the composition that creates depth. Overlapping shapes creates instant depth. If I have too many shapes that don't overlap, and stay on the same plane, then my composition goes flat. I won't have any flow or line running through the design. It's something that I have to be very conscience of, as I have to be conscience of creating lighter values or cooler colors as objects recede to suggest depth. Our eyes don't always pick it up in nature, and photos don't always show it.

©Phil Starke www.philstarkestudio.com

©Phil Starke www.philstarkestudio.com

# The Importance of Thumbnail Drawings

Thumbnail drawings are where I simplify the whole composition. Eliminate all detail and just work with the shadow pattern, find the large light shapes and plan out the lines that flow throughout the composition. After doing 3 or 4 thumbnail drawings (usually no more than 4 or 5 inches wide) I know my plan for recomposing the photograph or starting a painting outside. It keeps me from rushing head long into detail and thinking about slick brushwork. I have to remember every time that composition is the most important aspect of painting. I can have great color or good brushwork, but if my composition is bad, the whole painting fails. Likewise, if my brushwork isn't my best or my color is too muted or doesn't have great harmony, but if it has a composition that works and can be seen from across the room, then on some level the painting will always work. So plan out your compositions first and try to exhaust all the possibilities then you will develop an eye for creating good compositions.

It helps me to set aside time for just composing. Going outside with a sketch book and some pencils  (I generally use a 9x12 sketch pad with carbon or wolf pencils) and spend a half day doing small thumbnails, about 4 to 6 inches long and spend no more then 15 to 20 minutes on each one.


©Phil Starke www.philstarkestudio.com

The goal isn't drawing for drawing's sake, but practice. Simplifying, finding patterns, and seeing how I can improve on what I'm seeing compositionally.

©Phil Starke www.philstarkestudio.com

# About The Author

Phil Starke is an accomplished artist.  He also enjoys teaching and sharing his knowledge of painting. You can see more of his work at his gallery website:  www.philstarke.com.

## - LEARN MORE -

You can find more learning opportunities at Phil's teaching website:

www.PhilStarkeStudio.com



©Phil Starke www.philstarkestudio.com