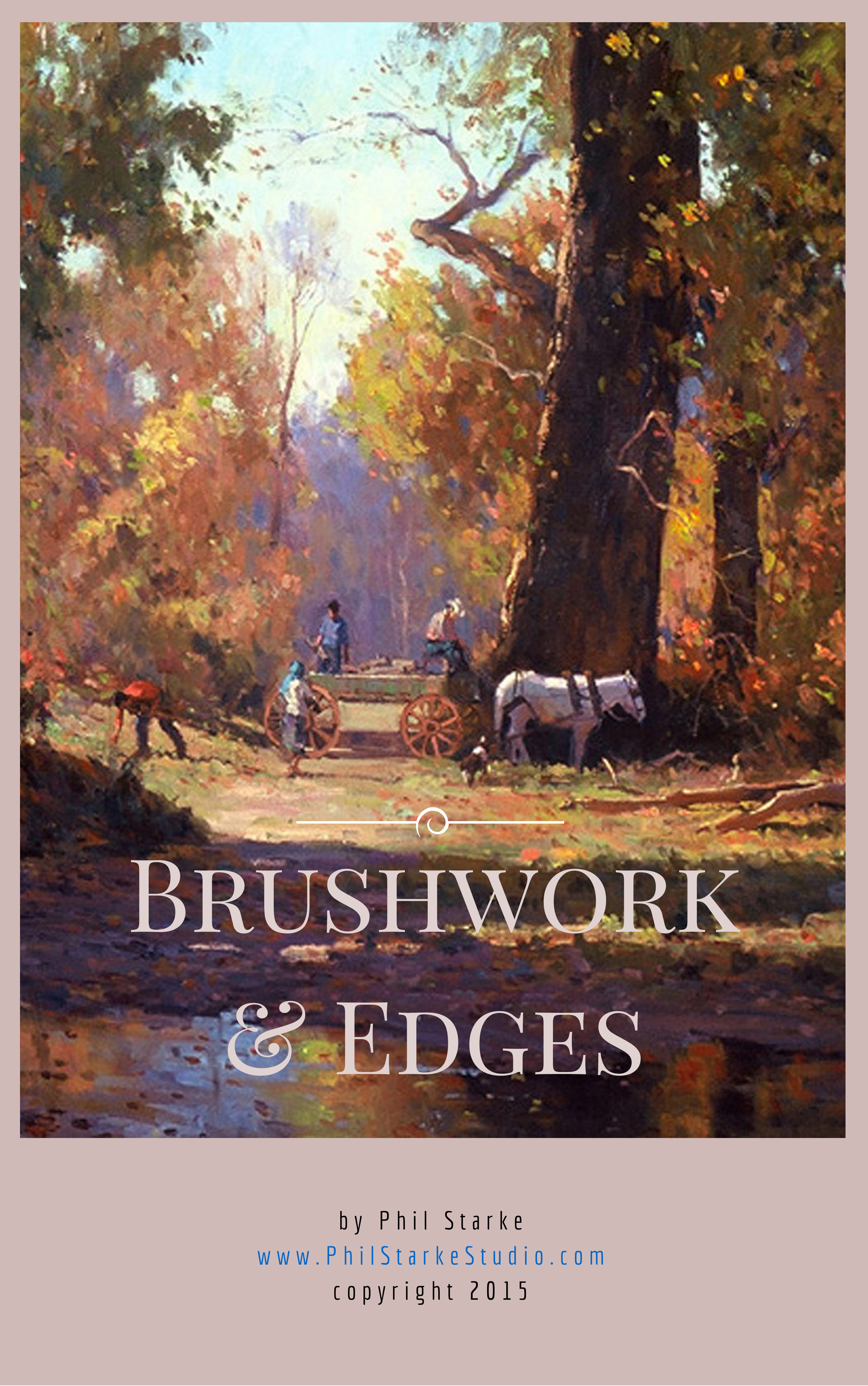


A detailed oil painting of a forest scene. In the center, a horse-drawn cart is being pulled by a white horse. Several people are visible: one standing on the cart, another walking beside it, and a third in the background. The forest is dense with trees showing autumn foliage in shades of orange, yellow, and red. The ground is covered in fallen leaves and a small stream flows in the foreground. The overall style is impressionistic with visible brushstrokes.

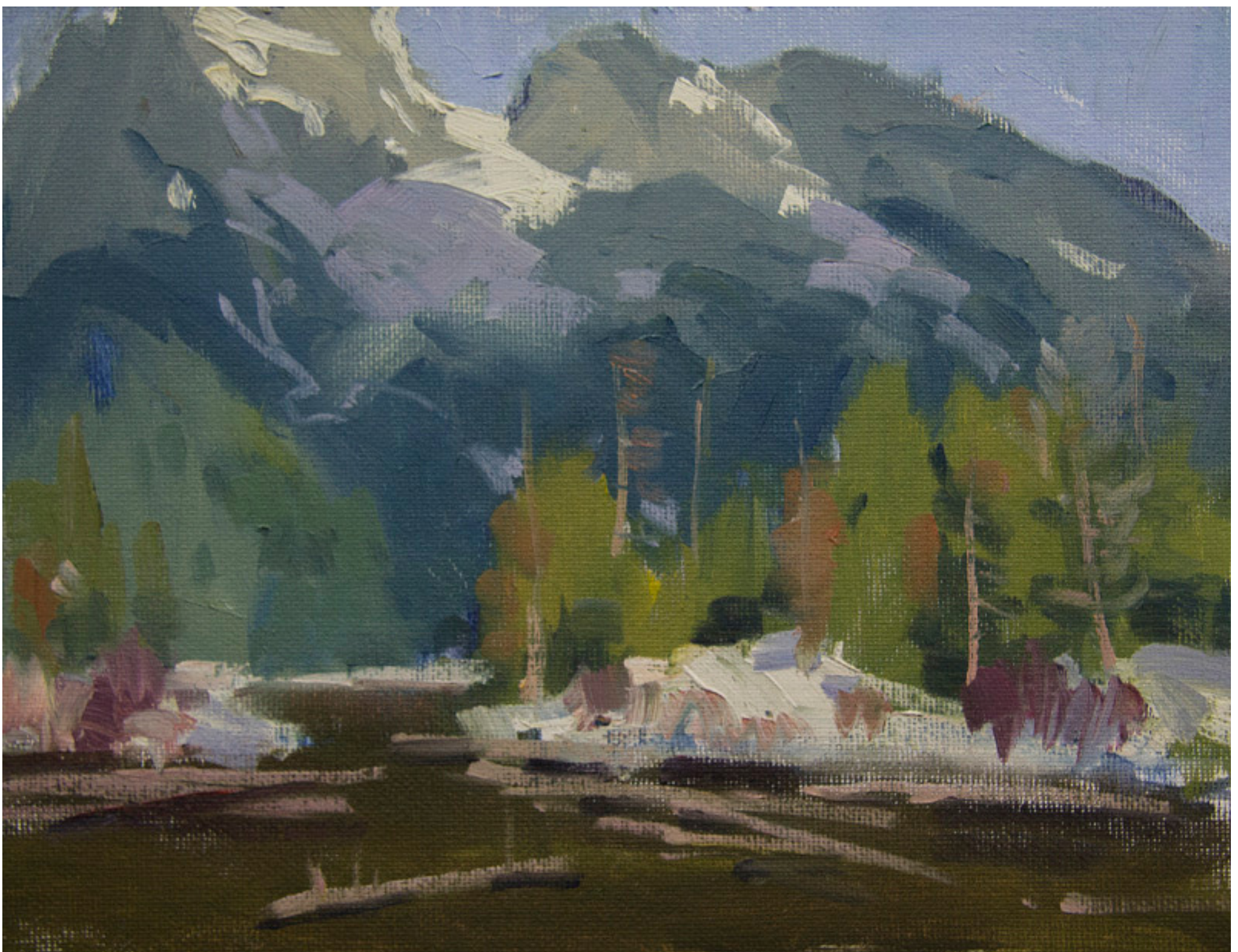
BRUSHWORK & EDGES

by Phil Starke
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Brushwork is the icing on the cake, the decoration of the painting. What makes the brushstrokes work though, is the thinking and planning and "seeing" correctly early in the painting.

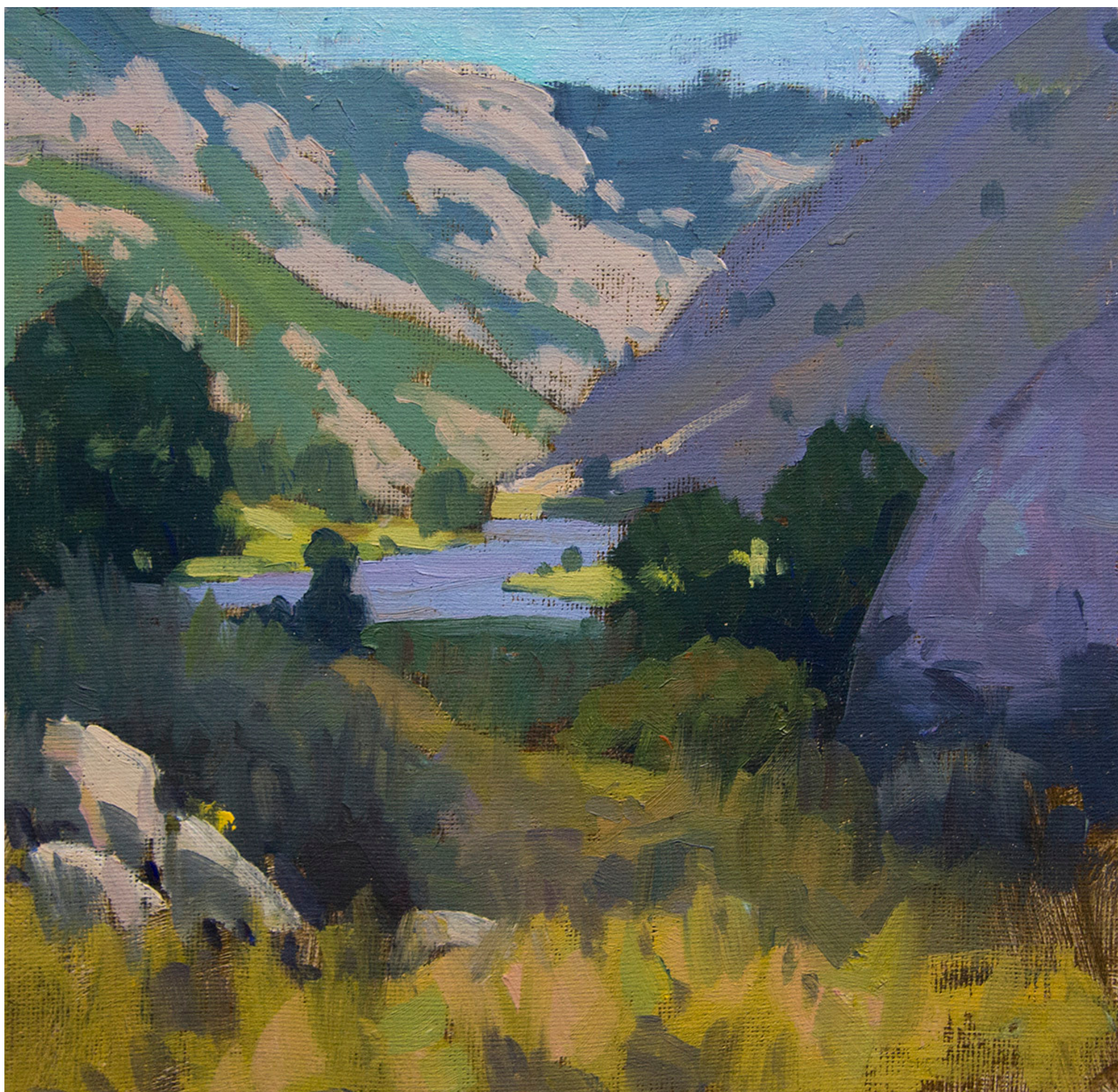
SIMPLICITY

The whole idea of painting is to simplify, to reduce what we see to what's necessary to the painting. We want to suggest instead of copy. The most important thing to learn is to simplify shapes and values. That's what leads to better brushwork. We don't want our brushwork to ruin the vision of bigger, simpler shapes and values.



This is a painting in the Teton School and I've started the block-in with big brushstrokes. A painting only gets tighter the more we work on it,

they never get looser, so I want to start out with big, simple brushstrokes that show the pattern in the painting, never the detail. If you start with detail in the drawing and block-in, your painting will become detail oriented and fall apart.



This is another simplified block-in, painted in the Wind River country. I carried this block-in a little further, but still very little detail, some broken color in the foreground, but I was trying to keep the pattern of dark and light shapes, making it the most important aspect of the painting. If I can see things as simple patterns, then the brushwork will be big and simple, but if I see

things in terms of detail, the brushstrokes get smaller and I'll lose my composition.

DIRECTION OF BRUSHSTROKES

After simplifying my brushstrokes I want to consider the direction of the strokes. I want the brushstrokes to follow and suggest the form of the objects in the painting. Vertical object will have more of a vertical brush stroke and slanted objects will have slanted brushstrokes and so on. If water in a stream is moving then I want the strokes to follow the movement.

Also planes and objects are more horizontal in the background. Flatter brush strokes will recede more and stay in the distance. So I might have short, choppy vertical brush strokes for the grass in the foreground but it will become flatter and more horizontal in the background.



In this painting, near Sheridan, Wyoming, I use the brush strokes to follow and suggest the form of the trees, mountains, grass and water. I want the strokes to emphasize the form of the trees by having the lighter brush strokes follow the rounded form of the tops of the trees that are catching the light. The dark brush strokes on the trees are more vertical to suggest the upright feel of the trees, detail doesn't play a part in it. You can see the short, choppy strokes in the foreground and they become flatter in the background fields to suggest depth. The strokes in the mountains are more slanted and more horizontal in the water. So I'm

using the strokes to suggest form and depth, not detail. That's why you have to be careful with detail, too much of it destroys the sense of form and simple pattern in your painting.



This is a night scene on a ranch in Tubac, AZ. This painting does have more detail, I've carried it beyond the block-in, where the values work well together and the color suggests the light. As I use smaller strokes in this painting my goal is still to retain the large, simple patterns and not destroy them with detail.

I want the smaller strokes to still suggest the form by following the shape and use the smaller strokes to break up the color, not always to break up the value, which is what detail is. So I can have smaller strokes that are the same value in a shape but different color.

EDGES

At this point I'm also considering edges. When you're working wet into wet, you will get softer edges, but be thinking of where you want to harden or sharpen some of the edges. I will usually have sharper edges between the shadows and light areas or when an object, like a tree branch is coming towards the viewer.



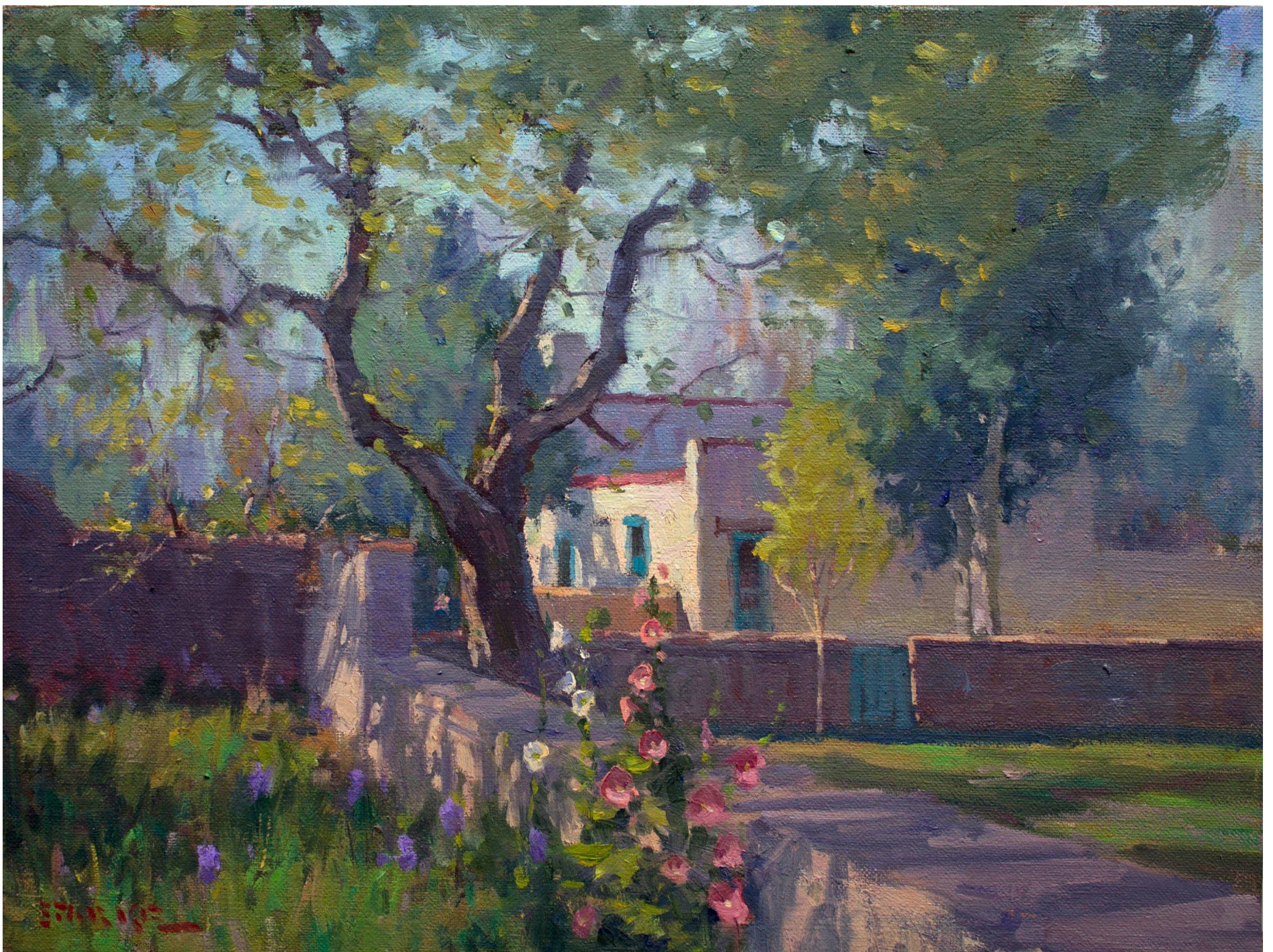
I want to make sure the edges are softer in the background compared to the foreground and all the edges in the shadow are softer where there is a dark shape next to another dark shape. In the painting on the previous page, the different shapes or forms that are in the foreground shadow will have soft edges between them. Also, in the shadow in the background there are softer edges between the trees and the hill because they are both in the shadow. The harder edges are in between the sunlit yellow and orange trees and the shadowed hill, because of the contrast of dark and light or sunlight and shadow.



This is a detail of a larger painting and I wanted to show the use of edges on the horse to suggest form and contrast. I first softened the edges on the backside of the horse to make it go around as well as go recede into the background. I softened the edges of the legs so that they disappear into the grass and hardened the edges between the highlights and darks on the horse as well as between the light areas on the horse and the darker background.

MAKING DEFINITE DECISIONS

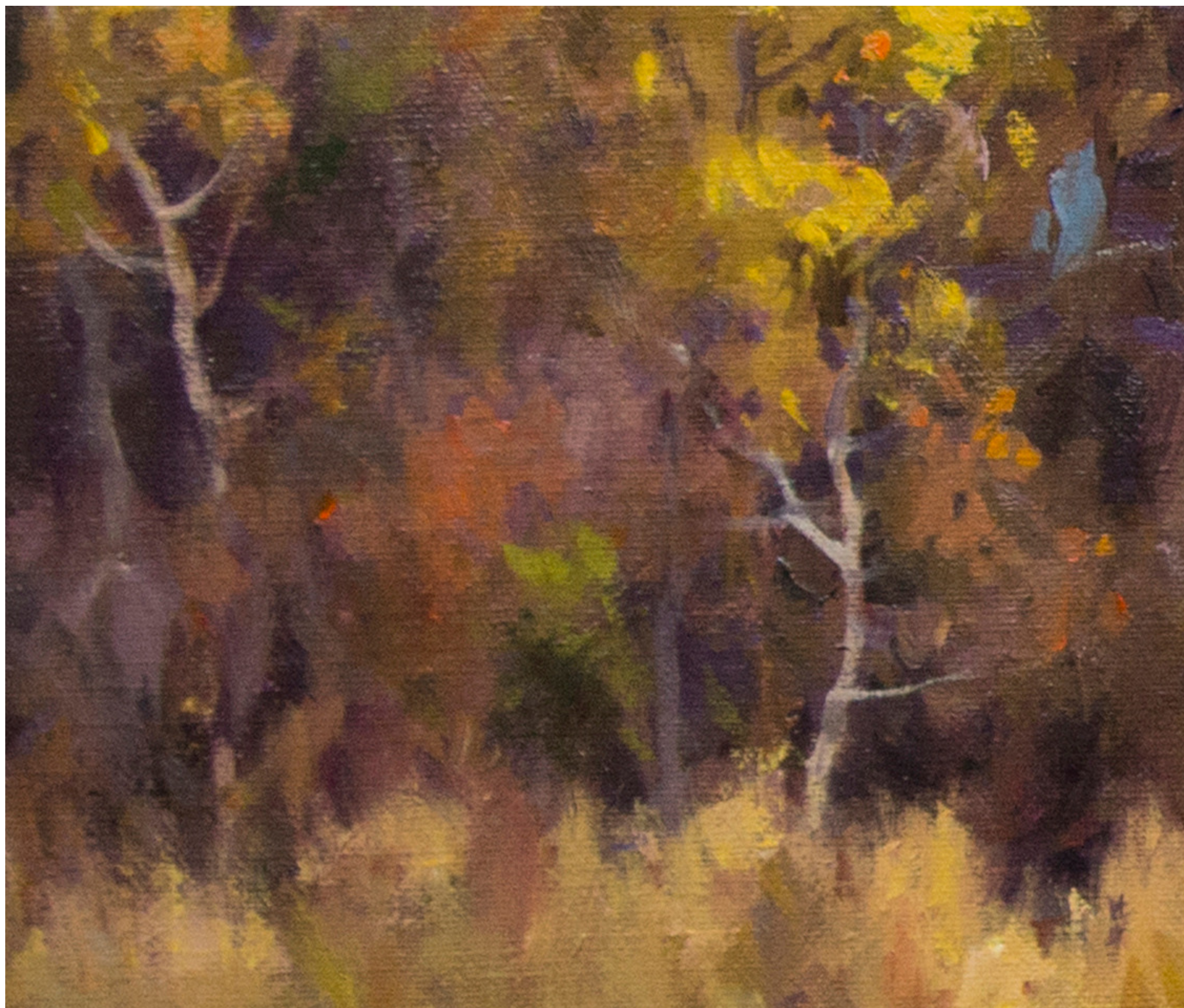
If I'm going to keep my shapes simple in the painting and have my brushstrokes follow the form then I have to make sure that I make definite brush strokes, I can't be indecisive or hesitant. Put the brush strokes down with purpose and decision. If they're wrong, then scrape them off and try again. What we're trying to stay away from is dabbing or going over the stroke too many times. Your brush strokes will lose their correct value and the color will get muddy.



The painting on the previous page is from Tubac, AZ. In this painting I'm wanting to suggest a lot of contrast in the dappled lighting on the wall and on the ground so the brushwork has to be direct and decisive with enough paint that the stroke makes a definite value and color statement. For the light and shadow on the white building in the background I have to have a definite plan for the shadow shape and the light shape, then apply it thick enough with as few strokes as possible to keep the colors clean and bright. The same holds true for the flowers in the foreground, I have to use definite strokes with thick paint to suggest the contrast of light and dark. Also using the background color and value to cut into the shapes allows me to paint smaller objects more accurately.

DRY BRUSH AND WET INTO WET

When we apply paint, we are either painting into wet paint or into dry paint. Painting into dry paint allows me to harden edges easier or make a color lighter or brighter. Painting into wet paint allows me to blend colors and values when I need to, and helps create more color harmony.



Above is a detail of a painting showing both dry brush and wet into wet technique. The small white trunks are very light against the darker background so painting it into dry paint allows me to make the trunk stand out more as well as keep the color cleaner.

Also in this detail I used wet into wet to create the softer edges between the different trees in the shadow.

In learning brushwork there is no short cuts. You will make a lot of mistakes learning to paint wet into wet and controlling a dry brush techniques but it does pay off if you stick with the idea of larger brushstrokes, focusing on shape and value and not detail.

The problem is we get frustrated and resort back to copying a photo and focusing on detail which is unsatisfying and boring. So set a routine to practice brushwork and keep things simple. You can also learn a lot by looking at other artists work to see how they simplify shapes and use less brushstrokes.

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