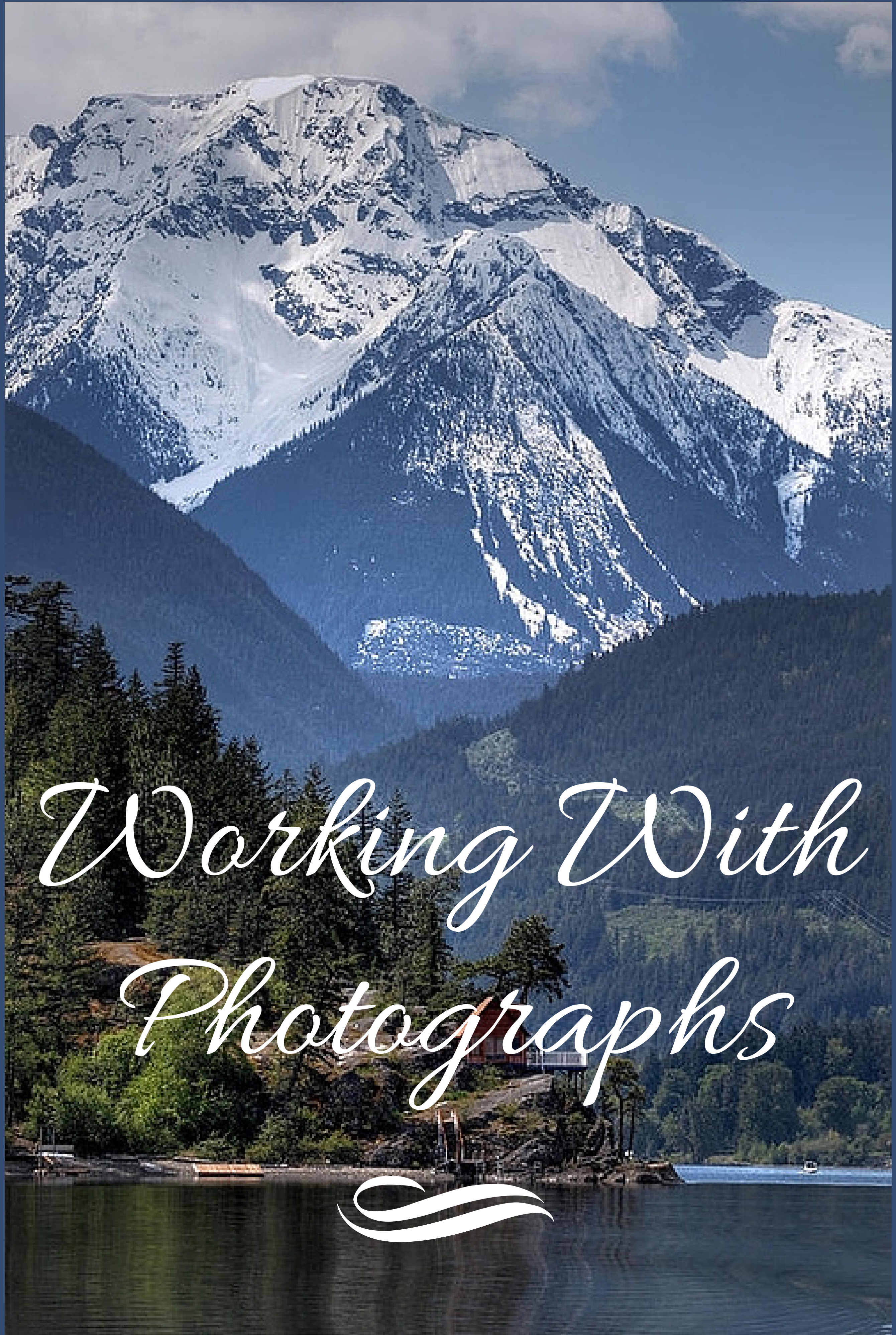




Working With Photographs



by Phil Starke
www.PhilStarkeStudio.com
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I've put together these thoughts on working with photographs
because photographs can be a great tool for the artist.

This guide is intended to only be a quick reference, if you'd like to
learn more about how to work more effectively with photographs
you can find more learning opportunities on my website at:

www.PhilStarkeStudio.com



WORKING WITH PHOTOGRAPHS

Photographs are a great tool to use in painting. When I'm painting outside, my focus is more on learning, experimenting, and gathering material for larger paintings.

When I'm painting inside my focus is more on composing and designing the canvas and putting to practice what I've learned outside, so photographs are a great tool to use in the studio.

There are a lot of problems working with photos though, and it helps to be aware of what they are. In the following pages I'm going to go over each of these problems and explain possible solutions to them.



COMPOSITION

Photos don't give us the best composition possible. They tend to make objects smaller and spread the composition out. So it helps to rework the composition. Find the center of interest and zoom in to eliminate the unnecessary areas.

A good way to figure out a better composition is to do a series of thumbnail drawings, small, 5 or 10 minute drawings, where you can rework the large shapes of the photo.



On the previous page is a photo and the thumbnail drawing of the photo. Here I'm trying to simplify the large shapes and planes of the landscape and figure out the best positioning for the tree. I will do 3 or 4 different thumbnails to find the best possible composition. I'm looking for the shadow pattern in the photo, eliminating all the values except the dark and light, no halftone. It's the shadow pattern that sets up the composition.

SHADOW PATTERN

Finding the shadow pattern in the photograph first sets up the composition, simplifies the shapes and makes finding the right values easier. If I can find the shadow pattern in the thumbnail drawing and transfer that drawing to the canvas then the painting can remain simple. But if I'm seeing detail first then my painting doesn't have a chance.





On the previous page is a photo I took in Sedona, Arizona. In the image above, I used photoshop to find the shadow pattern. This is what I want to see in the photo. First I will see where I can crop it and zoom in on the center of interest, then find the shadow pattern that sets up the composition.

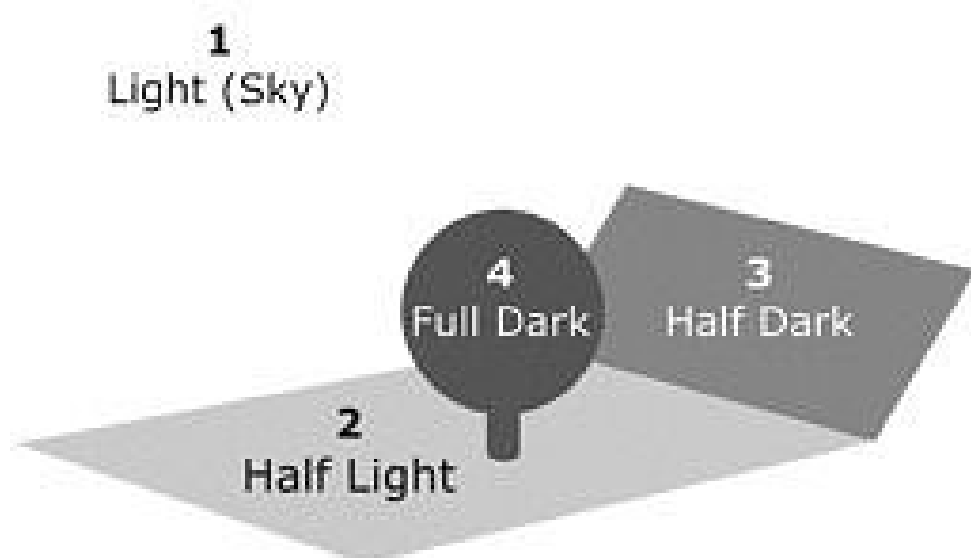
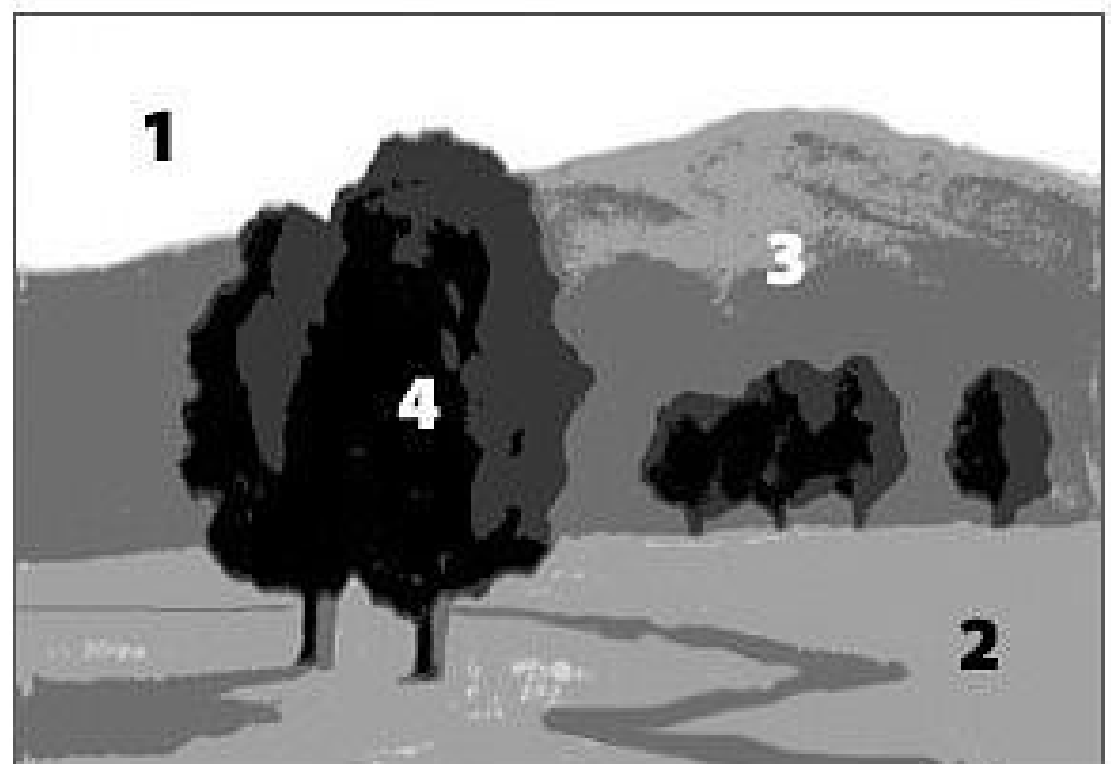
When I'm looking for the pattern, I will pull together smaller darks to create a larger pattern. The shadow pattern should flow throughout the photo and help simplify the values. Eventually you will break up the shadow pattern with other values, but you still want the pattern to be evident at the end of the painting.

VALUES

Since a camera sees too much detail and generally is either too dark in the shadows or too light in the light, we have to have a way to fix the values in our paintings. To simplify values into larger shapes the landscape is broken into 4 planes:

- The Sky Plane - is the light source and is usually the lightest plane, but not always.
- The Horizontal Plane - This is the flat plane of the ground, meadows and fields. Any plane that is parallel to the sky.
- The Vertical Plane This plane is perpendicular to the sky.
- The Slanted Plane - This is any plane that is slanted between the sky and the ground.

Everything fits into these 4 planes, which makes all the masses in the landscape large and simplified. The key is, they can't be the same value or the painting will go flat. Below is a diagram showing the 4 angles that catch light differently, causing a different value for each plane.



In the photograph below you can see the planes are too close in value. If I painted them this way, the painting would look flat and lack depth.



In the image below I've made changes in photoshop to separate the planes more, which creates more light and contrast and a sense of distance that the photo lacks.



COLOR

Photographic color can look dull and lifeless when we try to copy it. Even if it looks good in the photo, it doesn't translate well to opaque paint. So I have to mix colors that suggest the light in my paintings not just copy the photo.

To suggest light, I want to think in terms of color temperature, pushing the color warmer in the sunlight and cooler in the shadows on a sunlit day. On an overcast day, the light is cooler overall. I want to think about how the light affects the local color on an object, cooler or warmer. For example, a green tree is yellow-green in the sunlight and blue-green in the shadows. If I make the tree too green, then I'm not painting the light, just the local color. Photographs can lose color temperature, so always look to push the idea of creating light in your paintings. The painting below is of the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico. I pushed the contrast of warm and cool color to increase the sense of light.



DEPTH

Since my canvas is a flat surface, I want to be conscious of creating space and depth in my painting and photographs don't always show enough distance. Atmospheric perspective or depth has color to it -- blue, blue green, violet. So I have to be able to suggest depth whether I see it in the photo or not. In the painting below, I had to push the idea of the hills and trees receding by adding cooler temperature to the local colors in the background. Getting the temperature right is more about comparing the color in the distance to the color in the foreground. If I can get the correct temperature relationships right, then the painting will work.



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