

Seek Strong Abstract Shapes

If you look at the work of the best early black-and-white photographers, you'll see that they really understood the value of strong abstract shapes. It was all they had to work with. They also had to make decisions before taking their photos since there was only so much they could do in the dark-room. Have a look at the work of Edward Steichen, James Craig Annan, Paul Strand, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Edward Weston. They were using photography as an art form, not just as a means to record data. Because black-and-white photography is so limited, they really had to push the abstractness and drama of their designs.

You can learn three important lessons from those photographers:

1. Think about the visual strength and beauty of your shapes. This will affect how you crop or frame your image.
2. Think about those shapes in terms of light and dark value masses.
3. Plan those shapes before you start to paint.

It's not that you see only simple shapes and no longer see details. When you squint, you simply subdue their importance so they won't distract. Then, when you come to paint the details after you've established the major shapes of your composition, you'll see that the shapes are already carrying the painting. Then you'll be able to choose which elements to eliminate and which to integrate. Thus the details will

mesh with rather than conflict with the abstract shapes.

Look at the three paintings on these pages. Notice how they are conceived abstractly. A black-and-white copy of each painting only emphasizes this quality. If you study the great paintings of the past, you will see that they, too, are carried by abstract value masses.

As an exercise, try painting several paintings in just black and white to force you to establish interesting value shapes. Try focusing on this one idea so that it becomes second nature.



Squint to See the Main Masses

This painting was done late in the day in about thirty minutes. I concentrated on portraying shapes in relation to the picture plane and took no time for details. When you think this way, you get a feeling for what is relevant and needs to be included, and what is just going to complicate the painting and bog you down.

PROVENÇAL EVENING
Oil on board
8" x 15" (20cm x 38cm)

What counts is your eye, your sensitivity and the strength of the shapes you make.

Henri Cartier-Bresson

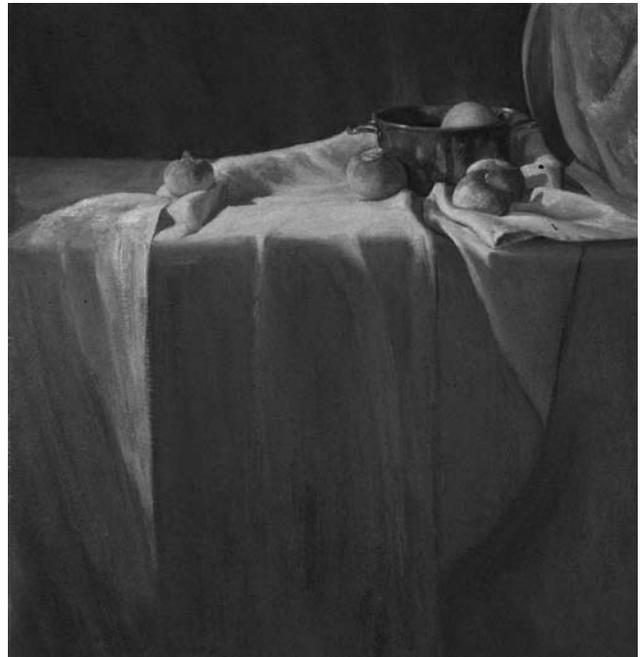


Concentrate on Design, Not Detail

This is a dramatic asymmetrical design. It's the unusual cropping that makes this painting engaging. You can see it's painted loosely, letting the design carry it.

AT THE CAFÉ

Oil on canvas
20" x 20" (51cm x 51cm)



Use Lighting to Create Drama

This piece only works because of the light and dark shapes. If it were lit more evenly, it would be much less engaging. The inverted L armature leads us up to the rich center of interest at the tarnished silver pot and turnips.

DARK SILVER

Oil on canvas
32" x 30" (81cm x 76cm)