

Search Out the Composition

Sometimes ideas for compositions just come to you, fully formed. Other times you have to build them from scratch. In both cases, you still need to play with the idea to develop it.

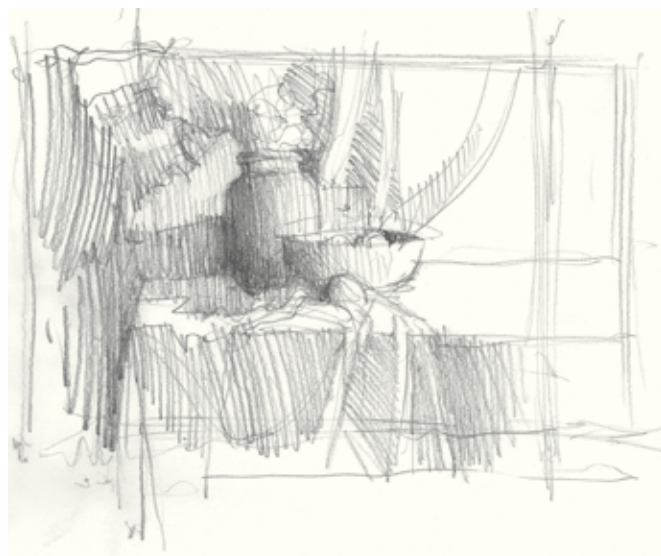
Approach the framing of a composition with an open mind. Coax it. Exaggerate it. Dramatize it. Start fluidly, so the boundaries aren't fixed. This is the process that leads to great composition. Be open to an unusual or unexpected possibility. A small shift to one side or another can suddenly make all the difference, so don't commit too soon. When you find a subject that's worth pursuing, do a value sketch to evaluate its potential. If, after exploring an idea, you aren't excited by it, move on and try something else.

Don't feel that all this experimentation is just busywork before you get down to the real creative process of picking up your brush and starting to paint. This is a vital part of the process, and can be just as engaging as applying the paint.



Cropped Photo Reference

Any still life has a lot of possibilities for cropping and emphasis. Even when your painting will be done from life, it's useful to observe the setup and determine the final crop with a viewfinder.



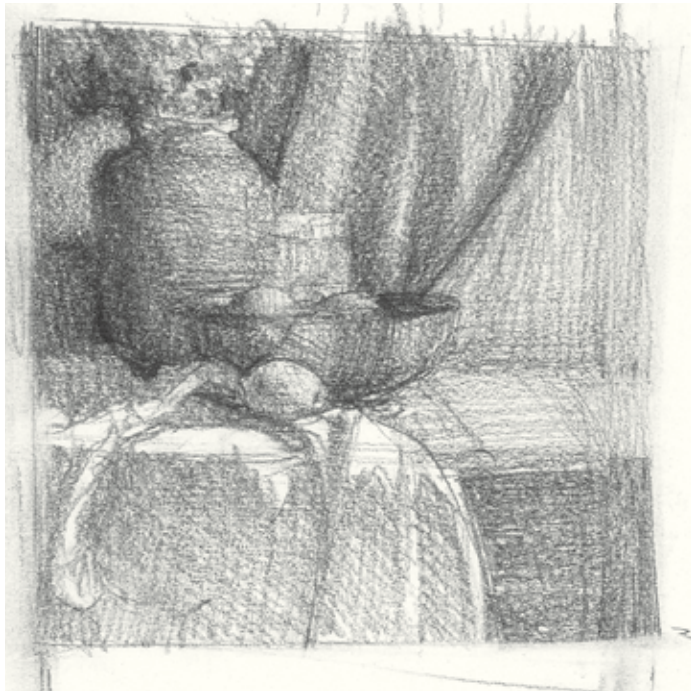
Keep the Boundaries Fluid

Notice the boundary changes in this sketch. The left side has been expanded beyond the original border. The right side has been cropped in and the bottom extended down. The boundaries are fluid; anything is possible at this point.



Try a Different Format

This sketch examines the possibility of a strong vertical composition. It's not clear yet how close to the bottom the composition should be cropped. Try running your hand up the drawing to see where you might crop it.



Final Crop

Here is the final thumbnail. Notice that the left side has been further cropped and the right extended. Solve as many compositional problems as you can before you start to paint. Once you do start to paint, there are so many other things to think about that you may not notice serious compositional flaws until too late. Once you have committed a lot of time and effort to developing the painting, you may be very reluctant to make changes.



Finished Painting

Even though the color intensity is quite high in this painting, you can still see the abstract value masses that define it. The shadows, lost edges and reduced contrast encourage your eye to travel out to various parts of the painting, but they then swing back to the center of interest, the fruit and silver bowl.

RED, BLUE AND TARNISHED SILVER
Oil on canvas · 20" × 20" (51cm × 51cm)

Do not be afraid that too much labor over a composition is going to kill the spontaneity.

John Carlson