

# Planning Art

## (Art: Past, Present, and Future Part 10A)



Insights into creating successful paintings by organizing ideas and creating structure

This resource has three sections:

- Choosing a Concept
- Size – How Big or How Small
- Painting from Photos

Figure 1: *Color Harmonies*, Josef Albers



## Choosing a Concept

An artist's concept or idea is the root from which a work of art grows. Some artists are inspired to create art that is limited to formalistic art concepts.

Others are inspired to create art with deep messages. Still others are inspired to create art that is fanciful, for pure entertainment, or a combination of entertainment with serious messages.

There are as many varied concepts or ideas as there are artists. Exploring art created by famous artists can help you understand the wide range of possibilities open to you.

German-born artist, Josef Albers, from the 1950s, was intrigued by color juxtapositions and how colors reacted to one another. He painted hundreds of squares of varying colors (Figure 1).

Just assigning a title for each one (and keeping track of them all) must have been a major chore.

Alexander Calder created a sculpture whose title and physical shapes tell us that his concept is one of graceful aerodynamics. He contrasts its physical presence with the earth, wind, and sky of its environment (Figure 2). Calder is also famous for mobiles that are moved by the wind.

Figure 2: *The Three Wings*, 1967, Alexander Calder



For most of its history, art was an important vehicle in communicating concepts and ideas to the masses.

Nowhere is this fact more obvious than in patriotic art and its close cousin – propaganda art. The line between them is real, but, the labels are interchangeable according to the viewer's point of view.



Figure 4:  
*Worker and the  
Collective Farm  
Girl*, Moscow

Boccioni employs a stylized figure as a means by which to explore time and space in suggesting the element of movement (Figure 3).

Unlike Calder, Boccioni demands a neutral environment for his sculpture and movement is assumed in the mind of the artist and the viewer making the concept purely one of imagery and imagination. Thus, communicating the concept is more demanding of the figure itself and the viewer's interaction with it.

Figure 3: *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913, Umberto Boccioni



Virtually every culture, every nation, every political faction, and every ethnic group has an abundance of both. Is the towering sculpture *Worker and the Collective Farm Girl* (Figure 4), soaring over the streets of Moscow, patriotic while the billboards below are merely propaganda? Both are art. They communicate concepts in a creative manner.

A close kin to both patriotic and propaganda art is historical painting, as seen in John Steuart Curry's *Tragic Prelude* (Figure 5).



The difference, if there is one, is mostly a matter of timing. In this case, the work was painted well after the Civil War (or War Between the States). As in the disputed name for the tragedy that the title refers to, the strident figure of John Brown is either heroic (as Curry tends to see him) or dastardly, as viewed by those who hung him in 1859.

In a similar vein, Eugene Delacroix painted *Liberty Leading the People* (Figure 6), which perhaps is the French equivalent of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* or the *Statue of Liberty* (also French inspired and created).

Figure 5: John Steuart Curry, *Tragic Prelude*, 1938-40



Figure 6: *Liberty Leading the People*, 1830. Eugene Delacroix



Liberty is a French concept and the reason we have some degree of liberty today (research *Yorktown*).

Though the French would claim Delacroix's work to be highly patriotic, in 1830 it was seen as a vitriolic piece of revolutionary propaganda.

Those who win revolutions write the history in their favor and likewise get to label its art. Concepts have often been controversial.

Artists should not shy away from such concepts for fear of offending, when in fact, many social concepts worth exploring are likely to offend someone. One person's patriotism is another person's propaganda.

Some artists are skilled at combining humor with a strong message, as seen in the painting I've dubbed *Cookie Monster Leading the People* (Figure 7).

This image entertains and makes us laugh. I guess some might even find it decorative to a degree.

Even in its humor, we have to admire the revolutionary spirit, which, if compared to other works in this genre, bears a number of similarities.

Throughout much of history, some of the most powerful concepts employing art have been religious.

Figure 7



Long before Pope Julius II browbeat Michelangelo into painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling, giving us the image of the ultimate creator in the act of creating, art and spiritual concepts were intertwined. Religious concepts are, by their very nature, difficult to comprehend. God is difficult to comprehend. Think about it. What does God look like? If you find yourself picturing an old man with a white beard, thank (or blame) Michelangelo!

If you partake of Holy Communion (Eucharist, Mass, or the Lord's Supper), and you find yourself contemplating Leonardo's deteriorated masterpiece purely from habit (Figure 8 on the next page), then perhaps you might want to switch channels and try recalling Salvador Dali's more modern take on the concept (Figure 9 on the next page).

Though somewhat (perhaps unavoidably) influenced by Leonardo's imagery, Dali breathes new life into both the concept as well as the execution. His version seems much more spiritual, yet in its surrealism, more physically real.

Some might claim that without a message, the creative effort has nothing to say, nothing to communicate and, in failing to communicate, does not rise to meet the definition of art. Of course, the concept of the concept is a relative concept. Scratch your head and read that again. Let me translate: The concept (idea) of the concept (message) is a relative concept (entity). It is relative in that a concept may be minimal, trite, tired, passé, overused, overexposed, hackneyed, or pointless. From there, they may range all the way up the figurative ladder to the explosively, obscenely, outrageously controversial idea apt to offend not just the proverbial "somebody" but the universal "everybody."

Because of this broad range, some might say that art automatically has some kind of concept at some level. If true, then predicating one's definition of art based on the concept of the concept, is, to mix metaphors, skating on a slippery slope of thin ice. Perhaps it's a pointless debate in any case.



The important concept here is not whether there is one, but in choosing a concept to communicate.

The important act for the artist is to consider a concept in the first place, causing you to either climb that figurative ladder and pluck your concept from the highest shelf you can intellectually reach, or create whatever inspires you, be it whimsical, decorative, or not.

Be true to who you are, what you feel, and what you have to say.

Figure 8: *The Last Supper*, 1495-98, Leonardo da Vinci

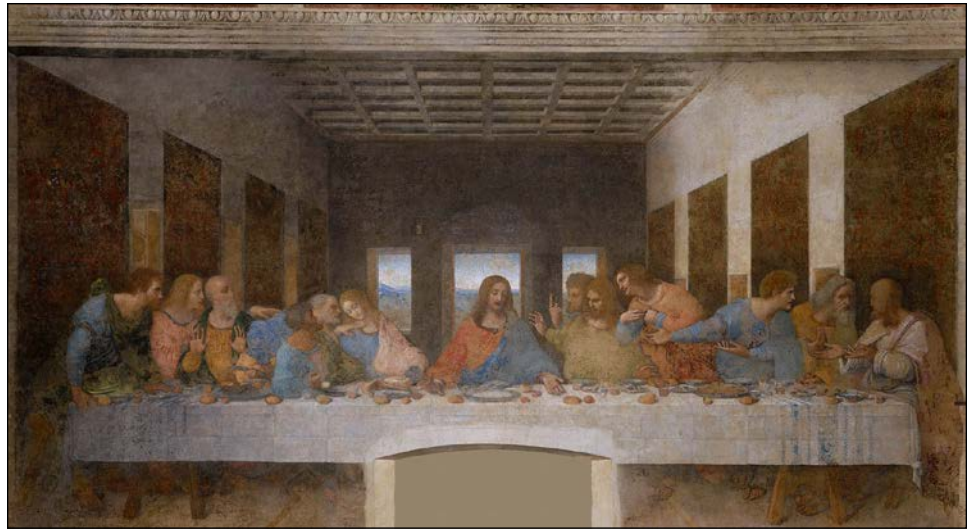


Figure 9: *Last Supper*, 1955, Salvador Dalí



## Size – How Big or How Small

One very important aspect of any creative endeavor is seldom covered in art schools or classes, yet it's one of the first decisions an artist makes in setting to work. How big, or conversely, how small should you make your art? It has a lot to do with where, or how, the work will be displayed.

The tendency with novice painters is to choose a canvas of about 16 by 20 in (40.6 by 50.8 cm), then make the subject, composition, and technique fit this modest, unthreatening size. This choice can have both positive and negative consequences.

One good reason is convenience – it's inexpensive to paint and frame and fits easily in most homes. However, this size can also impose limitations, depending on the style of art. If you choose to experiment only with small-to-medium size canvasses, you will limit yourself to the amount of experience you can gain.

Having said that, a small painting tends to merely “whisper” any difficulties the artist might have encountered in creating it, while the same painting on a large canvas can literally SCREAM problem areas. This doesn't mean you will make better art only if you choose to work with large sizes, but it is well worth the experience.

From one who's worked both large and small, the difference has little to do with subject matter. Of course, a tiny kitten rendered in any medium five times life size could appear to become a wildcat. For the most part, however, the difference is usually one of impact.

Take music for example: low volume music, even hard rock, can be easily ignored. The same may happen for a tiny artwork, depending on what is around it. When you pump up the amps, the music takes over and inhabits you – as can large paintings or 3-D works.

The determinant as to size (all else being equal) has to do with where that work belongs. Just as music at a low-to-moderate level is very comfortable in a home, a low volume at a concert would be distressing. Even a very ordinary little still life, when doubled or tripled (or more) in size, can really blast the viewer.

Small pieces must be placed with more care, so they are not easily overlooked. Tiny work has more in common with a jewel: delicate, precious, and elegant. A small painting should hang at eye level, in a hallway, or perhaps with its own easel on an end table. Smaller works are often grouped, especially if they're of similar subject matter, so that they “sing in harmony.”

In contrast, a large piece belts out an “operatic” solo. A large painting, drawing, or sculpture allows more freedom of movement as to technique, more subtle color expression, and larger spaces for detail.

So, there are no rules, only considerations. Whether extremely large or extremely small, quality work displayed in the right context garners attention because of its quality and workmanship. Look at the attention the Mona Lisa gets! And it's pretty small! However, extremes in art can be very exciting.

## Painting from Photos

Since the invention and wide-spread availability of photography, many artists now use photos as references in their work. Most individuals commissioning a portrait consider photos a convenience as much as the artist does. After all – without them, both would be tortured by long, tedious settings.

When transferring an image to a canvas, projection devices are easier to use, faster, and more accurate than using a grid.

Although these tools are now quite common, there remains a faction of traditional artists that would call this cheating.

Some people might be surprised to learn that a couple of the most admired artists in history seem to have relied almost totally on projected images in the drawing stages of their paintings.

In the mid-1600s, the Dutch artist, Jan Vermeer was probably the first to actually use such labor-saving methods as his sole means of drawing upon his canvases (Figure 10).

Even then, the device, called a *camera obscura*, was not new. The Italians had first experimented with it during the Renaissance.

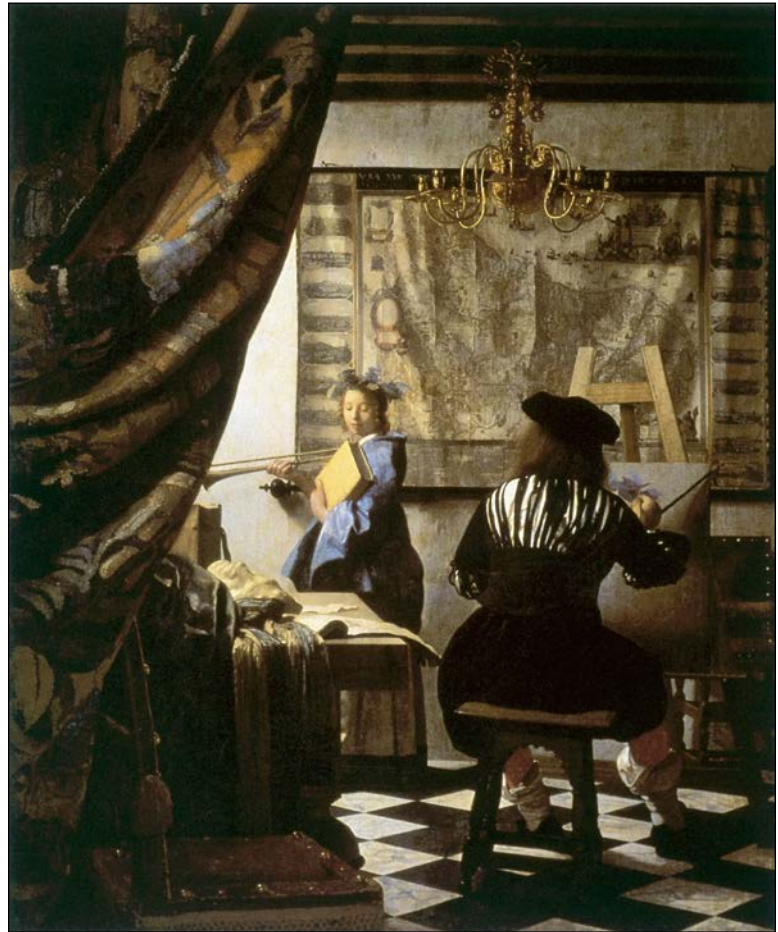


Figure 10

Vermeer's interiors invariably featured a figure, usually female, positioned before a light source from the left, probably dictated by the configuration of his studio and his camera obscura. The configuration Vermeer used was a large wooden framework, the size of a small room, set against a wall with a wooden top and dark curtains hung on the other three sides. The canvas was mounted on the back wall.

A plank with a tiny, rectangular hole in it was mounted on the front of the frame to allow a small amount of light into the cubicle. The size of the hole determined the sharpness of the image while the depth of the cubicle determined its size. The image came out upside down on the canvas, but that was of little consequence.

The camera obscura (*dark chamber*) offered the artist a considerable savings in time and improved accuracy. One of the hallmarks of Vermeer's work was a wall of windows on the left in most of his paintings through which bright sunlight was admitted, a vital prerequisite for using a camera obscura. At the time, Holland was the world center of lens production.

About 100 years later, the Venetian artist, Canaletto used a similar device. (Or, more likely, his assistants did.) It takes no great artistic skill to use such a visual aid beyond some basic instruction and a little trial and error. The sheer quantity alone of Canaletto's output would have dictated its use.



Beyond that, the consistent quality of his detailed renderings of the complex Venetian cityscape (Figure 11) gives further evidence of his reliance on camera technology.

Believe it or not, there was even a handheld, portable camera obscura (an upside-down kayak-like contraption which fit over the artist's head and shoulders) for drawing on location.

Almost from the invention of practical photography, the use of photos as painting source material has stirred considerable interest and discussion among artists. This discussion has even spurred interest in the "art of detecting" the use of photos in paintings.

Very well, on the premise that the users of photos must be "ferreted out," how can you tell? The best-trained eyes are undoubtedly artists who have worked from photos themselves. The obvious clues are photographic characteristics that the artist has not altered, such as parallax, which causes vertical lines in the painting to curve and/or lean inward.

Another clue is the appearance of frontal lighting in the painting from a flash. There are several others, however, even the best trained eye can only spot photo originated paintings depending upon how skilled and conscientious the artist happened to be in disguising the fact.

Conversely, some artists see no need to hide their use of photos, accepting them, even their "flaws", as positive (or at least neutral) artistic values.

Having laid that matter to rest, an artist who uses photos skillfully should choose only the best photos or else improve upon them digitally to make up for any shortcomings. If you choose to work from photos, learning skills in photography and digital photo manipulation would go a long way to creating quality work.

Because it is difficult to obtain photos used by famous artists to use as an example, I have included one of my own works, for which I have the source photo on hand.

The simplest use of photography as source material occurs when an artist snaps a single photo, likes the result, and chooses to translate his or her photographic art into some other medium (painting, in my case).

The photo of the mirrored garden ornament (Figure 12 on the next page) is a recent example. It was, unavoidably, a self-portrait. The resulting painting (Figure 13 on the next page) is titled *Golden Globe Self-portrait*.

Figure 11: *Return of the Bucintoro to the Molo on Ascension Day, 1732*, Canaletto.





Few if any changes were made from the photo to the painting. Any apparent differences are the result of my personal painting style, lack of skill on my part, or peculiarities of the acrylic painting medium itself.

Of course, being able to use photography and actually using it are two different things.

Far be it from me to insist that photography can replace drawing as an artistic skill (though, conceivably, it could, given all the modern technology artists today have at their disposal.)

For the past hundred years or more, it has been the portrait artist who has become the most beholden to photography.

The quality of their work has improved and their time and effort has been reduced thereby allowing a more reasonable pricing structure. However, the use of photography can become more challenging when multiple photos are used for one painting.

For the accomplished artist, multiple photos can be a blessing in that it more closely mirrors the traditional advantages of having a live model.

Several years ago, I was privileged to do a series of portraits for a client involved in the faithful restoration and display of antique automobiles.

Not only was each painting a portrait of the car, but also included portraits of the man and his wife in period costume. Moreover, the average size was about 18 by 24 inches (extremely small for a painted portrait of the human face).

Fortunately, the client was far more interested in the accuracy of the car than his own visage. The 1909 Ford (Figure 14 on the next page) was typical of the series as was the main source photo (Figure 15 on the next page).



Figure 12: *Golden Globe Self-portrait*, 2012, Jim Lane. The photo of the painting did not capture some of the subtle gradations in the reflected sky.

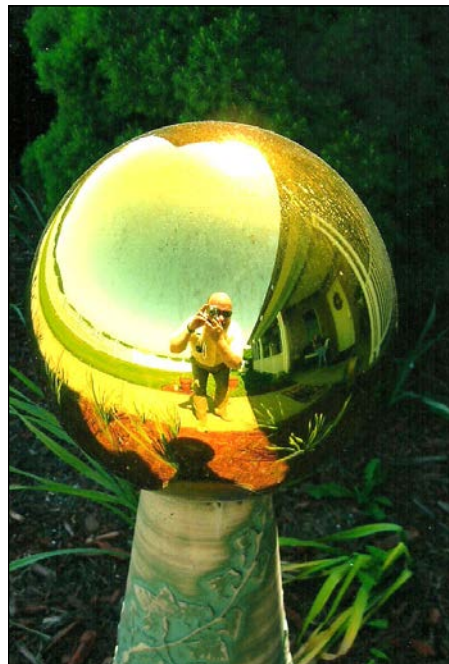


Figure 13: The source. Photo manipulation was minimal. The photo was four by six inches.



However, given the degree of accuracy the client demanded and their quite modest sizes, a single parade photo was far from adequate.

Figure 14: 1909 Ford, 2000, Jim Lane

Figure 15: The background was simplified to remove visual clutter while maintaining the festive parade ambience.

Thankfully, the client proudly provided a wealth of photos of his little red masterpiece allowing me to fill in the numerous gaps not plainly visible in the parade photo.



Figure 16: When painting a collector's item, detailing is a vital element.



Figure 17: A detail demanding its own photo.

The vintage Ford Motor Company logo on the side of the vehicle (Figure 17) was barely discernible in the main photo. It, and the side basket, required additional photography.

The work took about 10 hours to complete. Setting up my easel in the client's garage would have involved two or three times as long and my presence as a house guest for a week or more (he lived in a distant city). The cost would have been at least double, and most importantly, the work might not have been as satisfactory.

More important than detecting photo usage, or whether or not to use them, are decisions involving "when to" and "how to" use photography in painting.



Photography should be seen as just one more tool the artist has at his or her disposal; one that can be misused as surely as a palette knife or a fan brush.

More recently, my wife and I returned from a Mediterranean cruise with a whole “boatload” of pictures. Most were decidedly of the “tourist” variety. However, on a previous visit, I discovered the island of Capri. It was love at first sight (site).

I then created paintings of the Marina Grande and the rear of one of the island’s vacation villas (I got lost). Both were based on photos. In returning, I especially wanted to paint the main harbor again. Of course, a five or six hour visit would have been totally inadequate for much in the way of on-site painting (not to mention the difficulties in carting along the needed paraphernalia).

Also, I wanted to see much more of the island than I had on my first visit. Instead, I spent about an hour prowling around the waterfront shooting lots of pictures. Unfortunately, the weather was not ideal (cloudy, even a brief shower).

In returning home and studying potential source photos, I found adequate (barely) material for two paintings. One depicted the harbor itself while the other was much more a waterfront street scene (Figure 18).

Both images were composites of two or more separate photos. The first demanded a 2:1 ratio format. In creating them as a set, I was thus forced to contrive a less than ideal composition for the street scene, and in doing so, discovered I simply did not have the necessary photos for the upper left quadrant of the painting.

I also improvised a more attractive sky for both paintings from stock Internet photos. The “borrowed” sky was used mostly for the naturalness of the cloud formations; the color was derived from the earlier companion piece. Each painting was 15 by 30 inches, rendered with a palette knife.

In not having my own photos of the missing imagery, I was forced to explore a considerable *mélange* of source photos downloaded from various websites featuring the harbor area (Figures 20, 21, and 22).

Of course none of these photos were from the same angle as my own, so, traditional drawing skills and perspective came into play as I filled in the missing upper levels of the waterfront structures.

Figure 18. It’s always better to take too many photos of a scene than too few. Hope for good weather too.



Figure 19: The final painting of *Marina Grande* 2010, 2011, Jim Lane





Figure 20. A Caribbean sky over the Mediterranean.



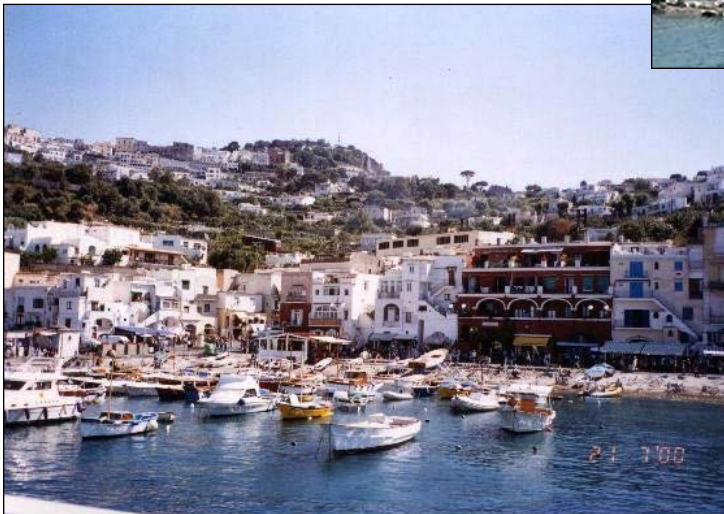
Having photos from several different angles helps identify details, though often, the quality of Internet downloads leaves much to be desired.

Figure 21

The brick building in the center served as a vital landmark in all the half-dozen photos utilized. The pale, listless sky (Figure 21), was a liability in my photos.



Figure 22: In downloaded source material, the images were far superior to my own.



For the representational painter, photo imagery is not an inconsequential tool any more than the pencil or the eraser.

Skillfully used, good photography can save lots of pencils and erasers, not to mention time, energy, money, and frustration.