

Adding Structure to the Landscape

Anchor an outdoor scene with man-made elements to provide contrast and add interest.

By Nancy Nowak



One of the most impactful ways I've found to add interest and further the narrative in a landscape painting is to place a man-made structure into the scene—a barn, boat, shack,

house or car, for example. These objects offer a strong contrast to the natural world and anchor the organic contours of the landscape. They also help to establish a sense of time and place.

Breaking up lines and rectangles with organic leaf shapes, shadow shapes and interesting edges—and playing up the sunlit areas—highlights the abandoned house in **Tucked Away** (9x12).



Here's the process I follow when painting a landscape that features a man-made object.

Selecting a Reference Photo

When choosing a reference photo from which to work, I look for:

- something that inspires, excites and compels me to paint it.
- a strong composition.
- a strong foreground, middle ground and background.
- a visual lead-in to lure the viewer's eye to travel to the focal area and then throughout the painting.
- a focal area that emphasizes the intent of the painting.
- a large dominant shape and a variety of successively smaller shapes (aim for about five interesting shapes).

Setting a Foundation

I'm a big believer in establishing a strong foundation for a landscape painting, so I take the necessary time to compose and design the layout, and then make a value study. This process

enables me to identify shapes, simplify them and work to create a more powerful composition. I find that if I take the time to do this, my paintings are stronger and more successful.

For me, one of the most essential building blocks to a strong painting is an accurate drawing. Taking the time to familiarize myself with one- and two-point perspective, and carefully and competently render the drawing on the painting surface, helps make the painting authentic and true. If the drawing isn't accurate, no matter how well the painting is executed, it will be lacking.

When I first began adding barns and buildings to my landscapes, I searched online for perspective tutorials and practiced drawing until I could do so proficiently without the use of a straight edge. I found that using a ruler or straight edge made the drawing stagnant and rigid.

Value accuracy is also critical, so I always take the time to make a quick value study. I do a thumbnail-size pattern sketch of the shapes using three or four values. At that time, I determine whether I need to

A watercolor underpainting helped inspire a simple pattern of interesting shapes in **Tuscan Dream** (8x17). The interplay of light and shadow shapes weaving between the overlapping greenery imply the buildings in the distance.

delete elements or move them around to build a strong composition. I know that if the value study makes a good abstract, it will make a good painting. This also helps with simplifying, editing and placing key elements.

Building an Underpainting

There are many different ways to create an underpainting, and I love experimenting with them. I'm currently on a watercolor kick, so I've been using the medium to build an initial underlying color (see "Demonstration: *Garden Home*," pages 14-15). I loosely mass in the shapes closely related to the color and color temperature—warm colors where the light hits and cool colors in the shadows. I also keep the underpainting more translucent. I look for shapes within shapes and add another shade of color with each dip of the brush.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Consider these six tips to construct better buildings in your paintings.

- **Look for interesting shapes within shapes.** For example, I'll play up a dynamic shadow shape on a rectangular roof. Shadows of foliage against the side of a house, overlapping trees, farm equipment and people also work to break up a structure's square and rectangular forms.
- **Find various viewpoints and angles of the structure.** Cropping in at various angles also adds interest.
- **Adjust the angles.** Photos often create sharper angles in a building. A roof line, for example, may appear as though it's at a 45-degree angle in the photo when, in reality, it's at a 35-degree angle. I change this slightly in my paintings, although sometimes I like to play up more severe angles for effect.
- **Know why you're painting the structure.** What's the story you're trying to tell? Do you want the viewer to "feel" the age and deterioration of an old barn? The formal stateliness of a town's courthouse? The pattern of light and shadow on the side of a cottage? Tell the story visually through your mark-making and color choices.
- **Add variety.** When painting windows, for example, make each one a little different. Don't just paint rectangles. Instead, paint the light reflecting on the windows or the shadow shapes, not the windows themselves.
- **Focus on the painting instead of staying true to the reference photo.** The painting's composition always takes precedence. If, for example, a tree or a bush needs to be moved, a path and tall grasses added, or windows removed to make your painting look better, do it.
—Nancy Nowak

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LEFT
Breaking up the hull with interesting pattern shapes of various tones of color adds form and variety to the boat in **Missing the Boat** (12x16). Confident mark-making also adds a sense of energy and freshness.

OPPOSITE
Because the people are the focus of **Sunday Walk at the Pier** (12x12), I painted the restaurant in understated shades of blue.

An underpainting doesn't have to be perfect; it seldom is. I've learned that mistakes can be fixed easily with the pastel layers.

Painting With Pastels

The most pivotal lesson I've learned in art is to remember that I'm painting the *light* on an object, not the object itself. Once I understood this, I realized that I could paint anything. It's just a matter of finding the shape of the light. I look for the shape of

the light on the house or barn and paint it in the corresponding value and temperature.

Once I've laid the groundwork, I'm free to express myself with pastel. If I've managed to establish a solid understructure, it won't take much pastel to enhance what I've done.

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Step 1: When painting from a reference photo, my setup includes the photo reference on an iPad or computer screen, the value study, the painting surface (in this case, a sheet of UART paper mounted onto acid-free foam core), and a full-color printout of the reference photo. I find I see the colors better on an iPad and the shapes better on the printout. I lightly draw the shapes using a pencil so I can easily adjust or erase any mistakes. I included a figure by the side window, but decided to omit it further along in the process.

Step 2: Using a terra-cotta pastel pencil, I draw over the contour of the house to maintain a fine line. I use a hard Nupastel (No. 305) to mass in the foliage. Using a stiff brush and a little isopropyl alcohol, I carefully dab over the lines of the house and brush over the foliage to fix the pastel on the surface. This helps me maintain the drawing and establish dark shadow shapes.

Step 3: To create the underpainting, I fill in shapes using washes of watercolor. I create several layers to build up the color (3a). The finished underpainting (3b) isn't perfect, but it doesn't matter, since it merely serves as the base for the layered pastels.



Step 4: I build up various colors of pastel on the surface, beginning with the darks, and establish the lightest light on the face of the house. My intention is to create the sensation of warm sunlight hitting the front of the house, so I use a variety of warm colors. (See the Step 4 photo, opposite.)

Step 5: The watercolor inspires my color choices and creates unplanned visual excitement with its fluid nature. Because the painting is about the house, I downplay trees and shrubs. The tree on the right works without much pastel, so I choose to leave it alone. Less is more!

Final: I cool down the shadow in the foreground and break up the sharp rectangular shape of the driveway on the left to complete **Garden Home** (12x12). *PJ*

