

THE SHAPE OF YOUR FIGURE

The mere mention of getting our figures into shape makes us all a little nervous; we know we should watch our diet and get more exercise. But getting your figure into shape is exactly what you have to do if you're a figure painter and you want to effectively design your painting. It's not easy.

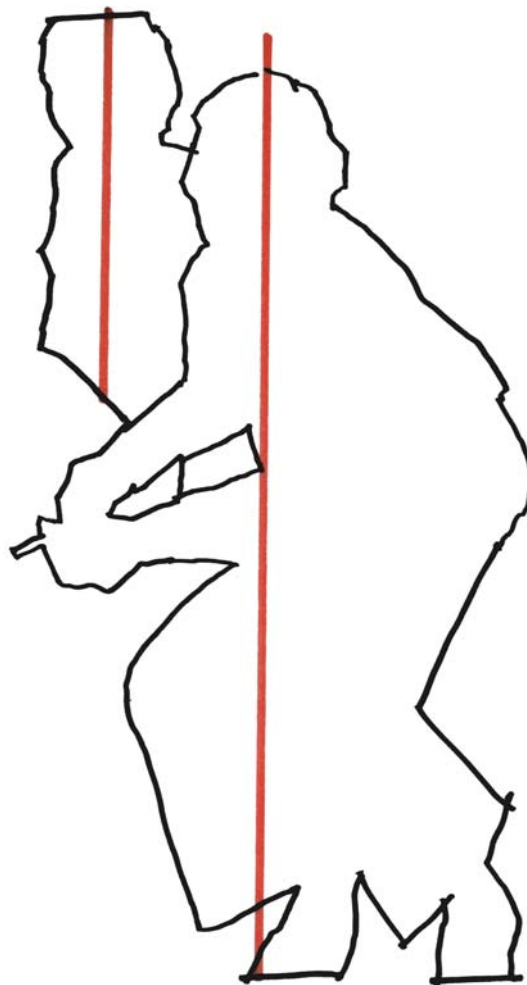
If we have some experience in painting, we don't have difficulty seeing boats or barns or flowers as simple design elements that can be shifted, arranged, and reordered to fit our painting's composition. To us, boats and barns

and flowers are just things, but a figure is a person—someone we might know. We have a hard time thinking of people we might know as design elements. It would seem rude to shift, arrange, or reorder them. Our instinct is to leave them where they are and paint them exactly as they appear. But, more often than not, that instinct leads to ineffective paintings. Learning to see our figure subject as a shape is the first step in creating a better design for our figure painting.

The first step

The first step in designing your figure painting is to ignore all interior detail and draw your figure (or figures) as a simple silhouette. By carefully capturing the small changes in the contour of a form, you can make the shape surprisingly descriptive.

With a simple silhouette you are able to assess the effectiveness of your design and arrange elements (see "Moving Things Around") to create an interesting use of space.



Comparing sides

By drawing a line through the axis of your shape and comparing the two sides, you can see how varied and interesting its contour is. Shapes that are symmetrical are less interesting than asymmetrical shapes. Notice the difference in the contour of the sides of the two shapes shown here.



"French Cafe—Old Woman" by Christopher Schink Mixed media, 26" x 38"

The simple silhouette

When we look at a person, the first thing we notice is his eyes, or his nose, or the shape of his mouth. But to effectively design your painting you must forget the interior features and look instead for the simple silhouette of his whole form. The shape, size, and placement of this form is critical to the success of your overall design (see "Moving



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Interior shapes

When interior shapes (such as the hands in this painting) are reduced to a simple silhouette, you can assess their effect in your design. Note how little modeling is necessary when a shape has an interesting and descriptive silhouette.



"The Girl in the Yellow Skirt" by Christopher Schink 26" x 40"

Seeing negative space

By reducing the figure to a silhouette, you are able to see it as a simple design element that can be changed in size and rearranged to create an interesting composition. Here, I have also described the negative (or surrounding) space as a shape to determine its effectiveness in my design.

try this...

Take an old figure painting and try drawing the silhouette of the figure. Is it interesting? Would a different viewpoint have improved it? Would a closer viewpoint have produced more interesting negative shapes? Here's a chance to redesign your painting and try again.

Note:

The three paintings in this article are part of a recent series. All are done in mixed media on stretched 140# D'Arches rough paper. I began each painting in watercolor and then added acrylic (tinted with gesso) and Caran d'Ache Neocolor crayon for finishing touches.

