

# Sneaky Darks

by Skip Lawrence

**Whoever told you that you should “always put your darkest darks next to your lightest lights” should have his (or, maybe, her) teaching certificate revoked.**

It is true that when you put your darkest darks next to your lightest lights that area will invariably become the focal point of your painting. But, it’s like hitting a mule on the head with a hammer to get its attention: what you get is a cross-eyed mule that staggers. The question: Do you always need to use a hammer? The answer: NO. There are millions of exquisite paintings that do not have a single focal point. Most great paintings have numerous focal points (a place where your eye stops because something interesting happens). Your eye moves through these paintings, stopping momentarily to enjoy subtle contrasts or relationships.

**Are darks essential? No. Are darks important? Sometimes.** Like height, our judgment of values is relative. But most people do not have to have a giraffe stand next to them to appear relatively short; they need only to be in the vicinity. The same is true of dark values. A dark value placed in the vicinity of lighter values will intensify their lightness.



**Isolated darks or lights** tend to separate from the picture plane interrupting the rhythmical movement of the eye. In landscape painting these extreme value contrasts destroy the effect of atmosphere. Notice that nature keeps every element in harmony by not allowing extreme value contrasts. Teachers will sometimes say that there are no whites or blacks in nature. This is hyperbole designed to keep students from punching holes in their work. White and black are perfectly allowable when they are eased into surrounding values through the use of gradation.

## Sneaking in your darks

You can use dark values effectively without them becoming theatrical or obvious by sneaking them in with gradation (a smooth, sequential transition). Instead of placing a value 10 (black) next to a value 1 (white), begin with value 10 and sequentially lighten your values until you arrive at value 1. You have the same contrast, 10 to 1, without the visual “bang” that occurs when these extreme contrasts are jammed together (Remember the mule).

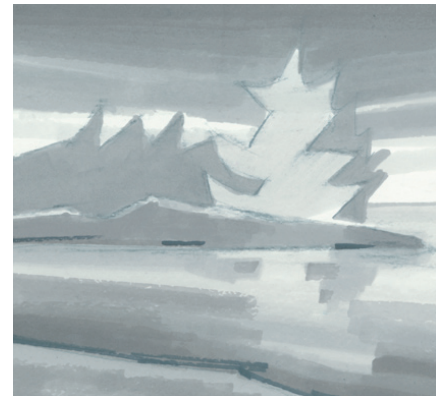
**Here are three ways you can use darks. Which one seems most subtle?**



**obvious**



**less obvious**



**downright sneaky**

# Obvious vs. sneaky

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## Traditional placement of light and dark.

No question here as to where we are to look. There is some question, however, as to the importance of the rest of the painting. The effect (or special effect) of grabbing the viewers' attention with a single focal point is an obvious and attractive device, but it diminishes the overall impact of the painting's design. Your viewer, when hit on the head with a hammer, will probably not stick around.



## Sneaky treatment of darks and lights.

By placing the lights away from the darks, our eyes move more slowly around the painting. The same value contrast exists, but is reorganized to avoid emphasizing an arbitrary place in the landscape. Subtlety of color contrast replaces extreme value contrast, portraying the landscape as a more unified whole.



## When to use those sneaky darks

I am not saying that you should never place your lightest lights against your darkest darks. I am saying that you do have permission to not always follow this worn out and simplistic rule of design. I have met students who are so calcified in "the value contrast focal point" approach that it precludes all other possibilities. This is a mistake and should be corrected

immediately. "Rules are meant to be broken" and "If it's too good to be true, it probably is" are just two bromides that will allow you to have more fun painting.

**Try this: Sneak in your darks and watch your paintings come to life.**