

paint **BIG**

by Skip Lawrence

Make your paintings simple and strong.



“Light At Pemaquid Point” by Skip Lawrence.

Watercolor on Arches 140# paper, 18”x26”

Why Paint With Big Shapes?

There is no element in designing a painting that is more important than the size relationship of the shapes you employ. One of the generally accepted principles of design is variety in the division of space. A page is more visually interesting when divided into different size shapes. No one ever looked at a checker board and proclaimed its beauty. In order to achieve variety, big shapes are necessary to play against smaller shapes. It is only by comparison that size differences are made clear.

Dominance is another principle of design. Dominance is achieved when there is enough of one element to dominate other elements. The minute you create a big shape of similar color, value, or texture a dominance is made. Andrew Wyeth created a warm neutral color dominance in “Christina’s World” by making the field occupy three quarters of the painting. In “Taking on Wet Provisions”, Winslow Homer made a light value dominance by paint-

ing the sky and water a light value against the smaller darker shadow portion of the schooner. Lines dominate the majority of the paintings of John Marin and make a textural dominance by their overwhelming size.

“Small shapes seem weak.....big shapes generous”

Big shapes appear generous and big spirited. They convey certainty and commitment to the subject matter and to the viewer. Small shapes seem weak and lack conviction. I am not saying that you should only paint huge objects--elephants and aircraft hangars. Big shapes can be made from many small shapes. Just as it takes hundreds of trees to make a forest, so too can houses, people, trees, and cars be joined to make one generous shape from what might be portrayed as 15 stingy shapes.

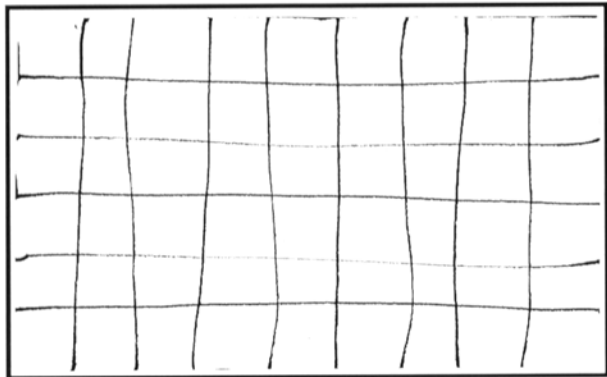
Think Big

I often begin a workshop by encouraging students to think big. Big hopes, big brushes, big ideas, big shapes, big colors, big prices, and big expectations. To do otherwise is to flirt with defeat. One needs only to be a student of great art and artists to appreciate this approach. I ask you to test this concept by looking at your favorite art and artists.

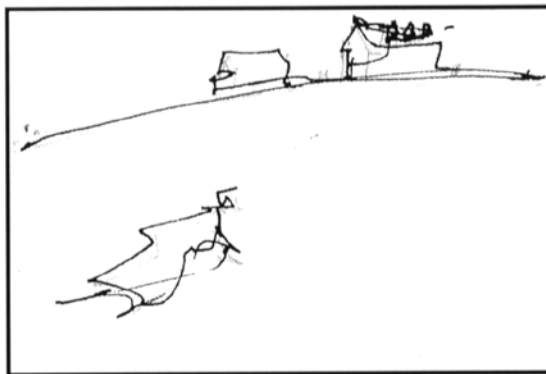
Painting big is the result of thinking big. I have seen students make little shapes with huge

brushes and monumental shapes with two haired brushes. Charles Reid makes beautifully generous figure shapes with #10 and #12 round brushes while Christopher Schink paints beautiful shapes with a 2 inch bristle brush. I even saw the palette and brushes of Winslow Homer on display at the National Gallery and there was not one brush bigger than a #8 round. Certainly there is a lesson to be learned from these examples. Big shapes are made with your head.

No dominance of size

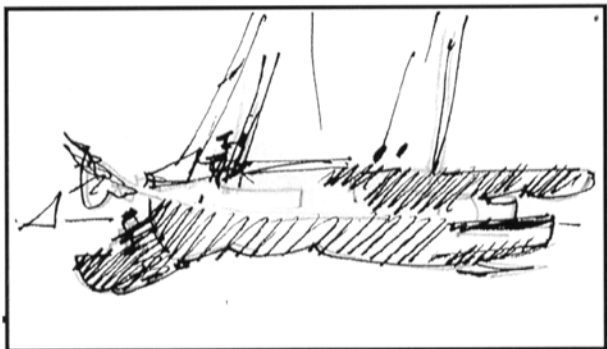


Color



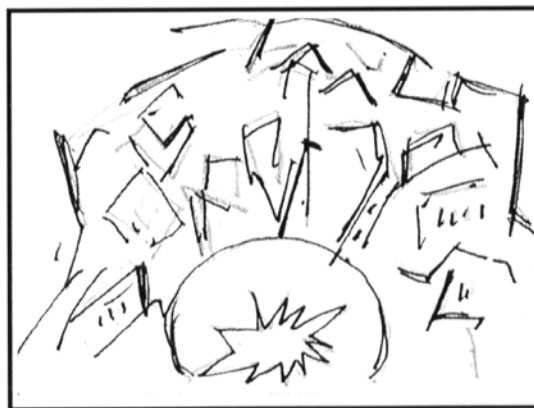
From "Christina's World" by Andrew Wyeth

Value



From "Taking on Wet Provisions" by Winslow Homer

Texture



From "Lower Manhattan" by John Marin

Starting Big

I generally begin a painting, either in a sketch book or on the watercolor paper, by drawing the size and placement of the biggest shape in the painting. The remainder of the page is sequentially divided into smaller shapes working from the largest to the smallest. This same approach is continued when starting to paint, the largest shapes being painted first. The decision as to which brush size is determined not by the size of

the shape but rather by how often I will change colors within the shape. Sometimes a 2" brush is employed when a large rather flat color shape is desired. Other times I will use a #12 round when a more varied color / textured surface is desired. While brushes can determine the size of a brush stroke (look at paintings by John S. Sargent), they are not responsible for the size of the shape they produce. .

Old advice

By following the old advice of “paint along the wet edge”, a small round brush can cover an entire piece of watercolor. By using this sequence you will find you have made significant size differences and estab-

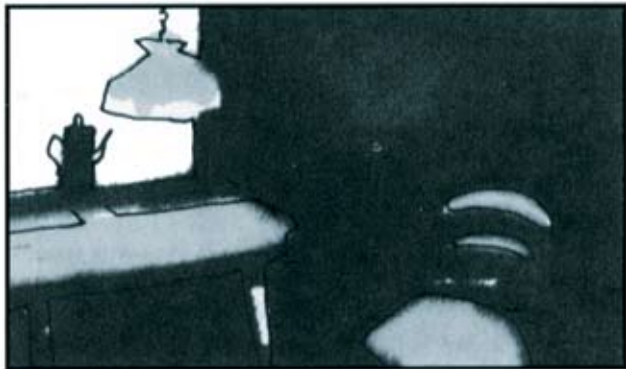
lished a color dominance from the start. This will make painting much easier and will set in motion a chain of events you will find exciting and meaningful. **Trust me!**

try this....

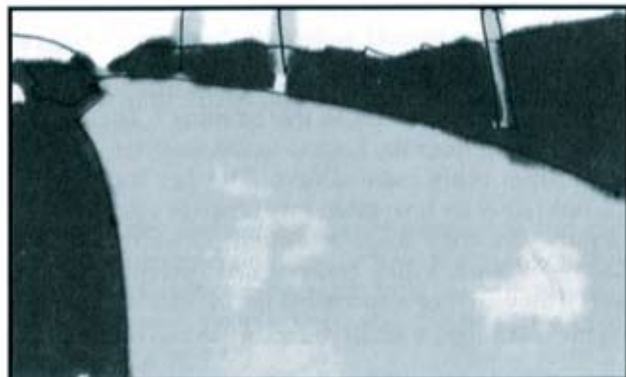
1. Select a simple landscape of three elements, such as sky, trees, and land. Determine which of these shapes will dominate by the size—the “big shape”. The remaining two will be smaller than the first and should be of unequal size. Paint it! Repeat the process twice more, making each of the remaining elements the dominant shape.



2. Repeat the previous sequence with a still-life as the subject. Make the first painting a room with a still-life in it and the second—a still-life in a room. I wouldn't bother to do the third variation, a room and a still-life. It will only be boring.



3. Choose a subject. Determine the size differences beginning with the biggest shape. Proceed with a 2” brush (or larger) making flat color shapes. Redo the painting using smaller brushes, like number 8 and 10 rounds. This version should place greater emphasis on color and texture.



Remember: THINK BIG