

# ROUND & flat

Learn how to effectively treat the forms in your painting.

by Skip Lawrence and Toph Schink

**W**e wanted to make everything look round when we were first learning to paint; it was one of our big tricks. We'd been taught how to make things look three-dimensional by shading them, and we could hardly wait to put shadows on the lighthouse tower, the rocks, the tree trunks, the boats, and all the buildings in view. We checked the direction of our light source and then made sure every object in our painting was consistently modeled—no exceptions allowed. And if the sun wasn't shining, we couldn't paint. We never thought about painting things flat. It didn't seem to be a choice.

Whether to make things look round or flat (or a combination of those two approaches) is a decision contemporary artists have to make at the outset of every painting. Their choice is based on what they want to say in their painting. If the form of your subject (for example, a massive mountain or an old locomotive) is what appeals to

you, then modeling it with strong value changes is an effective approach. If you are interested in conveying effects of atmosphere or weather (as, for example, Monet and Turner were), you would reduce contrasts in value to flatten forms and, instead, emphasize contrasts in intensity or hue. If you are interested in conveying your emotional response to your subject (as, for example, Van Gogh was), you would reduce or eliminate descriptive modeling of the form with value change and, instead, employ subjective color. In short, making things appear three-dimensional in your painting is not a rule; the choice is yours.

Here are some possibilities—with paintings from our new video—that illustrate the advantages and disadvantages of modeling or flattening the forms in your painting.



We make an object appear round by shifting values on its surface (color change plays only a minor part in this illusion). The wider the range of value contrast between lighted and shaded areas of an object, the rounder (or more three-dimensional) the object will appear. Skip modeled the apple on the left in a wide range of values

(from off-white to almost black) to make it appear round. In the apple on the right he used contrasting colors of the same value throughout its interior to make it appear flatter. Here we identify this apple by its silhouette, not its form. In short, to make an object look round, you should emphasize shadow patterns and value contrasts; To make it look flat you should reduce or eliminate shadows and value contrast.

## From round to flat

Toph took this head from a Van Gogh painting of a young man. In the painting on the right, he used a full value range (from white to deep darks) to model the form. This is the most effective way (short of using a camera) to tell the viewer what our subject looks like. In the hands of a master, such as Vermeer, Rembrandt, or Thomas Eakins, this traditional approach can give us insights into the subject's character.

The treatment of form is very different in his replica of Van Gogh's painting (below left). By replacing contrasts of value with contrasts of intense, subjective color, the artist creates a form that appears flatter and more two-dimensional. This approach tells the viewer how the artist felt about his subject.

In Toph's third version (below right), he took a Matisse-like approach, eliminating all value change on the forms and using more subjective shapes. You can flatten a shape, as Toph has done here, by surrounding it with a dark (or white) line. Here again, we sense the artist's response to his subject rather than his accurate description of its observed form.

