



This lesson shows how to simplify values in a photographed scene. The result is the creation of large, abstract shapes that become the underlying value structure of the painting. Learning this is one of the best ways to improve your painting.

Color vs. Value In Our Subject

We are likely to notice color before value in any scene or subject – if we notice value at all. It gives us a sense that “color” is the most important element in our scene. This gives us the notion that copying what we see – especially the color we see – is the way to approach the painting. What we think of as “color” is really what’s known as “[Hue](#)”, just one of the [Four Characteristics of Color](#) – and arguably the LEAST important of the four.

The human eye has about four times as many receptors for dark and light as it does for color. Sensitivity to value helps us understand form, space and distance far better than Hue – or color. [Value](#) is also one of the Four Characteristics of Color and has two important roles in a painting: helping to represent light, which then creates an illusion of three-dimensional form; and in creating a strong underlying shape and value structure for the painting.

Simplifying Values For Painting

Even the simplest of scenes, like the one in this lesson, has hundreds of different values, represented in slight and subtle changes from one to the other. Our eyes are sensitive to them, but we are not able to consciously process and organize the many small variations in a scene.

The good news: there is no need to do so for your painting! A simple structure of no more than a small handful of large abstract – that is, non-objective – shapes filled with one of three values, will do more for the strength of your painting than almost anything else.

This lesson shows how to work from a photo of a simple scene – converting the actual, complex values to three simple values. The first step is to create a thumbnail drawing and apply three simple values. This process creates an abstract composition of large shapes with simple values.

From there, we create a larger value study, allowing the action of water and paint to create some subtle variety in value shapes, that visually simulate the slight changes we see in an actual scene.

