

Frank Webb

A tale of two esthetics — realism and the abstract

"It takes courage to paint what you think and feel."

Biography

Frank Webb has been self-employed as an artist since 1947. He has earned 120 major awards. He has authored three books and is a Dolphin Fellow and a vice president of the American Watercolor Society.

Favorite color I am somewhat partial to violet. When friends ask why I reply, "Violet is the color of royalty and of passion." Although my tonal values are created in a preliminary sketch, I use color intuitively.

Paints I prefer the large 37 mm size tube. What a pity we no longer have the pleasure of squeezing the tin metal tubes of yesteryear.

Palette My palette has a flat floor that allows my brush to slide directly into the pile of paint.

Papers I try many brands and weights. 140-lb (300-gsm) Arches cold press is my favorite. When I want a calligraphic dominance, I use hot press.

Workspace I believe that paint strokes should be made with the whole body, so I paint while standing at an adjustable table. From my hilltop studio, I can look out over a funicular that goes down to the city of Pittsburgh's Golden Triangle.

"Monet is only an eye," said Cézanne, "but what an eye." Most of us admire both these painters. There certainly is room in this world for both Monet's impressionistic and Cézanne's semi-abstract approach and most painters are in one or the other camp. It takes no courage to paint what you see. It does, however, take courage to paint what you think and feel.

I enjoy painting portraits in oil and pastel, but when it comes to landscape, I am partial to watercolor. Landscape appeals to me as an opportunity to orchestrate more complex and numerous parts into a unified whole while adding insight to eyesight.

Abstract defined

Since the days of Monet and Cézanne, the subject of most contemporary art is not the narrative but the design of the painting. In this article, I'm using the word "abstract" to mean semi abstract. (A complete abstract is best defined as non-objective.) When we abstract, we emphasize certain

qualities emerging from the subject while giving less importance those parts that are less welcome. Thus a painting is abstract to the degree that we depart from nature.

With this definition in mind, in my work I aim to fuse two opposing esthetic ideas — realism and abstractionism. There are excellent works and poor works in each camp. To fuse the two, we need to focus less on the model and more intensely on the paper.

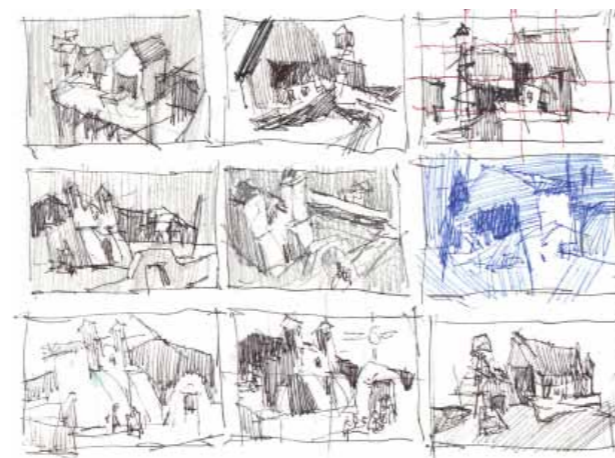
It is difficult or impossible to start with the academic drawing and then try to abstract it. Abstract first and then fit the realism into it.

Making the design

I start by making small, preliminary pencil drawings that include all the tonal values. The typical artist's sketch, done with line and only sparse bits of shade, will not do. I seldom find the lighting of the subject to be satisfactory, so I often change the light source. All my drawings are made on location, or by memory of location. I almost

Mini patterns

These are only 2 inch (5 cm) wide and are made with a ballpoint pen. Nothing is more important than the four to six shapes of the painting. The smallness of these allows me to quickly make several and then to choose the best one. I follow with a larger 5 x 7-inch (12.5 x 18 cm) value drawing using an 8B graphite pencil.



never use photos. I say, "Let photos be photography and let painting be painting."

As I begin, I ask myself, "What is my highest pleasure in this subject?" I walk around the subject to see all its character. During this process I often close my eyes. What I see with my eyes closed is what I need to paint. The subject then will be shorn of all inexpressive detail. Yes, detail is needed — but it must be significant and in selected areas.

Shape is the most important element of visual art. A good shape has two different dimensions, some slanting edges in relation to the border and interlocks with its neighbors.

Continuing on the road to abstraction, I draw from nature before me, but in so doing I also make my own sizes and tonal values. I abstract pictorial space by making a flatter, more shallow space. (A picture is not a window.)

I make no color notes. I want my color to be abstract (away from nature). My



Nostalgia Trip

16 x 30 inch (41 x 76 cm)

The format of the paper is going in the same horizontal direction as the subject. Consider the large white shape. It is what I call a linked shape. It is related to the subordinate white at the left.

drawings then follow me to the studio where, being less model bound, I am encouraged to make a more creative image. If I remain at the site, I turn my back on the subject and refer to the drawing.

Finishing the painting

The drawing now before me has solved most of the design problems. Now I am free to give most of my attention to color and running of washes. I have made my own shapes, lines, tonal values, textures, sizes, color and directions. If the painting fails, I have the information I need to repaint. I have sought to give it the vital import and delight of one person's imagination.

When I look at your painting, all this is what I want to see. I want to see a subject that has been imbued with your heart and mind.

Taxco, Mexico

30 x 22 inch (76 x 56 cm)

Color in this painting expresses my enchantment with the subject. I believe the shapes also express delight. Note the piece of white: my rule for locating the important white is that it should not be centered and it should not be too close to a border.

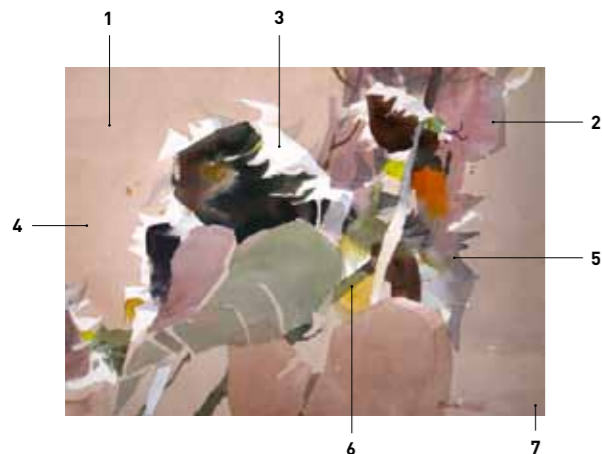




Basking Floral

16 x 30 inch (41 x 76 cm)

This is a layered painting. Each application is put on a dry surface, one after another.



Walk-through

1 Flatness abstracts this decorative concept. All hard-edged shapes demand they be entertaining. I painted the background color first, covering everything except the whites. This mother color lends harmony to the whole scheme.

2 Overlapping pulls shapes together and flaunts the transparency of watercolor. You can see overlapping of two colors and in some places more than two overlap. Transparency is one of watercolor's greatest characteristics.

3 Note the variety of sizes of the all-important whites. Whites make a painting sparkle. Note

that the most commanding shapes here are where the darkest darks come near the whites.

4 Larger areas here are a nice foil against selected areas of greater eventfulness.

5 Interlocking helps to hold the parts together as in a jigsaw puzzle. If possible, each shape should have a bite or two taken out of it and then other parts sticking out.

6 Every long line or edge should be interrupted by an incident.

7 Each of the four corners is a different size and shape.

Techniques

- > I use mostly flat brushes, up to 3 inches (7.5 cm) wide. Often I use the corner of the brush. I seldom use a pointed brush.
- > My early career included some lettering, so I have an intimate acquaintance with the flat brush, which I can twist, turn and use to caress the paper, making shapes from the inside out rather than from the outside in. Since letterforms are abstracts, I have gained expertise in making shapes with a minimum of strokes.



Maple Sugar House

22 x 19 inch (56 x 48 cm)

I call this kind of color "Patchilism." Color variations are introduced with each brush stroke. While the paint is still wet, the edges fuse. The trick is to maintain the tonal value of an area while changing color.



Funchal Beach

22 x 30 inch (56 x 76 cm)

I was intrigued by the possibility of linking several houses into one white shape. My shape dominance here is the triangular. The dominant cool color surrounds and intensifies the subordinate warm color.