

Creating an Original Composition

This article is an edited version of two that were written by UKCPS past-President Ann James-Massey and originally published as part of a series in Talking Point during 2005. Ann has generously given an Award for Excellence in Drawing for the UKCPS Annual Open Exhibition. Some seven years after the original articles were published, it feels timely to distil the articles for the benefit of newer members and to offer a glimpse into the thinking behind Ann's own highly considered artwork. A further article combining two more of Ann's articles will appear in the next issue of TP.

Editor

With a good understanding of the basics (perspective, composition, design, color, anatomy, etc.), believable original compositions can be created without relying entirely on what you see before you or copying exactly from a photograph.

Everywhere I go, I snap photos as potential reference material. I ask family, friends and even strangers to pose - often without something particular in mind. I may consider an idea for years before finally creating a composition that may be gleaned from many sources - some from life, some from photos and some made up.



"For Art's Sake" - Ann James-Massey
© 1997, collection of Phyllis Caves-Rowley

"For Art's Sake" was inspired by one of five photos I took of a street artist outside New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Her pose - with the wonderful folds of her clothing and her crude handling of the brush - intrigued me and formed the starting point. But what to do with her body? I enjoy depicting people pursuing their talents, so she would remain an artist. But there were other possibilities - petting or feeding an animal, reaching to stir a pot, pointing at something? What scenarios can you imagine, considering that it is best to draw from your own sensibilities rather than worrying about what would please others?

Her feet would be simple enough to add to the drawing. But what else could create more interest? Ah! My own dogs often sat patiently at my feet while I



worked? I photographed this dog somewhere in Europe and it seemed the perfect artistic companion. I did not copy the artist's face exactly. Unless I'm particularly taken by the expression, or it is a commissioned portrait, I generally change the face. If you plan to draw people so that they are recognisable, always get permission from them first. It was not an issue in this case.

In what setting should my subject be placed? The background could have been an existing place, but roughly 80% of my settings are significantly altered - or made up, like this one.

My favourite compositional design is the classic pyramid - which is probably why she interested me in the first place. But - no matter how tight the detail in some areas, you need to encourage the viewer's gaze to move around and back to the central design with angles, value and colour. The horizontal (restful) and vertical (strength) lines of the seat and wall form a framework and relief for the movement of the eye created by the angled (action) lines. Knowledge of perspective was vital for making up the background, easel and canvas.

It is far more interesting to stimulate the viewer's imagination by what is not shown exactly (or even at all). In this case, I placed the artist so that only she sees the landscape she is painting. The viewer guesses what is beyond, guided by the image she is creating.

Never assume - just because something is in a photo - that it is right or even necessary. The left arm in the photo was left out as it formed a distracting hump in the line of her back. Which feels more natural and pleasing: the figure in the photo

(which is real) or the one in my drawing (which is unreal)?

When combining elements from more than one photo, make your light source consistent. The dog in the reference photo is in deep shadow except for a tiny ray of sunlight at the top of the head. My drawing depicts a cloudy day. So - my dog is neither in deep shadow (brightening the light areas in his coat) nor in sunlight (removing the highlight). I also made the dress lighter in overall value to emphasise the contrast with the darks. If I had made it the same value as the photo, it would have been closer to the background value. This would have been boring.



Even after fixing the composition, and working for months on the drawing, a key element was missing: the hairstyle! Nothing I tried clicked. However, on a flight back to the States, I was working on the drawing (which was practically finished except the hair). When drawing on a plane, other passengers often pause to see what I am doing. On this occasion, I noticed that they were spending far longer deliberately staring. This baffled me until one of them commented about the portrait I was drawing of my seat companion. I was shocked to realize that the woman next to me had almost exactly the same profile as the face that I had made up many weeks before. Although we had chatted, I hadn't really noticed her profile. Providence had come to my rescue. She had the perfect hairstyle! By the time we arrived in the US, the hair and the drawing were completed.

The last chapter concerning this piece is also interesting. We create the artwork, but it belongs to someone else. I had christened the dog "Art". With my love of puns, the artist was not only painting for

her own sake but also to support her dog. One of my collectors told me she knew someone who must have the newly completed drawing. Sure enough, when the woman I was referred to saw the piece, she fell in love with it. As she was leaving with the drawing, she asked for the title. I replied "For Art's Sake." She stopped in surprise and said that she already knew that the piece was meant for her but now she had no doubt - explaining "My ex-husband's name is Art!"

Overcoming flaws when drawing from photographs: working towards a higher level of artistic expression.

Some pretty impressive CP artworks are being produced by artists around the world. However, a closer look at many pieces can reveal basic errors. To reach a higher level in art, having talent or being an accomplished copyist is no excuse for not studying the basics. Understand the anatomy of folds. Recognise mistakes in perspective and common errors in drawing people. Study the rules of value and form. Here are some tips to help you overcome flaws that can arise when taking and using photographs as source material.

1) Photographs almost always present a distorted image. Reference photos can be a valuable tool to help recollect a place, a gesture, details or the spontaneity of a moment. But remember - a photo is created with only one lens and we have two eyes.

2) An in-depth knowledge of the basics (perspective, anatomy, colour and composition) is even more important when working from photos. Recognise and correct the photo's inherent flaws. Elements copied directly from a photo often feel "wrong." Don't use the excuse that "It looked that way in the photo." Despite what is commonly believed, a photo is not true to life.

3) Shoot many views and angles for a fuller understanding of the subject. We are more likely to misread what we see in a photo than in life - where we can approach the object, walk around it, study it closely and gain an understanding of what it really looks like. Take photos from many viewpoints.

However, avoid taking photos when looking down at items (children, people seated, animals, etc.) that are below your eye level - unless that perspective is specifically chosen for compositional effect. This can create an awkward perspective and gives an 'amateur snapshot' appearance to the artwork. Stand further back and take the photo across the plane, in which case the subject may remain below eye level. Alternatively, drop down until you are closer to the level of the object. (See 5.)

4) Focus on the background with separate shots for the option of sharp images instead of having fuzzy source material. In tight realism, a blurry background (unless it is meant deliberately to focus on the main subject), is a dead give away that the artist is only copying a photo. An artist working from life focuses on each item; therefore, nothing is out of focus.

5) Use a telephoto lens. Help overcome the false perspective of a camera's single lens by standing farther back and using a telephoto lens. This will flatten the depth of field. Look through the lens, then look at the scene and continue to adjust the telephoto until what is seen through the lens is approximately what is seen without the camera. My all-purpose lens is a 35 - 105 mm macro telephoto lens. Aim for similar capability with digital cameras.

6) Draw freehand. Don't trace, project or use mechanical or grid methods to reproduce photos, which also reproduce the photo's artistic flaws. These flaws are more noticeable to the artist who is sketching freehand, since there is concentration on getting the right imagery, not on minutely following the photo's contour lines.

7) Use natural lighting. Avoid using mostly artificial lighting and built in flash. Both will create inaccurate colour and lighting. For indoor shots, use a tripod and faster film or equivalent settings on your digital camera.

8) Keep elements from different source photos in agreement. When pulling elements from different photos to create a composition, be aware of the light sources, the eye level lines, and the depth of the items in order to keep every element in the scene compatible and in relation to each other.

9) Don't depend only on photos. If a photo must be used for a particular image, but the anatomy feels wrong, have someone pose in person to figure out the correct angle, shape or detail, or look in a mirror (my hands and feet have appeared on many of my female subjects).

Check the subject's colour by having some of the real elements at hand (when drawing dead leaves, I gathered up a bunch from outside and strew them on the floor in front of my easel).

Soften (ever so slightly) the edges of rounded objects so they appear the way our eyes see them. Avoid depicting them with the sharp edges in the photographs.

Take time out to research details not apparent in your photos. For a drawing of a Golden Retriever mix, although I had photos of the dog, I spent a day researching Golden Retrievers at the library and the animal shelter. Though I had photos of a Baccarat black crystal vase for a commission, I spent two weeks searching in antique shops, finally buying a new black crystal vase so I could observe the reflections first hand).

10) Artwork should be a reflection of the artist, not a photo. Copying a photo exactly is just that - an exercise in exact copying! Why not just display the photo? Simplify, add, cut, change, create an entirely new setting, create an original composition that does not exist in a photo, or even in reality, draw elements from numerous sources, work from life, use your imagination.

A good eye is no substitute for knowledge, so take those classes and/or study those books on perspective, colour, composition, and anatomy. That knowledge sets the artist free: not only from the flaws of photos, but also free to break the rules to distort reality convincingly to create an even better composition or more exciting artwork.

Ideally, viewers should look at the finished artwork and not only see the image, but feel the presence of the artist behind it.

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