

SERGEI BONGART: NOTES ON PAINTING

The following essay by Russian/American artist Sergei Bongart (1918-1985) is the best, most succinct treatise on painting I've ever read. Gleaned from notes taken by Sergei's students while under his tutelage, these insights are a priceless introduction to painting. This text may be distributed freely, but may not be sold for profit. Please give credit where credit is due: Sergei Bongart.

For a delightful examination of Bogart's life and his work, order the book Sergei Bongart, by Mary Balcomb.

Compiled by John Erwin, edited by Norm Nason

True art has passion and contains insight. It shows us a new way of looking at our world. As Matisse would say, it helps us to see with the fresh eyes of a child. Art is the great renewer of life. Impatience is the only threat to this prescription. It is all in the mileage invested. As Robert Henri says, do lots of starts and the finishes will take care of themselves.

In art, the hardest skill to learn is to be simple. As artists, we have a natural inclination to create detail; we must overcome this tendency. The first rule is to begin big and simple, then move toward small and complex.

The best art amazes us because of what the artist left out, not because of what he or she put in. If everything is included, why not photograph the subject instead? Any beautifully rendered detail can be strengthened by this editing process. Even a photo-realist must leave some things out. It is the artist's job to only put in the information that speaks to the relevant issues.

Before you begin, ask yourself what should be seen first within your painting, and what you want to say about it. Areas of greatest contrast will attract the most attention. This is your first reading. A strong composition usually facilitates three good readings.

Understand the basis of composing a picture in color. No color should be viewed in isolation, but rather in constant relation to what is around it. A color is what it appears to be only because of its relationship to the surrounding colors. Nothing exists in isolation. Each previous color choice must be re-evaluated as a new color is placed along side of it. If you change one color, you have in effect changed them all.

When we paint, we really aren't copying the colors of nature, we are painting the color relationships. We don't have the color palette that nature has, so we must give the illusion of truth through the relationships of the colors we choose.

As in chess, try to think several moves ahead, painting the color relationships that are deemed integral to the picture. Always make the next most important move. Don't paint in nose highlights, for instance, before you have established the background colors.

It is vital at the start of a painting to cover the white of the canvas with chosen silhouettes of color. Do this as soon as possible. A white canvas masks the truth of the color relationships. Toning the canvas can help eliminate the glare of white, but does nothing to establish the true harmonies between each color.

Work around the canvas two or three times or more before moving to any detail. It is entirely possible, and often advisable, to spend 90% of your time merely adjusting the big, simple shapes before ever moving to the rendering. Once this is satisfactory, the chosen style or technique can be completed with confidence, up to and including ultra-tight realism.

There are three properties, or contrasts, of color. They are:

- Value (Light to Dark)
- Intensity (Rich to Gray)
- Temperature (Warm to Cool)

The color we see an object as having is not merely because it is being lit by a light source, but because it is bouncing some of that light back at us. A white piece of paper is such because it receives light and bounces most of it back at us. A black piece of paper receives the same light, but absorbs most of it and bounces very little back at us.

Everything that receives light is a source of light. In this way everything is a light source, to a greater or lesser degree. This is why shadows are not pure black. Even though the light source, by definition, isn't directly effecting the shadows, that light is hitting other objects around the shadow. These objects become weaker, indirect light sources that effect the shadow value. Because they are weaker, the value of the light side will almost always be lighter than the shadows.

Nothing in the light is as dark as the shadow. Nothing in the shadow is as light as the light. In other words, you can have all the detail you want in the lights and all the detail you want in the shadows, but the lights should stay light, the shadows dark. The two should never mix.

Of all the properties of color, value is by far the most powerful. Value and design set the painting; all else builds from them. Design your painting in terms of silhouettes; dark on light, rich on grey, warm on cool, etc. As you design your painting, always keep in mind that the viewer's eye moves from the area of greatest contrast to least contrast.

Silhouettes can be strong or subtle. The design is arrived at through the contrast of various relationships, but the degree of contrast is up to the artist, of course. Here-in lies the infinite possibilities.

What are going to be the lightest/darkest, richest/grayest, warmest/coolest areas of the canvas? These are the questions an artist asks before beginning a painting. Each of these contrasts are relative to what is around them. For instance, even though orange is a warm color, it is perfectly appropriate to think of a warm orange or a cool orange. A sunset is much warmer than untanned Caucasian skin.

Relativity is the hallmark of contrast. A middle value dark can appear light relative to the stronger darks around it; a muted blue can appear intense relative to the grays around it; a cool red can appear warm relative to the blues around it. With this relativity in mind it again becomes obvious that nothing can be viewed in isolation, but rather in constant relationship to its environment.

View a color not by looking into its center, for in this way you can convince yourself it is practically anything in terms of temperature, intensity and value. Rather, view it at its borders, against the surrounding contrasts. Glance visually back and forth between foreground and background colors. Further, if you are searching for a correct value, find other values of both lighter and darker degrees. Do this even if it means going beyond the limits of the intended composition. For example, the skin value in halftone is lighter than the skin in shadow, but darker than the highlight on the nose. The same should be done for intensity and temperature.

There is no such thing as white light in nature. Light always has a color (warm or cool). If everything that receives light is a source of light, then everything that receives light is also a source of color. Sunlight is warm-yellow to red. Sky light is cool-green to purple.

The color of the light plus the color of the object equals the color you mix. This is the key formula. For example, if the sunlight is yellow and the object to be painted is a red apple, the perceived color will be somewhere in the red-yellow range. If the light is strong, yellow will dominate; if weak, red will dominate. A powerful enough light source will bleach out the color of the object until all you see is the color of the light. If you want a sense of light in your painting it is often best to let the light color dominate the palette.

The color of the light is most revealing on a white object. Since white has no color it becomes, literally, the color of the light. Warm light, cool shadow. Just like the light has a color (as it effects the lit object), shadow has a color also. If the light is warm, the shadow light will be cool. If the light is cool, the shadow is warm. In theory, the shadow is a perfect complement to the light color (yellow light yields purple shadow). However, since any given object exists in an environment with other objects in it, and those objects, as we said, are bouncing light and color into the shadows, the shadow is generally catching several other colors besides the complimentary shadow color. The best we can say, then, is that if the lights tend to be on the warm side, the shadows will tend to be cool (and the other way around).

Generally, there are great shifts of color in the shadows, and subtle temperature shifts in the light. Light areas should consist of slight variations of warm and cool colors.

Different plane, different color. In shadows, planes facing the same direction take on the same color; planes facing different directions take on different colors. Edges of forms in light or shadow may take on some of the color of the immediate background, because of the background light reflecting off the form.

Think of color first, subject last. Everything begins as an abstraction of color. A warm light on a warm object will intensify; a cool light on a warm object will mute. All other combinations logically follow. When dealing with complimentary colors in a composition (warms against cools), a good rule of thumb is to shift both to the same side of the color wheel. This may help harmonize and otherwise sharp composition. Take, for example, yellow and violet. Move them both to, say, the red side. The yellow then becomes a yellow-orange, while the violet becomes a reddish violet.

A composition will often harmonize better if you bring some of the foreground colors into the background, and background colors into the foreground. In nature, colors reflect into other colors, although this is not always evident. In mixing compliments to gray, the intensity of it may become dull or dirty. To correct the problem, move the colors slightly to the same side of the color wheel (add a stain that is a common color to both).

A stain is a color that has the property of transparency as soon as it is thinned to any degree. For instance: Indian Yellow, Transparent Orange, Permanent Rose, Magenta, Alizarin Crimson, French Ultramarine, and any Thalo color (to name a few). No Cadmium or Cobalt color is a stain. Generally, a stain is a color that has no white or black in it. Most colors gray when white is added to them. Stains, on the other had, intensify. This is particularly true of the lighter colors (skin tones, for example), where the color will dull as soon as you mix it out of a high intensity. A stain will keep a richness to the grays.

Take green and red, for example. Move the green towards yellow and move the red likewise. Mixing the yellowish green with the orangish red will produce a fair gray in either the warm or cool yellow camp. If it is too dirty in practice, add the common Indian Yellow stain and it will become richer. (Obviously, too much will pull it completely out of the gray range and into the yellow.) If you stain your near compliments (grays) to begin with, it will effect a rich state automatically. When learning color it is wise to mix pigment a little brighter than you think it should be. It is much easier to mix down in intensity than to force it back up.

Avoid using pure white or pure black in a painting. A better way of getting black is by mixing Alizarin Crimson and Thalo Green. This will either give you a rich warm or a rich cool black that has much more depth than a flat black would.

Halftones. The color in the light is almost always different from the color in the shadows.

As planes turn away from the light and towards the shadows they will begin taking on the color of the shadows. The darker halftones will begin taking on the color of the background at the edges of the form. The halftones will be the best area to see the true local color.

Highlights:

- will not give you much turn of form;
- will tell you what the surface is like (rough or smooth);
- will fall in peaks and valleys;
- will move with you, the viewer;
- will reflect at the same angle as the light that hits the form as it bounces to the viewer's eye;
- will take on the color of the light more fully;
- are found on wet or smooth surfaces, especially;
- will be found on the corner separating two planes in light.

As highlight moves from a broad area to a thin one, it will often intensify and may become thinner (e.g., thigh to knee). Let the highlight be an interesting shape (something more square than round will usually describe the form better). Running lights (highlights that run the length of limbs, for instance) don't usually stay parallel to the form, but instead rotate or corkscrew to some degree.

Edges. A cast shadow is the sharpest edge (next to the contour), but it will soften and blur as it moves farther from the point of origin. The slower a form shadow turns on a form, the softer the edge. In other words, the rounder the form, the softer the edge. The more angular the form, the harder the edge. The harder the surface being lit, the harder the edges. Bone will have a harder edge than muscle. Edges in the shadows are generally softer than in the light. The closer the form is to you, the viewer, the harder the edge. The farther away, the softer, looser, and more blurred. The brighter the light source, the harder the edge. Edges perpendicular to the light tend to be sharper. Glancing light will leave a soft edge.

In rim light, the light will bleach out and the shadows will appear lighter and more colorful. A light object against a dark background (in intense light) will have its edges flare and soften into the darkness, taking on the intense color of the light. The human eye naturally focuses on one distinct area at a time, leaving everything else softly out of focus. When painting, pick out a few hard edges at points where you want the viewer to concentrate and soften the edges elsewhere.

For the figure, the larger the form the grayer, the smaller the form the redder. Blood is closer to the surface on small forms. The nose is redder than the face, the face redder than the head, the head redder than the torso.

Disclaimer. All of the above are basic observations of light on form. Things tend to play in reality the way I've stated. However, you can easily find wonderful exceptions in the art world to everything I've told you. Use the information as a tool to learn color, but don't feel inhibited by it. *Remember that art, at its best, is the seeing of life in new and exciting ways, not as rote formula.*

Stay in the paint!

Sergei Bongart