

# About Books

By BARBARA DACHOWSKI, PSA

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## A Painter's Guide to Design and Composition

By Margot Schulzke, PSA

Cincinnati: North Light Books  
2006; 144 pp.

During the last few months, I've been concentrating on sharpening my design and composition skills.

Consequently, when I saw Margot Schulzke's book *A Painter's Guide to Design and Composition*, it had to become an addition to my art library. I had enjoyed Schulzke's articles, which often appear in *The Pastel Journal*, and had no doubt that her book would be an excellent resource manual.

This book is chock-full of helpful information and is beautifully illustrated with paintings of high-caliber reproduction. There is also input from twenty-six master artists, who generously share their own secrets of design and composition. A few of my personal heroes are included, in addition to some other outstanding artists whose works I've never seen before. Throughout the book, Margot shares her "pearls of wisdom," which at times are laced with an entertaining, wry humor.

There are two main headings — "Design Basics," comprising a greater part of the book, and "Master Class." Each of these sections includes several subsections.

### The Basics

Early on, Margot writes, "The elements of design — space, shape, line, value, color, texture and pattern, plus intervals and proportion — are the raw materials of composition. They are to design what stone, mortar, lumber and steel are to building construction." The elements of design are reviewed with helpful commentary and examples of paintings by Margot and the other artists, as well as step-by-step demonstrations to illustrate her points.

Some of the suggestions were not

new to me personally but did serve to jog my mind as to their importance.

Others presented novel ways to approach the design that underlies all good art. That's why this book can be useful for artists at every level, from beginner to professional. A good review of basics never hurts.

A successful painting requires much detailed planning. The author recommends, while reading other art books or viewing exhibits, that we practice identifying components of great composition, then try to incorporate them into our own work. To make it easier, we are given a checklist of 16 important components.

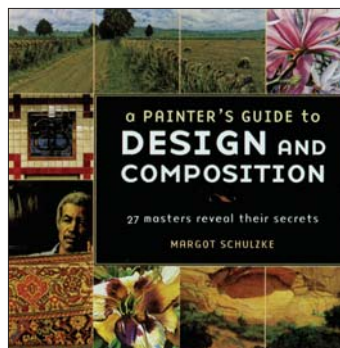
### The Thought Process

"How Artists Think as They Create" is a subsection where we learn how other artists work through their own painting process. For example, Albert Handell, PSA, begins by placing his focal point on his canvas/paper first and then works around it. Handell sometimes uses watercolor over pastel, which he says may seem unconventional — but it works.

Duane Wakeham, PSA, starts by manipulating shapes and colors as abstract elements and then proceeds to paint the imagery. A few artists are intuitive and spontaneous; most still complete several thumbnail sketches to establish their values and color ideas.

Some of the subjects discussed include working on location, studio painting, compositional schemes, choosing backgrounds, color strategies, and working in a series, to name a few. Especially interesting are the artists' explanations about how and why they choose particular colors.

Sidney McGinley, PSA, takes



"making a series" one step further, for she paints the same model, same clothes, and color combinations on

different sizes and shapes — vertical, square, horizontal — using strong, zigzag, diagonal compositions. The model, therefore, is not the focal point; she is merely part of the design scheme.

### "Master Class"

The section of the book entitled "Master Class" concentrates on you, the artist, suggesting creative ways to make paintings better than just good.

Innumerable guides are provided to help make one's work more dynamic and expressive. For instance, some of the subjects covered are: getting focused, concept and mood, edges, planes and masses, rhythm, the role of enigma, individuality and style, and taking risks. I especially liked Margot's paragraphs on establishing enigma in your paintings. The author advises us to "forget about making pretty pictures and about what markets well." Instead, she wants you to discover or rediscover what subject matter moves you — what you are passionate about. And paint it! For me, it is Victorian/vintage clothing, hats and accessories. When I render them, it's going back in time, and that fills me with a sense of mystery and nostalgia. I don't ever seem to tire of the subject.

Another important point relates to simplifying one's paintings. "There is power in leaving thoughts — and images — hanging in the air," she says. Margot's pastel "Parrochia" is a perfect example of leaving certain areas unfinished and allowing the viewer to get involved. "Become yourself. Who we are and what our life experiences have been contribute more to our expression

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## "A Painter's Guide to Design and Composition"

Review by Barbara Dachowski, PSA

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than any superimposed, artificial style ever could. The good and bad experiences that come our way, whether or not we seek them, have had their impact."

### Taking Risks

A dramatic watercolor by Linda Erfle is a perfect example of thinking outside the box — taking a risk. She chose to paint a small puddle of water in a dry river bed with a tiny bright blue section of the sky reflected in it. It's different, out of the ordinary and it became an award winner.

The risk I identified with, in particular, involved approaching my painting as if it were an experiment — not to look at the blank support and think, "This one is for such and such a show." I also try to allow room to play with new art materials and supports, as well as different techniques.

As you continue to learn and to focus on honing your own skills, your individual style will emerge automatically, without realizing that it has happened. The "not-so-secret" key is to keep working and taking more risks.

The author suggests experimenting with the "lost causes," perhaps those pieces about to be tossed, thereby freeing ourselves to work with complete abandon.

"In the Artists Words" is the section

where several artists, whose works appear in this book, comment about what motivates them, why they are drawn to certain types of subject matter, what they hope to achieve, how they problem solve, as well as their personal opinion of their own work.

Daniel Greene, PSA, tells us that he frequently uses contrast to help solve painting problems, as he does in his stunning oil painting "Uptown Platform, Wall St.," one of the earliest of his 79 paintings of the New York City Subway Series, which he believes is his most unusual in diversity and composition.

While visiting London, Anita Wolff, PSA, was enthralled by a display of suits of armor for her subject matter. They excited her so much she had to paint them and bring them to life in a pastel. Personally, I was attracted to the painting, with its unusual composition and the way it was cropped.

Clark Mitchell, PSA, was struck by the beautiful light and shadows in a landscape. He'd like the viewer to stop and absorb his shadows and sun patterns throughout the painting.

In the author's words, "Knowing why particular categories of subject matter capture your imagination is more helpful than simply knowing what they do. After all, if you don't know where you are coming from, it's difficult to get a lead on where you want to go."

This book is clear and concise, both in Schulzke's writings and in the contributions of her collaborators. It is written so that it can be read with pleasure in one sitting and, at the same time, it is useful as a reference book that one can return to repeatedly. □