

## THUMBNAIL STUDY

*Thumbnail studies can help you decide on aspect ratio, zoom, and cropping / framing of the scene. They can also help you analyze movement, lines, and balance. You can decide to exclude, invent, or emphasize certain elements.*

*Thumbnail studies should be quick, abstract, and SMALL! Explore at least 5 different framings of the scene.*

**Materials:** A pencil, sketch paper or a notebook, and two of the L-shaped pieces of paper that I have provided.

1) Examine your reference photo. Use the L-shaped papers to “crop” the scene in different ways. If you are on a device, you can try editing the photo directly instead. Decide on one way you might frame the scene.

2) On your sketch paper, draw a box no larger than 2 inches that matches the aspect ratio you have chosen. Do a very quick and abstract sketch of the scene in this box, representing the main subject and any important elements. Note light and dark areas, but leave out details. This is your first thumbnail study.

3) Repeat steps 1 + 2. Try out different compositions! Consider the variables below and try variations on each one, even if you think the result might look silly. This exercise is about exploring the scene and subject and visualizing your options, so the most important thing is to play and experiment.

**Orientation:** Horizontal (“Landscape”), Vertical (“Portrait”), or square

**Aspect ratio:** How wide and how tall is your framing rectangle?

**Zoom:** Are you far away or very close to the subject?

**Placement:** Where is the subject located? In the center? To the side?

4) Advanced: As you make your thumbnail sketches, you may start to notice things like balance, weight, and flow in the scene. If you find one framing that speaks to you, consider why that is. You can play around with moving, excluding, or inventing elements in the scene to see how that changes the composition. Ultimately, you may choose one of these thumbnail studies to paint in a larger size.

## NOTAN STUDY

*Notan (two-value black & white) studies will help you assess and decide on composition, light-dark balance, and value massing. They are very similar to thumbnail studies in that they help you to simplify shapes in order to better understand the balance of light and flow in the scene.*

**Materials:** A pencil, sketch paper or a notebook, a black sharpie (you can use ink and a brush if you prefer), whiteout or white gouache

*Notan studies should not be large, but they can be larger than thumbnails. 4-5 inches at the widest dimension is a good size. The goal is to reduce all parts of the image into either black or white values, creating a very high contrast final image. You can use a B&W reference photo for this exercise if you prefer.*

- 1) Start with a very rough sketch or dividing lines in order to capture the layout of the scene.
- 2) Begin at the top of the image, and work your way down. Start by blocking in dark shapes, avoiding areas where light shapes appear. Very light and very dark values will be easy to simplify, but remember that you also have to reduce all the middle values down into either black or white. I recommend squinting at your image, as this will help to simplify the visual information.
- 3) Once you've captured the scene with a first pass of black ink, switch to your whiteout or gouache. You can now replace white where you have lost it, and begin to refine the image.

As you build this Notan study, you can make choices about composition, flow, and edges. Simplify some shapes, and give greater detail to others. Weld shapes of similar value together to simplify the overall image. There are no right and wrong answers- you are an artist and not a camera, so you get to decide if you want to tweak certain values lighter or darker. Think about how you might want to lead the viewer's eye, and what elements you might want to emphasize with focus and detail.

- 4) Go back and forth between using your black pen and your white gouache until you like the balance of light and dark that you have achieved. Do your very best not to create gray values!

**If you choose to paint a full size version of the scene, this study can now become a guide for how you choose to use value and edges. Notan studies can also help with value massing, and in choosing where to have high detail vs low detail.**

## VALUE STUDY

*A 4-value or “grayscale” study will help you better understand the values of your scene, independent of color. Value studies are like notan studies in that you explore the light and dark balance of the scene, but a value study is often somewhat more detailed, and can provide a grayscale guide for an eventual full-color piece.*

**Materials:** A pencil, sketch paper or sketchbook, hard and soft charcoal if you have it.

*Like Notan studies, Value studies should be smallish. 4-5” in the largest dimension is a good size, larger is fine if your scene is very complex. For this exercise, stay small and simple. You can use a B&W reference photo for this exercise if you prefer, but using a color photo and trying to visualize value separate from chroma is great practice.*

- 1) Create a rough sketch of the scene in order to capture the layout, not more than 4-5” in any dimension. Avoid any fine detail, but try to represent the layout of important elements.
- 2) On a corner of your page, create a grayscale key. This will simply be four squares lined up next to each other: one white, one light gray, one dark gray, and one “black”, or the darkest value you can manage with your pencil or charcoal.
- 3) Now simplify all the values in your reference photo into one of these four values. Start by identifying your **white values**: This will be any true white areas in the reference, plus the lightest ~25% of grays. Leave these areas uncolored.
- 4) Next, identify the **light gray** values. This will be any value that is too dark to be left white, but still lighter than the dark gray value you identified in your value key. Using simplified shapes, block in your light gray areas with either soft charcoal or gentle pencil shading. You can cover darker areas during this step as well. Try not to have any variations in your light gray Value.
- 5) Following the same process as step 6, identify and shade in your **dark gray** values. This will be any value too dark to be light gray, but not dark enough to be considered black. During this step, it may help to begin identifying the darkest ~25% of values in your reference, which you will soon color in as black.
- 6) Finally, color in those darkest **black** values. This will include any true black, as well as some very dark grays.

**By going through this process of value simplification, you will have a much better understanding of the relative values in your reference photo, and if you choose to paint a full sized version of this scene, you will be able to make judgments about how to mass similar values together in order to remove complexity.**

## COLOR STUDY

*Color studies will help you decide on a color palette, show how using different colors will affect the scene, and give you the chance to experiment with how different pigments interact. As watercolor is a particularly permanent and idiosyncratic medium, it can really pay to plan out your color schema ahead of time.*

**Materials:** a pencil, watercolor paper, your watercolor kit. Other colored media is fine.

Like Thumbnail studies, Color studies are best done iteratively. It's better to make a handful of small studies that will allow you to test out multiple color combinations than to obsess over one single trial.

- 1) Create several small boxes in the aspect ratio of your scene, no larger than about 3" in any dimension. In each box, create a very simplified sketch of your scene.
- 2) Examine the colors in your reference photo. Which ones stand out to you? Is there a dominant color scheme? How are the colors dispersed or clustered? Do certain colors play off of other colors? How might you tweak the existent colors to create different moods?
- 3) Make color studies in each of your boxes, testing out different variations: Try to abstract the scene as much as possible- the goal is not to create tiny detailed portraits, but to see how your chosen colors play with each other. I recommend working with a limited palette to reduce complexity during this exercise. Try to stick to just 3-5 colors for each box.
  - Try using different pigments for each color in the scene. Quinacridone red will behave differently than cadmium red, for instance.
  - Change the colors in the scene. Try warming a cool-toned area, or make flowers or a shirt a different color. If you feel the colors are out of balance in the photo, now is the time to see if you can fix the imbalance.

You can also just experiment with how a handful of pigments interact with each other. What do they look like when mixed in different combinations? Or when allowed to mingle on the paper? What do you see when you glaze a layer of one color over another? Different pigments will create different –and sometimes unexpected– effects.

**Experimenting with the colors in your scene will allow you to make informed choices about what to copy from your reference and what to change. Colors tend to be very malleable! While departing from form and value will often render a scene unrecognizable, colors can often be swapped out and adjusted without losing realism. Testing out specific pigments can also help you to select a cohesive palette for a full-sized work.**

## TEXTURE STUDY

*Texture studies are very useful when working with an unforgiving media like watercolor. Certain textures –like hair, fur, or ocean spray for example– can be tricky to portray, so some experimentation and practice can raise your chances of success. It’s possible to achieve a very “fresh” feeling with watercolor when natural effects are allowed to happen without too much fussing. Peripheral or unimportant details in particular are often best rendered as suggestion rather than with explicit brush strokes, and you may find that watercolor can do all the hard work for you if you let it.*

**Materials:** Your regular watercolor kit, and whatever else you want to experiment with. Some fun tools include salt, saran wrap, sponges, wax crayons, and isopropyl alcohol.

Pick out a photo from the “Texture studies” section. Think about how you might achieve the look of this texture using watercolor.

- Wet-into-wet painting can create very soft edges and fuzzy shapes.
  - Alter the concentration of the paint you add. What changes?
- Glazed layers (letting the paper dry before applying more paint) can make crisp lines and luminescent colors.
  - Pigments layer differently, depending on their properties. What happens if you layer a sedimentary pigment over a staining pigment?
- Salt, applied to wet paint, can create flower-like crystalline patterns.
  - The size of the salt crystal will result in larger or smaller flowers. Adding the salt immediately vs waiting for the paint to sink in will also change the outcome.
- Saran wrap, placed and crinkled up over wet paint, can create the faceted look of rock, or folds in cloth.
  - Letting the saran wrap sit for a longer time will result in a more distinct pattern. What happens if you lift the saran wrap after 1 minute? Or after 5? 10?
- Water droplets flicked onto a damp painted area can make burn or cauliflower marks
- Wax crayon, applied to your paper before painting, will create a permanent resist.

Rather than trying to copy your reference image directly, think about recreating a patch of texture. For this study, you’ll want to experiment until you’ve determined what technique best emulates that texture. Try out lots of different combinations. Change factors and see how that affects your outcome. Do as many trials as you need, and remember to keep a record of what steps you took for each trial.