



## If This Was A Painting Instead Of A Photograph

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*Striving to better, oft we mar what's well.* - William Shakespeare

### 1 - Introduction - I was trained as a painter

One of the things that shape my approach to photography is my training as a painter. I studied Painting and drawing at the Academie des Beaux Arts, in Paris, before I studied photography. As a result, my approach to photography has been partly defined by my training as a painter.

For example, if I take a photograph and find in this photograph a color, or an element, that I do not like, I will not hesitate to remove it from the photograph. I will do this by cropping, if I need to crop the photograph to improve the composition, or I will do this by cloning, if the unwanted element is in an area of the photograph that won't be cropped out. I use cloning the vast majority of the time because unwanted elements are often found in areas of the image that are part of the final composition.

My reasoning for removing these unwanted elements is simple. I remove them because if I was creating a painting instead of a photograph I would not have included these elements in the first place. I would not have painted things that I find distracting or inappropriate. And if I did, I would have changed their shape, or their color, or I would have made them look like something else altogether.

My goal in this essay is twofold: first, I want to explain how my approach to photography is influenced by my approach to painting. I want to do so because I was trained as a painter first and as a photographer second.

Second, I want to describe the differences between painting and photography when these mediums are used towards the creation of a fine art piece.

### 2 – The landscape in painting and photography

Landscapes and other natural scenes are the result of geological, botanical and other natural forces. They are not arranged to fit a specific artistic composition. They are not composed the way we would compose them if we had total control over lighting and placement of element the way we do in a studio set.

This means that in a landscape setting, elements will show up in our photographs that we may not wish to have in the final print. With film photography we could not do much about removing unwanted elements. With digital photography we can easily remove or modify just about anything that we do not like.

When I say "elements" I use a general term that applies to a variety of things. These "things" can be objects - rocks, clumps of grass, or other elements present in the landscape but unwanted in my photograph - and in that instance they are cloned out as I just described.

However, these "things" can also be colors, either naturally present in the landscape or created by the camera, but unwanted by myself. Again, if I was creating a painting instead of a photograph I would not have painted these colors in the first place. Instead, I would have changed the colors present in the landscape into colors that are pleasing to me, colors that work within the color palette chosen for a specific painting. In photography, since it is impossible to change the colors in the scene on a local level, I make this change in Photoshop using one of the many color adjustment tools available to me, such as curves, saturation or selective color to name the three that I use most of the time.

My goal in changing these colors is similar to what my goal would be if I was creating a painting: to create a homogeneous color palette so that none of the colors of the image seems out of place. I want all the colors to belong to the same color palette so that there isn't a "clash" of colors or so that a color doesn't appear to be out of place because its saturation, tonality or density is inappropriate in the context of a specific photograph.

With both objects and colors, I see no reason to keep them as the camera captured them just because this is a photograph and not a painting. As I said, If I was painting this scene instead of photographing it, I would not have included things that I find distracting or inappropriate. Therefore, there is no reason why I should leave these things in because the camera recorded them.

Here is a list of the different things that I either remove, modify, or occasionally add to my photographs because if I was making a painting I would have never painted these things:

- I would have never painted certain things, therefore I clone out unwanted details that the camera captured - I would have chosen my own colors, therefore I change some of the colors that the camera created - I would have included certain elements that the camera did not include, therefore I copy them in the photograph - I would have painted certain areas darker or lighter, therefore I darken or lighten these areas in the photograph

### **3 - The differences between painting and photography**

The second purpose of this essay is to point out the differences between painting and photography. This second goal is closely related to the first one since knowing what are the differences between these two medium is useful in finding out what changes need to be made to a photograph when the goal is to create a photographic image that has some of the qualities of a painting.

### **4 - Visualization**

I want to start this section by talking about the concept of visualization. Visualization is the process of seeing the scene not as it is in front of you, but as you see it "in your mind's eye" in your imagination if you will.

In photography there is a difference between what you see in your mind's eye –what you visualize-- and what the camera records. This is because what you see in your mind and what the camera captures are different. What you see in your mind, your visualization of the scene if you will, is influenced by your emotions, your imagination, your vision, etc. What the camera captures is purely factual. It is whatever is in front of the lens. These differences are due to the presence of the camera between what you visualize and what is recorded. While it is you who visualize the scene, it is the camera that records the scene for you. These differences are present in the image because you have very little control (or no control at all depending on which aspect of the image we are looking at) over how the camera records colors, shapes, contrast, etc.

In Photography there is no option besides having the camera factually record what is in front of the lens. Therefore, while some aesthetic decisions can be made when the photograph is taken, such as composition, depth of field and other technical option available in the field, other decisions have to be made after the photograph has been taken, such as keeping certain colors while removing others, changing the contrast, changing the shape of objects, etc. We have to do so because the camera does not allow us to take these actions in the field. Instead, we must wait until we are in the studio to do so. Only then will we have tools (software today, darkroom previously) that give us the flexibility we need to modify what the camera captured. In effect this means going from a practical decision to an aesthetic decision.

In Painting there are no differences between what you see in your mind's eye and what you paint because there there is no machine painting the scene for you for you. There is no machine between you and the representation of the scene. Instead, you do it all yourself. You visualize the scene and you create the representation of the scene yourself. As a result, if you have mastered painting, what you visualize and what you paint are one and the same. This means that in painting most decisions are made for aesthetic reasons.

Another main differences between painting and photography, as far as technique is concerned, is that painting is a whole lot simpler. We don't have paint colors that go out of gamut and we don't have brushes that create clipping! There is less technique to be learned and more time can be spent on practicing.

### **Two different visual vocabularies**

Painting and photography each use a different visual vocabulary. Therefore if we want to transform a photograph into a painting we need to transpose the visual vocabulary of photography into the visual vocabulary of painting.

To demonstrate how this process takes place, and how different a photograph and a painting of the same subject are, I decided to use as example one of Van Gogh's most famous painting: *The Church at Auvers*.



At left, is Van Gogh's painting *The Church at Auvers* and on the right, a photograph of the church.

## 6 – Lenses and Brushes: comments on this painting and photograph

Photographers are limited to what the lens sees. A camera can only see the subject the way the lens was designed to see it. While a lens may distort, either by compressing or widening the field of view, it does so in a predictable manner. In other words, all lenses of a specific type and make will distort the subject in a similar manner.

Painters on the other hand face no such limitations. They can paint whatever they want, whatever they see. They can add or remove things from the scene they are painting. They can ignore certain things and refuse to feature them in their painting, or they can add things that are not in the scene in front of them.

In short, what they see, and what they paint, is peculiar to them, not to a lens or to a camera. In painting *The Church at Auvers*, Van Gogh did not paint what a camera and lens would have captured. While he may have seen what the camera sees, he decided to ignore it and instead painted the subject the way he wanted. In doing so he went far beyond what a lens can represent.

The lens sees objectively. Painters and artists see both objectively and emotionally. Therefore painters make deliberate decisions to change what they see objectively into what they see emotionally.

A painting is therefore a deliberate transformation of the objective reality we all see into the emotional reality that a specific artist sees. Photographers capture what the lens sees. Painters ignore what the lens sees unless they have a specific effect they want to create.

Painters include colors that are not present in photographs. One such example is the orange roof and the blue windows in Van Gogh's *The Church at Auvers*. These colors are there because they represent Van Gogh's vision of this scene. He decided to use these colors because of what they meant to him, not because they were there in the original scene. These colors are there for emotional reasons, not logical reasons.

Van Gogh's colors are exaggerations of the colors present in the scene, and this exaggeration represents the emotional response of the artist to this scene. The painter made a deliberate decision to exaggerate these colors to express his emotional response, his vision of the scene.

Artistic photographs are meant to be changed, not meant to be kept as is. The photograph, or the scene as it looks to all of us, is a malleable material for the painter. It is a point of departure, not a destination.

## 7 - The Importance of high detail and low detail areas

One of the most important differences between paintings and photographs is that paintings have fewer details than photographs (except for Hyper Realist paintings). This means that the painter intentionally reduces the amount of details present in the original subject. By reducing details the painter is able to focus the attention of the viewer onto specific things that the painter wants to emphasize.

We tend to focus on areas with lots of detail while we tend to ignore areas with little or no detail. For example, smooth areas of color such as the sky, clouds, or grass do not receive as much attention as high detail areas such as the pattern on a dress, or details of a piece of furniture, or the texture of a natural or man made object.

From a positive perspective this means that low detail areas can be used to rest the eye and offer a break in our exploration of the image. On the other hand, from a negative perspective this means that low detail areas can weaken the composition, or dilute the interest of the image.

We therefore have to find the proper balance between high and low detail area. We can also feature both low and high detail areas in the same photograph, or painting. Doing so will emphasize the viewer's attention to specific areas while minimizing attention to other less important areas. There is no penalty for using this technique because an image with low detail areas will not suffer from having specific high detail areas.

## 8 – Conclusion

An artistic approach to landscape photography can follow in the footsteps of landscape painters. Black and white landscape photography also follows in the footsteps of engraving and line drawings. In early photographs, compositions are very comparable to those used in these older medium, then photography branched out to compositions that were made possible only through the use of specific lenses such as wide angles or extreme telephoto lenses.

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