Painting from Photographs

"Painting's not dead because photography's not good enough." ~ David Hockney, PBS interview aired 4/13/2018.

Good Qualities of Photos

Provide a wealth of detail.

- Capture much detail later useful in "filling in" a composition. Lots of them from different angles, distance from the main subject, different time of day, different seasons.
- Easy to crop and join to create multiple compositions, and find the ideal composition.
- On-line cornucopia of photos of nearly every conceivable subject. (For example, I have used a woman's bare foot walking, rear view of a Ford Focus.)
- Can capture action that is difficult to see, memorize, and sketch.
- Provide measurable proportions for exact renderings.

Photos are Inadequate Because

Photos do not represent scenes as the eye sees them.

- Capture too much detail.
- Capture detail in the wrong places, visual clutter that distracts from the overall composition.
- Focus (sharpness) is typically too narrow, in the wrong place.
- Light vs dark balance is not ideal.
- Bury detail needed in dark areas. (Often this is just apparent, when image brightness and contrast is manipulated the details appear.)

Think of all the things you do to get a "good" photo: eliminate background distractions, move around for the right angle of light, adjust the exposure, zoom in, step back. If your photo isn't perfect, perhaps your painting can be.

The Goal of your Painting

The goal of your painting is *usually* to represent a scene as the eye would see it if you were standing in the scene itself, i.e., not looking at a picture. This applies to landscape painting, and 'representational' painting in general. The subject could still be fantastic, purely imaginary.

Selecting Photos

Make Photos

- Use a photo to capture the visible scene that stimulates your imagination.
- Make photos as sharp as light and movement conditions allow.
- Make multiple, overlapping shots that capture the surrounding scene from the same point of view.

- If outdoors, make photos with camera centered on sky, centered on middle distance, and centered on closer features. Since cell phone cameras automatically adjust light balance to what the phone believes is the center of interest, detail in peripheral parts of the scene may be lost to over or under exposure. Multiple shots overcome this.
- Take pictures of shadowed areas without light glare that washes out detail.
- If you're planning to paint a street view, be sure to get separate photos of shop signs and various architectural details in the middle distance. Often these details are nothing more than smudges in your central photo. In a natural landscape of trees, rocks, that detail at, say, 100 feet away is unimportant, but in a painting of an urban environment the eye wants to pick out small details further out.

Select and Compose

- Select the most representative photo containing the subjects you're interested in.
- Add to it by joining other photos left, right, above, below, until you have included everything you will want in your painting.
- From the composite crop the composition to paint.
- Remove unwanted objects from the image by cutting and pasting from other photos missing the objectionable material. I.e., restore background areas obscured by the removed area.
- Cut and paste any other material into your composition, such as people, animals, boats.

Spend time now looking at your composition. Especially note the light vs dark values. Disregard color. If you have the tools and the skills try adjusting the lightness and darkness of different areas to see if you can strengthen the picture. Otherwise satisfy yourself that you can make these adjustments in the painting.

Make Reference Images

- Print out your reference image. Make it big enough to see all the detail you'll need in painting. Perhaps a rule of thumb is half the width and half the height of the proposed painting. Color prints are nice but not usually essential. Copy and print shops can make large prints if you need that service.
- For hard to see areas manipulate the original photos by zooming, enhancing brightness and contrast, and print them out too.
- If there is something in your painting you don't have an image of, such as a 1930's writing desk, find an image on-line and print that out.
- Draw a loose or fine grid on your reference print that you can use in drawing your composition on your painting canvas. Sometimes it's useful to use a colored pencil on the print, rather than ink or graphite. Use a graphite pencil for the grid on the canvas.

Other Computer and Tablet Tools

Treat the original photo as a starting point, not the goal. Posterizing, brightness and contrast, edge detection, select and fill areas are some of the image manipulation tools that can help you test your composition ideas on the computer.

"Photoshop" is the product whose name has become a generic term, "That looks photo-shopped." It's a little expensive. There are alternatives. Gimp is very powerful, although not simple to use, and free for use on Linux, which is a free operating system.

Less powerful but practical and cheap is Autodesk Sketchbook. Cost for the "Pro" version is very small and very much worth it. Sketchbook runs on an Android tablet and on iPad. It's particularly good at compositing a group of photos into a single image, as described in **Select and Compose** above.

Draw on the Canvas

- Draw the corresponding grid onto the canvas, lightly, with graphite pencil.
- Sketch in a line drawing from the reference print. Don't use shading or blurred lines. Draw outlines.
- At least separate the main areas of the painting by a line, e.g., sky, trees, land, buildings, rocks and streams.
- Draw in any detail that needs exact placement, e.g., architectural detail on a building.
- Draw in details that have a sharp value change from their surroundings, so that you can get that right in the value painting.

You should now be ready to begin your value under painting. Yea!