

By Frank Zampardi

Everything you paint is a shape. You can't paint a flower, you can only paint a shape of color and value that conveys the visual information of a flower. You're working on a two-dimensional surface. A flower or any other object is a three-dimensional form in space. As soon as you represent that form on a flat surface, you have done so with a shape, therefore, it is critical for you as an artist to be able to see objects as shapes. Visually interesting shapes entertain the eye. Visually boring shapes are static, uniform simplifications or generalizations of facts.

Most people can tell an interesting shape from a boring one. But, when we pick up a pencil a curious thing happens. If the shape we're looking at is boring, we paint it that way. We tend to want to paint just as it is, without changing it to make it more interesting in our compositions, not just like the picture. Looking at an object from several different points of view will help you find which view presents the most visually interesting shape, or silhouette. Sometimes you may see an interesting shape in nature but turn it into a boring one on paper. Even though you realize the attributes of the interesting shape, this does not deter the left brain from affecting your ability to recreate the interesting shape.

When painting any subject ask yourself, "Is the shape interesting?" This is different from asking if the subject is interesting. I've lost track of how many artists say "I can't think of or find anything interesting to draw. Some shapes are perfect and don't need changing. Often shapes need just a little adjusting to make them more interesting. Other shapes need a complete makeover.

When you name things, you put them into intellectual categories. We all do this, but few people outside the field of art take note of a thing's shape. Train yourself to place shapes into visual categories, such as: Shapes of light value, shapes of dark value, shapes of color, or shapes of space. You can't paint good shapes if you're not aware of them. Train yourself to see interesting shapes and you will respond more to them when painting. Building a painting involves organizing shapes into a unified visual statement wherein each shape, like a piece in a puzzle, contributes to the whole. Good shapes are all around us; however, be aware that they tend to keep bad company. Everywhere you find an interesting shape, you'll usually find a boring one, too. Remember, avoid the circle, square and the equilateral triangle.