Stay Away from the Middle!
by Susan Mayfield

Does your painting disappear when you hang it on the wall? Does it scream in disharmony?

Creating a dynamic painting that attracts attention in a gallery, a painting that causes the viewer to walk over to take a closer look, happens by design. Make your paintings more dynamic by staying away from 'the middle' in composition, values, and color temperature. Strong landscape paintings are created by pushing and manipulating elements in your painting, with pro-active planning by the artist. Explore this idea of 'staying away from the middle' in the following areas:

1. **Composition** Don't cut your painting in half! Plan a dynamic composition **before** you start your painting; keep the focal point and horizon line away from the center of your painting.
2. **Value** Does your painting seem to fade into the background? Boring and muddy? Increase the contrast in values, avoiding mid-value grey paintings. Choose to make a light-value(high-key), or a dark-value (low-key) painting.
3. **Color**: Stay away from using equal amounts of warm and cool color. Instead, choose a warm OR cool color scheme, and use complementary colors in areas of interest.

My general rule of thumb, my mantra, when designing a landscape painting is:
Stay Away From the Middle!

Composition

Choose a Focal Point and Horizon Line, and Keep them Away from the Middle of your Painting

1. Choose a Focal Point
The first thing I do before picking up a paint brush is determine 'the one main thing' my painting is about. What do I want to paint and why do I want to paint it? What am I trying to say? Your painting tells a story, and the main idea of this story can/should also be used as the focal point. I try to keep this simple; my story might be the way the late afternoon light hits the side of a pine tree, and so this patch of light would be the focal point. Using this 'one main thing' as the focal point, or the focal area, gives you, the artist, a plan of direction and a place to take the viewer in your painting. Choose the focal point and make an interesting path or trail for the eye to travel through your painting to get to this point. All other compositional elements in your painting should support this path to the focal area.

2. Keep the Focal Point Away from the Middle of the Painting
Once I know **what** the focal point is going to be, what the one main thing my painting is about, I then choose **where** to place it on the painting. By keeping the focal point, hard edges, and main action away from the middle, the artist avoids the effect of lines, or edges, cutting the painting in half. Keep the focal point in one of the "sweet spots", and plan an interesting trail to get there for a dynamic composition.

Composition, cont...

3. Avoid Focal Point/Composition Pitfalls
There will be a focal point in your painting, whether you choose one or not. Visually and psychologically, there are specific things that the human eye is drawn towards, so learn what these are and use them to your advantage. For instance, the eye looks at areas of high contrast in color, value, and shape, so save the highest-contrasting elements for the focal point. In a landscape with organic shapes, any man-made object with hard edges and geometric shapes will stand out, such as a sailboat, or an architectural element, such as a house. Place these objects with edges carefully, soften the contrasting edges if you don't want them to become the focal point.

The human eye naturally is drawn to the following, so emphasize or camouflage these elements to your advantage:

• The areas of **most contrast** in Color, Shape, or Value. Save the most contrast for the focal area, and for the path to the focal area.
• **Small shapes** with hard edges stand out. Make sure small shapes are in areas of your painting where you want the eye to go.
• **The color red**. Traditionally red is a color that draws attention, makes your eye 'stop'. In a landscape, filled with organic shapes, anything **man-made/hard-edged/architectural** will stand out. Use to your advantage in the focal area, and in the path to the focal area.
• In a landscape, **people and animals** stand out. Be aware of this, and use these as compositional elements.

Establish the Horizon Line in a Landscape Painting Away from the Center.

Most landscape paintings have a visible or perceived horizon line, the imaginary line where the sky meets the land, or sea. A horizon line placed in the middle of a painting creates the effect of cutting a painting in half. This is not the desired look for most landscape paintings; keep the horizon line away from the center of the painting, and any hard edges and vertical lines as well. In a landscape painting, make a conscious choice from the start of either a high horizon line, or a low horizon line, depending on your subject matter and the perspective you want to establish.

Low Horizon Line
• Is your subject is a sky painting? Is the sky the most interesting thing about the image? Do you want to evoke a feeling of great space or spaciousness? Use a low horizon line.

High Horizon Line
• Is the action happening on the ground? Is the ground more interesting than the sky? Do you want your painting to have a feeling of intimacy? Is there a lot of movement on the ground/river/street? Do you want to give a feeling of great depth, or a sense of traveling into your painting? If so, try raising the horizon line.

Value

Make a more powerful, dynamic painting by increasing the contrast in value, staying away from mid-range, grey paintings.

If a painting disappears on the wall, doesn't pop, doesn't work, it is usually a problem with value, or the dark and light tones. Paintings with value problems appear all-over grey, with not enough contrast, nothing stands out. Use a value-finder, squint to eliminate details and to see the big shapes and value more clearly, or use the black/white setting on your computer's photo editing to find out if you need to increase the contrast in your paintings.

Choose to Paint a Light or Dark Painting

- Decide from the beginning if your painting will be a mostly light painting or a mostly dark painting. Push the 'light' or the 'dark' for dramatic effect. Remember, you don't have to use the entire range of values from 1-10 from black to white to make an impact in your painting; in fact, it will probably be a stronger painting if you don't.

- In a **Light-value Painting**, or **High Key Painting**, (think of a foggy day with no shadows) the overall tone of the painting is light, and the darks will stand out. These darks can be used effectively to draw your eye towards the focal area, which might be the darkest element in the painting.

- In a mostly **Dark-value Painting,** (think of Whistler's night-time paintings) light values can be used to lead the eye to the focal area, maybe the lightest element in the painting. Stand back frequently while creating your painting, or try photographing your painting, then viewing it on your computer in black and white...if it is all grey, then you need to work on increasing the value contrasts.

Simplify the Shapes

Get in the habit of seeing the darks and shadows as a few big shapes, and the lights as a few big shapes. Squint, Squint, Squint. Break down all the shapes in your painting as either dark or light, and connect as many of the dark shapes as possible, and likewise with the light shapes. Create interesting patterns in your paintings; this is one of the elements that makes a painting stand out from a distance. A painting with a few big shapes can be visually more powerful than one with many small ones; remember, keep small shapes in the focal areas for a more dynamic painting.

Color

Stay away from the middle in your color choices. Consciously make either a cool painting, or a warm painting.

Learn to manipulate color to your advantage; using the same amount of warm color as cool color neutralizes your painting.

- **Color Temperature, or Warm and Cool**: When choosing a color scheme for your painting, choose the overall temperature of the painting first, either warm or cool. In an overall warm painting, cool color will stand out as an accent in the focal areas. In an overall cool painting, a small amount of warm color will be effective as a highlight, and in the focal areas.

- **Complementary Color** Using a color wheel, you can choose one side of the wheel for most of your colors, and then choose a color from the other side and use a small amount in your path to the focal area, in your focal point. This "complementary" or contrasting color will pop, or contrast, and can be used to draw the eye in focal areas.

- Think of how camouflage works...nothing stands out. The same theory can be used in your painting; camouflage areas where you don't want the eye to go, and use contrasting colors where you want attention. For instance, if there is an all-over green color scheme in your painting, use a smaller amount of color from the other side of the color wheel, i.e. red, or any member of the red family, to draw the eye toward focal point.