

Tip #29

Utilizing Negative Shapes

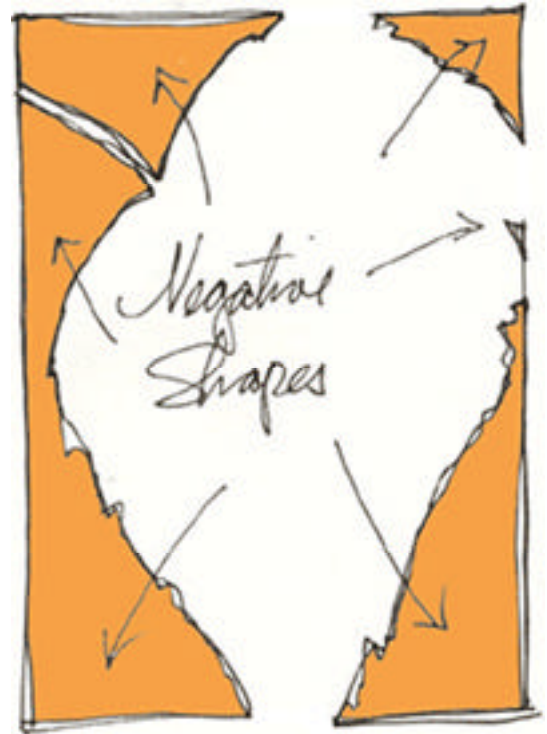
Don't draw your subject, but where your subject is NOT. How can you draw what isn't there? Well, you don't, really-but you can draw the spaces between and around your subject for increased accuracy!



Art 29-1, Leaf drawing

Here's a simple example I did for my recent talk at the Sierra Club Summit in San Francisco. Sometimes our efforts to see and draw accurately are foiled by our conditioning-our stereotypes of images. A leaf has got to be a canoe-shape with a vein down the middle, right? Except 9 times out of 10, they're not. If we're drawing something that is folded, foreshortened, subject to perspective, torn, etc., we can be a lot more accurate (and lively) if we notice the *shapes around the shape* instead of trying to force it into a form we "know" it has.

Drawing negative shapes instead is one of our best tools; look at the shapes around the object you're trying to draw-in this case it let me catch the energetic asymmetry of the begonia leaf with a lot more accuracy.



Art 29-1

Art 29-2, Sarah drawings

This is one of our best tools when drawing animals; again look at the shapes around the object you're trying to draw. If an eye seems wrong to you, draw the shapes of the cheek or nose beside it. If you can't quite tell how the legs are placed as your cat curls snoozing on her back, draw the interstices between the legs. The forms will be right. (The originals in this montage are in my new book, *Drawing and Painting Animals*, used courtesy of North Light Books.)



Art 29-2

Art 29-3, "White River from the Bluffs"

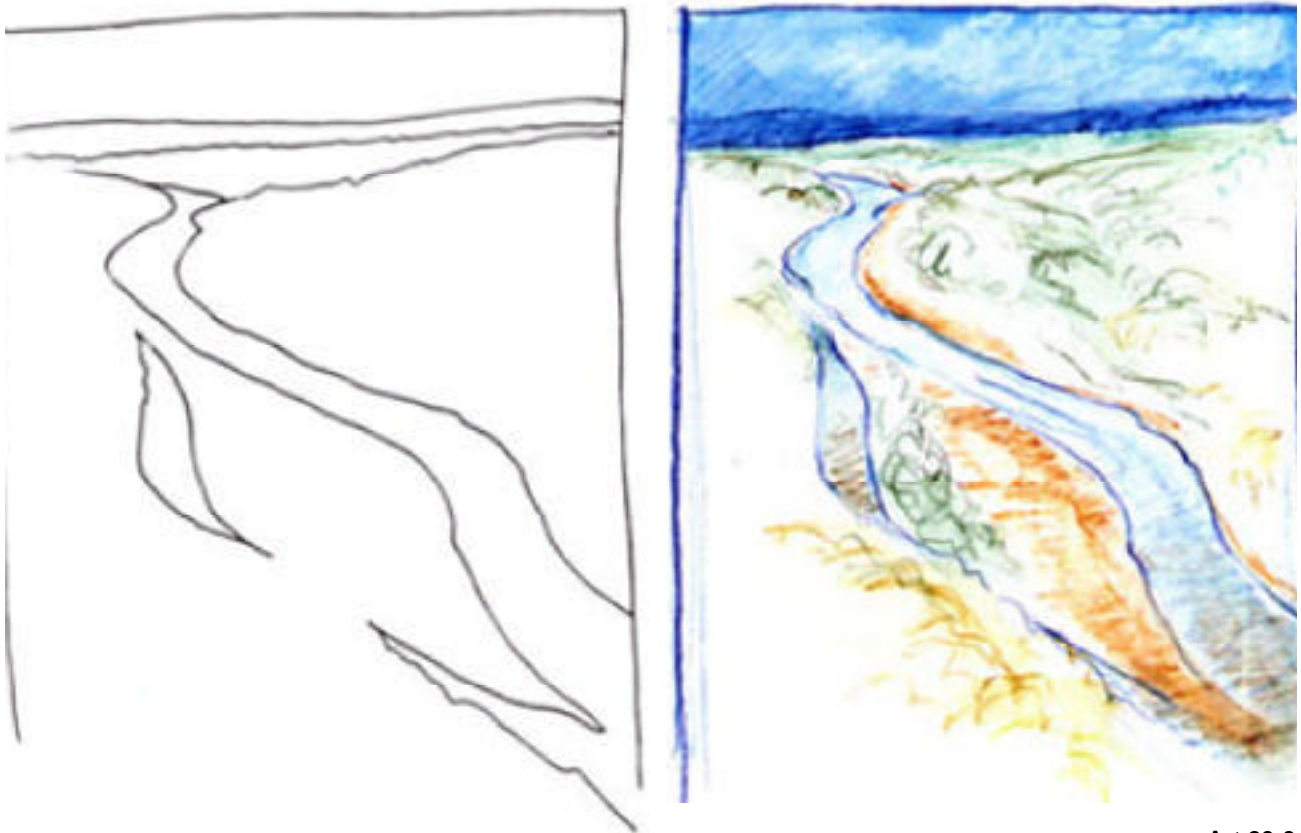
Sometimes it's a challenge getting landforms or rivers placed correctly - it may be difficult to make the river lie in its bed properly! Add in the challenge of aerial perspective - in this case I was high on a bluff overlooking the river - and negative shapes are a BIG help.

You may be able to more accurately draw your river in your picture plane if you pay attention to the shapes that surround it, as you would with any other subject. If you wish, draw a border around the edge of your paper and look at the landforms between that line and the edge of the body of water. The finished color drawing seems to lie properly, thanks to my little negative-shapes sketch. Note that the stream often seems to widen perceptibly at bends in the river; this particular spot also had a small oxbow off to the left where the old river channel had been. (This illustration was in my

For more on the concept of drawing negative shapes, see my *Sierra Club Guide to Sketching in Nature*, or my North Light books, *First Steps to Drawing and Sketching* and *Watercolor Pencil Magic*. I also highly recommend Betty Edwards *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*.

Look for these and my new North Light book, *Drawing and Painting Animals*, from your local bookstore, or from North Light Books, <http://www.artistsnetwork.com/nlbooks/index.asp>, online or <http://www.amazon.com>.

You'll find my artwork on new products in my Cafepress store at http://www.cafepress.com/cathy_johnson and original fine art auctions on eBay at <http://members.ebay.com/aboutme/cathyjohnsonart>.



Art 29-3