

Planning Your Painting with Sketches

By Cathy Johnson

It's easy to get so taken in by a scene that you rush right into painting it—only to wind up dissatisfied with your colors, mood, lighting or some other aspect. It's also not unusual to find yourself standing in front of a great subject, brush in hand, but at a total loss as to how to begin. These are common problems, but there's a simple solution to both: drawing thumbnail or value sketches.

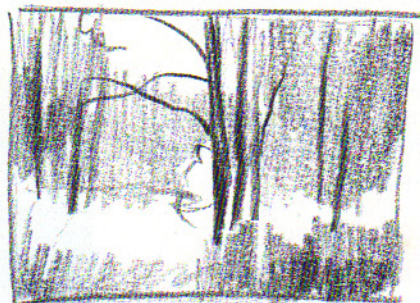
Thumbnails are quick planning sketches—maybe 2x3 inches or smaller—that can help you decide on a vertical or horizontal format, composition, color scheme and more. By creating several variations of the same scene, you can determine the best way to approach your painting. Thumbnails don't take much time to draw, perhaps only a few seconds for each one, but they can make all the difference in creating a finished piece that captures your original inspiration.

A value sketch is typically larger than a thumbnail, and includes more detail as well. It helps you decide where to place the lights and darks, and whether light values or dark values will dominate the scene. Value sketches are perfect for planning the movement of light in your painting and determining the best way to achieve the mood or effect you're after.

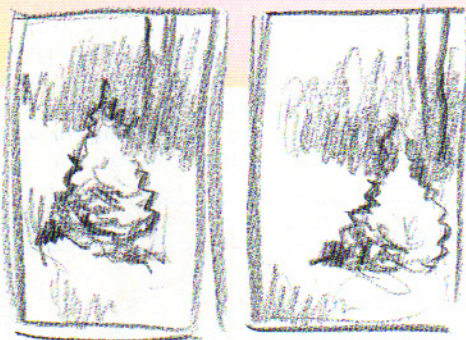
Just remember, neither thumbnails nor value sketches are meant to be polished works of art. Your aim is to work quickly, get the essentials down and make key decisions about composition and design. By taking a few minutes to do some planning up front, you'll avoid wasting time and materials later. And even better, these preliminary sketches will bring you closer to meeting your artistic goals.



Quick, 1½x2-inch thumbnails such as these will help you decide whether your subject looks better in a horizontal or vertical format.



Thumbnail sketches are a great way to establish the placement of your focal point (and to decide where to position it in terms of foreground, middle ground and background).



Create thumbnails in a colored medium, such as watercolors, watercolor pencils or colored pencils, to plan your overall color scheme.

Your value sketch should probably be about 4x6 inches or slightly larger, with more detail than a thumbnail. Use it to determine whether to go predominantly light or mostly dark, and where to place your contrasting values. You always want to include a fairly full range of values, as shown in the value scales at far right.

