

Miramichi River View – Notes on a Painting

When viewing a finished painting it's impossible to imagine the process by which it came into being. All the myriad transformations and adjustments that happen along the way end up hidden in the final result. What you see (the artist hopes), is just something that looks "right". So, it occurred to me that it might be an interesting exercise to try keeping track of my thoughts and methods (which are often subconscious and instinctive) while working on this project, and thereby provide some insight into the creative process.

Style

With a subject as traditional as a landscape, the question of style becomes particularly significant. With the invention of photography, producing a realistic image was no longer solely dependant on the skills of artists. Artists were freed to experiment with new styles in their desire to bring freshness and excitement to popular subjects which had been painted so often before. The result was the proliferation of "isms" that appeared in the late 19th and early 20th century: Impressionism, Symbolism, Cubism, Surrealism and on and on.

For me, it's hard to imagine starting a Canadian landscape painting without at least some consideration of the iconic paintings of the Group of Seven. Especially so, when the painting I'm planning has many of the elements most associated with those works – the autumn foliage, reflections in water, etc. Shortly before getting started, I had been looking at a book of Group of Seven silkscreen prints.

Historically, it was the availability of these prints that helped popularise the Group of Seven right across Canada. I was admiring how beautifully the landscapes had been translated from the now familiar style of the paintings to this very different medium of the silkscreen print. I was particularly struck by how the images, with their graphic style and solid, flat areas of colour still managed to retain so much subtlety, nuance and atmosphere. I started planning my Miramichi River View with these images in mind and the idea that it would be interesting to reverse the painting-to-silkscreen process, explored in the book, and re-incorporate some of the inherent characteristics of the silkscreen print back into my painting.

Inspiration

Facing the pristine, white surface of a blank canvas can be an intimidating experience – where to begin? This particular project, however, was a commission and based on a photograph which provided me with a nice "jump-start". Painters have used photographic references for as long as photography has existed. As a starting point, a photograph can provide inspiration in much the same way that an outdoor scene might inspire a landscape painting, or a human model might inspire a portrait. In each case, however, the visual reference is only a starting point. It's never simply a matter of just copying what is there. To begin with, "what is there" is truly a subjective thing, interpreted differently by each individual viewer. Also, a photograph may be a nice way to get you started, but further down the road, unless you break away from it and begin to follow your own instincts, your source material can start to restrict rather than to inspire your creativity. It's the artist's job not to copy the source material but to distil from it something that satisfies their own personal vision.

Getting Started

Step one is to establish size and format. In this case, I wanted a fairly large size and a square format (which has become my standard now for many years). I decided to further divide that large square into 4 smaller, 24 X 24 inch panels. (There were various reasons for this: It's useful to be able to isolate sections of a larger piece as you work on it – makes it easier to focus on details. There's also the very practical consideration that with smaller panels the finished piece will be easier to transport to its final destination.

This established, it's time to get started! Every artist, of course, has their own approach. Different styles of painting require different methods. But in this particular case, my approach, I think, is fairly traditional. I set up my canvases in their proper configuration and begin to sketch out my subject in charcoal. (Charcoal is an easy medium to erase and adjust.) My aim, at this early stage, is just to create a simple sketch, focussing on those aspects of the photographic image that I find interesting, deleting what I find superfluous and laying out a pleasing, balanced composition that captures what I perceive to be the essence of the scene. (For example: I chose to delete the small red bush that appears in the centre foreground of the photograph – it detracted from the smooth sweep of the water behind.)

The Work Continues

Once I'm satisfied with my charcoal sketch, I can begin the fun part of applying some colour. With the silkscreen prints in mind, I take the approach of using solid colours to fill in each major compositional element. My colour choices need only approximate what I imagine my final colours might end up being. All will evolve along the way. Once all the white space of the canvas is filled in, the image starts to emerge. Though it's still crude at this point, it allows me to judge how I will need to proceed. My main concerns right now are: Is my overall composition satisfactory or are there some major adjustments needed? Is there a good balance of colour across the entire work?

Now we're into the all-important developmental phase. Bit by bit details are added, shapes and colours slowly evolve and what was initially the core of an idea gradually transforms into a completed painting. Along the way, I try to sort out any compositional concerns as they arise, before I spend a lot of time perfecting my colours; I've found, from experience, that if ignored those problems tend to come back to bite you later on when they can be much more difficult to correct.

Detail – How Much Is Enough?

I recall reading a concert pianist's description of how he went about working up a new piece for performance. At first, he would put in every musical shade, detail and ornament that came to mind along the way. Later, he would remove, one by one, each of those details that felt superfluous until the piece was stripped back down to its essentials. This approach works nicely when applied to many of the creative arts and I certainly find myself using it with my painting. It's always worthwhile to try out an idea that springs to mind while you're working on a project. It may result in something exciting and unexpected. However, before the work is completed you need to be diligent about deleting anything that does not ultimately enhance the work as a whole, even if it sometimes means making the difficult decision to get rid of some detail that, taken on its own, you really quite like.

About Colour

I've always been fascinated by colour. It's one of the aspects of painting that I find most exciting and intriguing. Colour theory was a foundational course of my design training and for anyone in the visual arts it's invaluable knowledge. To the uninitiated, it might seem that colour is a pretty straightforward thing – red is red, blue is blue. In fact, the way we perceive colour is far more complex and interesting. To the human eye, colours are not fixed entities. Rather, they are entirely dependent on context. When we see a colour, what we see will be influenced by things like ambient light, adjacent colours, etc. A single colour can appear to be two entirely different colours depending on context and background.

Miramichi River View turned out to be a particularly interesting and challenging colour exercise. Every colour that you put on a canvas sets off a chain reaction that affects all the adjacent colours, and ultimately, all the colours in the entire composition. Within a context as complex as a painting, the only way to know if a colour will work the way you hope it will, is to try it out and see. To achieve the particular colour relationships and sense of balance I was aiming for involved a process of adjusting and re-adjusting each of the colours that you see in the finished work.

A Life of Its Own

When working on a painting, you eventually reach a point when the painting starts to take on a life of its own. Writers of fiction experience something similar when characters, once established, start to develop a life of their own that may surprise the author by leading him or her in some totally unexpected direction. With painting, the artist begins by establishing his or her vision and laying it out onto the canvas. But a visual expression, such as a painting, can only be preconceived up to a certain point. After that point, the painting starts to take on its own life, a life that may lead the artist on a voyage into unexpected regions. That's what makes the creative process so exciting, challenging and, ultimately, so satisfying to the artist.

When Is a Painting Finished?

It's a question I'm often asked and the simple answer is – when I'm satisfied with it! To the viewer, a painting might look finished at any point along the way; Standards of what constitutes a "finished" artwork disappeared long ago and in contemporary art, the distinction between what is finished and what is unfinished is entirely up to the artist's discretion. In the past, such distinctions did exist. Take for example, Impressionism: Now one of the most universally admired styles in all of art history, the term "Impressionist" was not originally a positive label. It suggested that these paintings were mere impressions, incomplete studies, rather than properly finished works of art. Time and familiarity have changed how we see and understand this style.

So, how do I know when my painting is finished? It's rarely a matter of it finally conforming to my original preconceived idea, since (as I've already suggested) the initial inspiration for a painting tends to evolve as the work progresses. It's more that I come to realise that a painting must be approaching completion when I begin to notice that there are more and more bits that I'm actually satisfied with! Eventually, it's the other bits that I'm not yet satisfied with that really begin to stick out, demanding further attention. Once every last one of those has been addressed and resolved, I know I'm finally looking at a finished painting. All that's left is to sign my name!

I hope these thoughts, most of which were jotted down while I was at work on the painting, will help provide some "behind the scenes" insight into the technical and creative processes that culminated in this painting [Miramichi River View](#).

Cheers!

Allen Shugar