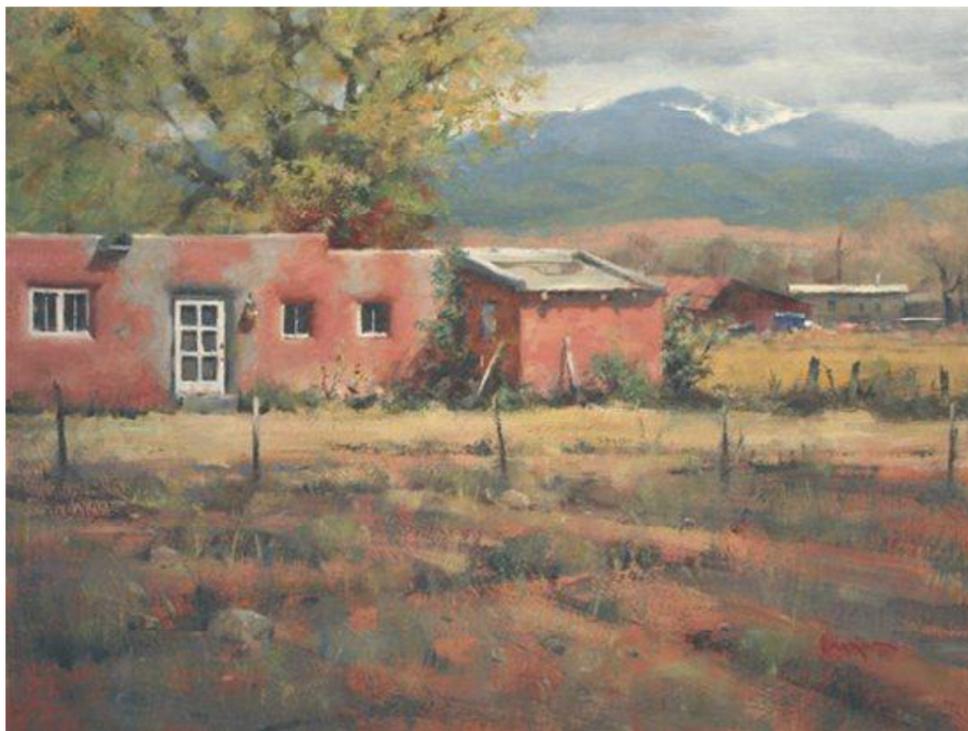


Building a Center of Interest in an Oil Painting

Call it the focus, the focal point, or the center of interest. For Doug Higgins, it's a crucial part of planning his paintings. Once a scene strikes him and he has a clear image of the composition in his mind, he sets up



his easel but Higgins says he never accepts nature as she comes. "I know I can change the scene--make things up, eliminate some things, simplify others, move elements, brighten or neutralize colors--to serve the idea of the painting," he says. "I carefully balance and design the elements. My goal is simplicity. Complexity is easy-- anyone can achieve that through thoughtless copying of details. You need intelligent strategies to keep it simple."

House at Arroyo Jacona by
Doug Higgins, 2006, oil painting,
18 x 24.

Because Higgins begins with an image of a painting in his mind, he has no need for thumbnail sketches. His first considerations are establishing the focal point, locating the horizon line, and placing the largest masses. "A painting is not a collection of parts, but a construction," he says. "I establish masses early on, stick to those decisions, and retain those masses by using close values."

Higgins next sketches in the main elements with a small, soft brush. The next step is applying a thin turpentine wash with a big brush using transparent colors--alizarin crimson, burnt sienna, ultramarine blue, and viridian for the shadows and warm local colors in the light areas--to establish the major shapes. With this step done, the artist wipes down his board with a paper towel, creating an interesting variety of colors. Using thicker paints, he begins with the focal point, completing that before moving on to other areas. By establishing his lightest light, darkest dark, and highest level of detail and contrast in the center of interest, he sets standards by which to judge the subordinate parts of the painting.

Because the eye is attracted by contrast, Higgins uses the strongest contrast in values, colors, edges, textures, and degree of detail in his center of interest. Linear elements lead the viewer's eye toward the focal point. To keep the viewer from being distracted by the foreground he simplifies and abstracts that area. Sometimes Higgins makes figures the secondary focus. The artist also uses secondary focal points to balance the oil painting and avoid weighing down one part of the image. **Source:** From an article for Artist Daily written by Linda S. Price.