

Is It Done? | Tips for Making a Painting's Final Adjustments

by [Richard McKinley](#)

It can be frustrating during the painting process when we know there's something wrong—something that's just not quite right—but we can't seem to put a finger on it, or what to do to resolve it. While some paintings just seem to fall into place, others can require considerable adjustment to be considered finished. I assure you, having a studio filled with my own unresolved paintings, that this perplexing situation has no prejudice between novice and professional artist. While there may be no cure, there are a few things that may prove helpful.



An image of Edison Slough (plein air pastel) when the painting remained unresolved.

1. Know your purpose.

Remind yourself of why you started the painting in the first place. Was it the subject matter, lighting, or color relationships? The physics of painting can allow us to lose sight of the initial purpose behind the painting. This in turn leaves us sailing around like a ship without a destination. It may be an interesting journey, but how do we know when we have arrived if we don't know where we are going? It is to be noted, though, that merely because you have a destination doesn't mean that you can't change your mind, or explore other options, along the way.



Edison Slough (pastel) after undergoing studio evaluation and adjustments to value and focal point. Notice that I did sign the unresolved painting, hopeful, I guess, of a strong finish.

2. Art Evaluation.

Analyze the fundamental components of the painting's composition, such as shape, value, and color relationships. Look at the painting upside down. This denies the mind an association to recognizable objects and makes it easier to focus on abstract design elements. Compare the initial composition sketch to the painting and make sure that the same visual flow is represented. If you find it hard to evaluate value differences, use a piece of ruby-red plastic as an overlay or digitally convert the painting image to gray scale. Scrutinize the composition of color. Make sure colors are harmonious and share a light source. Remember the general rule of composition that every category (shape, value and color) needs both a dominant and subordinates. Otherwise, there is no visual impact.

3. Establish the Focal Point.

Ask yourself if the painting has an area of interest? Is this spot working as the first place the eye goes? Do you then travel to other points of interest, ultimately returning to the main area of interest? If not, decide what accents to add to make them stand out. Visual interest is associated to contrast of edge, value, and color saturation.

4. Be Willing to Take a Chance.

Being afraid of ruining a painting, or falling to in love with a specific section of a painting, can allow us to freeze, making it difficult to finish. While it is true that additional adjustments can sometimes produce disastrous consequences, ultimately relegating the work to the burn pile, they may also make all the difference between a painting being judged marginal or excellent. Plus, if final adjustments don't improve the painting, something was learned from the attempt. Nothing ventured, nothing gained! True artistic growth is always based in taking chances.

Any talk of finishing always begs the question: How do you know when is a painting done? The best answer I have is to quote Leonardo da Vinci "Art is never finished, only abandoned." I would add: some to a frame and exhibition, and others to the trash bin.