

ART ASSIGNMENT #13B

How to Simplify + Improve Reference Photos for Better Art



INTRODUCTION

Though photography is an art form in and of itself, a photo is quite different from a drawing or a painting.

Drawings and paintings are *interpretations* or *artistic renditions* of a scene, subject or object, done by a human being. Photos are mechanical captures.

Drawings and paintings are the result of information we've taken in through our senses, interpreted through our unique "lens", and manifested in physical form via our unique use of whatever art mediums/tools we enjoy.

Creating artwork requires at least some amount of planning and bringing in our critical thinking to, not only create a visual composition that is pleasing to the eye and that conveys a mood/message/idea/story, *but that has ourselves in it,* subjectively and objectively.

A *huge* mistake lots of beginner artists make is starting a drawing or a painting using their reference photos as they are, without thinking about whether it's optimal for art-making on a compositional level, or giving any thought to how they can bring in more of themselves into the piece to truly make it their own.

When we start giving thought to these things is when we start developing our art style and voice.



Very **rarely will we come across a reference photo that is going to be in optimal state for art making purposes or that is to our liking 100%.**

If we *do* come across a quality photo that looks great on a compositional level, it was most likely taken by a professional photographer that knows about composition, lighting, etc. and it was probably *already* cropped, cleaned or edited in some way.

Even photos we take ourselves will likely have to be improved with some cropping in order to sort out positive and negative spaces, and to ensure that the image's proportions will fit the format we want our final piece to be.

Even the best photos *do not* necessarily translate into great drawings or paintings. As artists, we're looking to improve what we're seeing in some way. Art is an interpretation of what we're seeing.

Also, just because something is there, it doesn't mean that it should be included in your artwork.

We have to practice knowing what to look for and also get comfortable changing/ manipulating images.





A few essential questions I ask myself when choosing reference photos for drawings or paintings are:

1. What are my objectives? Is this a study I'm doing to improve my skill or a finalized artwork?

2. What's the format/size of my final piece? Will I be working in my sketchbook?

3. Is this photograph interesting enough?

- *If it's a scene, is the perspective interesting? Are there enough elements or layers to transmit depth?*
- *If it's a portrait or figure, can I see the body parts I want to bring in fully, or are body parts cropped in ways that can make the process more difficult for myself or that take away from the composition? Is the expression transmitting what I want to transmit?*
- *Is the lighting contributing to a balance between light and dark areas so that I can create good contrast?*

4. What message am I trying to transmit to the viewer? Would it be helpful for me to make part of the environment around the object/subject visible?

5. Is there something in the image that can make the drawing/painting process very challenging for me, taking my current skill level into account?



COMPUTER SOFTWARE + PHONE APPS

There’s no denying that photo editing softwares and even phone apps can be invaluable tools for artists who draw or paint.

This is because, we can easily do things as we’re preparing for a new piece such as: crop, lighten, flip, increase the contrast, remove certain elements that might be distracting or confusing, move elements around, or even bring in elements from other photos.



Even if you don’t have a photo editing software such as Photoshop on your computer, now-a-days, you’ll be able to find many free phone apps that you can install.

Phones have great cameras and many photo apps have a grid (Rule of Thirds) that you can use to create a better composition.

This said, once you’re ready to take quality photos of your artwork for prints, cards, etc. having a photo editing software installed on your computer is helpful as you’ll be able to prepare files for print that are true to the original.

SIMPLIFYING COMPLEX PHOTOS

Learning how to simplify is key for artists, not only because it's important to work large to small/general toward specific when building up an artwork, but because it'll help you create better compositions that are not overcrowded with elements and will successfully take the viewer's eyes from one area to the next.

Three ways that you can simplify images are through value, shape and color.
Reduce values, bring together shapes, and limit your colors.

When you've chosen an image to work with, ask yourself:

- *What is the primary focal point? How can I enhance this area to make sure the viewer sees this first? What are the secondary areas/elements I want to call the viewer's attention towards?*
- *How can I keep the viewer's eyes moving through the image? Is there anything that can keep the viewer "stuck" or can distract away from the important elements?*
- *Are there shadows, shapes, details, etc. that could end up confusing the viewer?*
- *Is there too much or too little negative (empty) space?*
- *Can I use the Rule of Thirds to make the piece more interesting and balanced?*
- *Should I manipulate or change colors in order to transmit the mood/message more effectively, or to simply make the piece more interesting or harmonious?*



What would you do to improve this photo for a better drawing or painting?

Examples of changes you can make to improve the composition or better convey a message or story are:

- **Adding figures into scenes**
- **Removing cars from scenes**
- **Moving trees or adding flowers in landscapes**
- **Changing the sky in a landscape**
- **Changing the color of the background in a still life arrangement**
- **Designing the hair in a portrait**

USING THUMBNAILS

- **Thumbnails can be incredibly valuable while preparing for a new piece and can be done either *before* taking our reference photos or *after* choosing your references.**
- **You can sketch out a few quick thumbnails to decide what elements you'll be bringing in, their location within the picture plane, and plan for positive and negative areas before taking your photos. This works very well when planning for a still life photo shoot.**
- **Or after you've taken (or have collected) some photos you can create a few thumbnails to decide how you'll be cropping the image so that it can better fit the Rule of Thirds grid and your final format, and also decide if you'll be removing/moving any elements.**



EXAMPLES

STILL LIFE





Sometimes, it's just going to be a matter of cropping. Using the Rule of Thirds grid can be very helpful.





This image also has a lot of negative space.





This image also has a lot of negative space. Flipping the image horizontally after cropping can also make it look better.

EXAMPLES

LANDSCAPES/NATURE SCENES





There are certain images that are simply not interesting enough, don’t have enough elements/layers to make it work as a drawing or painting, or are simply cropped at an awkward point.





Other times, images are salvageable, if we have a higher skill level and can "complete" structures or elements that are cropped off. We can "open up" the picture plane more, completing the information we're visually lacking from imagination.





This image also has a lot of negative space. Flipping the image horizontally after cropping can also make it look better.

EXAMPLES

CITYSCAPES/URBAN





This one was just a matter of cropping (once again aligning the main building with the left vertical in the Rule of Thirds grid) and also increasing the color saturation.





The obvious focal point in this one (the tram) is right in the middle of the photo again. By placing it off center, using the Rule of Thirds grid, the composition is improved.





This photo has a lot of inactive space, especially below the tram. Making it smaller helps a lot and the focal point is no longer in the center.

EXAMPLES

PORTRAITS





Zooming in and placing the figure along one of the verticals in the Rule of Thirds grid makes for a better looking composition.



Sometimes, things that might look interesting in a photo, don't work so well for a drawing or painting.



Certain photos are not going to have enough information for drawing or painting purposes because they are overexposed.



This is a great example of the use of the Rule of Thirds in a photo of a person.

EXAMPLES

ANIMALS





This image has too much negative space.



This works great for a photo, but the crooked angle, the unfocused/blurred body and the large amount of foreshortening can be very difficult to work with when drawing or painting.



It's really helpful to plan for drawing/painting techniques that will help make the main subject pop, even after simplifying.





This image also has a lot of negative space. The animal almost gets lost in the greenery. By zooming in, we're able to see more of the animal's features and there is enough of the environment showing.



This is a great example of the use of the Rule of Thirds in an animal photo.

ART ASSIGNMENT #13B:

- **Collect (or produce) three reference photos that feature your subject of choice (scene, animal, still life, etc.).**
- **Recommended websites: unsplash.com, pixabay.com, pexels.com**
- **Bringing in your knowledge of Composition, analyze and edit these photos so that they are ready to use for a drawing or painting.**
- **If you don't have software to edit your photos digitally, create thumbnails in your sketchbook, where you change location and sizes of elements, modify the cropping, and choose colors to bring in.**
- **If you choose an image and you cannot think of anything to change, it might be good as is. Look for another that you *can* improve in some way.**