The Artistic Lens

By Sharon Hamilton MDA

Light: REALLY SEEING IT - Part I

Goal: Learn to see and apply light to create a sense of tonal harmony in your painting that appears natural, creates a third dimension and controls your viewer’s eye direction.

When you look at a fine painting, the most critical ‘technique’ is most likely the one that you may overlook. When you evaluate a fine painting you see so many of the techniques that you have learned and in some cases you have mastered. Sometimes it is what you don’t initially see that makes one particular painting stand out from all of the others.

Control of light within a painting constitutes the single most critical step in creating beautiful works of art. Let me repeat that one more time so that no one misses this important point. Control of light in a painting constitutes the most critical step in creating beautiful works of art. Take a look at each of these paintings and notice how effectively each artist has used the lighting situation to their advantage.
Regardless of the style of painting, whether the art is a surrealistic work, an abstract, a landscape scene, a portrait or a still life set-up, light plays a major role in evoking a mood or emotion from the viewer. Without the type of light that each artist used in these examples that I’ve given you, they wouldn’t have been able to convey these feelings to you, the viewer.

The finest composed still life, floral, landscape or portrait painting can fall short of the “Ahhhh Factor” (AF) without at least a sensible approach as to how the light falls on the subject. How you render light on any subject can be the difference between mediocrity and the AF that we all strive to achieve. I learned that painting and the knowledge of technique alone were not enough. Rather, it took a lot of work and a lot of mistakes to see light and how it controls a painting.

Certainly that sounds like an odd statement since we can all see light, can’t we? Well, yes and no. While we may not be fully aware of it, we all tend to accept natural light as, well, natural. Although natural light comes in many forms, which we will discuss later, we accept it in any of its forms.

Yet, with artificial light sources many beginners try to outwit natural light by eliminating shadows. This can be somewhat understandable as some important parts of your still life could be hidden in shadow or odd shadow patterns come into play and become distracting. It is not the shadow that is the real problem here but there certainly can be unpleasant shadows and in some cases, multiple shadows. Regardless, shadows are inherent with any light source and are not only desirable but they are necessary to create form, depth, tone and texture.

Multiple shadows indicate multiple light sources and throw the shadows usually in different directions. This is known as cross-lighting and it is a big no-no! Cross-lighting can be the result of an artist attempting to rid their setup of shadows. Unless you are taking a photograph of your own...
two-dimensional painting where you need flat, even lighting to reproduce your work well, cross-lighting has no place in either still life or floral painting.

Light coming from two directions fights what is natural. Use the sun as your guide. There is only one sun and to appear natural you should only show one main source of light, period.

**Natural Light**

Often your choices for lighting a still-life arrangement are based on convenience or necessity. Daylight is always a safe source of light and a natural choice—one that has a long, rich history in painting. Daylight is also the one you want to study and learn to see through its multitude of variations and how each of those variations can change the entire feel of your painting.

Daylight, regardless of its qualities, is rarely monotonous and can provide a wide variety of conditions to explore ranging from broad, diffuse open shade to intensely directional sunlight. Each variety of natural light alters shape, color, tones and form in your painting. Additionally, each variation provides a different form of shadow as shadows are affected in their shape, direction, value and color.

Let’s look at some of the variables to daylight. The direction of the sun changes throughout the day and provides different angles at different hours of the day—with each change of angle, of course, the direction of the shadow also changes. Whatever the qualities of the lighting, it still comes from one source—the sun—and is correct in any of its variations. Setting up a still-life and watching how the feel of the setup changes as the sun moves throughout the day gives you a visual sense of what type of light works best for you. So the first variable is the angle of your light source which is, in this case, daylight.

The color of daylight often changes along with the direction of light. So the second variable becomes the color of light—and it also affects how your final painting will appear. As a generalization, morning light tends to be a bit cooler while late afternoon sun tends toward the warmer side of your palette. Not only does color change by the hour, but also by the season. And to make it even less consistent, the color is also affected by the weather. So these are additional variables you need to be aware of and employ in your work that, done with awareness, will help bring that AF into your paintings.

We’ve all seen family snapshots taken with strong, direct sunlight in a person’s face. Sunlight in this form creates dark, well-defined shadows and hot highlights. Just think of Uncle Fred standing in front of the camera with the eyes barely visible through the dark shadows surrounding his eyes and his receding hairline catching some of the strong rays of light and making his head glow like a light bulb—not exactly the ideal light. But some conditions can be used to your advantage in your paintings if you are aware and can see the light in front of you and how it affects the overall feel of your subject.
Study each of my photos below that were all taken in sunny conditions and note the differences in the shadows. They vary in length, value (darkness) and temperature (coolness/warmness). The cauliflower and background is affected by each change of light also. The more oblique light at 8 am and 5 pm have given the cauliflower more texture as compared to the other times of day. Now look at the effect on the background, the late morning to mid-afternoon times tend to even out the values and it becomes rather mundane. The early morning and particularly late afternoon light gives the background more of a gradated look, which can add interest by helping to isolate your subject. Also observe the color of the light, it is definitely cooler in the morning and gradually changes to a warmer light by afternoon.

8am- Note the length of the shadow and its coolness.
9am- The shadow is slightly shorter and is more defined.
11am- The shadow shortens again and it is even more defined and is warmer overall.
Noon- The shadow is very small and is directly underneath the subject.
3pm- The shadow begins to lengthen and is slightly warmer again.
5pm- Notice the long length of the shadow and the overall warmth. Texture is more defined.

Backlighting can yield dramatic results when handled correctly. If the position of the light is directly behind your subject then it blocks the light and your subject may be little more than a silhouette. But if the light is a little higher than your subject and is in a three-quarter rear position, then the light skims across one side of your subject and that can be very exciting!

Backlit - Notice the long cast shadow in front. While the front of the subject is in soft shadow, the top and right edges have beautiful highlights skimming across them.
Diffused sunlight on a slightly hazy day, or open shade such as under trees or under a covered porch, is softer and creates softer shadows and less contrast in your paintings. This is often referred to as flat lighting. Flat lighting tends to bring out fine detail but it also flattens form—but it also tends to create wonderful rich, saturated colors.

The secret here is to observe—see how the different variations of daylight react when it illuminates your subject matter—be it a flower petal or an elaborate setup. Nothing replaces seeing and being aware of the changes that happen with subtle changes in light. Both the quantity and the quality of the light will determine how your subject appears to others.

The light you choose to apply to your subject matter will create the entire mood of your painting and defines four basic qualities upon which all images depend: three-dimensional modeling (highlights, mid-tones and shadows), separation of planes, cast shadows, and the rendering of texture.

I realize that many of us paint late into the night and don’t have availability of sunlight when the time nears midnight. Likewise, it rains, it snows, it sleet and hails and we all continue to paint despite the lack of sunlight. So the next issue we’ll talk about artificial lights and how to set up lights to ensure a natural look for your subject and get the lighting down so we can move toward that AF together.

Special permission was granted by The Dali Museum for use of the image “The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory”. Reproductions of this image, including downloading, are prohibited without written authorization from the Salvador Dali Museum, 1000 3rd St., St. Petersburg, FL 33705. Tel: (727) 823-3767; Fax (727) 823-5832; website: thedali.org E-mail: Jkropf@thedali.org

All remaining paintings are from public domain at Wikipedia Commons.
Sharon Hamilton, MDA is a graduate of the Art Institute of Pittsburgh with a degree in Commercial Photography. After working in the field for several years she became interested in painting and joined the SDP in 1988. Sharon earned her MDA in 2001.

Sharon is published in numerous national and international publications. Her work was selected for exhibition at the 2004 Nihon Vogue Decorative Painting Gallery of the World in Tokyo. Sharon has authored eight books on decorative painting.

Sharon has been teaching for twenty-one years including SDP Conferences and associated mini-conventions. She currently teaches at her home studio and on-line classes at the http://www.aaoclassroom.com/. She also travel-teaches throughout the U.S. and internationally.

Sharon lives outside of Allentown, PA with her husband, two daughters and two adorable little doggies. You may write to Sharon at 8366 Walbert Lane, Alburtis, PA 18011 or at sharonhamilton@rcn.com or visit her website at http://www.sharonhamiltonartist.com