

Design Rules! *By Ian Roberts* <http://www.artistsnetwork.com>



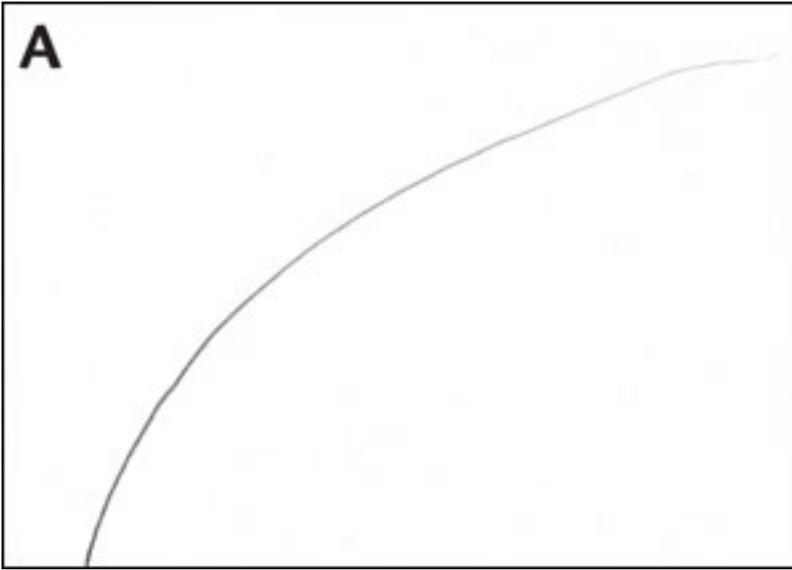
Tuscan scenery, the subject depicted in 'Road to Asciano' (oil, 36x36) is undeniably beautiful, but the effectiveness of the painting arises from an asymmetrical design, strong shapes and masses, and dramatic value contrasts.

The design of every painting you create affects that work as much as—and usually more than—the subject. Most students I've taught are looking for good subjects to paint. In fact, what you need to look for is good design.

You're not really painting the world "out there." You're painting a design that you impose on the world. Without that design concept, you can get caught up cataloging what's in front of you. I like the way John Carlson puts it: "If you approach nature without some idea, she is merciless in the way in which she piles lumber in your way."

That "idea" Carlson is referring to is the design, the overriding structure you impose on your painting. Without it, details, incidentals, nuances and distractions can easily bury you. Begin your painting with a design idea firmly in mind. Then you have a road map—a good idea of where you're going and, just as important, an indicator of when you've arrived. Once you actually get into the thick of painting, so much is going on that, without that map, you

could end up almost anywhere—and you'll usually be disappointed with that endpoint.



This picture plane is alive and dynamic. This single pencil mark pulls the eye to the lower left. Every mark you add to a painting triggers an automatic visual response.

Every mark matters Let me give you a simple example: Take a blank sheet of paper and draw a large arc on it from top right to bottom left (**A**). That arc leads your eye across the page down to the lower left and has become the dynamic of the design on the picture plane. This dynamic isn't an aesthetic feeling or preference, nor can you do much to stop it—it's just a fact resulting from the way your eye responds.

When you begin painting, each mark you make influences the picture plane in that same way—sometimes dramatically, sometimes subtly. The marks all add up to the lively dynamic. Each mark is doing something.

You need to be aware of that something when you paint. Each new mark not only represents an element—a tree trunk or a patch of sunlight, for example—but also influences the entire dynamic of your painting. Most painters bury their head in the subject they've chosen, and, because that subject looks interesting or beautiful, they assume the painting will also be interesting or beautiful. It doesn't work that way. Either you're molding the dynamics to enliven the design of your painting, or the dynamics are running the design on their own—and seldom to your advantage. The moment you get lost in the subject at the expense of the design, your chances of success quickly start to slip.

So the crux of the matter is that when you paint, you must give at least equal attention to the design as to the subject. It's like playing music—if you get so entranced with getting the notes right that you lose the beat, you'll lose the music. In the same way, if you get so caught up in the subject that you lose the design, you'll lose the painting.