



Give your oil scenes a stronger sense of mood by focusing on color, light and simple texture. • By Cheri Christensen

Lighting

I grew up around farms and ranches, and I've always been fascinated by animals. But more than just the animals themselves, I'm drawn by the way light affects colors as it falls across the various textures of fur, feathers and skin. I want those who view my work to feel that they're part of the painting, that the light



could be striking them, too. So when I see a subject that inspires me, I immediately try to think of how I can re-create my feelings on canvas in a way that will make that all-important connection with viewers. Most often, I've found that it's the overall mood of a scene that snares viewer attention, and the best way I know to create mood is by using color, light and texture. Here's how I do it.

Setting the Mood

The mood of a painting is determined by the ratio of shadow to light. For example, a brightly lit scene like *Banty on the Steps* conveys energy and wonder, while one with a more

pronounced shadow grouping produces an introspective feel, as in *Geese of Villa Rucelli*. Finally, close values at the dark end of the value scale produce a somber effect.

Color is the most important component for helping me capture the mood I'm after. Colors guide me in building form, provide clues to the direction and temperature of the light, and tell me how to respond emotionally. Colors in a scene are intricately related. For example, if you look closely at *Chianina di Toscana* (at left), you'll notice color reflected in the shadows, especially in the shadow areas of the white cattle. I tend to use broken color—color that isn't fully mixed but stays within the same value range—throughout my paintings. Colors placed side by side this way add visual energy to my work.

While color provides the actual form, I use texture to create the feel of the form, whether I'm painting warm wool or translucent feathers. Producing texture can be as simple as a heavy brushstroke or a gob of paint placed with a knife. For example, I use a brush when I need a softer, more subtle look. In such cases, I often produce textures by lightly dragging a brush loaded with paint over my working surface and allowing the underlayers to peek through the layer I'm adding. Conversely, a painting knife is a great tool for conveying energy and movement. To make textural effects with a painting knife, I work one color into another without mixing the two, an approach that seems to give feathers or hair a more translucent look. There are instances where I use both a brush and a painting knife. For example, I may use a brush to give an animal a smooth coat, then pick up my painting knife to add rougher grass textures. But in any event, the textures I create must make sense. I don't get involved with texture for its own sake. Rather, I make it intrinsic to the painting. If it improves the painting, I keep it. If not, I scrape

Reflections of Serenity

Warm colors contribute to the serene inviting mood of Chianina di Toscana (oil, 30x40). In particular, notice how the colors of light and the surrounding area are reflected in the coats of the white cattle.

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it off. Remember: Less is more. It's better to use one bold stroke than 10 ineffective ones.

Selecting a Subject

I actively seek out painting subjects that convey a particular mood I want to express. Animals move around a lot, which makes it difficult to paint them from life. So when I find a scene that catches my eye, I usually take a reference photo, or use a digital camera or a digital video camcorder. (I should point out, however, that my experience painting from life allows me to make up for the camera's shortcomings in terms of color.)

Once I settle on a subject, I visualize the finished painting and decide what I want to accomplish. I look for the primary focus and an element—perhaps a river of light—that guides the viewer's eye to that focus. I find the composition and color scheme that work best and decide on a size and shape of the finished image. I don't use painting mediums or solvents, so I rarely use a wash to tone my canvas. Instead, I use a colored gesso—my favorite is a Venetian red warmed with gold—and I often let the

gesso show through in the finished painting. If I must thin a color, I use linseed oil; if I need a painting to dry quickly, I may mix in a bit of Gamblin's alkyd gel.

Making Ideas Work

When I'm ready to start the actual work, I draw the big shapes, including the shapes of light and shadow. I work wet-into-wet, and in the early stages I use either paint thinned with linseed oil or paint straight from the tube, which I brush on so that it appears translucent. If I make an error, I simply scrape the paint off with a palette knife and start again. It saves both time and paint to fix structural problems at this stage. Scraping also keeps the colors bright and prevents muddiness.

In this phase of my painting process, I don't think of objects, just the shapes of light and shadow. I ignore my mind telling me what an object looks like; instead, I paint what I see. If a shadow extends into another object, I paint through it without worrying about edges. I relate the colors to each other and compare their relative value, hue, temperature and intensity.

1

Draw the Big Shapes

2

Catch the Light

3

Model the Form

4

Add the Accents



1 I began by drawing in the big shapes (inset). Then I used thin color to block in my shadow areas and added some color in the background.

2 Next I started blocking in the shape of the lights. At this stage, I don't think about objects; I think colors. And I constantly compare the relationships of value, hue, temperature and intensity.

3 When I was satisfied with the big shapes, I began to model the form. I may not model all of the forms to the same extent. My focus area tends to be more finished, but other areas may be no more than suggestions of shapes of colors, which act as resting spots for the viewer's eyes.

In particular, I make sure that the values in shadows aren't so light that they become part of the light shapes—it's easy to be tricked by reflected light in shadows.

I paint the shadow shapes first, then start on the shapes of the light. Again, I think of colors instead of objects and constantly compare the relationships. As I work, I step back from the painting often, squinting to check the big shapes against each other. When I'm satisfied that these shapes are right, I begin selectively modeling the form—I work on my focus area until it has a fairly finished look, but in other areas I may merely suggest shapes of colors.

As the painting moves toward a finish, I apply light and dark accents, always comparing value, hue, temperature and intensity. If I'm painting with a brush, texture really comes into play here since I tend to use thicker paint for the light colors, especially whites. With a painting knife, texture becomes a big part of the entire painting because you can really load up the knife with paint.



4 I finished *Banty on the Steps* (oil, 24x12) by applying my lightest and darkest accents. Once again, I continue to compare value, hue, temperature and intensity until the piece is complete.



When I think a painting may be complete, I hang the piece on the wall, then come back the next day and see whether I've missed anything. Once I reach the point that I can look at the painting and it doesn't ask for anything else, I know the piece is finished.

Striking a Chord

I've discovered that focusing on texture, color and light enables me to create paintings that engage viewers' emotions. This approach can work for you as well. By creating a mood that invites both the eye and the imagination, you'll find that viewers become part of your work and respond to your paintings in a deeper, more personal way. ♦

Establishing an Intimate Feel

I use color to create the forms in my work, then use texture to describe the feel of those forms. For example, in Geese of Villa Rucelli (oil, 20x24), I used soft brushstrokes for the feathers. This, along with the dark shadows, produced the intimate mood I was after.

About the

Artist



CHERI CHRISTENSEN received her bachelor of art degree from the University of Washington, then continued her studies with Ron Lukas and attended demonstrations and workshops by Del Gish, Bill Reese, Ramon Kelly and Richard Schmid. Christensen is a member of several art-related organizations, including Oil Painters of America, and her paintings have garnered numerous awards. Currently based in Bainbridge Island, Washington, Christensen is represented by a number of galleries, including Howard/Mandville Gallery (Kirkland, Washington), Trailside Gallery (Jackson, Wyoming), Contemporary Southwest Galleries (Santa Fe, New Mexico) and Knox Galleries (Denver, Colorado). To see more of her artwork, visit her Web site at www.cherichristensen.com.