

Tip #14

Capturing the Effect of Distance and Depth



Some very simple tricks will give your landscape paintings and drawings a sense of distance and volume--try using something called aerial perspective. Think about it...what tells our mind that we're looking at great distance in landscape? It's partly a trick of the eye, an optical function that makes things farther away look smaller, simpler, cooler in color, and even higher. That's aerial perspective!

Art 14-1, art-Cooley Lake

Here, I've kept the background hills very simple, using most of the detail in the foreground reeds and plants; the hills are a simplified, muted blue, giving them a sense of atmospheric distance. I also use a triangular device to lead the eye into the painting.



Perspective as often understood by artists and architects consists of lines and vanishing points--that's mostly what's covered in school when we're kids, if we're lucky enough to

take art classes. That type of perspective works great when the subject is buildings or roads, but not so well when painting far hills or trees in a forest.

My old mentor, John Pike, used to sketch out landscapes as a sort of stage-set schematic, especially visible when he drew trees in a forest. The closest trees were larger and much more detailed, the intermediate ones were somewhat smaller and simpler, and the distant trees were much smaller, and often drawn as merely simple linear shapes. When it came to painting, the near trees were warmer as well, and the background was often a pale blue-gray ... it really gave a sense of distance and depth to the flat plane of his paper!

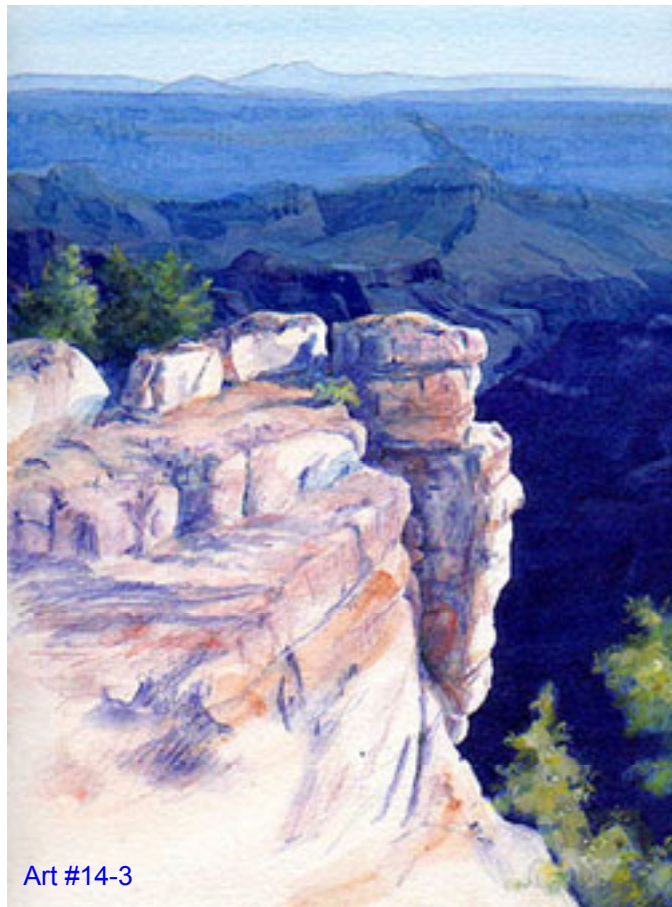
If you're using pencil, try using a softer pencil for the closest elements, then harder ones for the simpler background forms, to add another aspect.

Art 14-2, art - pen and ink sketch - “Distance”

For pen and ink, try a similar approach, using more detail and heavier lines closer up, lightening and simplifying for distance. This image is used courtesy of the Sierra Club, publisher of my Sierra Club Guide to Sketching in Nature and the Sierra Club Guide to Painting in Nature.



Art #14-2



Art #14-3

Art 14-3, art - “North Rim”

The same principle of aerial perspective can be applied to painting, no matter what your medium. Watercolor works particularly well for this, though, as does watercolor pencil, because thin glazes of color also can be layered to suggest that sense of spacial depth. Here, I worked from the background forward, adding as many layers as necessary to suggest the rich blue distance on the north rim of the Grand Canyon. Hard to imagine a more perfect example of distance than what can be seen in the American West!

Read much more on aerial perspective in my Sierra Club books, available from <http://www.amazon.com> or directly from <http://www.sierraclub.org/books/> - just type Cathy Johnson into their search box!