

Tip #27

Paying Attention to Details - more on painting animals



The architect Mies van der Rohe wrote "God dwells in the details," and when we paint sometimes that is very true, whether you like to paint tight or loose. Get the details "right," and the whole composition sings. Miss them, and there's often a niggling sense of something out of kilter.

I'm not one of those who paint photo-realistically. I guess I just don't have the patience-and since I am also a photographer I tend to like what my camera can do, in that department. When I paint or draw, I enjoy focusing the attention here or there in my composition, rather like the eye itself does. Where we look, we see details most clearly, while other things around our focus are less detailed, fuzzier. (That's a good technique for leading the viewer's eye where you want it to go, too, by the way!)

And the eyes definitely have it, when painting animals. So much expression and feeling is in an animal's eyes! Notice the shape, especially of the pupil - depending on the light level and the animal's emotional state, that pupil can expand or contract a great deal!

Art 27-1, step by step to painting a dog's eye

If you like, draw your subject carefully first, so you understand how the eye is shaped and how the pupil works. Use the shape of the reflections and highlights to suggest the roundness of the eyeball.

Lay in lighter preliminary washes of color, following the shapes in your sketch. Let them dry thoroughly. Paint around the highlights, or mask them out.

Now, continue to develop those darks - most dogs have very dark brown irises, though a few are pale blue, almost white (think huskies and some English sheepdogs). The pupil usually looks quite soft against the dark brown of the iris. Add fine details with a small, round watercolor brush, and soften the reflections and highlights with clear water.



Art 27-1



Art 27-2

Art 27-2, eye comparison Notice, also, how the pupil is placed within the eye-dogs have rounder ones, like humans as you see above; cats have a vertical pupil (with the most capability of expansion and contraction in any of our common creatures), and goat-like animals have a horizontal one.



Art 27-3

Art 27-3, "On the Nose!"

Pay attention to noses, too-there's a vast difference between dog breeds, let alone the differences between animals such as horses, dogs, and cats. Use a bit of white gouache, if you like, to get the sense of wetness of a dog's nose, or scratch through your dry paint layer with a sharp blade, as in the cat's whiskers.

Art 27-4, "Mack," acrylic, 11x14" with detail inset

Even the paws come in for attention-a dog's foot is very much more elongated than a cat's, as in the inset of Sarah's foot. The claws are not retractable, as in a cat, so you see them in most dogs, even Mack, whose other details tend to get lost in all that hair! Still, this painting wouldn't look right without the claws, would it?

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Art 27-4