Tip #11

Utilizing Negative Spaces

Years ago, one of my students was bothered by the term "negative spaces" - he thought it was, well, so negative! But all that means is drawing the shapes AROUND your subject in order to help you break free of stereotypes and see what you're looking at with new eyes. We get so used to seeing our subjects through a set of preconceived notions that sometimes we need a new outlook.

Take eyes, for instance - we may think of them as an oval with points on each end, or a simple canoe shape - and that is useful if we're drawing a generic eye. If we're trying for a likeness of a specific person, it's not enough. When we draw the shapes around the eye, instead, we begin to capture the subtleties, and so a more accurate observation.
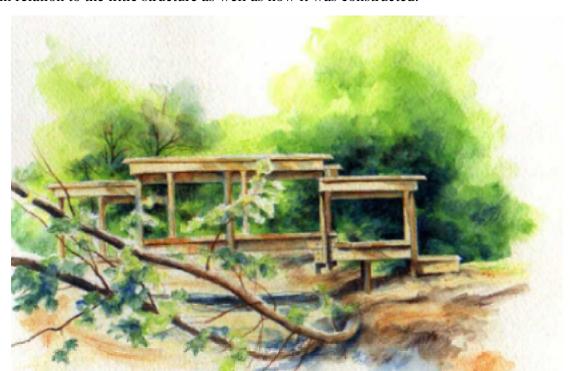
Art 11-1, Mara

Here, by looking at the shapes around the eye itself, I was able to get the tilt and angle of the eye and its brow, as well as accurately place the pupil and iris - you can tell what direction she's looking, and a bit about the expression on her face, just from this one feature.

Detail of "Mara," acrylic painting, right

Art 12-2, Aaron's Bridge

Paying close attention to negative shapes can help you capture perspective more accurately, too. The bridge across my tiny creek was quite simple, but the subtleties of perspective are deceptive. I made myself draw the spaces between the uprights and rail rather than the bridge itself, to start out, and managed to capture a sense of where the viewer is in relation to the little structure as well as how it was constructed.

"Aaron's Bridge,"
Watercolor pencil,
right

Art 11-3, Closing Time

Nature can be quite complex! This wintry tree near Rocky Hollow Lake had many overlapping limbs and branches. In order to sketch it accurately and to get the sense of what appeared where in space, I noticed the negative shapes between the branches, as well as the branches themselves. I didn't have much time-the park closes at sunset-so this training in seeing in a different way was very helpful. The addition of color and value, splashed in quickly, helped give the tree a sense of volume. It's now a very specific tree in a specific time and place, not generic at all.

"Closing Time," colored pencil and watercolor, below

For much more on using negative shapes in your work, see my North Light First Steps Series book, *Sketching and Drawing* (http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0891346155/002-7494068-5080048?v=glance), or *The Sierra Club Guide to Sketching in Nature* (http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0871569329/002-7494068-5080048?v=glance) from the Sierra Club/University of California Press.