

### 3 Things a Painting Can't Live Without

Good painters don't merely re-create what is in front of them. An experienced artist knows how to create a successful painting no matter what situation or model he or she is presented with. Of course, this often comes after years of practice and experimentation—as well as the development of a unique artistic voice—but there are some basic characteristics that all good paintings have in common.

**1. A strong focal point.** A focal point is not like the big bold 'X' that marks the spot on a treasure map. It can take on any shape and size. It can be bold but it can also be subtle. A dappling of light, a pop of color, an expression or emphatic gesture—any of these can become a focal point in a composition. Regardless of how it is created, its purpose should be to engage the viewer or act as the culmination of the momentum built in the work.

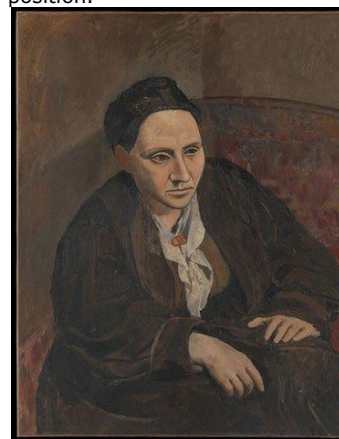
**2. Layers of color.** Color makes a painting tranquil or vibrant, dramatic or stark, and this comes about not only in color choices, but how you build passages of color over one another or side by side. Warm and cool colors in a sky create a sense of atmosphere and space more than any one swath of color, no matter how perfectly matched it is to the sky above.

**3. Changes in direction.** In many great paintings the image is realistically rendered, but brushstrokes are clearly visible; you are aware of *how* the painting is painted. Think about how the paint application of Jan van Eyck versus Vincent van Gogh perfectly reflects or resonates with what the artists painted. The way a brush moves paint around makes a statement that should be taken advantage of. You can start by being mindful to changes in the direction of your brush, literally working on a painting with different strokes and from various angles.

When you look at works of art that you respond to, always ask yourself why. Keep those characteristics in mind as you develop your own pieces, too. That awareness is what drives the instruction that *American Artist* delivers. Whether it's a [calendar](#) featuring intriguing and unique works of art that make you think; DVDs such as [Mastering Portrait Drawing](#), that delve into the details of how to draw a person's likeness; or magazines like [Studios](#), where you get a peek into how to adapt your art space for performance and comfort, *American Artist* always couples artistic inspiration with instruction so that you can come away with a better sense of where to go on your own path as an artist.



In Vermeer's **Woman with a Scale**, the focal point of the painting is accentuated with nothing more than a glance and delicate hand position.



In Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein, the colors are muted but quite varied and establish an introspective mood.