

The Importance of Backgrounds

Julie Elizabeth Podstolski (Australia)



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In my second year of art school back in 1978, we students were given the task of painting a still life of our choice. I chose to realistically paint my (then) boyfriend's air rifle. It must have been the various textures which interested me; glossy wood and black metal. The object was displayed on my desk. I studied it over several days, meticulously rendering every detail in oil paint. It was only when



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I had finished painting the air rifle that I asked myself the question, "What shall I do about the background?"

At that point, the painting was doomed. I had not planned the painting through to its conclusion at conception. I had only thought of the gun in isolation without considering its immediate environment. When I tried to paint in the surroundings as an afterthought, everything fell to bits. It was a good lesson though—and 37 years later I remember it like yesterday: Don't make the background an afterthought!

The topic of backgrounds comes up quite often in art groups that I belong to. Now and then, a person laments that he or she is not keen on backgrounds or is no good at them. The person wants to get straight to the main subject—relegating the background to something to be "gotten through"—a nuisance even. Just the other

day I saw a beautifully drawn flower. The artist had done a lovely job but asked on Facebook, "Now, how am I going to do the background?" (Alarm bells!)

There may be a belief that a background is less important than the subject within it. I prefer to think that the subject and its surrounds are equally valuable and that they support one another. The composition is one integrated whole. Imagine a composer writing a concerto for violin and orchestra. He has completed the score for the solo instrument and thinks to himself, "I am completely satisfied with what I've written for the violin. Now, what am I going to do with the orchestra?" No way. You, the visual artist, are just like the musical composer. Plan your composition at the outset.

Of course, I am not suggesting that every space on a page needs to be filled with pigment. A work with NO background is complete if that is the artist's intention. Just as there can be a sonata for a single instrument or an actor's soliloquy on a stage without props, so can there be a floating object on white paper. Nor do you necessarily know how you are going to tackle various parts of your cp work from the outset. There have to be some surprises and you experiment as you go.



Rare View, Julie Podstolski (Australia)



The Art of Elegance, Julie Podstolski (Australia)

For example, fellow CPSA member, **Sharon Kow** (Malaysia) "discovered" pointillism for herself while she was figuring out how to render concrete.

A background describes the story you are telling. It gives the subject its roots; its sense of time and place, history and meaning. It is the subject's environment; the air it breathes, the terra firma it stands on or water it is suspended in. It radiates light or lurks in shadow. Each background is its own evocative world. We should relish our backgrounds, knowing that they are places our subjects cannot exist without.

What a joy to create a poetic space on paper where one's subject thrives. Background and subject support one another in a symbiotic fashion, each sustaining and strengthening the other.

Julie's studies at the Fine Arts at University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand, included three-dimensional studies, photography, drawing, and art history with a major in painting. In 1982 she moved to Australia and for years painted in oils. It was in 1994 that she experimented in colored pencils. She has had numerous solo shows and art awards. Most recently she received the Best of Show award in ExploreThis! 11 and also earned Master Pencil Artist status with the Pencil Art Society, Canada. She regularly travels to Kyoto, Japan, to photograph and draw the unique world of geisha. Read more about Julie on page 30.