

# How to Avoid the Pitfalls of Painting from Photographs

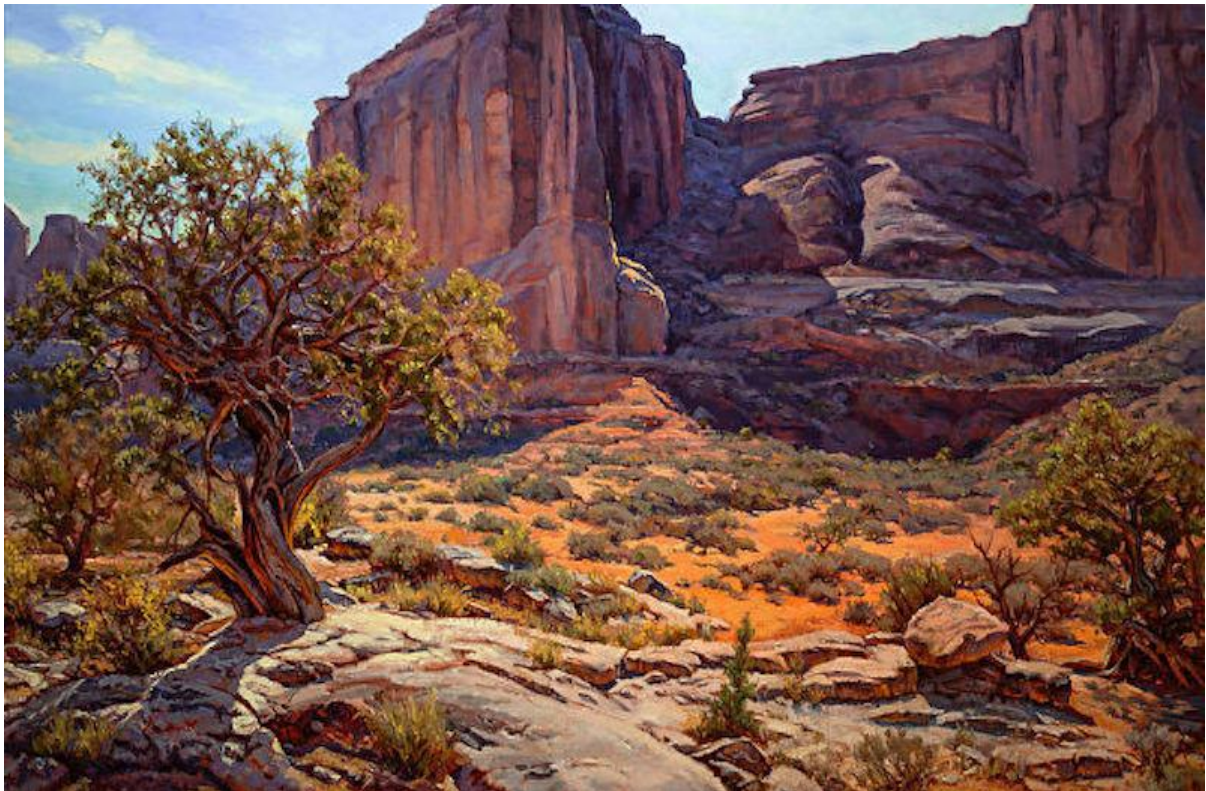
June 13, 2017 [Courtney Jordan](#)

<http://www.artistdaily.com/blogs/artist-daily/how-to-avoid-the-pitfalls-of-painting-from-photographs>

I've spent way too much time in murky classrooms looking at slides, slides, and more slides. I'm convinced that the entire academic field of art history would grind to a halt without projectors, carousels and, you guessed it, slides. But what is weird about looking at so many images is I find myself thinking I know exactly what a sculpture or a painting really looks like because I've seen a photograph of it.

## From Photo to Sketch

Photographs can never tell you the full story of an object, landscape, or person's face, but they are convenient references for artists. The reality is that most artists use source photos in some capacity when they work, whether to jog their memory of a particular place and time or to record specific visual details to incorporate in later pieces.



Red Rock Country by Mark Haworth, oil on canvas

However, to produce a successful piece of art, an artist has to be wary and attentive to what he or she is seeing—and not seeing—in a photograph. That starts with understanding the limitations of [reference photos](#).



El Mercado by Mark Haworth, 2006, oil painting, 16 x 20.

Artist Mark Haworth puts it this way: “The camera cannot see like the eye can when it comes to colour accuracy, depth of field, and the warms and cools of highlights and shadows. There’s a lot of distortion that comes along with photographs.”

Pastel artist and instructor Denise LaRue Mahlke agrees. “Following a photo to a ‘T’ is a big mistake, because the camera lies,” she says. “Photos can be indispensable as a jumping off point, but even if the photo is an excellent one, you want to reinvent the scene for a painting to work.”

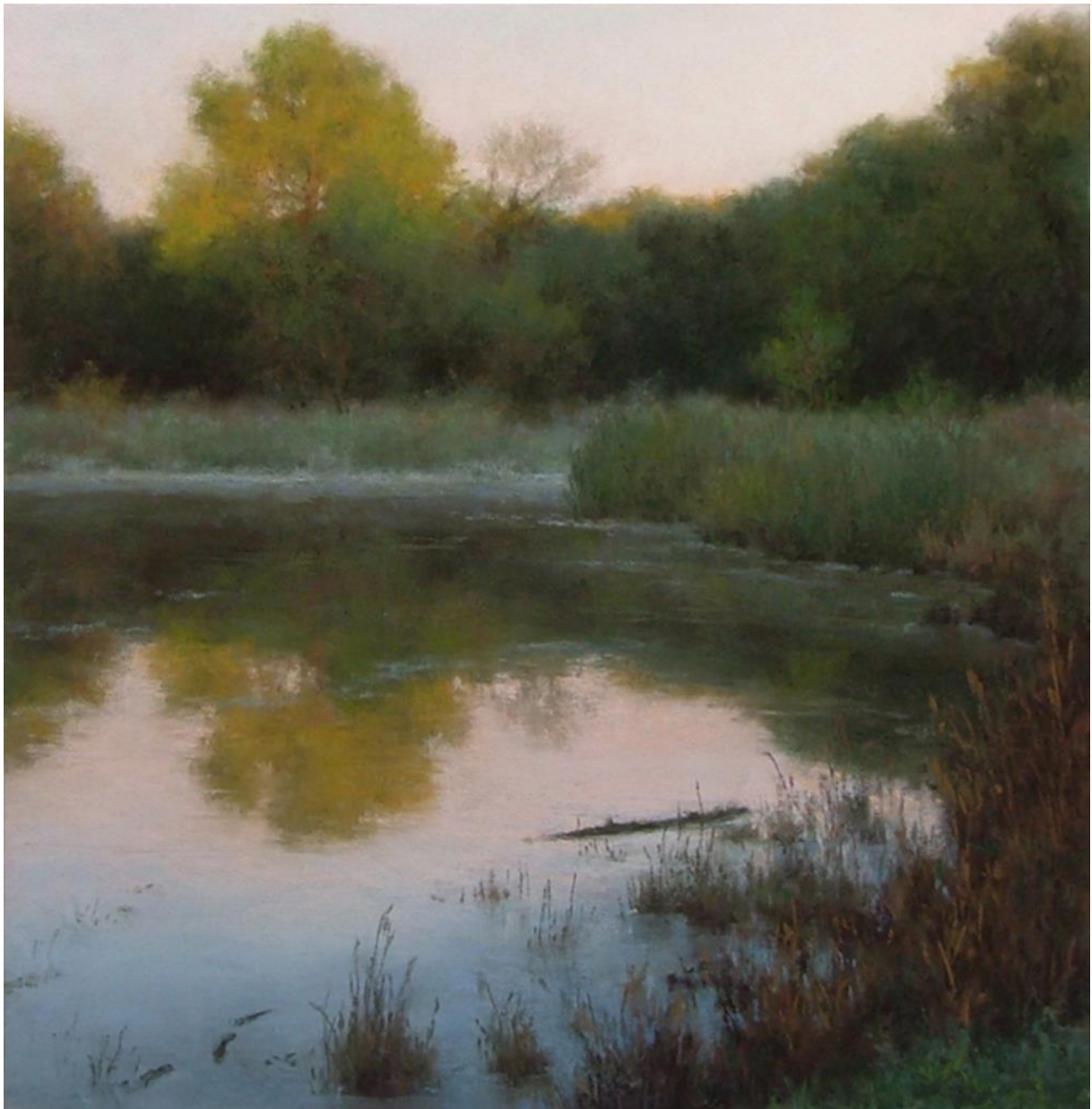
Haworth, for one, puts decidedly less emphasis on reference photos than on preliminary sketches made on-site or notes written in the field. “When I’m traveling through an area, I write what I am seeing,” he says. “My notes often give me what I can’t get in a picture. Photos don’t give the subtleties I look for to capture the look and feel of a place.”

When Mahlke is on-site and doesn’t have time to paint, she’ll often do the same—sketch and take notes. But she acknowledges that sometimes she takes as many photos as she can.

“Having that multitude of photos can give you a lot to work with,” she says. “When I’m ready to start a piece, I’ll pull from many different photos for inspiration and do thumbnail sketches to familiarize myself with the subject and composition I’m working toward.”



## Using Photo References, the Right Way



Morning Song by Denise LaRue Mahlke, pastel

I asked Haworth and Mahlke if constantly referring back to photos can lead to overworking or to a painting filled with a bunch of little details instead of a cohesive composition. Both artists knew just what I meant. "It can go from painting to documenting," says Haworth. "You can take in all the details and go crazy."



Winter Stream by Denise LaRue Mahlke,  
2008, pastel, 14 x 18.

Another point both artists stressed is the importance of working from photos they've taken themselves. "When using someone else's photos, you aren't painting your own concepts, just copying," says Mahlke. "I tell my students, 'Work from your own photos—your ideas are there.'"

What's more, a reference photo, no matter who clicked the shutter, shouldn't lead to a sense of obligation to show exactly what is depicted in the shot. Instead, an artist should feel free and inspired to manipulate or leave behind a reference any way he or she chooses. That assures there's vitality in a piece of art and means you won't miss seeing—and hopefully recapturing—the moments that will make a painting great.