

# Using Photographs Like an Artist

By [Mitchell Albala](#) on April 12, 2013 [Landscape Theory](#), [Working with Photos](#)  
<http://blog.mitchalbala.com/using-photographs-like-an-artist/>



For many artists, photographs are an essential part of their creative process. A photo can give us extended access to specific information about a subject that would otherwise be impossible to refer to for longer periods. For the landscape painter, it might be a fleeting effect of light or shadow, or weather effect; for the figurative artist, a particular pose of the model. Working with photographs, however, does not come without risks. If we rely too heavily on the photo, or use it improperly, it can lead to technical and stylistic problems.

## Be an interpreter, not a copyist

Photographs capture reality with such fidelity that we have come to accept them as an accurate stand-in for the way we see the world. This can lead to a strong urge to follow the photo very closely, especially for the novice. Yet it is the “reality” of the photo that must be left behind. Instead, we move toward the interpretive “reality” of the artist.

A photograph is an already-resolved visual problem. Its colours are set. It has already been converted into two dimensions and the composition defined. If we rely too heavily on these pre-set parameters, we can override our own stylistic approach that might otherwise be trying to assert itself. As artists we are interpreters, bringing something to the act of painting and drawing that is uniquely our own. If all we do is replicate the photo, then why do the painting at all? The artist must endeavour to *translate*, not transcribe. Photos are most useful — and least risky — when they are used for compositional exploration, detail, or drawing.

Highly representational artwork, which some might call “tight,” is not the same as painting photographically. There are many “realistic” paintings and illustrations that don’t look at all like photographs. For example, the paintings of Andrew Wyeth are very detailed, down to individual blades of grass and threads of clothing, yet his work has its own distinctive style of representation. The landscape paintings of the Hudson River School are filled with detailed flora and fauna, yet bear no resemblance to photographs because their conclusions are uniquely painterly.



Terry Furchgott, *Woman Reading at Window*, 2007, acrylic on paper, 22 x 13.

Furchgott makes considerable effort to arrange her subject for the photograph — but then freely alters almost everything, including the composition and drawing. Only in general subject does the final painting resemble the photo. Most of all, her subjective and vibrant interpretation of colour is testament to the fact that the artist is a far more intentional colourist that the camera will ever be.

## Using Photographic Reference: Best Practices

### Make the composition your own

A camera defines a composition the moment the shutter is pressed. Don't be too quick to accept this as the "final" composition. There are often far more dynamic compositions to be discovered when you explore other possible croppings. **Tip:** When photographing subjects of interest, don't attempt to compose the perfect picture in the camera. Shoot at a wider angle. Include *more* in the image with the intention of exploring compositional variations later.

### Don't follow photographic colour

If the painter's subjective interpretations of colour didn't offer something more than the photo, then photography would have replaced painting a long time ago. If one is simply copying the colour, then one is not translating, but engaged in an uncreative colour matching exercise. A photograph may be used for suggesting generalized colour direction, but it should not be used for matching colours, hue-for-hue. The camera doesn't see colour the way the artist does. For example, the human eye sees subtleties of colour within the darks and lights that the camera often misses. **Tip:** Work from a black-and-white photo. This can be a stretch, but it will force you to be more original and inventive with your colour choices. There are only two places effective colour solutions come from — a direct observation of nature or your imagination (or some combination of the two).

### Don't trust photographic values

The most misleading type of information provided by the photograph is its value relationships. All too often, the camera creates too much contrast between the lights and shadows, especially in bright light. It underexposes the darks (turning them to black) and overexposes the lights (making them overly light or white). This might appear correct in a photo, but black-and-white is a poor substitute for the colour solutions available to the artist. Photographic shadows also have a certain quality, perfectly formed and overly dark. If you map these too closely, the painting will take on a photographic quality.

### Manage detail and edges

Keep it simple. When it comes to detail the painter must strike a delicate balance. The photo is ideally suited to give us information about detail, but it can also trick us into capture detail in excess. The artist must always pay attention to the big shapes that drive the composition, and detail must *always* remain subordinate to those shapes. **Tip:** The camera, with its all-seeing, high resolution eye, brings everything into sharp focus. Artists, however, control attention and interest in their artwork by *not* giving equal weight to all detail. Assigning varying degrees of hardness and softness to edges creates a form of spatial mapping that helps support the illusion of space.

### Beware of ambiguous or awkward passages

We sometimes find ambiguous or awkward passages in our subjects that we think are interesting. Or we may not notice them in the photograph at all. For example, the corner of a table appears to touch the corner of the window behind it. The rectangular shape of a barn is distorted because of its age. These types of effects are more acceptable in a realistic photo, but when brought into our artwork they can look ambiguous or poorly drawn.

### Let go of the photo

At a certain point, the photograph needs to be put aside. As a piece develops it takes on a life of its own and becomes independent of the source from which it derives. If you are constantly looking at the photo, you will be pulled in its direction and begin to make less creative choices.

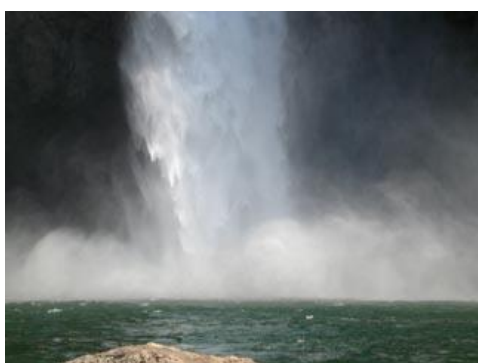


Suzanne Brooker, *Portrait of Pigeon*, 2009, oil on canvas, 20 x 16.

Pigeon is based on a photo, yet those characteristics that are uniquely photographic are not carried into the painting. Where a photo over-darkens the shadows, Brooker lightens their value and lets more light in. Where a photo records the colour in an entirely objective way, Brooker uses a limited palette to establish a unified colour harmony. A photo captures every detail in equal measure, yet in Pigeon the edges are delicately controlled. Details of the background are entirely suppressed so as not to distract from Pigeon's face. The finished painting looks nothing like a photo because the artist *thinks* like a painter, not a camera, and her solutions are painterly ones.

### Consider the source

One of the biggest mistakes an artist can make is to start with a poor reference. If you are going to rely on the photo for detail, drawing, or composition, then those things must be working well in the photo. Always start with material that has the most reliable visual information. Are the shapes well differentiated? Is it difficult to tell where one shape begins and another ends? Is there much ambiguity? Does it offer too little detail, or too much detail that will distract from simplification? Are the value relationships clear?



Mitchell Albala, *Cascadia*, oil on canvas, 22 x 42

For *Cascadia*, the photograph was only a starting point. My initial inspiration was the explosive power and movement of the waterfall. Although the photo caught the action accurately, there was little colour and the composition was unfocused. By developing my own colour strategy and recomposing the photo, I came up with an original visual statement that captured my initial inspiration, but had none of the visual qualities that made the photo uninteresting. See more works from the [Water Falling Series](#).

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