

There was a time when I didn't know what an armature was and my paintings reflected this. They lacked organization and were basically just copies of subjects.

Now I think of myself as a composer emphasizing some areas of a subject while de-emphasizing others. My compositions begin with an underlying structure or armature that controls the painting. If the structure is interesting, this energy will carry through into the completed painting.

Armature Types

- § Cantilever – a large shape with an extended arm
- § Constellation – clusters of orb-like shapes
- § Cruciform – a modified cross shape
- § Diagonal – oblique lines or shapes
- § Double S or Arabesque – interlocking S's
- § Horizontal – long, broad shapes across the paper
- § H and L – letter shapes
- § Radial – a wheel shape with spokes
- § Vertical – shapes moving from the top of the paper to the bottom

Classes & Workshops

I offer workshops around the country and regularly teach classes in the Colorado Springs area. You can see my schedule online at: www.thomasjowen.com.

If your group would like to host a workshop, please contact my studio via [Email](mailto:thomasjowen.com). Check my [facebook](#) page for recent updates and my [blog](#) for current ideas and projects. I now show my paintings online at: www.owen-studio.com



My college watermedia students have asked about the difference between an armature and a value plot. It can be confusing since they are used in conjunction with each other. The following information helps to illustrate the differences and their usage.

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Using the Armature

A Starting Description

I like to think of an armature as the bones of a painting. Just as a skeleton supports our muscles and other soft tissues, an armature supports the meat or substance of our paintings. I call this area the motif or the dominant area of the painting. Because a value plan is usually hung on the armature, I can see why students become confused.

Why Structure is Important

If you compare a painting to a building, the armature is the foundation and frame while the value plot would be more akin to the finish work like siding, windows and doors. An armature brings order to what could be called our painting choices: how to place active, contrasting and aggressive areas. The remaining areas become quiet, restful places where your eyes naturally go to rest and rejuvenate. Thus the armature defines the path that the eye will follow in its journey into and around the painting.



Some Popular Armatures

Carrying names like cantilever, cruciform, diagonal, double S, H, horizontal, L, radial and constellation, armatures' name reflect their look. An artist usually selects an armature that reflects their subject's nature. The painting of the narrow gauge engine on the left uses a modified cruciform. It was modified to create a dynamic shaped armature. The cruciform (a cross shape) would be weak if it crosses through the center of the paper. Yet if it divides the paper into different dimensions it becomes exciting.

Similarity with constant variation is the key to interesting design. In selecting an armature your first thought should be, "What am I trying to say visually?" Identify the nature of your subject and keep the armature complementary with the subject. A brightly colored, diagonally moving painting of horseback riders would not represent the rough, lonely life on the western plains. On the other hand, a horizontal armature with its quiet areas might just say this better. The nice thing about armatures is that they come first after choosing the subject and so you can play around with them as you work through the design of the painting. You have several to choose from and if one doesn't seem to work, try another.

Let Your Eye Be Your Guide

Let the armature be the foundation for all that follows: the value plan, the color scheme and the center of interest. If none of the above named armatures works for you, be creative and make your own personal armature. I often draw several rectangles on a piece of paper and doodle inside of them. I allow some of the lines to extend outside of the rectangles. If I like one or more of these, I'll try them out in a painting, letting my eye be my guide. "Queen's Landing", on the left, started with one these random doodles. Look at the linear structure underlying the pathways of light; it's a modified "Y" shape. I concentrated on the areas of lights and darks to move the eye around the painting. When a strong value plan is hung on this armature, we have dynamic results.