

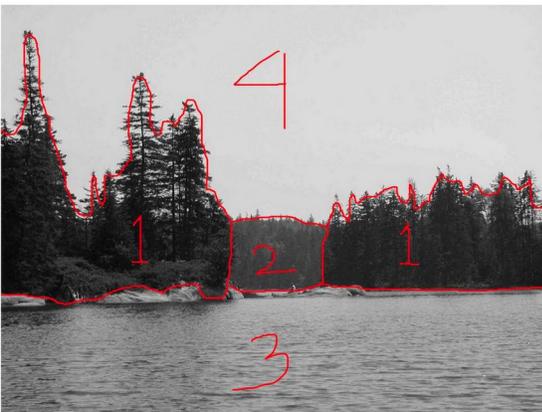
Understanding Values by Bobbi Heath

It was years after I started painting that an instructor introduced me to the concept of values. I wasted a lot of time and I don't want that to happen to you. Values are the basis for composition in photography and in painting. Along with perspective, they allow us make objects three-dimensional and recede into the distance. Before we learn how to use color, we have to understand values.

What are values? If you take a color photo and make it black and white, the values are the shades of gray. In painting we use a scale of 1 to 10 to describe value, a high value is light and low value is dark, so in black and white, 1 is black and 10 is white. Colors also have value, it's one of the components that make up the color, along with hue (the name of the color), intensity (brightness), and transparency.

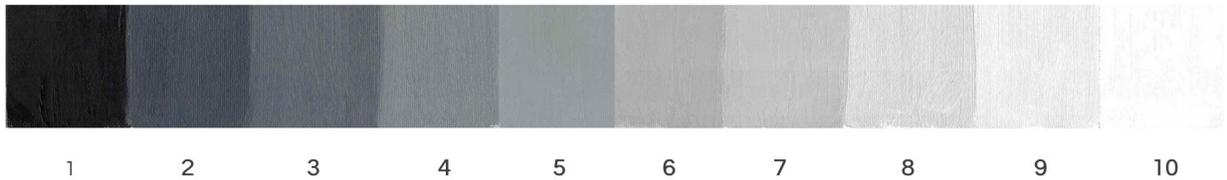


Above you see two photos of the same scene, one in color, and the same photo in black and white. Let's take a closer look at the black and white photo reference. There are basically 5 big shapes in the photo and 4 values. I've outlined the shapes and labeled the values in the left photo below.

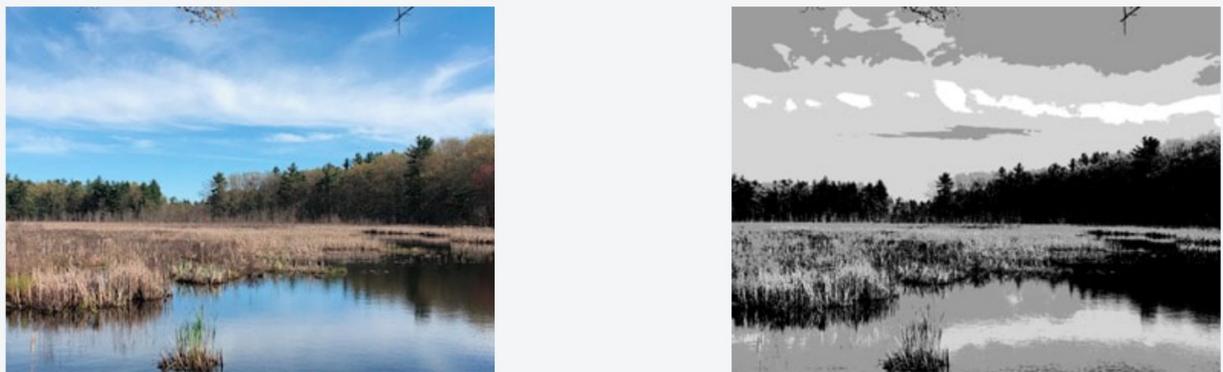


A great way to cement this in your mind is to find a photo that has some simple value shapes, use your phone to make it black and white, and print it out on paper. Then mix shades of gray to match what you see and paint over the paper. I did that in the photo

on the right above. This is an exercise we do in my Oil Paintings for the True Beginner class (also known as the Back to Basics Class).



A further way to keep values in mind is to create your own value scale by mixing the 10 values using black and white paint, as I did above. Google “printable value scale” to find a value scale image that you can download or make a screen print of the scale above. Print it out, then mix paint to match it. A useful trick is to go for the middle value first. Once you’ve mixed it, put a dot of your mixture on your printed value scale. Squint, and if your dot disappears, you have mixed the right value. If your dot is too dark, add white, if too light add black until you get the right value. Continue until you’ve mixed all the values on the scale. We also do this exercise in the class I mentioned above.



Another way to help you separate the values in a scene is to posterize it. By that I mean use an app which allows you to choose the number of values you want to use and applies them to your photo. Four values usually work best for me. [Here’s an article](#) I wrote with instructions on how to use the Pixlr Editor phone app to do that, as I did above. You can also turn your photo black and white and crop it with this app.

Now that you have a good understanding of values in black and white, you can use them to create a solid composition. Your composition is not just composed of lines, but of the interlocking shapes, each with a value, that make up your picture.

When you paint in color, you can use the same trick of putting a drop of your color mixture on your value scale, and squinting to see if you’ve mixed the right value of the color you want to use. It’s the squint that allows you to compare the value of the paint and the value scale, because squinting removes color from your vision.