



DRAW PAINT ACADEMY

# Common Landscape Compositions

# Introduction

Composition is one of those tricky areas in art which is extremely important, yet difficult to define. Many art teachers either instruct you to follow all the principles of composition like they are rule-bound instructions, or on the other extreme they do not teach composition at all.

I prefer to take a more flexible approach to composition. I think you should learn all about it, but not be bound by that knowledge.

The problem with composition is that we think we know what a great composition is when we see one, but we cannot seem to agree on what a great composition is. What looks stunning to me, may appear bland to you.

We use sophisticated terms such as balance, unity, harmony and movement to try and explain composition, but we all have different interpretations of what these terms mean.

This is why I don't like to follow cookie-cutter composition layouts, as I feel this limits how you think about composition. With that being said, there are some compositions which you will see over and over again in landscape painting because they appeal to most people. In this guide I will explain some of these landscape compositions.

But remember, these compositions are not guaranteed to work in your painting. Make sure you always keep an open mind when thinking about composition. It is not a black and white area, so you need to be flexible with the knowledge you choose to apply (or choose not to apply).

# S-Shape

The S-shape is one of the most common landscape painting designs. The idea is that you lead people through your painting with a gently curved line which usually forms an S-shape, though it does not *need* to be in the form of an S.

Here are some tips for using this composition design:

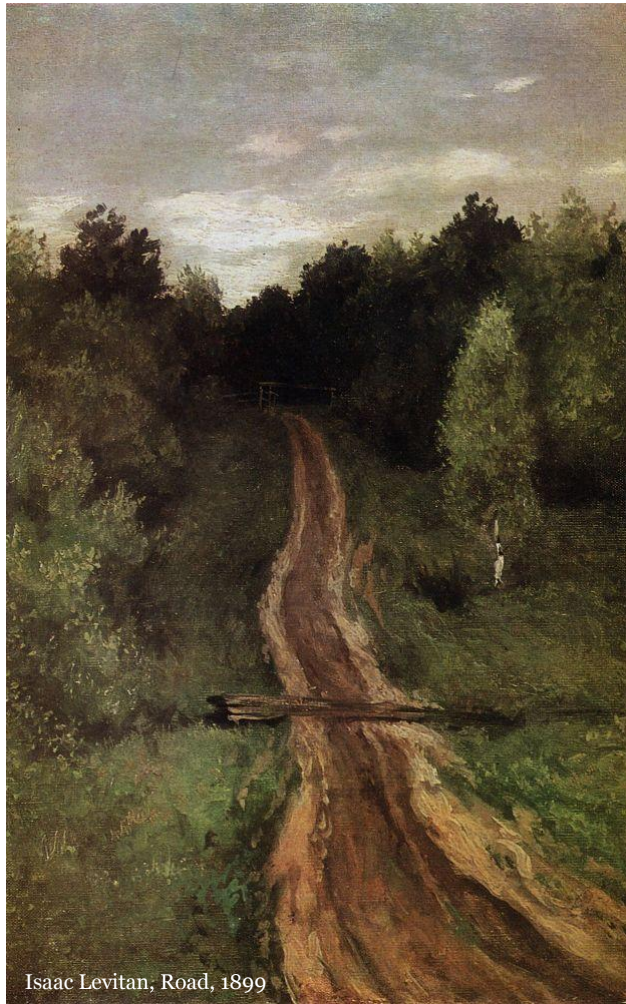
- You do not need to make the S-shape obvious. Most of the time it is more effective for it to be subtle. People do not like to feel they are being pushed through your painting. They want to feel like they are moving through your painting at their own free will.
- Make use of all the elements in your painting to create the S-shape. For example, the edge of a tree line, or the shoreline, or a row of fence posts.
- It can be effective to place a focal point at the end of the S-shape, but it is not necessary.
- To give a sense of perspective, you should consider making the S-shape narrower as you go into the distance. In this painting by Sir Arthur Streeton, notice how it starts with a wide opening then gets progressively narrower.



Sir Arthur Streeton, The River, 1896

Arthur Streeton, At Templestowe, 1889

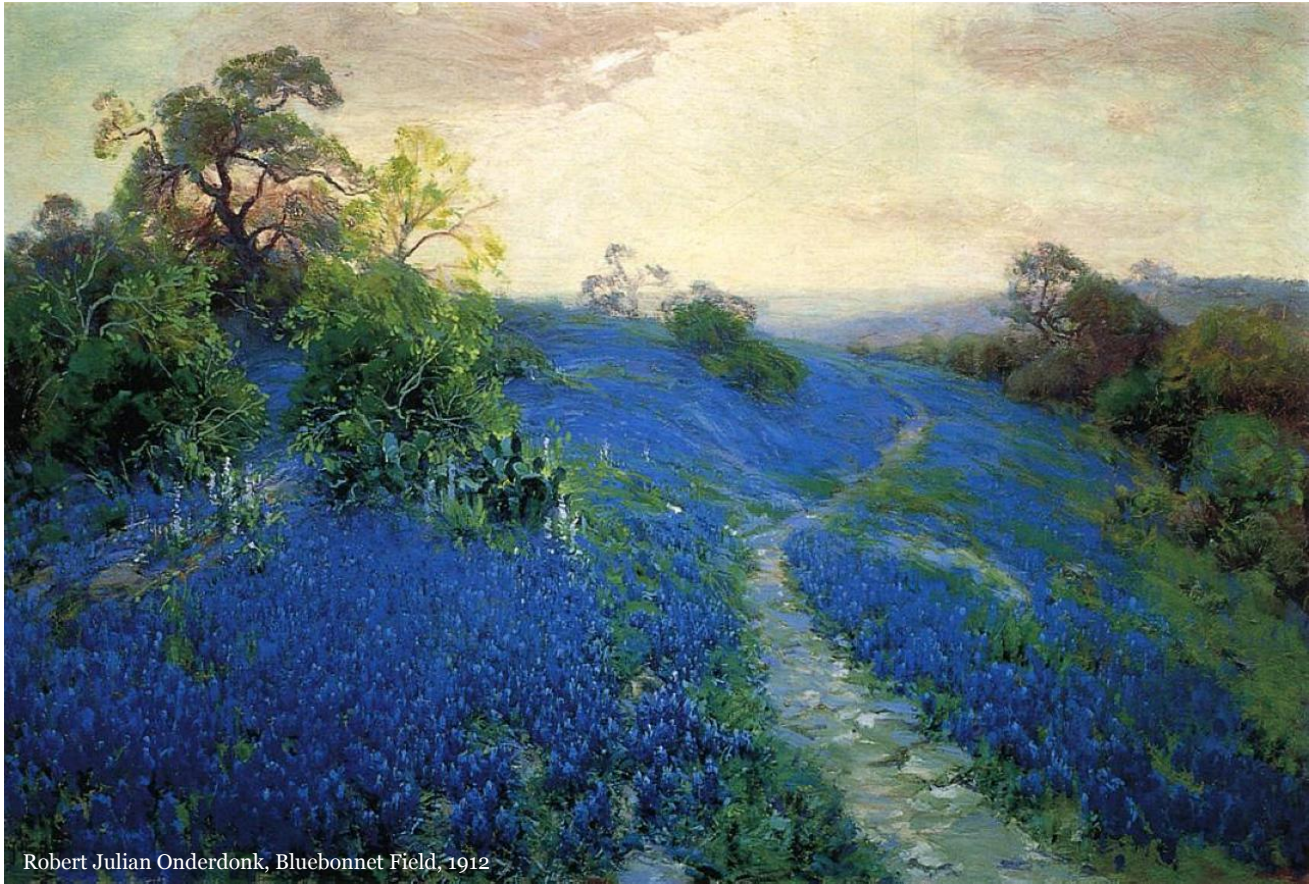




Isaac Levitan, Road, 1899



Ivan Shishkin, Rye, 1878



Robert Julian Onderdonk, Bluebonnet Field, 1912

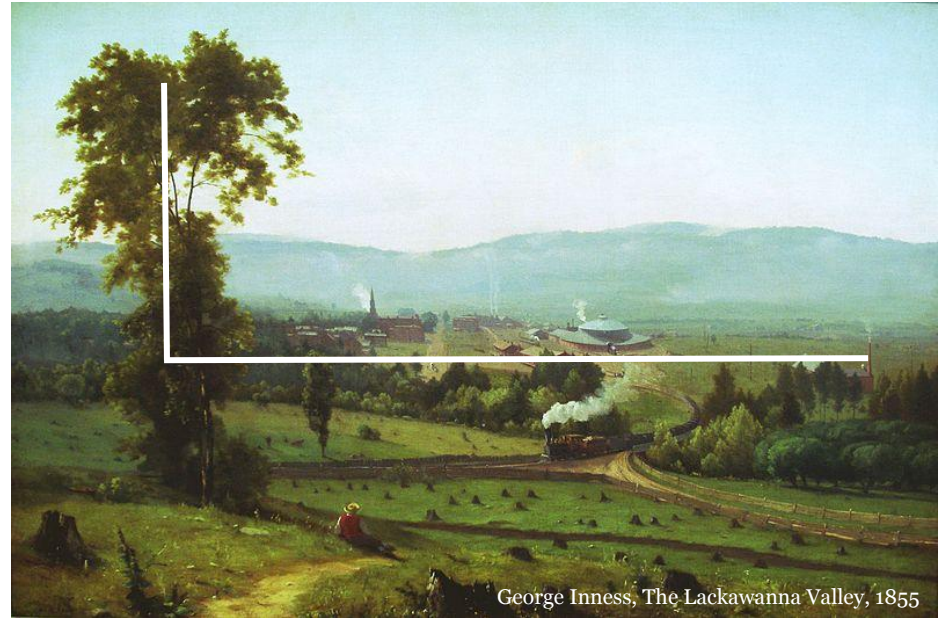
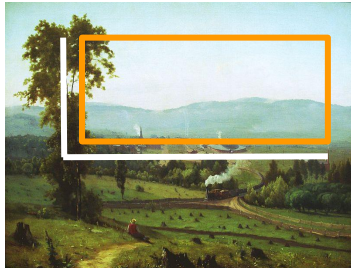
# L-Shape

The L-shape composition involves two parts:

- A strong vertical element on one side of the painting; and
- A strong horizontal element.

You will typically see this kind of composition with a large tree on one side of the painting and the wide plain of the landscape extending across the rest of the painting.

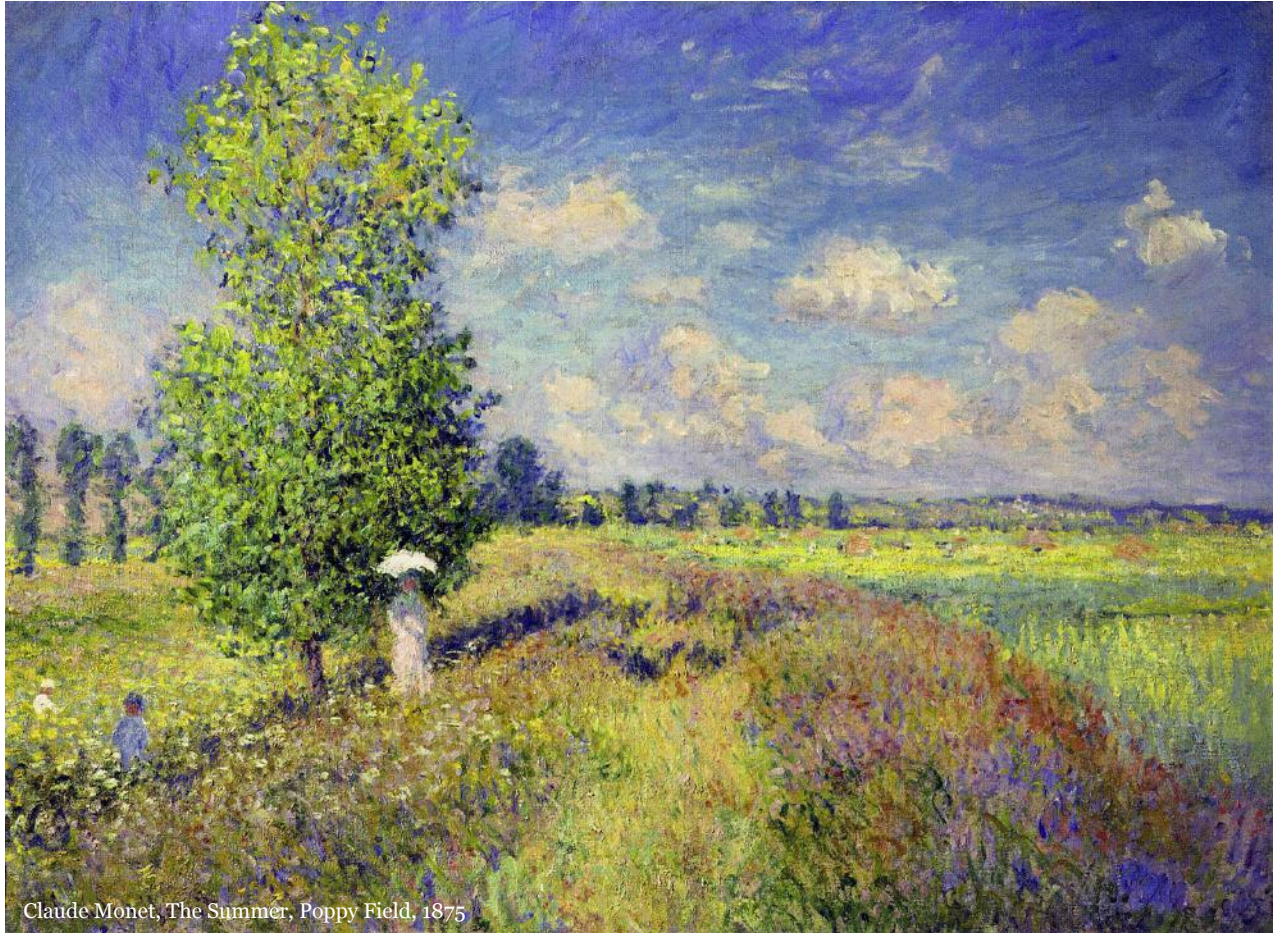
The L-shape helps frame the composition and creates an interesting subsection in the painting, shown in orange below:



George Inness, The Lackawanna Valley, 1855



John Atkinson Grimshaw, *Sunset From Chilworth Common, Hampshire*



Claude Monet, The Summer, Poppy Field, 1875



Thomas Cole, The Oxbow, 1836

# Circle

The circular composition is less common in landscape painting and it will usually not be that obvious. This painting by Albert Bierstadt is one of the more obvious cases of the circular compositions I have found.

You will typically make use of clouds in the sky or the top of a mountain to create the circular shape. Otherwise it will be more of a U-shape composition.

It is also not necessary to connect the elements when using a circular composition. You could merely arrange the elements in a circular shape and let people's eyes do the rest of the work.



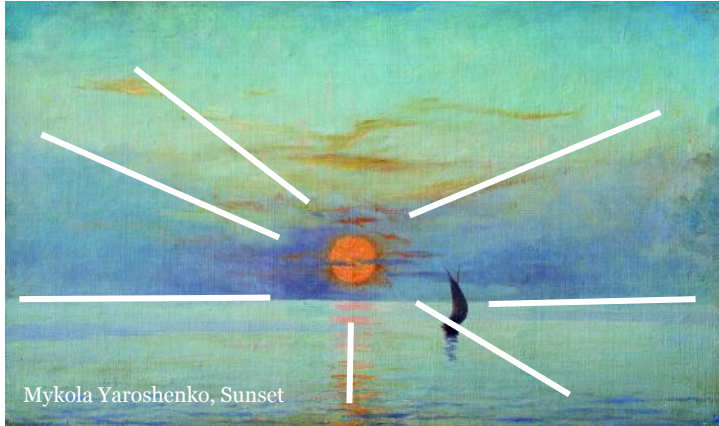
Albert Bierstadt, Storm In The Mountains, 1870



Thomas Hill, Mount St. Helena, Napa Valley

# Radiating Lines

This is an interesting composition design which involves using radiating lines from a central point. Sometimes, it will be a subtle design like in the painting by Isaac Levitan on the right, with the path, trees and grass all hinting towards a central point. Or it might be strong design like in the sunset painting below.





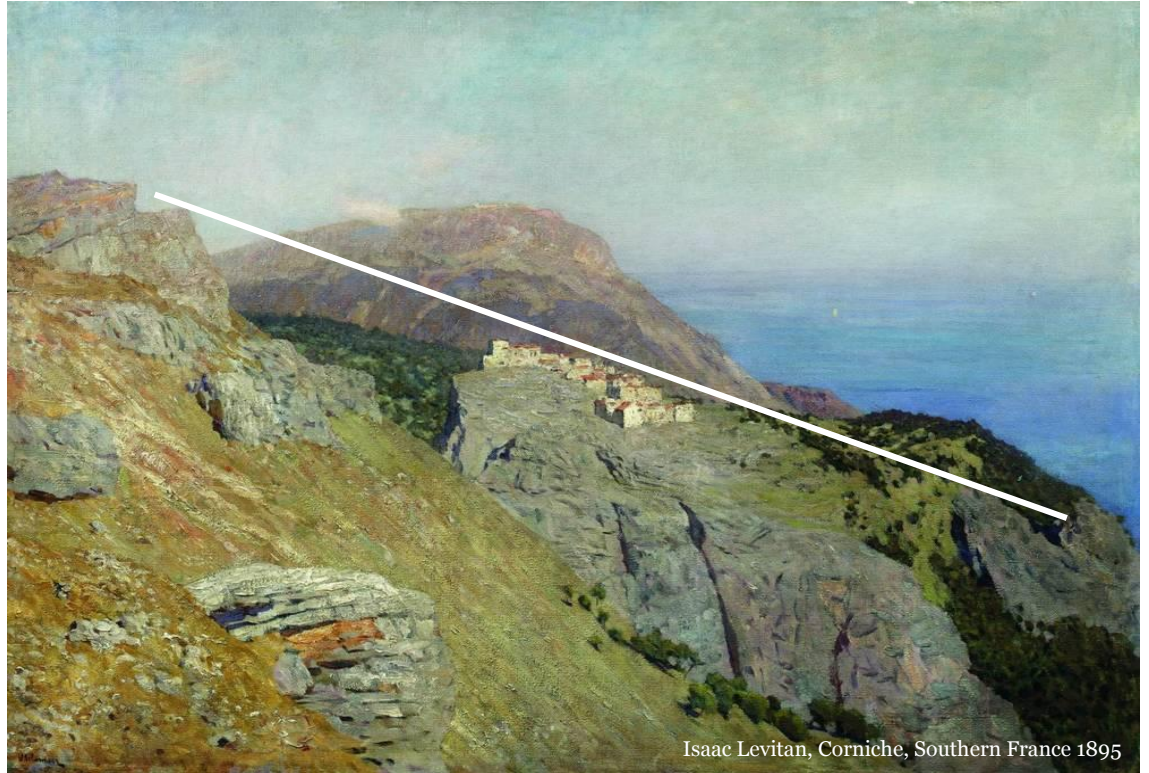
Isaac Levitan, Autumn Landscape, 1880

# Diagonal

The diagonal composition usually involves two dominant areas which are separated by a diagonal line. This is a reliable design for a number of reasons:

- It breaks you away from only painting straight horizon lines.
- It usually appears like a natural design which is not too rigid or formal.
- It can help create a beautiful sense of depth, with a distinct foreground and background area.

This design is useful when painting close to a mountain or large hill. You just need to be careful that you are painting from a perspective which appears natural to look at. You want people to be able to picture themselves standing there in your painting looking out at the landscape.





Ivan Shishkin, The Rocky Landscape, 1889



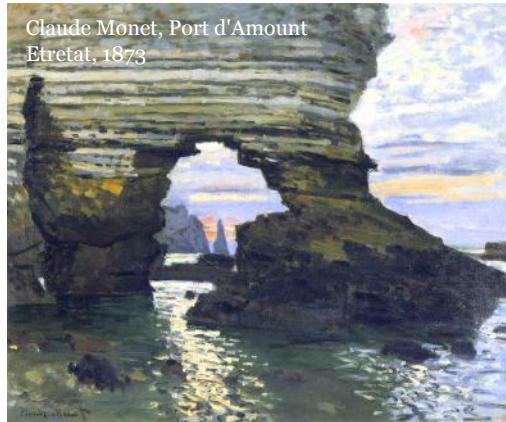
Thomas Hill, Mountain Of The Holy Cross

# Tunnel

With the tunnel composition, you should arrange the elements in your painting to *tunnel* people through to a background area.

The tunnel does not need to be obvious or completely connected. It just needs to frame a background area. The painting on the right by Daniel Garber is an example of a loose tunnel composition. The trees in the foreground tunnel you through to the high-key background.

Claude Monet incorporated the tunnel design into this painting with the cliffs forming a tunnel to frame the sunset colors in the background.





George Henry, Noon, 1885

# Cluster

The cluster design seems to be typical for forest paintings, where there is so much activity that it is difficult to simplify it to a basic design. The vast number of elements is a key feature of the painting design.

This is an extremely difficult composition to pull off. At best, you will have an intricate painting which places you in the environment. At worst, you will have a confused mess of color and detail.

In this painting by Ivan Shishkin, notice how he used simplified detail and used lighter colors for the background trees. This helps you make sense of the cluttered composition and it pulls you through the painting.





Ivan Shishkin, Winter, 1890