

WHEN TO STOP PAINTING?

By Erin Hanson

ONE OF THE QUESTIONS I GET asked most often is, “How do you know when to stop painting?”

After painting thousands of oils over the years, I have developed an instinctive sense of knowing when a painting is complete. Over and over in my painting career, I have come to the realization that a painting reaches a “peak” of excellence, and the more I fuss with it after that

moment, the worse the painting gets. I talk to artists all the time who complain about their paintings getting muddy and overworked. So, I know I am not the only one who has experienced this.

I can’t tell you how many times I have decided a painting was complete, then picked up the brush again to place just one more brushstroke...only to regret it afterward as a mistake.

One of the hallmarks of Open Impressionism is the painterly brushstrokes, which I achieve by restraining myself from overlapping and overworking my strokes.

So, how do I know when a painting is complete? I paint until the work has attained the emotional response I was aiming for (this usually happens when most, but not all, of the underpainting is covered), and then I stop.

Continuing the painting past this point, past the point of achieving the communication I set out to create, will only degrade the message and make it foggy. I want my paintings to be clean, crisp, and





Pelican Sky, 2021

joyous—like I just picked up a brush and painted the whole canvas without a pause.

I do a quick “quality control” step before I sign my work: I step way back from the painting, squint my eyes at it, and take an iPhone photo of the piece. These three actions help me uncover any areas of the painting that are too high-contrast and draw the eye away from the main focus. I ensure my eye is drawn to what I am trying to communicate in the painting. For example, in *Pelican Sky* (above), the main focus is the radiating lines of light, drawing attention to the flock of pelicans. If there was a sudden bright patch in the sand in the foreground or a vivid green rock, that would distract from the basic communication of the painting.

Often, I will finish a painting in the evening and then leave the final look until the following morning. That’s a perfect time to view my work with new and unbiased eyes, seeing it fresh, like I had never seen it before. This is the best way to make sure my painting is, in fact, complete.

Finally, I sign my initials at the bottom corner, and I have a firm policy never to touch the painting again after my initials are placed. This self-control takes trust in myself, gained from years of experience, as well as a healthy dose of cheerful insouciance.