Vignettes

A vignette adds zing to a painting because it allows you to paint just the best of the subject, and lets you replace the boring bits with interesting shapes of white paper. Sometimes there’s no need to change things – just leave them out.

What is a vignette?

A vignette is simply a painting that doesn’t cover the whole of the paper or canvas. It will tend to be a picture that focuses on the subject matter and leaves out all the extra bits and pieces that don’t add to that subject. It’s often a quick way of making sketches, as you don’t have to cover all the paper, but vignettes can make lovely paintings in their own right.

When you paint a vignette you are forced to edit the view in front of you. Begin with the focal point (ask yourself why you want to paint a particular scene, and you will often identify the focal point), and then work outwards from this to build just one interesting shape that creates the vignette. Pull all the ‘objects’ in front of you into the one shape and make it as interesting as you can.

Below are a few simple ‘rules’ that will help you to paint vignettes. Take a look at them and then have a go yourself.

1. The painted subject should be larger than the area of unpainted paper.

These two attempts at sketching a thumbnail idea for a vignette painting have turned out quite differently.

❌ The top sketch has just too much white paper, so the picture looks lost.

✅ The bottom sketch however is much better, with the subject taking up more of the format, yet still leaving plenty of white space and interesting shapes. Notice how the cart, the mill, the tower, the hedges and the grass are all brought together to form just one shape.
2. The vignette should touch each of the four edges of the picture

In the top sketch the vignette only touches two of the sides, leaving two fairly equally sized bands of white paper above and below the buildings, this makes for a boring painting.

Much better is to make a few artistic changes to the original scene, so that all four edges of the paper are touched by the painting, which then looks much more anchored. I’ve taken the liberty of making the statue taller so that it not only touches the top edge, but also becomes much more of a focal point. I’ve also brought the man with the wheelie suitcase down to touch the bottom edge, and he then becomes a lead in for the eye.

3. The corners should be mostly white paper of different sizes and shapes

Here the white corners are very dull because they are mirror images of each other. There is no variety and hence no interest.

In this sketch all the white corners are different sizes and have much more interesting shapes. Much better all round!
4. The vignette should contain a variety of hard, soft and broken edges. This stops it looking cut out and pasted onto the paper.

In my painting below, I’ve used all the rules above, plus I’ve also varied the edges of the painting itself to include hard edges, soft edges and broken edges. This stops the painting from looking cut out!

broken edges
soft edges
hard edges

Here’s my initial thumbnail sketch, which I used to help me decide upon the shape of the vignette. I then painted the picture using both the photo and the sketch as reference.

My thanks to Claude Croney for his insights into Vignettes.