ChrisOatley.com

This is a PDF version of a blog post I wrote which you can find at:

http://ChrisOatley.com/TextureMonster

I made the PDF so it would be easy for you to share it, print it and eat it or use it as kindling when you're lost in the mountains on a painting excursion gone bad.

The actual blog post contains **hi-res versions of the paintings** and a **Video Tutorial** which will enhance your learning so even if you LOVE this PDF, a visit to the website is recommended.

You can also subscribe to my newsletter and get awesome FREE STUFF:

1. My FREE ten week email mini-course called "The Key To Great Paintings"

2. Custom Photoshop Brushes and Photo Textures

3. Industry job announcements

4. Additional newsletter-exclusive podcast episodes and email lessons.

5. Answers to your questions about Concept Art and Illustration!

Find the accompanying Tutorial Video and hi-res versions
of the paintings at http://ChrisOatley.com/TextureMonster/

The Hudson River Painters Vs.
The Texture Monster

The painters of The Hudson River School used tons of texture but they kept it under control.
Painting: 'Among The Sierra Nevada Mountains', 1868 by Albert Bierstadt

The Texture Monster Is On The Hunt.

We all must remain watchful for no painting is completely safe.

When *The Texture Monster* attacks, it will *SMASH* your subtle values, *PUMMEL* your perspective, *SKEW* your sense of scale and *CONFUSE* your compositions.

…unless you trap it and tame it.

So how can you protect your paintings?

You will need three ancient weapons to trap and tame *The Texture Monster*.

In this post I'll teach you how to use these ancient weapons with a horror story, a history lesson and a video tutorial.

So read on. …if you dare.

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The Attack Of The Texture Monster:

Here's how the horror story goes…

While you gather reference and work out your thumbnails your patience and focus lead to some of the most promising studies you've ever sketched.

The promise of those studies supports an elegant line drawing and your confidence builds.

Then you establish a strong mood with your value study and score *yet another* remarkable victory in your color comps which are inventive and dramatic.

Then it becomes clear.

You're crafting a masterpiece.

You proceed into Photoshop (or your painting program of choice) carefully, concentrating, taking your time, being decisive with each brush stroke…

But as the hours pass, "finish fatigue" sets in and the temptation to rush and cut corners intensifies.

So you bust out your texture brushes and your scatter brushes hoping to speed things up. You apply some photo textures here and there...

You manage to control these digital conveniences at first but eventually you get a little lazy and let your guard down…

Then, in what seems like an instant, *The Texture Monster* strikes and devours *everything* for which you worked so hard.

You Never Even Saw It Coming…

Even within a very tight composition, Asher Brown Durand tamed the many textures in his 'Study Of A

Your sky looks like an ocean, your mountains like a pile of melted crayons, your rocks and trees like they came from a model railroad.

Your caustic cross hatching of ten-times-too-many brush strokes could induce vertigo and even though you won't admit it…

Your clouds look like bird poop.

You fight back with everything you can think of…

Levels, Brightness/ Contrast, Hue Shifts, Curves, Layer Opacity, Airbrush, Gradients, Undo, Redo, MORE TEXTURE and brush stroke after brush stroke after brush stroke after brush stroke after brush stroke after brush stroke…

But nothing works. The painting just gets worse and worse.

As dawn breaks through the window of your studio, you collapse, face-down, on your Wacom tablet, exhausted.

The stylus slips out of your RSI-afflicted-hand and falls in slow motion to the ground…

You muster just enough strength to close the file and move it to the Trash.

The Texture Monster wins again.

Terrifying, I know.

Warn your friends…

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Take Heart, Fellow Painters!

'The Natural Bridge, Virginia' by Frederic Edwin Church

The Texture Monster has been defeated *many* times throughout history.

[Thomas Cole](), [Albert Bierstadt](), [Frederic Church]() and the other painters of [The Hudson River School]() went toe-to-toe with *The Texture Monster* time and time again and *won*.

…time and time again.

The Hudson River Painters tamed *The Texture Monster* and made it obey.

Texture served the vision they set for their paintings.

They developed a "visual voice" which remains unique and powerful throughout history.

They combined romanticism with realism; patriotism with religion with humanism; nostalgia with hope…

Although they mastered the many elements of design to craft this epic vision,*TEXTURE* (which, for the purposes of this lesson, includes "detail") played a particularly unique and important role.

The secret to their many victories against *The Texture Monster* can be found in the way they wielded three ancient weapons: Atmosphere, Scale and, appropriately, Shadows…

Don't Feed The Monster.

Before I explain the secret weapons of The Hudson River School, we must acknowledge one of the most significant problems with the current digital painting culture.

Digital painters are especially vulnerable to *The Texture Monster* because so many of us are obsessed with speed and shortcuts.

Entire communities of inexperienced artists have made it a practice to slap together a bunch of photos from a Google Image Search and call it "painting."

Now, I'm a big fan of shortcuts and I also *love* digital painting. I'm not trying to convince you that digital painting is awesome.

I'm saying that when it comes to "digital painting," don't forget the "painting."

Technology is not the problem. Impatience is.

The Hudson River Painters never had to worry that adding a photo texture on a "Multiply" Layer might suddenly wreck a work-in-progress. The medium and tools of oil painting dictated that they build Texture gradually.
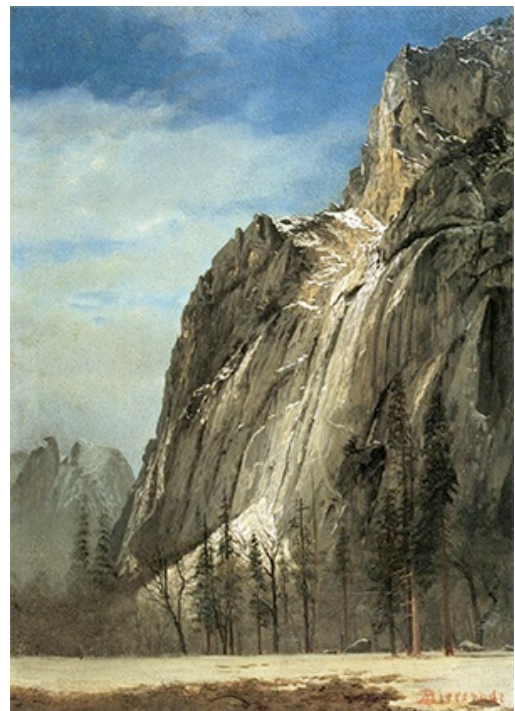
Digital painters have the ability to introduce tremendous amounts of Texture in just a click or two…

…and our textures can get completely out of control in just a click or two.

Yes, of course, let's embrace technology, but just because technology might speed up *certain parts* of the process, quality and (dare I say) MASTERY still takes focus and patience.

When you seek speed over quality, any number of disasters can occur, including a visit from *you-know-who.* So when you're painting, don't feed *The Texture Monster* with impatience or, worse, laziness.

Instead of feeding it, pick up your ancient weapons, take a stand and fight.

Painter Albert Bierstadt selectively placed, enhanced, obscured and diminished texture so that it served his composition.

Weapon #1: Tame The Texture Monster With Atmosphere:

In "Shandakan Range" by Asher Brown Durand, the artist achieved a sense of atmosphere by mixing a golden yellow hue into every color, even the cool white of the distant background.

By mixing oil paints on a palette, the Hudson River Painters could be sure that the colors would harmonize before they made even a single brush stroke on the canvas.

There were no surprises like the kind you get in digital painting – especially when photo textures and texture brushes get involved.

Mixing paint makes it easier to achieve color harmony because the colors can blend together right on the palette – even accidentally.

Color harmony can (and likely will) help to create a sense of atmosphere.

In 'Shandakan Range' by Asher Brown Durand (left), the artist achieved a sense of atmosphere by mixing a golden yellow hue into every area of the painting.

The yellow is most prominent in the foreground. Even the shadows carry that same, warm tint.

(Warm shadows are common in the Hudson River School paintings.)

A cooler white (yet still with a hint of golden yellow) envelops the distant background and separates it from the warmer foreground.

In this painting, it's the cool white which provides a sense of atmosphere and causes the background to recede.

(Cool hues often submit to warm ones – but not always.)

The midground has a gradient of color which connects the foreground to the distant background. That gradient is what gives the painting such a great sense of depth.

Note how the distant mountains in 'Shandakan Range' are just barely visible.

The atmosphere blurs and obscures detail (Texture) and that effect increases as the *density* of atmosphere increases.

So the farther away a form is, the more it blends in with the color of the atmosphere. Also, the farther away a form is, the less prominent it's detail.

And detail, with few exceptions, is Texture. That we've already established.

Granted, 'Shandakan Range' is an extreme example (the painting is practically monochromatic) but it is an optimal example of my point: *Atmosphere simplifies and unifies complex textures.*

So when you're applying Texture to your paintings, ask yourself:

1. What role does the atmosphere play in this painting?

2. How will the atmosphere effect each texture?

3. How will I (or should I) design the atmosphere to enhance or obscure certain textures?

Weapon #2: Tame The Texture Monster With Scale:

'Rocky Cliff' by Asher Brown Durand is a great example of how Texture can communicate the proportion and contour of individual forms within a painting.

Artists write me all the time wanting to know how to improve their rendering.

In most cases, better rendering will not save them (subscribe to my newsletter and find out what will) but for those of you who actually are ready to focus on rendering, make sure you understand this.

It is difficult to explain so be sure to ask questions in the comments below if you need clarification.

Bear with me. This is the hardest part of this whole post.

It's all downhill once we get to Shadow…

The simplest way to say it is this:

The textures in your digital paintings might be too big.

Although this statement grossly oversimplifies the problem most digital painters have with Textural Scale, the easiest way to spot the problem is to look for oversized textures.

This test won't reveal every textural problem, but it will reveal the most common one – wacky Textural Scale.

Oversized textures will skew the sense of scale in your painting.

Oversized textures will make the world within your painting look like a toy or a stop-motion animated movie.

…and maybe [that's what you're going for](), but even then you still want to be intentional about it. You still want to be in control of the weapon, so to speak (so you don't accidentally poke your own eye out).

We often focus on the contour of the forms in our paintings and forget the importance of the textural information *within* those contours.

But when you start thinking about the scale of your textures, you start thinking about how a texture does or doesn't *fit* the form to which you are applying it.

To think of Texture as "form within the forms" will help you to communicate your vision more clearly. Texture describes what that form is, what material it's made of, it's role within the composition of the painting, it's position relative to the viewer, etc.

The sense of scale in 'Cathedral Rocks, Yosemite Valley, Winter' by Albert Bierstadt is achieved
mostly with Texture because a clear, dry atmosphere was necessary
to communicate the cold climate and high elevation.

In Thomas Cole's epic painting 'The Oxbow' the textures are vital to the sense of dynamic scale.

Study the two paintings on the previous page. Take your time. Focus.

Unlike 'Shandakan Range', which has a dense atmosphere that tints the midground and background and obscures the textures therein, neither of these paintings primarily rely on Atmosphere to communicate Scale.

However, both paintings have an epic sense of scale.

Now, let me be clear, these two paintings *DO* have a sense of atmosphere.

Note how the ultramarine sky in 'Cathedral Rocks' tints the shadows and obscures the detail of the mountains slightly. Note how the distant mountains in 'The Oxbow' fade into the sky.

Simply, the atmosphere in both paintings is not as prominent as it is in 'Shandakan Range.'

So how do both paintings convey such a vast scale if not with a strong sense of atmosphere?

You're absolutely right. Textural Scale.

The textures in 'Cathedral Rocks' and 'The Oxbow' are so carefully rendered and proportioned that they carry most of the responsibility for the vast sense of scale in these paintings.

The textures create what is almost an irregular perspective grid over every form. This "textural perspective" allows every form to sit in it's proper location within the world of the painting because the textures are the right size and shape.

The forms within the forms.

So, every time you apply a new texture (via adjustment layer or scatter brush or whatever) ask yourself these questions:

   1. Is this texture appropriate for the form to which I'm applying it and for the painting as a whole?

   2. Considering the relative position of the form in relationship to the viewer, is it's texture the appropriate scale?

   3. Considering the relative position of the form within the world of the painting, is it's texture the appropriate scale?

   4. Does this texture fit the contour of the form to which I am applying it?

…in that order. Does this make sense?

Weapon #3: Tame The Texture Monster With Shadow:

Albert Bierstadt kept the many intense textures in 'A Rocky Mountain View'
under control by grouping textured forms together in shadow.

Now this is where it gets fun.

One of my favorite ways to trap and tame Texture is with Shadow.

That's exactly what Bierstadt did with his painting 'A Rocky Mountain View' (shown above).

Take a minute and imagine this painting lit from the front, without the shadows in the foreground and midground. It could easily have become a caustic mess.

That group of trees in the foreground, which is so vital to the composition, might just become a mass of textural noise in front of those very textural mountains in the background. The foreground would be in constant competition with that epic sky and that melodramatic sense of depth would be gone.

Enter *The Texture Monster*.

Bierstadt knew this painting was at-risk of *Texture Monster* attack which is why, I'm sure, he "grouped" the compositional forms within the foreground (and some forms in the midground) together with shadow, simplifying everything that might undermine the point of the painting.

The point of the painting is the way light breaks through the clouds in that epic sky. And it's pretty awesome how Bierstadt took the shadows that would already have been present in this view he observed and designed them to trap and tame*The Texture Monster*.

So when you're wielding the ancient weapon of Shadow, ask your self these questions:

> 1.What is the point of my painting and how can shadow help my audience to focus on that point?
>
> 2.Are there areas in the painting where shadows would naturally occur?
>
> 3.How can I design those naturally-occurring shadows to serve my point, my vision, my composition?

I have just a couple more important things to say about Shadow.

1.) This is not an excuse to just black out everything you don't know how to handle.

The Hudson River Painters respected the vitality of Shadow in their paintings and so should you. Use it as often as it's appropriate for each individual painting, but don't just replace Texture cheats with Shadow cheats.

2.) For further insight about Shadow…

Scroll up to the section titled "But Take Heart, Fellow Painters!" and look again at 'The Natural Bridge, Virginia' by Frederic Edwin Church. Church trapped and tamed *The Texture Monster* with shadow here as well.

(Side note: He's my favorite of the Hudson River Painters and that's my favorite painting from The Hudson River School.)

Homework:

Bierstadt's 'A Rocky Mountain View' is pretty atmospheric and cloudy.

Bierstadt *could* have used Atmosphere to obscure the background *more than he did.*

The sense of atmosphere is especially evident in this painting because the clouds and mist are such a big deal. They're there because Bierstadt put them there. He didn't make his design choices by accident.

A designed atmosphere would have achieved the separation of the foreground trees and other foreground details from the mountains and sky to avoid a caustic mess. It certainly worked for Asher Brown Durand in 'Shandakan Range.'

So, why didn't Bierstadt just protect his painting from The Texture Monster with Atmosphere when it was already so prominent?

I have my thoughts, but I want you to work this out.

Think it through and share your thoughts in the comments here:

http://ChrisOatley.com/TextureMonster/

Don't worry about being wrong. Although I think I can defend my own opinion, we can't be completely certain unless we talk to Bierstadt.

And he's dead, so…

It's up for discussion.

The Hudson River Painters Faced The Texture Monster Head-On.

Texture is detail. Texture is contrast. Texture is form.

So when you add texture to a painting, you are putting detail on top of detail. Contrast on top of contrast. Form on top of form.

Detail, contrast and form are all things that draw attention.

Chaos will ensue if you don't make a plan for your texture from the start and consider every application you're inspired to make as you progress.

If it isn't contained, tamed and controlled, *The Texture Monster* will destroy your paintings so wield the three ancient weapons of Atmosphere, Scale and Shadow to make texture serve the vision for your painting.

Comment and Share:

Have your paintings ever been eaten by The Texture Monster? What could you have done to protect them?

The three weapons I talked about in this post are not the only ones that The Hudson River Painters fought with. Can you think of others?

Head to http://ChrisOatley.com/TextureMonster/ to see the video tutorial that accompanies this post and discuss the homework.

Don't forget to DOWNLOAD your FREE Digital Painting Kit at DigitalPaintingKit.com!

Find the accompanying Tutorial Video and hi-res versions
of the paintings at http://ChrisOatley.com/TextureMonster/