

Masterclass: Developing compositions

If you are struggling to find inspiration for a new composition, remember that imaginative paintings can still be created by cleverly combining a range of elements and influences. Artist and tutor **Miriam Escofet** gives an insight into her thought processes

The idea for this painting evolved as I was working on some of my other chalice-themed pieces. The title of the painting – *And Do We Not Live In Dreams* – is a quote from Tennyson, which seemed to fit very well. I wanted to create a rather grand painting that drew quite liberally from historical, mythical and romantic imagery.

A chalice is an intriguing, sacred and mysterious object that can be a work of art in itself. I am interested in the way they have been used symbolically throughout history, in stories and legends. The cup or vessel is one of the oldest man-made objects and I wanted to convey the idea of the chalice's inherent attributes in the painting.

I also wanted to reference work by other artists including the Ingres painting *Angelica Saved by Ruggiero*, Paolo Uccello's *Saint George and the Dragon*, Donatello's relief of *Saint George and the Dragon* and Ghiberti's Baptistry doors in Florence.

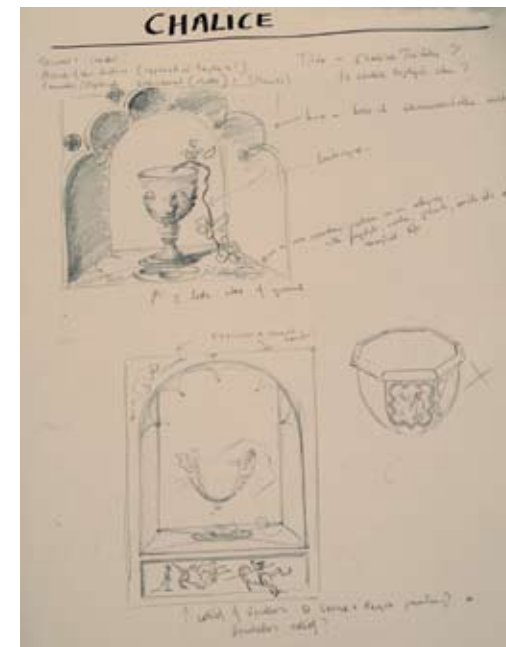
The idea of setting this chalice in a niche or window served three purposes: to allow for a view or backdrop into an Arcadian landscape; to act as a compositional device where I could architecturally reference imagery I had in mind; and to allow me to indulge my love of architecture and perspective. Niches act like altars and they often tell you stories, whereas windows are like pictorial portals – a view into the inner world of the sitter or the object.

I should maybe point out that every element in this painting is invented and formed in my imagination – apart from the marbles and the apple blossom.

Miriam will be teaching life drawing at the Central Saint Martins Summer School, from 23-27 August. www.miriamescofet.com



“I wanted to create a grand painting that drew liberally from historical, mythical and romantic imagery”



1. Sketching ideas loosely

This is the first drawing I did, just jotting down the idea for the painting. When I first start this part of the composition, the drawings are very loose, as I don't want to slow down the thought process with fiddly details. I also tend to write down some of the elements as a shortcut to drawing, again for speed and clarity. The idea of the niche was there from the outset, as were the references to Uccello and Donatello. I decided the niche should also be a window, because I wanted something beyond or behind it – quite possibly a landscape.



3. Adding influences

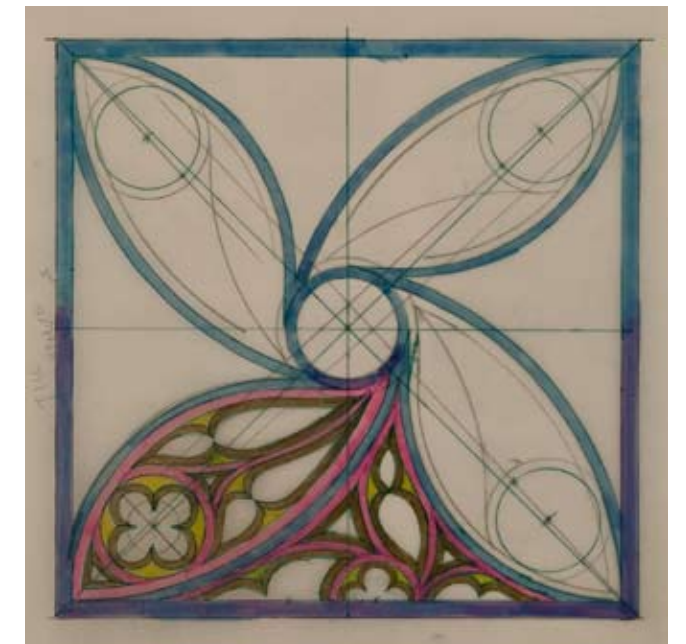
Here I was trying to settle the composition for the upper part of the niche, as the other elements are sufficiently resolved for now (the chalice is fairly undefined so far, as I know the design of it will be a whole project in itself). I introduced the idea of a quatrefoil plaque above the niche, inspired by the individual frames in Ghiberti's Baptistry doors in Florence – I see the relief figures in it as kind of Adam & Eve-style innocents. I feel happy with the general proportions and layout now, so it is time to start pinning down the detail.



TOP TIP
Save time by writing down possible ideas at this stage. It is often better to let your ideas flow and save time consuming sketching for later

2. Resolving the setting

I am starting to work out the composition in more detail here. It is important for me to resolve the principal elements of the architectural setting before deciding on other aspects of the composition, as this structure really dictates the 'world' in which the other elements inhabit. I felt happy with the idea of the frieze, so I explored how to incorporate an allusion to *Tristan & Isolde* around the arch to echo the 'love cup' aspect in the story, which draws on medieval and early Christian ideas of a chalice having magical, transformative qualities.



4. Planning patterns in 2D

By now I had set in my head the idea of using a rose pattern on the bottom of the niche, so I could begin to work out a design for it that will work best within the painting. I started with this 2D plan view of it, which will later be projected onto the niche using the rules of perspective. This also helps set the depth for the niche.

I have consciously designed a pattern that will create sections of different depths, which I highlighted in different colours here to help me visualise them and see how well the pattern is balancing out.

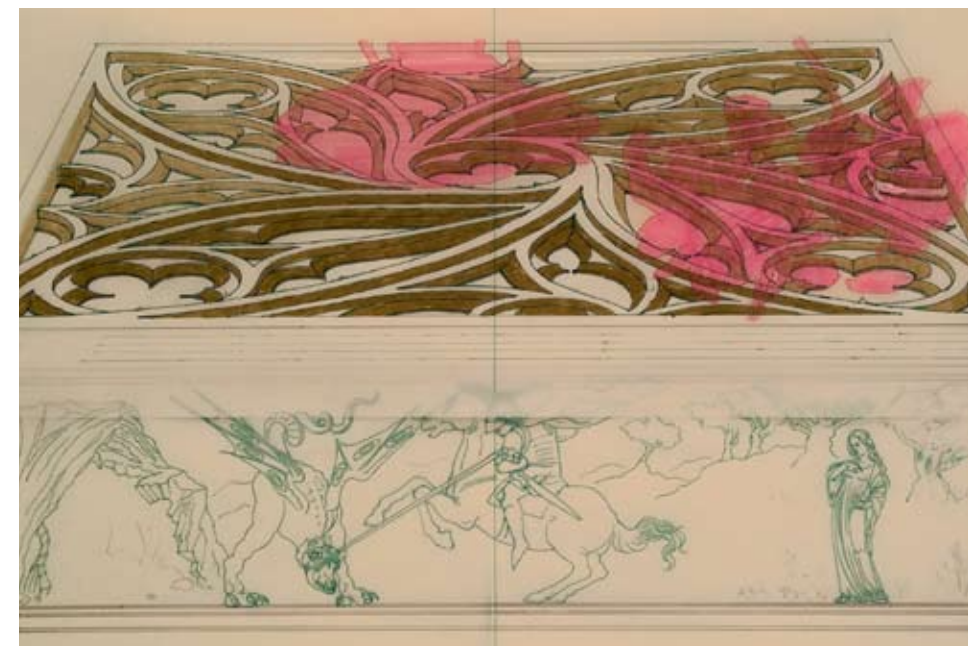
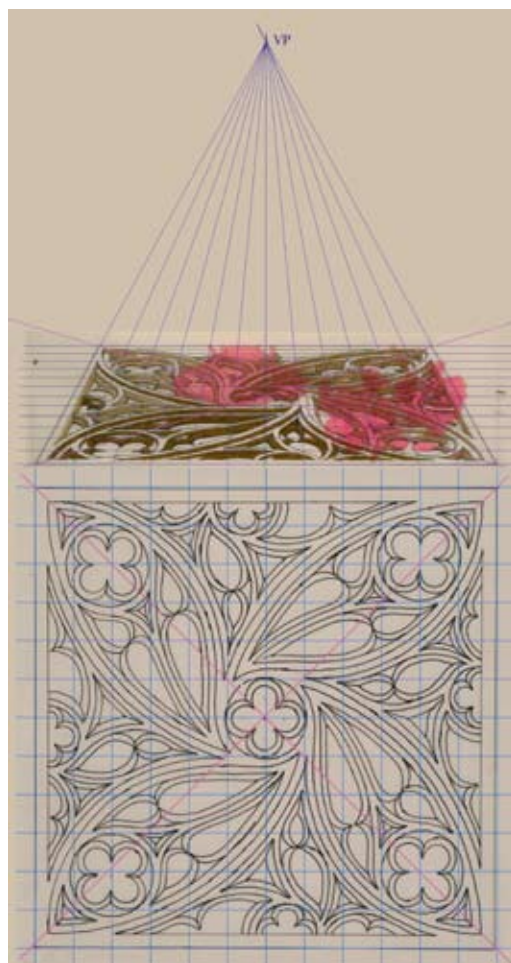
5. Repeating roses

Once I have established the design for one quarter of the rose pattern, I can then draw up the whole pattern by tracing through the same design repeatedly. This is now the template I will use for the bottom of the niche. I will pretty much stay with tracing paper from this point onwards, as there will be many different layers and elements to contend with. The tracing paper allows me to work out these elements separately, so they can be brought together later and overlaid to form the finished outline for the painting.



6. Transposing a design

I have superimposed these lines onto existing illustrations to show the basic principle for transposing a pattern in plan view onto a 3D perspective drawing. I start by creating a grid of lines over the original plan. I then create an identical grid on the chosen area with the vertical lines merging at the Vanishing Point (VP) – this becomes the horizon line for all the elements in the painting. You can see that where you choose to set the VP determines the ‘visual depth’ of your horizontal planes, so you can play around with this to suit. The diagonal lines are important (shown here in pink) as the horizontal lines in the transposed grid at the top are set where the diagonals cross the vertical lines. Once you have this projected grid, you can follow it square by square to transfer the pattern. I find it better to place a layer of tracing paper over the grid and draw on that, otherwise it all gets very messy as inevitably mistakes are made.



7. Combining influences

Once I have projected the floor area, I discard the layer showing the grid and lines to the VP, as it interferes visually with the following stages of the design. The next element of the composition to be established is the relief panel at the bottom of the niche. I now carefully draw out the figurative elements of this. The dragon is clearly based on Paolo Uccello's magnificent, somewhat psychedelic dragon in his *Saint George and the Dragon*, St George is based on Donatello's relief of St George in Orsanmichele in Florence and the female figure is loosely based on the figure of Mary in the *Annunciation* frame on Ghiberti's baptistry doors in Florence, which I think is a jewel of expressive sculpted storytelling.



8. Filling the chalice

Now for the chalice. I have drawn it in relation to the perspective that has already been established for the rose pattern. This is drawn onto a separate layer of tracing paper so I can keep track of how it ‘sits’ on the ground area. The female figure at the foot of the chalice is based upon Angelica in the Ingres painting, *Angelica Saved by Ruggiero*.



9. Defining the space

Now that the base of the niche is set and I know how much visual space the chalice will occupy, I can design the top arch of the niche. Again, I use the same perspective markers already established (VP and depth) to make sure the finished space looks convincing. I decide to reintroduce the *Tristan & Isolde* theme in the trefoil plaques on either side of the arch.



10. Recycling ideas

The quatrefoil plaque above the niche is taken from an idea I had for a small painting, also featuring blossom. I have used the idea of blossom in other paintings too, as well as the idea of a rose design as a ground area. I find it interesting how ideas travel from one painting to another and I see this one as being a synthesis of many themes I have worked with before.



11. Using coloured markers

Here the quatrefoil plaque is set above the arch of the niche and the outline of its elements drawn out. I use different line colours for different elements of the drawing: I must have an orderly, logical mind that likes to make sense of things in this way, but it can be a useful trick to follow. I like building up a drawing or design in layers like this and the different line colours become ‘markers’ for each stage of that process.



12. The final structure

I now have a finished outline that can be traced onto the canvas, using a sheet of graphite paper under the tracing paper. It's important to remember this is just the ‘structure’ for the final work, and that the painting process has to follow a looseness and plasticity of its own. However, I find that working out the drawing to this degree now frees me to concentrate on painting without feeling I have to continually reassess the composition as I go along.