

Atmospheric Perspective

Distant objects appear lighter, cooler, and lower in contrast as atmosphere scatters blue light between viewer and subject.

BEGINNER

Atmospheric perspective (also called aerial perspective) explains why mountains on the horizon look blue-gray rather than green-brown, and why closer hills look darker and more saturated than distant ones. The air between you and any object contains particles that scatter blue wavelengths of light. The more air (the greater the distance), the more blue scattering. The result: distant objects appear lighter in value, lower in contrast, and shifted toward blue-gray. Using this principle in landscape drawings immediately creates a sense of depth without any perspective construction — simply making foreground elements dark and saturated and background elements light and cool reads as deep space.

HOBBYIST

Atmospheric perspective works in concert with linear perspective to create complete spatial depth. Linear perspective handles the convergence of lines and the apparent shrinking of objects with distance; atmospheric perspective handles the color and value changes with distance. Together they are more convincing than either alone. Useful rules of thumb for landscapes: the sky is lighter at the horizon than at the zenith; the darkest dark in a landscape is never in the distance; and the highest contrast elements in a scene are almost always in the foreground. Violating any of these reads as spatially incorrect even to viewers with no technical art knowledge.

PROFESSIONAL

Atmospheric perspective is one of the oldest documented painting techniques — Leonardo da Vinci wrote about it extensively, and his sfumato technique (the smoky, soft edges in his paintings) is a direct application of atmospheric perspective to figure painting. In landscape painting, Turner pushed atmospheric perspective to its extreme: his late works dissolve forms almost entirely into colored atmosphere. For concept artists and environment designers, atmospheric perspective is a primary tool for establishing scale — a distant mountain that is tiny and misty implies enormous scale more convincingly than one that is large and crisp.