

Value Structure

BEGINNER

Value means lightness and darkness. A drawing's value structure is the overall arrangement of light and dark areas across the whole image. If you squint at a drawing and it reads as a clear, simple arrangement of lights and darks, the value structure is strong. If it looks like a random scatter of patches, the value structure is weak. Strong value structure is what makes a drawing pop and read clearly even at a small thumbnail size. Try photographing your drawings, converting them to black and white, and shrinking them to thumbnail — the value structure is immediately obvious.

HOBBYIST

Limiting your value range forces you to solve value structure problems. Try working with just three values: white, mid-gray, and black. The notan approach takes this further: reduce every drawing to just two values, pure black and pure white. If the two-value version reads clearly, the value structure is sound. If it becomes a confusing mess, the arrangement of lights and darks needs rethinking before any detail is added. Value structure is a design problem — solve it before you render.

PROFESSIONAL

Value structure is a design problem before it is a rendering problem. Professional illustrators plan value structure in the thumbnail phase — before any detail is decided — because getting the value arrangement right at a macro level is far more important than any micro-level rendering quality. The classic academic approach allocates one dominant value (the large background), one secondary value (the main subject), and one accent value (the focal point). Departures — extra value zones, insufficient contrast at the focal point — weaken the overall image even when individual passages are beautifully rendered.