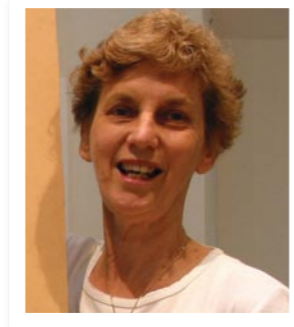


# Perfectly Plain Proportion

## Part 1: Proportion in Composition



By Dalerie Patterson

Proportion is perhaps one of the most important concepts to be understood by all artists when they plan their paintings. Our dedicated art tutor discusses Part One of the basics of this vital topic.

Please join me in exploring and learning to understand ‘Proportion’ – probably one of the most important concepts for all artists to understand.

This month it’s ‘Proportion in Composition’ of a landscape painting. In Part Two, we will be investigating ‘People in Proportion’.

Why is proportion so important?

As an artist, you might have heaps of natural talent, and understand all the theories I have previously illustrated in the ‘Back to Basics’ series ... but if the proportions are wrong, your painting will not work.

My dictionary explains: “Proportion is the comparative relation between things as to size, quantity, number etc.”

parallel to (and remained a constant distance from) the AP (Artist’s Position), they will remain exactly the same size they were in the line-up.

This precept is the basis for Proportion in Composition so please take the time to digest and understand it.

### STEP TWO

Each person, animal or object occupying a common space has a relationship – their size is governed by their proportion each to the other. This is easy to understand when you look at my drawing in Illustration 2.

Take note of the following:  
 Baldy is six feet or 183cm tall;  
 A normal doorway is 220cm high;  
 Baldy can rest his arm along the back of a docile, average sized steer; and  
 A fence post is usually a little higher or the same height as the steer’s back and a little lower than Baldy’s shoulder.

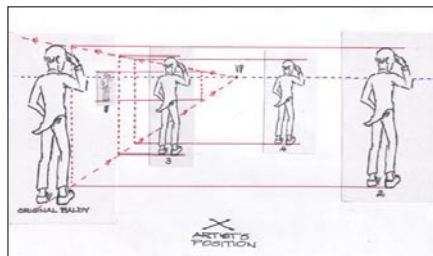
Now the penny drops. If we can ask Baldy to position himself in parts of our composition, we will be able to figure out the size of other objects in that space. That’s a real breakthrough!

### STEP ONE

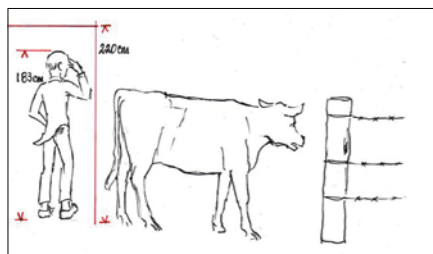
To assist you in understanding the big ‘P’ (Proportion), I am going to call back to active duty our friend Baldy from the ‘Perfectly Plain Perspective’ series.

In actual fact, I want you to imagine that I have cloned Baldy. First up I am going to order all the Baldies – a whole battalion in fact – to stand in a straight line like soldiers on parade. Every one is identical but you should be able to see them lined up in your mind’s eye, gradually diminishing in size until they disappear at the vanishing point on the horizon.

Look at Illustration 1. Any one of those Baldies can be moved sideways out of that line to any position in our composition. Because they moved



1. A person in perspective.



2. The relationship between objects.

### STEP THREE

It’s now time to put your knowledge to work. Here is my dreadful painting from ‘Oh Dear, What Can The Matter Be?’ (Issue 53, page 68). You should have already picked up many of the mistakes therein after the earlier ‘Back to Basics’ and more recently the ‘Perfectly Plain Perspective’ series. However, this ‘work of art’ also contains some humdingers in Proportion problems.

To assist you in understanding the big ‘P’, I am going to ask Baldy to stand on the AP right in the middle of the roadway on the edge of the dam – as though he was about to paint this landscape.

Here is my sketch of Baldy depicting all the elements in this composition as he would have seen them from this position.

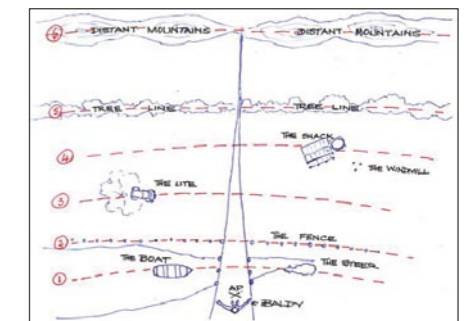
### STEP FOUR

Take a look at Illustration 4. You will notice that I have penned a red line through each of the elements of this composition. Every one of these imaginary lines is a certain and constant distance from the AP. We all understand that, if Baldy saunters off into the distance down that track, his size will diminish as he moves further away. Once this is established we have an indication of what size Baldy would be if he moved sideways from the track along any of the composition lines in the sketch above.

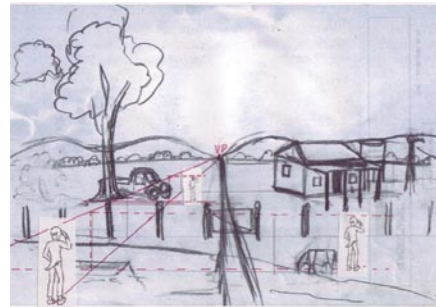
This is an awful sketch, everything is wrong and badly done – but it serves the purpose of illustrating the problems. On the bottom left you can see Baldy on the base line through the AP. Once his height is determined, lines can be drawn



3. The painting from ‘Oh Dear’.



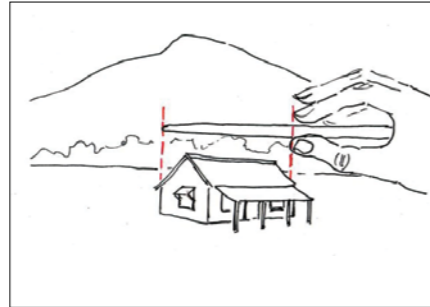
4. Overhead plan of painting.



5. Baldy in the sketch.

from the top and bottom to the vanishing point. A vertical line up from the intersection of this bottom line and the red, dotted lines will give you Baldy's size at that point.

The closest line (1) is approximately 3-4 metres away and extends through the following three objects which should be in proportion to each other: 1. The dinghy; 2. The bridge; and 3. The steer.



6. The actual size.

Let's commence with the bridge. This is a country track, so the bridge has to be wide enough for a single vehicle. Imagine Baldy lying across the road in the middle of the bridge and it will give you a good indication of what the width should be.

Now place Baldy in a rowing position in the dinghy and you will soon have the correct size of the boat.

Ask Baldy to stand beside the steer ... that should be just a little shorter than his shoulder.

Remember, this is just the beginning of your composition. If you make these foreground objects too small, think about how that will alter the size of the ute and the shack in the distance.

Now you can ask Baldy to walk further down the track and open the gate. You will immediately notice that the track and fence are not in proportion. A little further down the track, we request a detour to the left so Baldy can try the ute for size. Next stop is the house. Look back at Illustration 2. Once you have Baldy at the front door, you will be able to ascertain the height of the door. Use that measurement (and, of course, your newly acquired knowledge of perspective) and you can easily reconstruct the shack.

## STEP FIVE

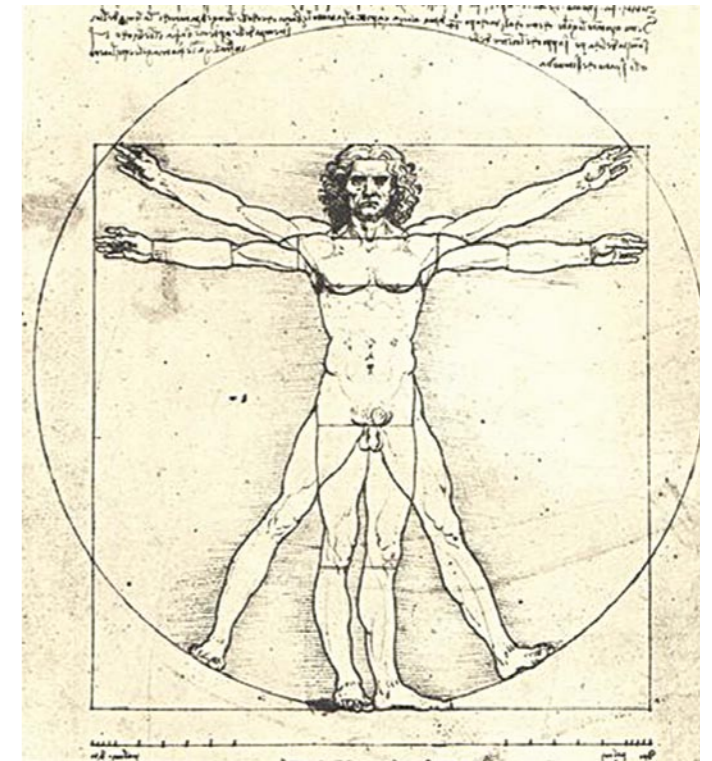
You will notice from the Overhead Plan in Illustration 4 that we have six dotted lines through each of the composition elements. The actual space between these lines can vary greatly. Look at the ute and the shack. Even though each object is on opposite sides of the road, the space between the ute line (3) and the shack line (4) might only be two or three metres. The distance from the shack (4) to the tree line (5) could be 100-200 metres. In Illustration 5 (the sketch for the painting), the base lines of the trees and the mountains (lines 5 and 6) appear as one line. The actual distance from the tree line to the distant mountains is probably several kilometres. The viewer comes to a conclusion that a distance exists because they compare the size of the trees to the far-off mountains that are also covered in trees – blurred and blue-coloured by distance.

When an artist establishes the size of the elements in a painting this, in turn, gives the viewer a concept of spatial distance between each of the objects.

How do you ascertain the sizes of objects in the composition when you decide to sit down and sketch from life? Hold up a pencil or brush horizontally or vertically at your eye level in front of that object. Pinch off the space on the handle and transfer that measurement to your sketch.

Proportion, like Perspective, is a fairly meaty subject – one that needs to be digested slowly and perhaps savoured along the way. Stay tuned for Part Two: 'People in Proportion'.

I find this topic fascinating, and so did many other artists including the venerated Michelangelo and Leonardo. However we won't be going to Michelangelo's gruesome lengths of dissection in search of the truth.



7. Leonardo's Proportion.

'People in Proportion' will not only be Perfectly Plain to understand ... but a lot of fun as well.

The websites of Dalerie Patterson ... your personal on-line art trainer ... can be found at [www.artist-tutor.com](http://www.artist-tutor.com) and [www.artstudio91.com](http://www.artstudio91.com) ■