INTRODUCTION
The earth’s ability to recover is amazing. So many areas have been ravaged by fires, hurricanes, and floods. Yet, in the quiet of early morning, you can still look up and be assured; all will be right in the world.

PALETTE
Yesteryear Chalky Finish 8 oz *discontinued
DecoArt Americana Acrylics
Aloe #13303
Antique Gold #13009
Burlap #13554
Burnt Sienna #13063
Celery Green #13208
Grey Sky #13111
Lamp Black #13067
Slate Grey #13068
Snow White #13001
Warm White #13239
Zinc #13539

SURFACE
Ornament Box #62707

MISC. SUPPLIES
Multi Purpose Sealer #87392
Americana Dura Clear Soft Touch Varnish 8 oz #72013
Media Gloss Varnish #87408
Cake Furniture Wax (not a liquid polish);
car wax will also work
Sandpaper or Small Sanding Pad—Fine/Extra Fine
#70795
Gray Graphite Paper 18x36 #70141
Soft Grip Embossing & Stylus set of 3 #70125
C-through ruler
Masking tape or painter’s tape
Misc. painting supplies (palette, water container, etc.)

BRUSHES
Papillon by Artists’ Club
Round size 4 #20161
Glaze Wash size 1 inch #20103

Note: Round brushes are my current brush of choice. I can flatten them to make a flat or filbert. I can point them to make them behave like a round or liner. The entire painting was completed with just these two brushes.

TECHNIQUE AND THEORY
Sometimes, less is more. Sometimes, the most important elements of a painting are not obvious. Advertising uses subliminal stimuli all the time. Such stimuli also work in art. Sometimes, the shape and location of an object not only define the object, but also subconsciously influence how the viewer perceives the image.

Softly rolling hills invite; angular pointed hills appear foreboding. In our painting, the distant hills are soft and out of focus. The heron is sharp and clear. A photographer would call this Bokeh, or depth of field. It is also a great lesson in life; keep your focus on what is important.

The heron’s eye, bill, and legs form a horizontal straight line; they point the viewer to look along that line—especially if the line is accentuated by being the only black in the painting. And, in contrast, the bright white of his wings form a vertical line. The line of darkest and the line of lightest cross where his wing attaches to his body.

This is the general area that the viewer will (should) see first. The viewer cannot help but focus on the heron, first looking near that “sweet spot” where the two lines cross. But, then, the viewer notices the brightness of his wing. And, then the dark contrast of his legs... and then the dark of his eye and the highlight on his eye... his bill... and the viewer will follow this path over and over as he journeys through the piece.

One can spend a lot of time learning about composition. The simplest and most common strategy is called “Rule of Thirds.” This painting almost uses the Rule of Thirds. However, it also uses a combination of two more sophisticated composition strategies, leading lines and triangles. Both strategies tend to subconsciously suggest movement. The hills are still. The heron (herons—look carefully) is in flight.

Please do an online search if you want to learn more about composition.

Here is my take: “Composition is the strategic placement of contrasts in hue, temperature, values, and shapes, subliminally influencing the viewer so he sees what the painter wants them to see.” It may change as I learn more. This pattern was prepared to teach the importance of composition and how to develop a good composition.
PREPARATION
Seal all sides of piece and sand with DecoArt Americana Multi Purpose Sealer. Sand lightly in direction of grain. Basecoat inside and out with Yesteryear. The chalky paint base coat will “grab” the acrylics of the background hills and it may be an unfamiliar feel to you. It is used because (1) it provides great coverage to the box’s insides and base; (2) provide a great matte sheen that we will play with during the finishing steps. Let the surface dry completely—preferably several hours.

PAINTING INSTRUCTIONS
Tip: Because of the chalky paint’s “grab,” the background has to be painted very quickly. This is a good thing, as it prevents too much putzing. The aim is to create the soft clouds and hills of a misty morning. Nothing is sharp or distinct. Because the brush is not cleaned when changing paints, the paints start blending and mixing in the brush. This “pre-blending” will soften the transition between paints. The brush first holds greys, then a mix of greys and cool green, and by the time you are painting the very bottom forward fields, the brush will hold only warm green.

The Sky and Hills
The box lid measures just slightly less than 13”. Starting at the top, place scraps of tape on the side of the box to mark approximately 2”, 4”, 6”, 8” and 10”. These will remind you when to change paints. Remember, the sample photos have already been mopped and blended, so the transitions shown are no longer where the tape indicated to change paints. They may be as much as an inch higher or lower. Use paint sparsely. Don’t worry about coverage. Let some of the background show in patches to add variety and depth.

Using the photos and background map as guides, start at the very top with a 1” flat brush and Slate Grey. Start in the middle and slip slap (big “x” like strokes) across the top 1-1.5” of the box towards first one side and then the other. Without cleaning your brush, pick up some Grey Sky and continue painting in the sky with the same loose “x” strokes, again, starting in the middle. Go to approximately the 4” mark (top third of the box). Mop as you go to remove any harsh lines that you don’t like. A wadded up dry paper towel or cloth can also be used to blot any lines so they stay soft. Let the clouds happen. Again, without cleaning your brush, pick up some Zinc and paint in the furthest back hills. Mop out the hilltops so they blend into the sky. You can pick up more Zinc, and because most of the lighter greys are now gone from your brush, this Zinc will appear to be different from the paint you just used. Keep painting and mopping in the grey hills until you have reached the 6” tape.
Pick up some Aloe and add some foothills. Let some of the Zinc show in areas. After you get that line of foothills in, mop again.

Pick up some Celery Green, which is very similar to Aloe in value (same level of darkness), but it is warmer. Warmer colors come forward. Add more hills and trees, overlapping the Celery into the Aloe. Let the upper outline of these hills remain distinct and unblended. More details are visible when objects are closer. Keep most mopping vertical (upward) in the direction of growing grasses and trees. We will let the brush strokes and more distinct changes in colors/values hint at individual trees.

Leave an area of the Yesteryear (base coat) unpainted to create a calm lake. Be sure to keep the back shoreline horizontal and level. Drag some of the Celery down vertically to create the slight hint of trees reflecting in the lake and then paint in the back shoreline with a broken horizontal streak of Grey Sky. The area at the base of the trees and above the shoreline “glisten” is dark in some areas. Tuck in some Zinc in a spot or two. (Figure 2)

Pick up some fresh Celery on your flat brush. Holding the brush so the handle is pointing slightly towards you and the bristles are vertical. Press the “heel” of the bristles down; rocking the edge of the brush forward, decreasing pressure. The paint forms a triangle, wide at the bottom, and narrow at the top. This hints at more distinct pine trees in the foreground to the right of the lake. (Figure 3)

At this point, we could spend hours adding more details. But, they are best left to later. Remember: sometimes, less is more. If you must, you can blend out any harsh lines. In the meantime, can you see a few tiny
spots of Grey Sky peaking through? Don’t they look like distant birds in flight? Delightful! Please leave them alone.

Let dry and transfer the heron, using your favorite method.

The Heron

STAGE 1
Before we start, let’s talk about the bird. All egrets are herons. A Snowy Egret has bicolored legs and bill: black and yellow. Snowy Egrets are widespread in their habitat. A Great White Heron has a heavier bill. Both his legs and bill are yellow. He is found typically in Florida. And a Great Egret has a yellow bill and black legs. At this distance, only an expert would likely be able to tell which heron is in this painting.

A color map is provided to show the general locations of the different paints used to “establish” our heron. You should consider it (and the photos) to be guidelines—not absolute rules.

Using a Papillon Round (size 4) create each feather tip with a separate stroke, starting at the very edge of the back wing with Burlap. Bring the Burlap down approximately one third of the feather’s length and then pick up Grey Sky with your still dirty brush. Bring the feathers down so that they now cover almost all of his wing. If a line forms where the paint changes from Burlap to Grey Sky (it should be seamless), create a 50:50 mixture of Burlap and Grey Sky. Use tiny pit-pat strokes and scant pressure to gently remove all traces of any lines or sharp divisions.

Tuck a little Slate Grey, using tiny strokes to create a small dark, triangle where his back wing connects to his shoulder.

His front wing is created using the same process, only without using Burlap. It is cooler because it is turned away from the early morning sun. Start with Grey Sky at the wing tips and then switch to Slate Grey. The innermost portion of the feathers are painted with Zinc. Be sure to stroke your brush in the direction of the feathers.

His bill is Lamp Black on the top and Antique Gold on the bottom; his eye, legs and feet/talons are black. Be sure to keep the paint sparse; you can always be heavy-handed later.

The Burlap of the brighter wing tips may have to be painted more than once to get the desired brightness and coverage. The Burlap paint will barely show in the final painting. It creates a warm basecoat to help our heron come forward. The background makes it appear brighter by contrast.

STAGE 2
Using your round brush, stroke Warm White over the feathers of his back wing. Start at the very tip of each feather, one by one, and pull the paint down to where the wing turns. Start with the foremost feather and use enough paint to get coverage. But, as you go onto the other feathers, further down, use less paint. The Burlap will show through at this stage.

Pick up Grey Sky in your dirty round and continue to where the wing attaches to his body, stopping to let the Slate Grey shadow stay from the previous stage.

His front wing is, as noted before, tilted away from the light. Tip the feathers on this wing with Snow White. The highlight on the first feather is the longest; each of the highlights is sequentially shorter on the first five of his feathers on the front wing. The remaining feathers are only barely touched on the very end with highlight.

The depth of his face is built by creating two strong highlight areas with Snow White: the first starts at the top of his head and goes down his neck, but stops to allow the Grey of his neck crease to create a shadow. The second is his cheek.

When building highlights, always always always put your newly loaded brush back in the center of the highlight and work outwards. If, in order to get enough paint to create the highlight, the brush needs to loaded seven times, you go back to the very center of the highlight all seven times. The brush is never laid down where you left off before reloading.

His body is also covered with feathers. Only the feathers are short and create a smooth surface. The deeper contours of his muscles are painted with tiny strokes of Grey Sky and then deepened with Slate Grey. The very deepest creases (along his tummy and under his
First, you may wish to redo the Snow White highlights. A second highlight over cured paint is subtle, but it does make a difference.

His face has a mask of Antique Gold that wraps around his eye. It is surround by a thin line of Zinc and there is a shadow of dilute Zinc where his bill attaches. His top bill is highlighted with Zinc; his lower bill is shaded on both the tip and where it meets his cheek with Zinc.

There is a very tiny highlight of Snow White in his eye.

His legs (actually, leg, as you can only see one) has a smear of Antique Gold highlight along its length. His talons are also highlighted with Antique Gold.

He is washed with the early morning light, using dilute Antique Gold. It lies on the top of his head, just below his wing along the top of his body, and the angular edge of his back wing.

A line of reflected light glistens along the further lake shore. Use Snow White and confine it to the area more or less directly beneath the heron. Use a ruler to assure that it is horizontal.

There is a “smudge” of dilute Zinc above the reflection. Some of the greens to still show in the forest beneath the heron.

STAGE 3
Evaluate your piece. As noted before, this is a project where less is more. Stage 3 will include some a very few, tiny details.

Many times, my students are timid at this stage of a painting. There are ways to erase them when using tiny amounts of paint as we will be doing. It takes an incredibly light touch. (1) Let the existing painting cure - I wait about 8 hours. (2) Apply a smooth coat of a DecoArt’s Dura Clear Soft Touch varnish. (3) Let that cure. (4) Prepare a bowl of warm sudsy water and have a soft natural sponge at the ready. (5) Lightly apply the first few changes. (6) Immediately evaluate and decide. (7) Either wash gently before that paint sets or continue. Ready?

All of the next details are confined to a very small area of our piece... Bokeh. They are immediately beneath the heron, directly above the heron, to the right of the heron, to the left of the heron, or on the heron. This strengthens the focus further.
There are a few faint trees that stand out from the others. Use dilute Antique Gold. Hold your brush loosely at about 30˚ and create a few squiggly lines of color. Confine these to three or four and only near the heron. In the sample, they create a four point frame for the heron.

There are a few tree trunks created by faint broken lines of dilute Zinc. There are only three or four and they are confined to the line of trees behind the lake.

In reality, you can quit now painting and go to the section on Finishing. Stages 4 and 5 have been included as options, or more correctly a number of additional options. The steps are separated out to teach what each detail contributes to the composition of the painting. The photos allow you to see each change and how the extra steps influence and change the painting, even though they are very small changes.

Compare Figures 8 and 9 and 11. You may decide that you want to continue with Stage 4 in whole or in part. You may decide to continue to Stage 5 and skip all or more of Stage 4. Any combination is fine. It is your piece and your decision. And, remember, there is always the option of doing an intermediary protecting coat of varnish.

STAGE 4
aka The Jazz and all that Pizazz

These details are as subtle as the ones in Stage 3. We are refining our Bokeh i.e., the area of focus is even smaller and tighter.

Add one or two squiggly tree with dilute Burnt Sienna. Where, you ask? At least as close or closer than the Antique Gold trees you added in Stage 3.

Put a glow of Burnt Sienna on the Heron. Where you ask? On top of the Antique Gold, but in an even smaller area.

Put a glow of reflected color with Burnt Sienna along his “tummy” inside the Zinc shading. Add a triangular shaped wash of Burnt Sienna inside his front wing where it attaches to his shoulder and to his tail.

Paint in some tiny lines of Burnt Sienna to create grain on his lower bill and feet.

If they are not already dark, darken the bottom two corners of the box top with a wash of Zinc. This will help frame the piece. Also, it is not already dark enough, further darken the back shore of the lake above the reflection.
**Back to the Background**—nope, not kidding
Let’s take stock. We have used many ways to bring the viewer’s attention to the heron. The lightest paint is on the heron or immediately near him (Snow White). The darkest paint is on the heron or immediately near him (Lamp Black leg and eye). The brightest paint is on the heron (the bright yellow and brown where the light hits him). The warmest paint is on or near the heron (again—the bright yellow and brown where the light hits him and also the few golden and brown trees that are immediately to his right and left.) The details are all on the heron. Everything else is hazy and blurred. Everything about that heron contrasts with the background. The heron is located near the intersection of the thirds. He is framed by contrasts and angular lines. What else can we possibly do?

Well, we could paint an arrow that points at the heron so the viewer’s eye is dragged to that heron. Seriously. A thin sharp line or lines, starting somewhere in the front left corner of the canvas and pointing at the heron will “invite” the viewer onto the canvas. And, the cattails make great arrows. We will use little paint and a light touch. The cattails will be “more” than the background and “less” than the heron.

Drop an imaginary line down the front of his wings through his eye onto the front of the lake shore. That is where our cattails belong. The cattails complete the triangle started by our lines.

Using Zinc, paint in a small clump of thin curved lines, making sure that most of them point right at our heron. Start adding more lines, using any or all paints from the palette. The cattails are Burnt Sienna. At least one cattail should be located at the corner of the triangle (same height as his feet). Shade only these strategically placed cattails with Lamp Black and highlight with Antique Gold.

Add a line of Snow White just inside the edge of his front wing. Shade the back wing as shown in the photo with Slate Grey.

Despite the small size and magnitude of these changes, they make a big difference.

**FINISHING**
Sign your piece with pride. Let dry and apply two or more coats of DecoArt Americana’s Soft Touch.

After the Soft Touch is completely dry, tape off the edges of the top, leaving the sides uncovered. Press tape down by scraping along the tape with the edge of a credit card. Varnish the sides of the top with DecoArt’s High Gloss. You can use a brush or you can use a fairly dry sea sponge and tap the varnish onto the sides. The latter creates a texture.

Tape stripes of desired width on the sides of the box. The sample shown in the photo has four equal width stripes on each side. Again, Press down by scraping along the tape with the edge of a credit card. Apply High Gloss to every other stripe with brush or sponge.

Remove tape and let varnish cure (24–48 hours). Wax inside top lid where it will contact the lower box with a good solid furniture wax.
To ensure your pattern is at 100%, this box should measure 1" x 1" when printed.