

John MacDonald

November–December 2018



WORKSHOPS

2019

FEB 16–23, 2019

CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS
Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico
[Casa de los Artistas](#)

MAY 20–24, 2019 – FULL
WETHERSFIELD ACADEMY
Wethersfield, Conn.
www.wethersfieldarts.org

SEPT 22–28, 2019 – FULL
**HUDSON RIVER VALLEY
ART WORKSHOPS**
Greenville, New York
www.artworkshops.com

OCT. 9–15, 2019 – FULL
**MASTER CLASS AT THE
MASSACHUSETTS MUSEUM
OF CONTEMPORARY ART**
North Adams, Mass.
(limited to 8 participants)



The studio at Casa De Los Artistas

Wrapping Up 2018.

A List of Lessons Learned

With my year off from teaching soon to end, I've had several painters ask me if I would sum up what I've learned in a newsletter. This being the last newsletter of 2018, it's an appropriate and timely topic—a good way to end the year.

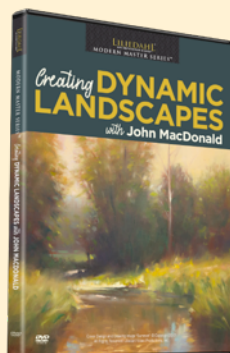
While it's true that all lessons learned come from personal experience, I didn't want to make this newsletter all about me. Even I would find that boring. So I've eliminated the backstory of most of the struggles and frustrations and presented the lessons I learned that are universal—problems that every painter eventually faces. Some were lessons learned for the first time; others were lessons that I once knew or should have remembered but had forgotten. I hope you find something useful here. Happy New Year to all!

Workshop in Sunny Mexico!

There are still a few openings for February's [workshop in bright, sunny Mexico](#). Now that winter's here, doesn't that sound better than dealing with cold temperatures and gray skies? A sincere *thank you* to those who've already taken advantage of the offer and have signed up. I look forward to painting with you.

A sincere thank you to those of you who have already purchased the Liliedahl video. I hope you're finding it informative.

Feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments.



Liliedahl Video

A workshop in a box.

The Liliedahl instructional video is available [here](#). It's a mini-workshop in a box: five hours of explanation and demonstration. Streaming is also available.

Work Broadly or Deeply?

Before taking off a proscribed period of time to focus on growth, it's important to consider the difference between working broadly and deeply. Should we focus on strengthening those skills we already possess by working within our normal painting process or style, or should we try something entirely new, push ourselves into the unknown territory of new materials, new subject matter, or new techniques? The easy and obvious answer is that we should do both. But sometimes we can't as time constraints force us to choose one approach over the other. Which we choose—broad or deep—isn't as important as being aware of the choice and how it will affect the goals we set, the expectations we'll have, and how we'll judge the results when finished.

Setting Goals

Beginning a period of focused learning, it's crucial to set a few reasonable goals and have some idea of how you intend to reach them. My two goals were modest. I wanted to get out of the studio and paint plein air as much as possible with the hope of finding a process and style that would lead to more consistently better plein air paintings. I also wanted to try a few new pigments, experiment with brushwork, and spend more time studying the work of artists I admire.

While it's good to be goal-oriented, it's also important to allow so-called mistakes to take us into new territory. If we're too focused on our goals and expectations, we'll likely miss the opportunities for growth presented by the unexpected or unplanned. What we hope to learn at the beginning of our work may not be what we learn in the end. And it may be exactly what we truly needed.

The Lessons Learned

Painting is an activity that demands the engagement of our hands (our technical abilities), our hearts (what we find meaningful), and our heads (how we think and behave), so it's not surprising that the lessons I learned came from all three areas. Since most readers of the newsletter are interested in the technical stuff, I'll start with the most important lessons I learned about technique and only touch on the other two areas at the end.



A few of the 200+ plein air paintings from 2018. Nearly half were either repainted or destroyed.

LESSON #1: Don't Forget the Basics.

Despite the endless emphasis in my workshops and the Liliedahl video on the importance of understanding and mastering the basic visual vocabulary of painting—composition, value structure, color relationship, edge contrasts, and details—far too often I forgot it when painting plein air. I was in a rush to get to color or details. And with every failure, I was reminded that a successful painting isn't built on flashy technique, a flourish of beautifully rendered details, or splashy color. It's the basics—especially the composition and the value structure—that make a painting work.

The three most important considerations when beginning a painting:

Composition

Identify the three to five major shapes in the landscape, see them as flat shapes, place them on the canvas, and change whatever is needed to create a design that works. If the composition doesn't work, the painting will never work.

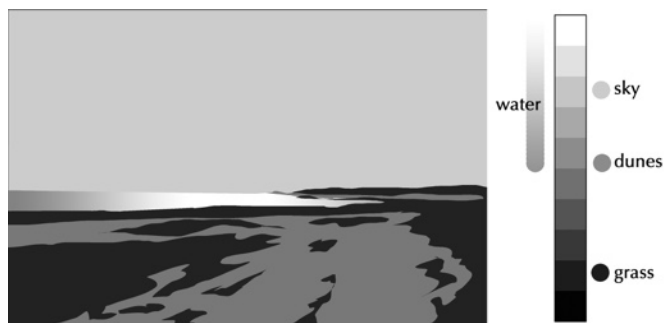


The original image.

Value Structure

Assign a value to each shape, ensuring that the composition still works. Determine if there is a value key.

The three to five values, when plotted on a value scale, should not evenly divide the scale. For instance, in a three-value scheme, the middle value should be closer to the lighter or darker value, not placed evenly between them.

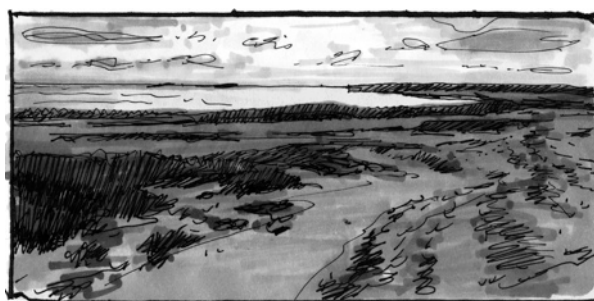


Reduced to three flat values: sky, sand, and grass, with a fourth, a gradient, for the water. They're unevenly spaced on the value scale, as they should be.

Secondary values.

The values **within** each shape should relate to the underlying, primary value. Think of each shape as being a high key, low key, or middle key painting in itself.

Avoid using too many values that fall **between** the primary values of the shapes. Doing so will obscure the shapes and break up the structure of the painting.



Translated into a tonal sketch. Notice there will be more contrast in the sky than in the other areas.

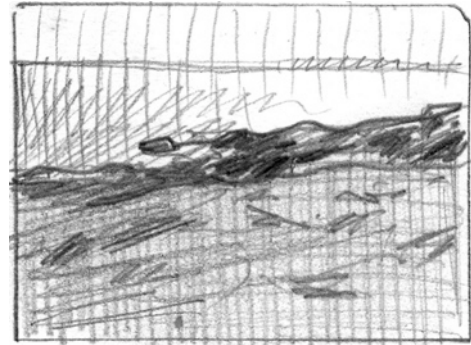
That's it. If those three steps are successful, when color is applied—and it respects the underlying values—the choice of hue (almost) doesn't matter. The hues can be in a cool or warm key or in a full range of color, but the structure of the painting will remain, held together by the primary values.

LESSON #2: Tonal Sketches

When composing a painting, no skill is more important than the ability to see simple, flat, tonal shapes. Like a muscle, this skill can be strengthened through exercise. Below are three sketching exercises I use to help improve my ability to see flat tonal shapes in the landscape.

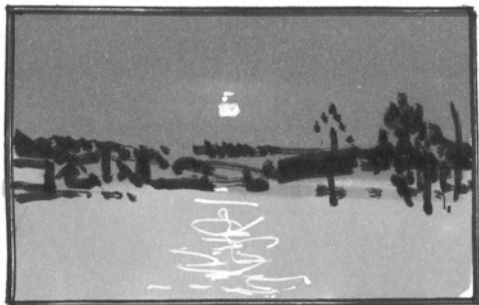
Thumbnail Tonal Sketches.

I've always done tonal sketches in my sketchbooks based on photos or memory but I've begun making quick, small tonal sketches in pencil, on location, before beginning a plein air painting. Many plein air painters do this and I now understand the advantages: it warms up our eyes, stills our mental chatter, reminds us of the importance of starting with simple value shapes rather than jumping to color relationships or detail, and it allows us to more easily judge the potential of a composition in a minimal amount of time and with little effort. On location, I set a viewfinder to the proportion of my canvas, traced the outline in the sketchpad, and added tone with pencil. I saw an immediate difference in my work. Many compositions were stronger and more skillfully designed.



Memory Sketching

On location or in the studio, I made small, tonal sketches based on memory, a painting, or a photo. Typically, I sketched in a few lines with a pen and then filled in the values with 5 different grays, using Prismacolor Premier markers (PM-108, PM-110, PM-112, PM-114, PM-116) and black. Working from memory, we remember only what first attracted us to the scene—the essentials. Not able to remember every detail, we often avoid overworking a sketch and the painting.



Invented Landscapes

As you become more skilled at creating tonal sketches from life and memory, it becomes easier to invent landscapes using simple shapes and values. Many of the Tonalists, especially Inness and Murphy, invented all of their landscapes late in their careers.



LESSON #3. Tight drawing and loose painting.

One of the characteristics of a great painting, one that makes it interesting and alive, is a combination of loose brushwork and tight drawing: the drawing with the brush is accurate and thoughtful, a result of intelligent seeing, but the brushmarks are loosely painted—loose but never sloppy or careless. I wanted to bring more of this into my paintings during the year. This combination of tight-loose creates a lively visual tension between the image and the surface: the realistic portrayal of 3-D space (the tight drawing) and the 2-D design on the surface of the canvas (the noticeable brushwork). Taking more time with the drawing slowed me down but, just by slowing down and thinking more deeply about what I was doing, the quality of the paintings improved. The painting looks quickly painted but it wasn't. It reminded me of a comment by Richard Schmid, that how a painting appears isn't necessarily how it was painted. (A detail from a painting by Isaak Levitan, right.)



LESSON #4: Trying Something New

While discussing the art of acting, the British actress Diana Rigg said, “You have to work on yourself all the time.” Below are some of the practices and exercises you can use while working plein air or in the studio, all having the goal of building visual, technical, or mental skills:

- Begin each day with a small, one-hour (and only one hour) painting, of any kind.
- Create an underpainting in the studio, which allows you to take time to work out a successful composition and value structure. Then go on location to add color en plein air, which allows you to take advantage of the color richness and variety found in nature. It's the best of both worlds.
 - Look for non-clichéd subject matter and compositions. Paint subjects or scenes you normally wouldn't consider paintable or find inspiring, e.g., trash cans in an alley, a simple tree trunk, etc.
 - Create a dramatic painting from a non-dramatic scene, inventing as much as is needed.
 - Follow the exercise (described in previous newsletters) of creating a painting using a photo for the elements in the landscape but borrowing the palette and/or value structure from a painting that you admire. It will improve your skills in judging values and mixing color.

Some Non-Technical Lessons Learned. . .

HEART ~ Looking for meaning. Committed to painting plein air as much as possible, I often found myself painting under conditions of weather or lighting or in locations that, frankly, I found less than inspiring. I realized that I had become too dependent on feeling inspired or on finding the perfect place under perfect conditions. Good paintings can be created almost anywhere, anytime, so I began painting scenes I would not normally choose. To compensate for the lack of inspiration or interest, I found it helpful to not get hung up on the results but to just enjoy and learn from the process, to see the painting as a chance to play or as an open exercise. Taking this attitude made the time spent worthwhile, even if I didn't feel inspired or was unhappy with the results.



It's easier to paint when the scene inspires us. We can envision a good painting before we begin.



But we can also create a good painting from a less-than-optimal scene. We can paint anything!

HEAD ~ Healthy attitudes, healthy expectations. As mentioned above, one of my primary goals of the year was to develop a painting process that led to more successful plein air painting. In the end, I was disappointed with the results. I had hoped for a breakthrough. Instead, I was reminded that there is rarely a magical solution to painting struggles, that almost all improvement is incremental and comes from working on the basics outlined above. A few other lessons that are perhaps clichés but are true nonetheless. . .

When I returned to the studio in late autumn following my disappointing plein air marathon, I was surprised to see a noticeable improvement in the studio paintings, a consequence of all those (disappointing) hours spent painting outdoors. It was another lesson learned. . .

- Don't get too attached to your goals. Be open to the unexpected insight. What you achieve in the end may be different from what you set out to accomplish. If you focus only on the comparison of your original expectation to the final result, you'll regard any difference you see as a result of making mistakes, never as opportunities to discover new ways of seeing or working.

- Accept the fact that many paintings are going to fail. Some will succeed. Enjoying the painting process rather than getting hung up on the result helps immensely. During my plein air frustrations, I found it helpful to say to myself, "I have nothing to lose; there's always the next painting."

- And finally, I spent two weeks in Maine painting with two great groups of artists. I tend to be more of a loner when painting and this pushed a few of my introverted buttons but, in the end, the experiences were only positive. It was wonderful to talk art, feed on each others insights and energy, and enjoy the collegiality and mutual respect. If you're able to devote a period of time to your art—which I strongly recommend—try to schedule some time painting with others.

Below are a few paints I played with this year. Although no brand of paint will turn us into a Sargent or Cassatt, it's always worthwhile to experiment with new materials.

BLACK

I've always avoided using black, especially when used unmixed. If I needed it, I've always mixed an approximation from the darkest pigments available on my palette. But over the last two months I've been working in the style of the Tonalists, for whom black on the palette was a necessity. Consequently, I've been experimenting with a few traditional black pigments:

PBk6 - Carbon Black. (Vasari Lamp Black; similar to Winsor & Newton Lamp Black)

PBk7 - Lamp Black (Old Holland Schevenings Black)

PBk8 - Vine Black (Old Holland Vine Black)

PBk9 - Bone Black (Old Holland Ivory Black Extra)

PBk11 - Mars Black (Old Holland Mars Black)

Payne's Grey (Old Holland: a mixture of Bone Black and Ultramarine.)

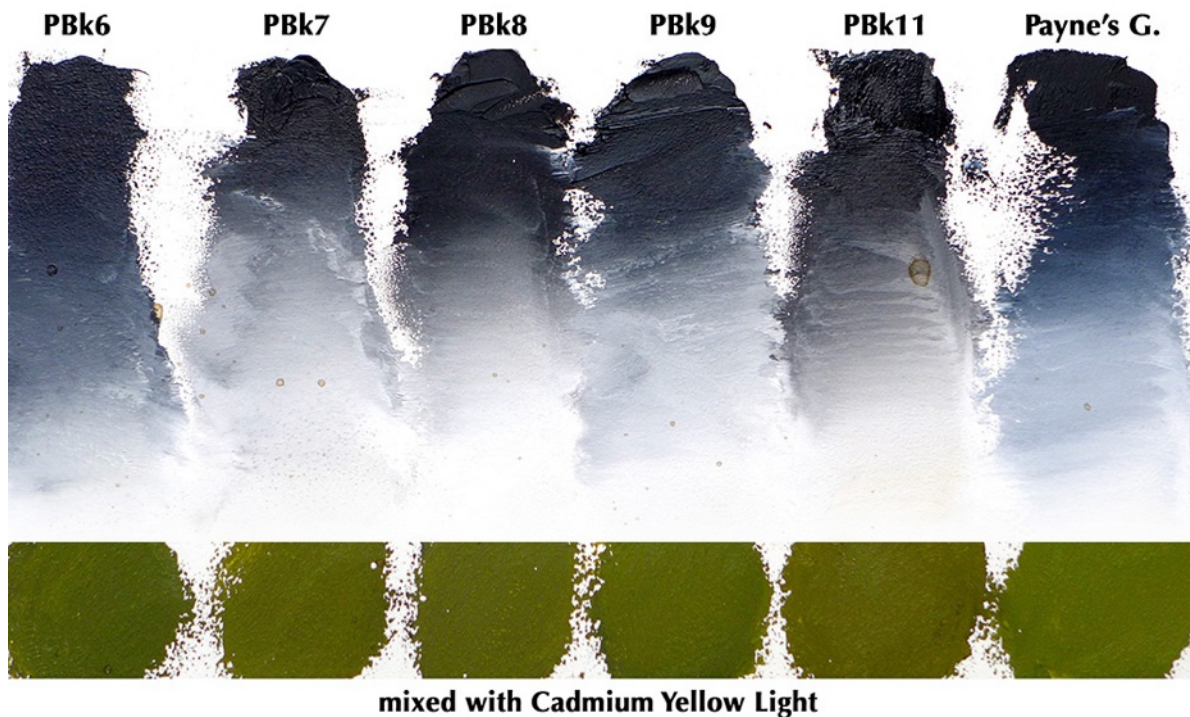
The results of all this experimentation. . .

- There's little difference in opacity between the blacks but there is a difference in color temperature. Lamp, Vine, and Mars Blacks are slightly warm; Bone Black is nearly neutral; and Carbon Black and Payne's Grey are cool. When mixed with Cadmium Yellow Light, there is little difference between the resulting greens, only a slight difference in color temperature.

- It's best to avoid using any black out of the tube, unmixed. The pure pigment is opaque and, when dry, appears flat and lifeless. Mixing in any dark, translucent pigment will give the black a little more translucency and richness. For a cool black, mix in Viridian, Prussian Blue, or Ultramarine. For a warm black, mix in the darkest Alizarin or Red Oxide available.

- In a warm key painting, a cool black mixed with white can provide a beautiful range of blues.
- Black mixed with Cad Yellow Light creates a rich range of olive greens. When a little white is first added to the black, the warm green can be pushed to slightly bluer but still rich greens.

The bottom line: I'm going to stick with two blacks: the Payne's Grey for cool hues and the Mars Black for more warm/neutral blacks and grays.



Winsor & Newton, Winton Soft Mixing White.

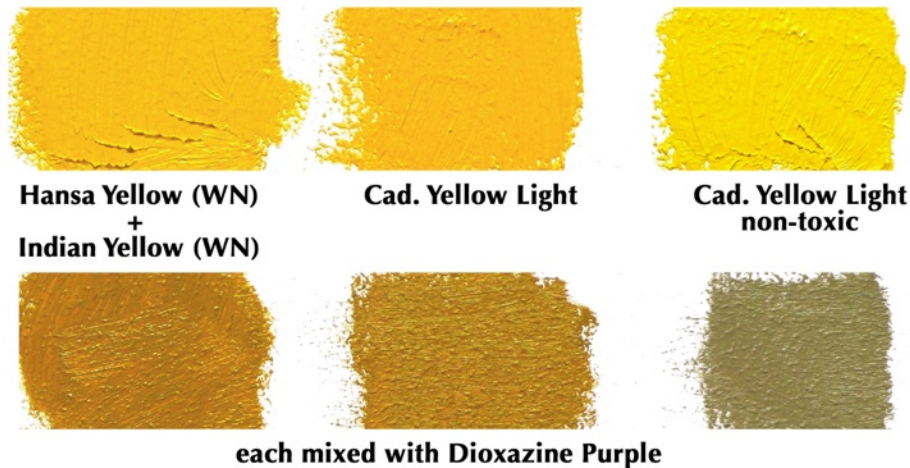
“Winton” is W&N’s student line of pigments. Normally, I’d never use student grade paints nor recommend them to others. The Soft Mixing White (consisting of Titanium and Zinc Whites with safflower oil) is student grade because of the quantity of oil it contains but it’s the amount of oil that makes it pleasantly buttery. I usually mix my own whites (50/50 Titanium and Zinc with safflower oil) but since this is essentially identical to my mixture and is of a more consistently soft texture, I’ve come to prefer it. It also dries **very** slowly, which extends the time I can paint wet into wet. Since discovering it in this summer, it’s become the only white I use.

Holbein, Transparent Red Oxide.

This pigment is darker, more muted, and warmer (more orangish) than the Permanent Alizarin Crimson I usually use. Mixed 50/50 with the Alizarin, or used unadulterated, it gives me a broader range of muted reds when painting in a warm key.



Lastly, Utrecht now offers **Cadmium-Free Yellow Light**. It’s a mixture of Isoindolinone and Bismuth Yellows lightened with Titanium and Zinc whites. It’s more lemon yellow than the non-toxic mixture I make and much more opaque. Having tried it, I confess I don’t care for it. It’s a little chalky in mixtures and lacks saturation, but if you prefer an opaque yellow, try it.



Words of Wisdom

If you always do what you’ve always done,
you’ll always get what you’ve always got.
~ Henry Ford

Patience is also a form of action.
~ Auguste Rodin

The 2019 Newsletters

Beginning with the January-February 2019 newsletter, we’ll take an in-depth look at **keys**: high and low value keys, warm and cool color keys, and work that is in *no* key: that has full contrast in value and/or color. I hope that interests you. Until then. . .

~Happy Painting!

2019 Workshops



February 16–23 ~ *A few spots remaining*

Casa de los Artista, Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

artworkshopvacations.com

This will be my fifth trip to this venue. The studio is perfect, the food delicious, and the scenery exquisite. It's a week of serious and focused plein air and studio painting paired with a varied and fun-filled exposure to the food, people, and culture of Mexico.



May 20–24 ~ *FULL (waiting list only)*

Wethersfield Academy, Wethersfield, CT

www.wethersfieldarts.org

A studio workshop for intermediate to advanced painters. We'll work with a single photo, using it to create paintings with different compositions, value keys, and color temperatures. This will take you from simply copying a photograph to creating a painting.



September 22–28 ~ *FULL (waiting list only)*

Hudson River Valley Art Workshops; Greenville, NY

www.artworkshops.com

A studio workshop for intermediate to advanced painters. As in the Wethersfield workshop, we'll work with a single photo, using it to create paintings with different compositions, value keys, etc.



October 9–15 ~ *FULL (waiting list only)*

Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art; North Adams, Mass.

www.artworkshops.com

A studio workshop for advanced painters. This workshop will be limited to eight participants. We will focus on creating a large studio painting based on plein air studies and sketches. Each participant will have a large, private studio. More details to follow.