

John MacDonald

Newsletter: April 2013



UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

SEPTEMBER 21–27, 2014

HUDSON RIVER VALLEY ART WORKSHOPS

Greenville, New York

www.artworkshops.com

FEBRUARY 7–14, 2015

CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com

“In literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth (without caring twopence how often it has been told before) you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it.”

-C. S. Lewis

News from the studio. . .

Once again, I'm late getting out the newsletter. This time it was the preparation for two painting shows, some travel, and dealing with the illness and death of our 15-year-old dog (and my studio companion) that forced the delay. I'm determined to send out the next in a more timely fashion! At least, that's my intent. . .

Resources . . .

Recommended Reading

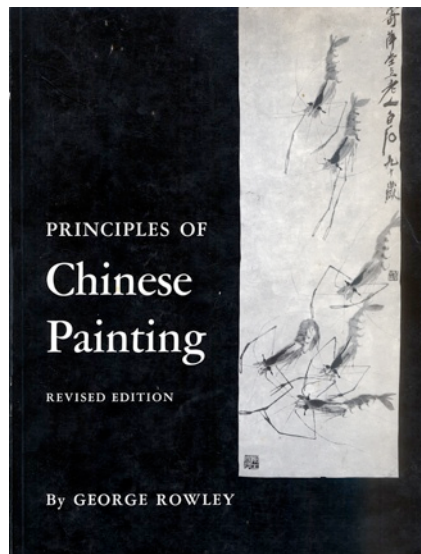
Principles of Chinese Painting

by George Rowley

(ISBN: 0691003009 paper)

(0691038341 hardcover)

Over the years the two greatest influences on my work have been the Tonalists, especially George Inness, and the classic painters and poets of China, particularly those from the T'ang and Sung dynasties. They have much in common.



If you have any interest in how the Chinese have approached art—how their view of the creative process and painting has been shaped by

their culture and history—you'll find this book fascinating and enlightening. The artists have been dead for a millennia but they still have much to teach us. Unfortunately, the book is out of print but it sometimes appears on e-Bay or on used-book websites. It's worth the effort to find it.

Painting Panels

For years, I've been painting on panels produced by Belle Arti, of Italy, which are sold under the brand name of Raphael and are available on several online sites. They consist of linen mounted on plywood panels.



Recently, however, I've begun using New Traditions Art Panels. They're sold directly from the manufacturer via their website: www.newtraditionsartpanels.com Only slightly more expensive than Raphael, I've found the quality to be consistently better. I particularly like the L280 linen (a medium-fine tooth) mounted on Gatorfoam. Being very lightweight, they are perfect for plein air painting. They offer many sizes, surfaces and four different backings, including plywood. They're made in the good ol' U.S.A. and are worth trying. I recommend them.

Tips & Techniques

A wax-based medium

If you've taken one of my workshops, you'll remember that I use a medium while painting. But unlike many artists, I don't mix the medium into the pigments while I paint. I wait until the painting is dry and then, when I'm ready to work on the painting again, I apply a thin coat to the entire surface—not unlike the traditional use of a retouch varnish. The thin coat of medium brings up dull areas in the painting and allows a soft blending of the new paint film over the old film, giving something of the appearance of painting wet into wet.

For many years I used a medium that consisted of three ingredients and that resulted in a hard, glossy film. More recently, I've been using a medium that includes Dorland's wax, which leaves a softer and more satin finish to the surface. I much prefer it to the high gloss of the other.

The formula for the old medium is as follows:

1/3 Stand Oil
1/3 Linseed Oil
1/3 Turpentine
a few drops of Cobalt Drier (for each cup of mixed medium)

The new medium consists of:

1/4 Dorland's wax
1/4 Stand Oil
1/4 Linseed Oil
1/4 Turpentine
a few drops of Cobalt Drier

Because of the inclusion of wax, in a cool environment the medium will solidify to the consistency of soft butter. The medium can be warmed or the surface of the painting can be warmed. I use a hair dryer to warm the painting surface. **But be safe!** Warm the medium in a closed container—the fumes are toxic. And when applying the medium to a painting surface, especially a large painting, use adequate ventilation. The large surface area will give off ample fumes. Try either or both and discover if using a medium this way fits into your way of working.

Coaching Ourselves

For part-time painters. . .

[This is an expanded article that was first posted on the website of the Creativity Coaches Association.]

Are We Creating or Just Cranking Out?

During a discussion period at a meditation retreat that I once attended, one of the participants stood up and proudly announced that he had been meditating for 19 years. After a brief silence, the retreat facilitator gently pointed out that such a record was largely meaningless, for it could represent nothing more than one year of true learning followed by 18 years of mindless repetition. This story, and its lesson, often comes to mind when I hear of artists setting ambitious goals of productivity for themselves: painters determined to create 100 paintings in one year or to paint plein air every day for a certain period. While setting such goals is admirable and working intensely to meet them can result in much learning and improvement in our painting, the question always remains: is the quality of the attention we're giving to each painting taking a back seat to the felt need to create a certain quantity of them? Do we find ourselves really approaching our painting with a beginner's mind and a willingness to take chances and make mistakes or are we just cranking paintings out?

If we wish to grow as artists in our technical abilities and in the depth and breadth of our expression, then the **quality** of our attention when working will always be more important than the mere number of works we produce. More learning, can be gained from a single painting in which we are fully and passionately engaged than in a thousand pieces which we are simply cranking out, mindlessly and repetitively. In other words, an artist who works mindfully will always learn more and develop her skills more quickly than an artist who produces much more work but does so without being fully engaged in the process and is always playing it safe.

This is very good news for those artists who don't have the luxury of working full time at their art, for those who, because of outside responsibilities, are limited to working

evenings or weekends. So-called Sunday Painters can become very good painters indeed if they spend each working session mindfully, attentively, and with curiosity and courage. And for those of us who work full time at our art, it's a warning that the quality of our art will wither away if we become complacent. Paying attention matters.

Discipline • Meaning • Mistakes

There are three skills that are particularly important to develop if you're a part time painter.

Discipline ~ If your studio time is limited, then having the discipline to work when time is available is crucial. Developing a schedule and sticking to it can lead to more focused painting sessions and fewer battles with yourself if you're feeling the urge to spend the time doing something else.

Meaning ~ Those who work part-time often do so after putting in a full day working somewhere else. It can be difficult to summon the energy needed for a focused session of painting. Doing the kind of work that you find most meaningful can help create the energy that's needed, even at the end of a long day. And, if you're feeling particularly low on energy, it's perfectly fine to decide that you'll just "play with something." That's often how we learn new techniques or find new ways of working that we enjoy.

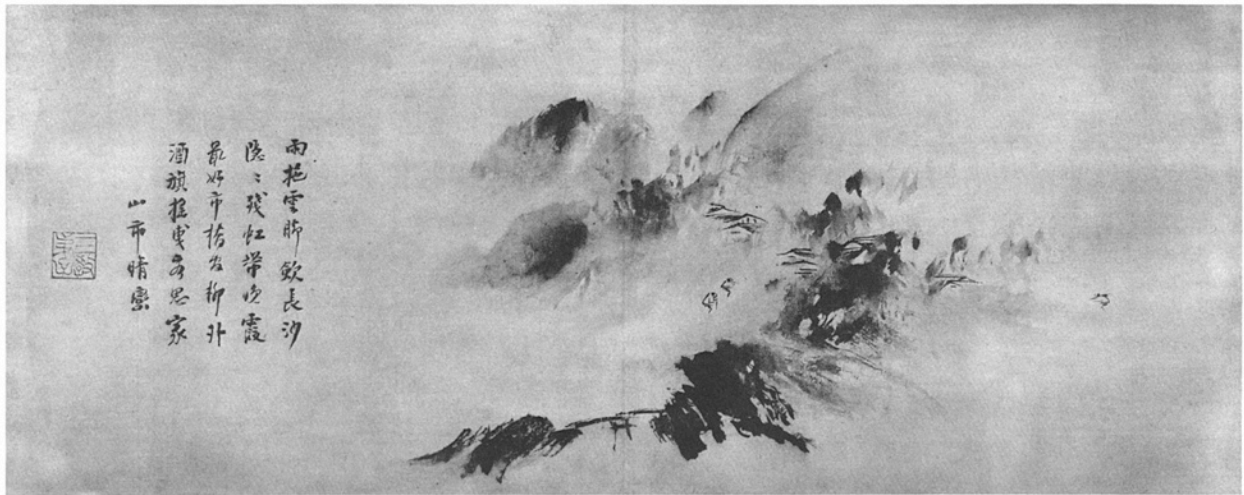
Mistakes ~ Learning to deal skillfully with mistakes is especially crucial for part-time painters. If a full-time painter produces four paintings a week, then a painting that fails represents only 1/200th of that artist's yearly output. But if a part-time painter is producing one painting a month, that failed painting is 1/12 of his total yearly output. That hurts! The temptation then arises to avoid all risk. He creates paintings that he already knows how to paint and learning comes to a screeching halt.

This ability to deal with failure and mistakes is such an important skill for us to have. I'll write about it in much greater length in the next newsletter. Meanwhile, keep painting and learning!

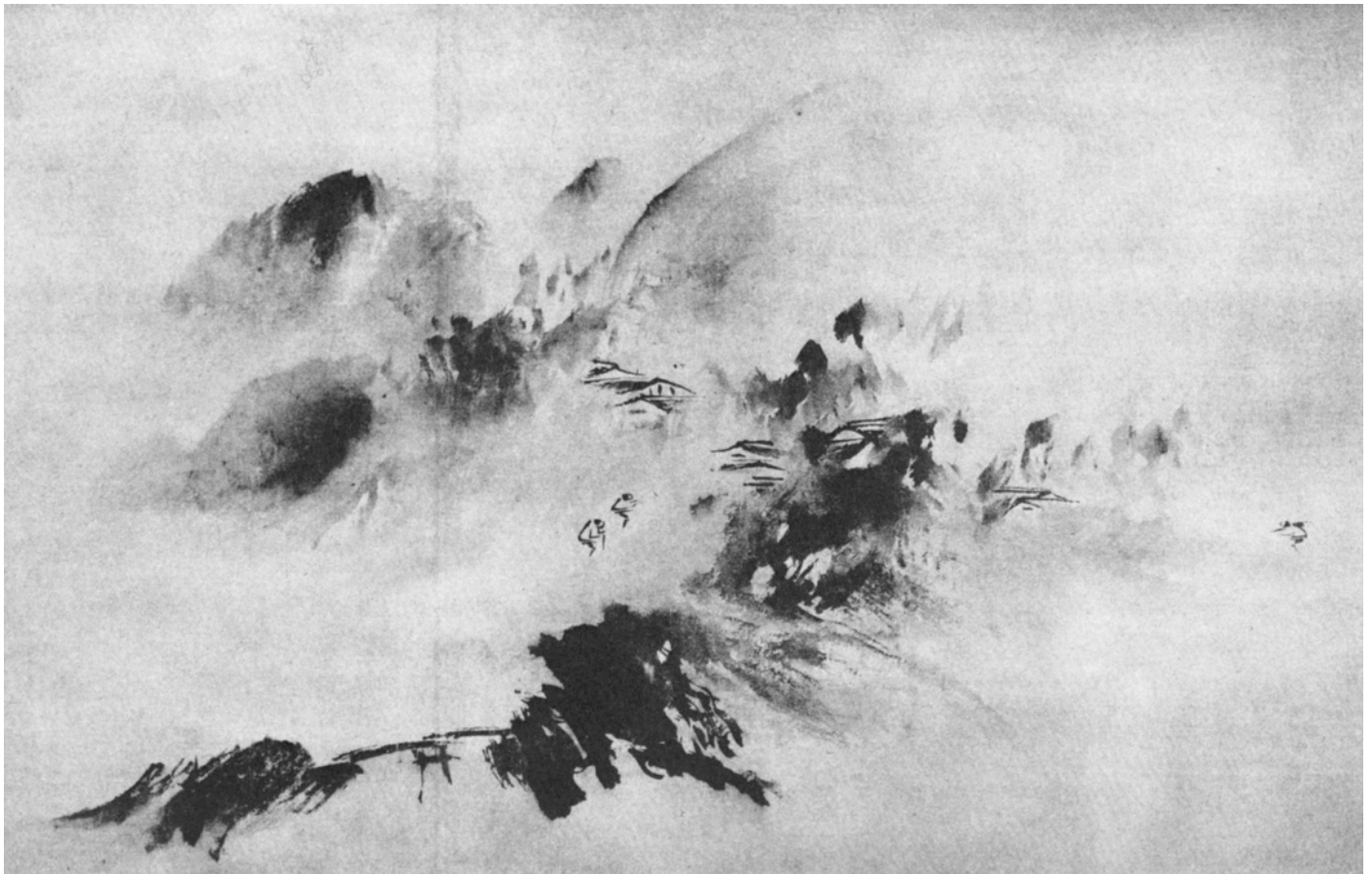
Deconstructing a Painting. . .

Ying Yu-chien, “Village in Clearing Mist,” early 13th c.

After recommending George Rowley’s book, “The Principles of Chinese Painting,” it only seems appropriate to feature one of the paintings from the book. I am NOT going to attempt to describe the painting in terms of how the artist saw it—how it fits in the context of Chinese history, art, and philosophy. We don’t need to know anything of the Taoist concepts of the Void or the 13th century Chinese view of humanity’s relationship to nature to see that this painting is a masterpiece. We can learn from it even if we’re limited to analyzing it solely in western terms. I’ll focus on just three aspects: the use of large areas of emptiness, the handling of edges, and the use of detail.

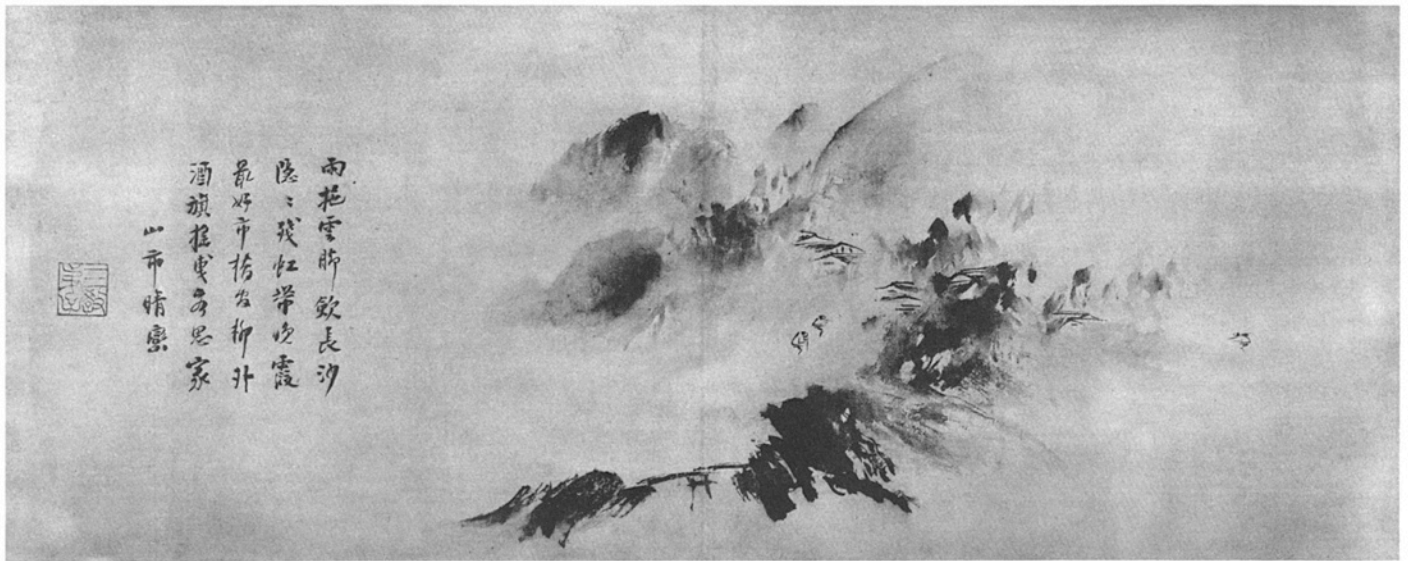


The entire painting, ink wash on silk, is shown above. A detail of the main areas of ink work is shown below.



Nothing versus Something:

Notice how little of the surface of the painting is covered. There are a handful of areas of intense and energetic painting surrounded by areas of nothing! It's precisely those large areas of nothing that allow those few areas of activity to jump out at us. The Tonalist and Chinese painters understood the power and importance of balancing areas of the painting that were active (full of detail) with areas that had almost nothing in them. The contrast and tension between them brought each to life.



Variety of edges:

The brushwork in this painting is astonishing in its technical virtuosity. From the hard-edge slabs of ink slapped onto the painting to the almost invisible washes of ink that fade away, nearly every possible handling of an edge is in this painting. The hard edges bring a life and a vitality to the painting and the soft edges create the illusion of space and of form dissolving into it.



The Essential Details

One of the most important lesson I've learned from Inness and the Chinese painters and poets is how to handle detail. Their rule is simple but effective: **suggestion is always stronger and more evocative than description.** They never give us detail for the sake of detail. Details were reserved for the focal point and only the details that were absolutely essential were added. They understood that the more detail a painting contains, the less will be its impact. If every instrument in an orchestra is playing at full volume, the melody will be lost, drowned out. Likewise, if every area in a painting is full of detail, the focal point, the mood, and the spirit of the painting will be lost. And notice how this principle relates to the use of voids in a painting. By definition, an area of a painting that has nothing with have no detail. So by including areas in a painting in which there is nothing, or at least very little, then those areas that include detail will sing! Confine most of the details to the focal point and only those details that are essential, and the painting will be stronger for it.



George Inness: "Home at Montclair" (1892)



Here are two recent paintings that are in the current show at the Harrison Gallery. It should (I hope) be easy to see how I've taken those ideas above and applied them to these two paintings: balancing areas of activity and detail with areas that are nearly empty, using hard and soft edges to guide the eye and define the focal point, and including only the details that are essential while relying on suggestion rather than literal description. A painting requires much less detail to work than we often think!



And lastly, an endorsement for a very special workshop venue. . .

Two months ago, I had the pleasure of teaching a workshop at the Casa De Los Artistas on the west coast of Mexico, one hour south of Puerto Vallarta. It's an incredibly beautiful location and the workshop venue, run by Bob Masla and Monica Levine, is unique. They have created an experience that is a perfectly balanced blend of serious art instruction with a fascinating introduction to the beauty of Mexico, its people, and its culture. Hours spent painting are alternated with snorkeling, fine dining, and lounging on a remote and beautiful beach. The food was excellent, the people friendly and gracious, and the landscapes perfect for a variety of painting experiences: ocean, river, beaches, hills, and colorful villages.

I hope you'll consider joining me for next year's workshop, February 7-14, 2015. Visit www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com

Here are a few photos from February's workshop:

