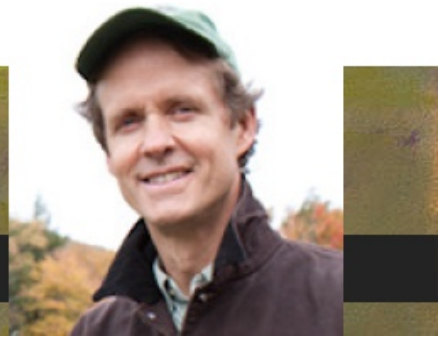


John MacDonald

April–May 2015



UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

2015

APRIL 25 (1-DAY)

DEERFIELD VALLEY ART ASSOCIATION

sold-out

MAY 19 (1-DAY)

COLONIE ART LEAGUE

Colonie, New York

sold-out

JULY 28–30 (2 1/2 DAYS)

THE GIBSON HOUSE

Haverhill, New Hampshire

www.gibsonhousebb.com

3 spots remaining

SEPT 8–11

THE BASCOM CENTER

Highlands, North Carolina

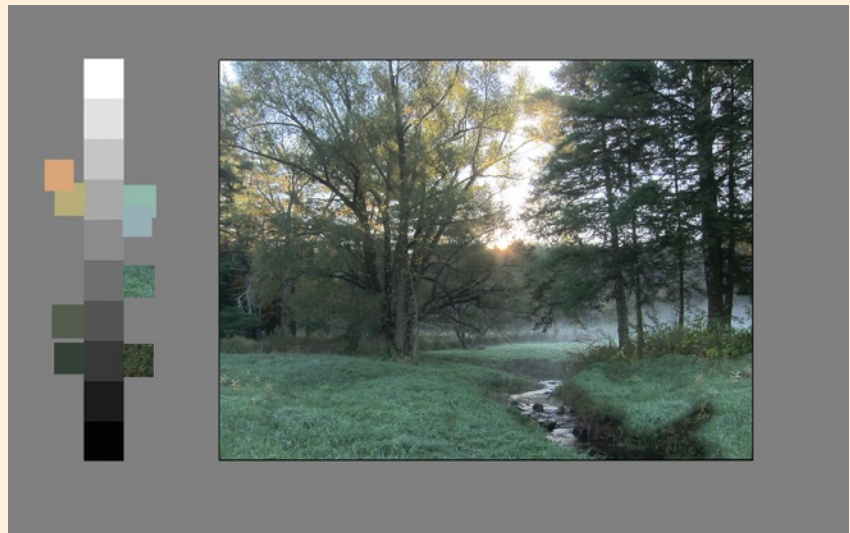
www.thebascom.org

*There is nothing worse
than a sharp
image of a fuzzy concept.*

-Ansel Adams

News from the studio. . .

Although I paint plein air as often as possible, I don't consider myself a plein air painter. Most of my paintings are created in the studio using photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. (Below is a screen shot of a typical set-up I use for painting, displayed on my monitor.)



In a few days I'll be teaching a one-day workshop in Deerfield, Mass. and I was asked to talk about the practice of the using photographs for reference when painting. In preparation for that workshop, I gathered some notes about the pros and cons of using photos in the studio. Those notes became the featured article for this newsletter. As always, I welcome your thoughts and ideas, whether or not you use photos for reference.

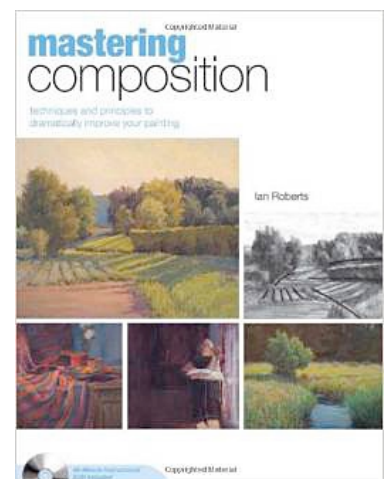
Book Recommendation

Mastering Composition

by Ian Roberts

ISBN 978-1-58180-924-4

Of all the books currently on the market, I've found this to be the most thorough and complete. For beginners and advanced painters alike, it's a wonderful source of ideas and information and well worth the read. Ian does a splendid job of explaining the nuances of composition but the book includes much more, with chapters on drawing, values, color, etc. If I were to own only one how-to book, this would be it.



Painting from Photos • Part I

The Pros, Cons, and Caveats of using Photographic Reference



Why paint from photos?

Sometimes it's simply impossible to paint outside. Inclement weather, the lack of a secure place to set up, time limitations, changes in light, insects, traffic, and grumpy landowners with guns—all of the above can prevent us from painting plein air at locations that interest and inspire us. But if we know how to take good photos and how to compensate for their inadequacies, we can paint scenes that we would otherwise have to pass by. In this newsletter, we'll look at the pros, cons, and caveats of working from photographic reference.



The painting, not the photo, is the point.

The greatest danger in using photographs as reference comes from mistakenly thinking that the goal of taking photos of a landscape is to find a single, perfect photo which we can copy as exactly as possible. If we believe that, then we're going to produce mediocre paintings that, not surprisingly, look like copies of photos. Instead, the camera should be used to collect a *variety* of visual information that will inspire us and inform our paintings, without limiting or defining them.

Photos are not sacred, unchangeable objects. They are simply collections of visual information. When using photographic reference, make the *painting* the point: take from the photos what you need and then ignore them. Whether or not the resulting painting looks like the photo on which it was based shouldn't be the goal. It's not relevant. Does the painting have life? Does it express what you want to say. Does it work? That's all that matters.

Are photos as good as life?

For richness, depth, and subtlety of visual information, nature beats a photo every time. Even the most expensive cameras can't compete with the eye. For this reason, painting plein air should be an important part of every landscape painter's routine. It not only improves our ability to see and mix subtle color and value but it is of inestimable value in teaching us the limitations of the camera and of the photos that we use when painting.

But isn't it . . . cheating?

Nature is superior to the camera but both are only collections of visual information that our eyes receive and our brains interpret. *Every* painting is an interpretation and invention. Line up ten plein air painters working on the same scene and you'll get ten very different paintings. When we paint plein air we filter, simplify, select, and manipulate the visual information that lies before us, which is exactly what we should do when painting from photos. When painting plein air, we're given superb visual information with which to work but it doesn't necessarily translate into a superb painting. It's the level of the skills of the painter, not the source of the visual information, that determines whether or not a painting is alive and dynamic. A bad plein air painting is still a bad painting. A good painting based on a photo is still a good painting. A skilled painter can produce good work regardless of the source of the visual information and those skills include an understanding of the limitations of photos and of how to compensate for those limitations.

Photo Problems ~ Photo Fixes.

In order of importance, a painting consists of a composition, values, colors, edges, and details. Let's look at the limitations of the camera in each of these areas and then explore ways to fix those limitations. (I use the word "fix" loosely. No photo can capture the nuances of nature but a good photo is always more valuable as a source of visual information than a bad one. There are actions we can take to help us shoot the best photos possible.)

Composition

Problem: The camera lens distorts the perspective of the landscape. Lines are askew.

Fix: While on location, take a moment to sketch the essential lines in the landscape, those lines that most express the composition. When back in the studio, use the photo to flesh out the details.

Problem: Shapes are flattened and objects in the distance appear too remote.

Fix #1: This is often the result of shooting with a wide-angle lens. If possible, zoom in on the scene until it appears in the camera viewfinder as close to life as possible, then take the photo.

Fix #2: Crop the photo, and use only a small section of it. This often results in an image that appears closer to life.



Tip:

Use the viewfinder in the camera as a compositional aid. Even if the proportions of the viewfinder don't match the proportions of the canvas, it can be helpful to explore different compositions simply by looking at the scene through the viewfinder. Using the zoom multiplies the number of available compositions. Play with the composition!

Values

Problem: The camera exaggerates value contrasts, overexposing the lights and underexposing the darks.

Fix: Take at least three photos of every scene: exposing for the darkest areas, for the mid-values, and for the lightest areas. Set the exposure on an area and then move back to the scene you wish to photograph.



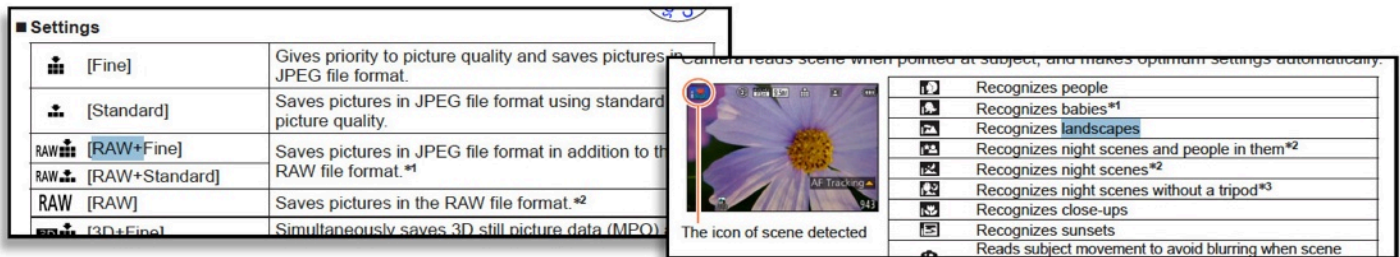
Problem: The camera loses the subtle value contrasts *within* the major masses; e.g., subtle value changes in clouds or within shadows of trees.

Fix: zoom into specific areas and take several photos, varying the exposure. Remember, you're not looking for one perfect photo. Just gather as much visual information as you can.

Tips:

Get to know your camera! Explore its settings and features. Even inexpensive point-and-shoot cameras often feature settings that allow the user to change the level of value contrast. Go on location and shoot a scene under various settings and compare them. Find the settings that will record the values most accurately.

Change the setting to black and white or monochrome. Look at the resulting photo on the camera's video screen and compare it to the actual landscape. If there are differences, jot down a few notes in a sketchbook.



Color

The limitations of the camera in recording accurate values pale in comparison to the substantial problems every camera has in capturing accurate color.

Problem: Global shifts in color—the color of the entire scene shifts in hue, temperature, or saturation.

Problem: Selective shifts in color—the color of certain areas shift in hue, temperature, or saturation while others remain closer to the color seen on location.

Below are photos taken of the identical scene using several different settings and formats. Notice the variety.



Fix #1: The only option is to manipulate the settings of your camera. Most cameras offer settings specifically configured for daylight exposure or landscapes. Try them all and, if possible, on location so you can directly compare the results of the various settings as shown on the camera's video screen with the scene before you.

Fix #2: If available on your camera, shoot in RAW format. The files sizes will be much larger but the color is invariably more accurate. Shooting in JPEG format, the standard default setting, surrenders control over color selection to the camera, usually resulting in colors that are simplified and distorted.

Tip: Take a movie. After shooting a variety of photographs on location, I will often put the camera on the movie setting and shoot a short movie in which I describe aloud—so the microphone will record my voice—the values and colors that I see. Once back in the studio, I replay the movie and am reminded of the attributes of the scene that I found particularly appealing or important. Occasionally, I will also describe what I see on the camera's video screen and how it differs from what I see in nature. (For instance: “I can see on the screen that the snow appears as a fairly saturated ultramarine blue. But I'm seeing the snow as slightly lighter in value and a more neutral, grayish-green.”) In doing

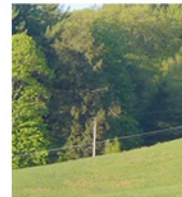
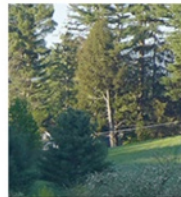
this, I'm not only providing myself with reminders of what I see but, in the process of describing the landscape, I'm seeing it with much more focus and sensitivity than if I simply took a photo and moved on. It's a wonderful way to both see the landscape more deeply and to provide a record of what I see.

Edges

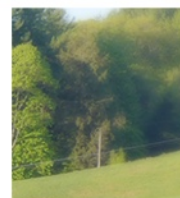
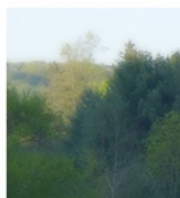
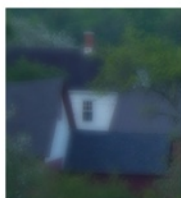
Problem: The camera objectively records every edge *as the lens sees them*. Hard edges are hard. Soft edges are soft.

Fix: No fix is necessary. There is only a problem if we copy every edge exactly as seen in the photo rather than editing and manipulating them as part of structuring our painting. Mindlessly copying every edge in the photo makes our paintings look like photos and makes it much more difficult to establish a strong focal point in our painting.

In the photo below, every edge is in equal focus. This is how the camera lens sees the landscape.



But this is how the eye sees the landscape. Notice how much more obvious is the focal point!



Tip: Depending on the f-stop, if the foreground is in focus the background tends to be blurred, and vice versa. The eye also works this way but with an additional lateral blurring. With the eye, objects fall out of focus not just from front to back but also from side to side depending on the distance from the eye's focal point. One of the most common mistakes made when working from photographs is to paint the edges, details, and contrasts that we see on the edges of the photo with the same intensity and clarity as those found in the focal point. That's painting how the camera sees. Instead, mass the most important contrasts, edges, and details in the focal point of the painting and let them diminish towards the edges of the canvas. That's how the eye sees.

Details.

Problem: What was said about edges also applies here: the camera will give us every detail with uniform clarity.

Fix: As with edges, that's not a problem unless we attempt to copy every single detail as seen in the photo. The photo will give us far more details than we need. Decide which details are vital, which are secondary, and which can be completely ignored.

Tip: Suggest rather than describe the details. A photo gives us every blade of grass in a meadow and every leaf on every foreground tree. When painting, select a few of the important details and *suggest* the rest. Look at anyone who has mastered the art of landscape painting, from Inness to Schmid, to see how they handle details.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

Quality Time Matters– Don't shoot and run!

There's no substitute for spending time with the landscape.

Imagine two painters who have discovered an inspirational scene:

Painter #1 wanders the landscape, enjoying the light and air and sounds; notices different possible compositions; takes photos; executes a small plein air color study; makes a few small sketches, and then returns to the studio to paint, using the dozen or more photos as reminders of what was experienced.

Painter #2 hurriedly takes a single photo and dashes back to the studio to paint.

It's not difficult to guess whose painting will most likely succeed in capturing the life and spirit of the landscape, with all its subtleties of color, value, and texture.

Although it's not always possible to spend two or more hours on location, the more time spent absorbing the landscape and its visual information the more the photograph will serve as a source of helpful information for the painting rather than dictating its outcome.

The Better the Photo, the Better the Painting.

Actually, it's not that simple but it is true that the better the photographic reference the better chance of producing a quality painting. Just as it's difficult to paint with student grade paints, it's difficult to work from inferior photos. Spend time in the landscape, get to know your camera, and take the best pictures possible.

Know Your Camera's Settings and Features.

A particularly effective way to find the optimal camera settings is to take some photos and then compare them with the actual scene in real time. Shoot a scene from a window that is near the monitor or printer (or anywhere if you use a tablet) and immediately download or print them. Then look at the monitor or printed photo and compare it with what you see outside. How accurate are the colors, values, edges, etc.? Shoot the scene again under different settings and compare again. Can you tweak the setting to make the photo more true to nature? One caveat: be aware that the settings on your printer and monitor will also affect the image and inaccuracies may be due to those settings.

Know Your Camera's View Screen

Nearly every camera allows the user to view a photographed scene on the view screen immediately after it's taken. While still on location, compare this small image on the screen with the actual scene. Later, compare it with the printed photo or the image on the monitor. Are they the same?

Shoot and Paint

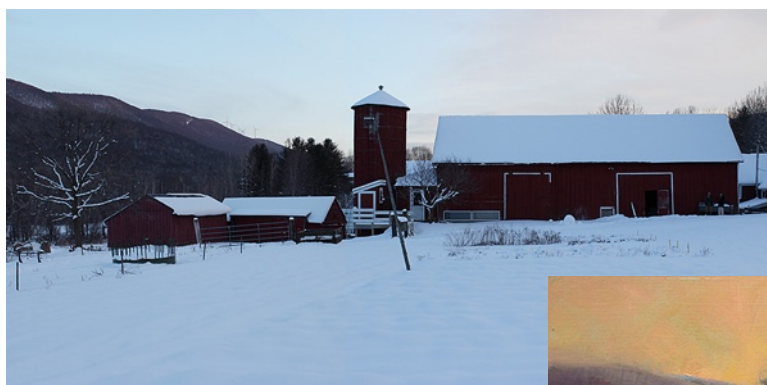
There's no better way of discovering the limitations of your camera than photographing a scene, immediately painting it plein air, and then comparing the results. In this case, the goal isn't to produce a finished plein air painting but only to record, as accurately as possible, the color and value relationships in the landscape. The painting can be rough and crude and unfinished but, if accurate in color and value, can be of immeasurable help in learning what the camera can accurately capture and what it can't.

Size Matters.

Generally, the larger you can print or view a photo, the more helpful it is. A photo on a smart-phone may help us see the massed values or overall color temperature of scene (just as a thumbnail sketch does) but it's worthless to use as reference for a painting. The image on a tablet is probably the smallest useable size. A good photo on a 28" monitor is a joy to paint from.

Pretend it's Plein Air

When painting plein air, the time period in which I can maintain an intense level of focus and energy and the time in which the change in light on the landscape has radically altered the scene is almost the same: two hours. It's often difficult to overwork a plein air painting for the simple reason that our time is so limited. But in the comfort of our studio we can easily overwork a painting. When working from a photo, I find it helpful to work as if I'm painting plein air and to stop after two hours of work, regardless of the current state of the painting. I can always work on it again under exactly the same conditions. That, after all, is the advantage and the point of working from photos.



Coming in the next newsletter: *Painting from Photos, Part II*

- From photo to canvas: transferring the composition.
- Digitally manipulating photos prior to painting: pros and cons.
- Using photos as the starting point: exercises that expand your use of photos.

Happy painting!

Workshops



July 28–30, 2015

The Gibson House, Haverhill, New Hampshire

www.gibsonhousebb.com

Painting plein air, rain or shine. (In the case of inclement weather, we'll paint beautiful vistas from the comfort of the porch at the Gibson House.) The Gibson House is a New Hampshire bed and breakfast that overlooks the landscape of New Hampshire's pristine Upper Connecticut River Valley. We'll cram a lot of painting into this 2 1/2 day workshop!

September 8–11, 2015

The Bascom, Highlands, North Carolina

www.thebascom.org



From Plein Air to Studio. The primary focus of this workshop will be the process of working from on-location plein air sketches, pencil sketches and photographs and then moving into the studio to finish a painting. We'll explore the advantages and limitations of using a camera as well as look at the differences between capturing what is *seen* (a scene) as opposed to creating a *painting*. The Bascom is a wonderful facility in a beautifully scenic area.

February 6–13, 2016

Casa de los Artista, Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

artworkshopvacations.com



This will be my second trip to this venue. The studio is perfect, the food delicious, the village charming, and the scenery exquisite. It's the perfect workshop experience: a week of serious and focused painting paired with a varied, fun-filled and fascinating exposure to the Mexican culture. We paint plein air each day but then play: snorkeling, shopping, a beach picnic, and an excursion through the hills to a remote town for sketching.

April 4–6, 2016

Colonie Art League, Colonie, New York

<http://www.colonieartleague.com/>



From Plein Air to Studio. The primary focus of this workshop will be the process of working from on-location plein air sketches, pencil sketches and photographs and then moving into the studio to finish a painting. Art League members will be given priority during registration.