

John MacDonald

Newsletter ~ December 2014



UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

2015

FEBRUARY 7-14, 2015

CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com

JULY 28-30, 2015

THE GIBSON HOUSE

Haverhill, New Hampshire

www.gibsonhousebb.com

SEPT. 8-11, 2015

THE BASCOM

Highland, North Carolina

www.thebascom.org

“Use the talents you possess, for the woods would be a very silent place if no birds sang except the best.”

-Henry van Dyke, poet

“Art enables us to find ourselves and to lose ourselves at the same time.”

-Thomas Merton

News from the studio. . .

Whatever your religious affiliation or spiritual path (or none), do have a happy, safe, and relaxing holiday season. And take time out of the studio to spend it with family and friends. Life really is bigger than art.

Speaking of the holiday season, unless you live in the deep South, this time of year means ice, snow, and cold. If you'd like to escape winter for a week, there are still a few places open for the February workshop in sunny, warm, luxurious Mexico. Painting plein air in shorts and a T-shirt on a tropical beach in February, what could be better?!

The Non-Toxic Studio

. . .continued

Having had another two months to work towards a goal of a non-toxic studio, I've made some minor changes to my routine. Some of you have also responded with ideas. Thank you!

The medium—to heat or not? If you've used the medium that I use, you'll know that adding Dorland's Wax will cause the medium to gel. To keep it liquid, I purchased a Mr. Coffee mug warmer, which gently and safely keeps the medium in a liquid state. But with cooler temperatures in the studio, I'm now finding that the medium begins to gel soon after I pour it out on a cold canvas. Fortunately, that's not a problem. Even in a semi-gelled state it spreads easily using a cloth. Heating is very helpful when initially mixing a batch of the medium but I'm now wondering if it's really necessary to heat it after the initial mixing.

Thinning paint mixtures. I've been using a few drops of 100% safflower oil to thin paint on my palette.. Lately, I've begun adding a little linseed oil to speed drying time and strengthen the paint film: 1/3 linseed oil to 2/3 safflower oil seems to work.

Your input.

Deborah Angilletta sent the following suggestion:

With my regular oils I first wipe them off well with paper towels or an old tee and put them in a glass jar to soak for awhile in Murphy Oil Soap. Later I wash them out and then wash them again this time in Richeson Jack's Linseed Studio Soap (available at Blick or Jerry's), until the soap looks white, then lay them flat to dry. The Jack's conditions them and also smells great. This may cost a bit more than using solvent to clean them but in the long run I think it's worth it.

On location I just tried using Gamblin Solvent-Free Gel which comes in a tube. It is an oil medium but can also be used to clean your brushes. You still need to give them a good cleaning when you get home but it is easier than bringing solvent with you.

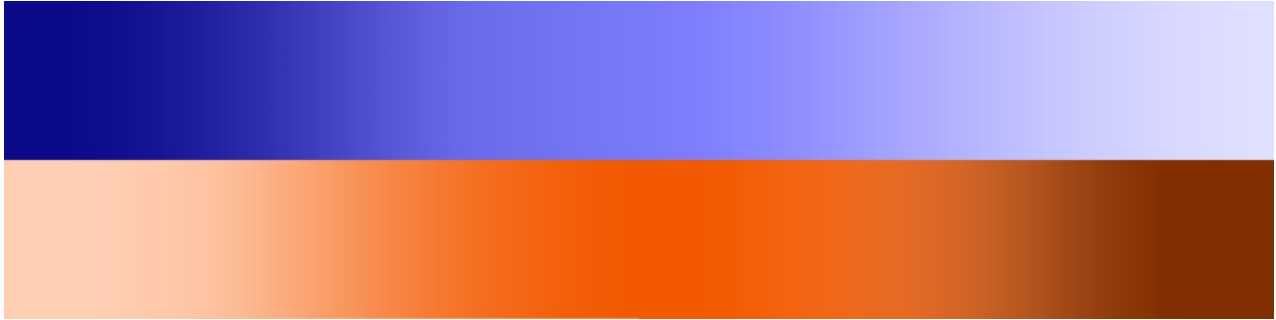
Gale Derosia wrote:

I find that Dawn dish soap does a very effective job of cleaning my brushes at the end of the day—it comes scented or unscented.

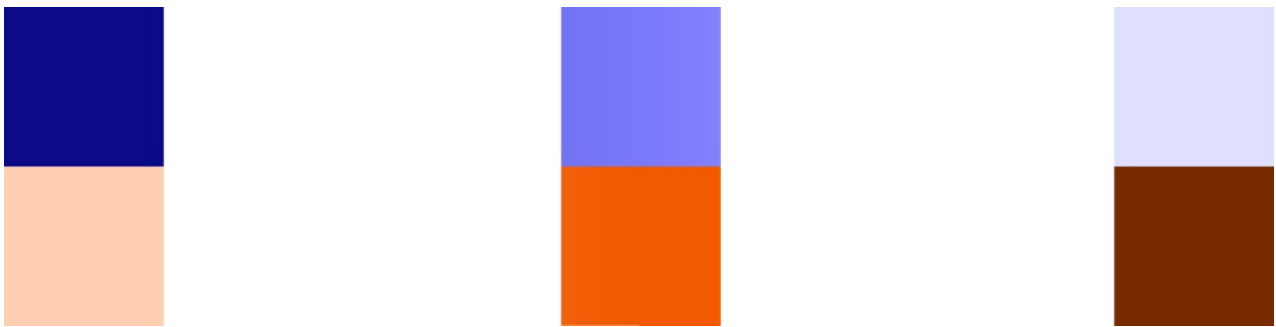
Any other ideas. . .?

Painting Snow . . . or, how understanding the relationship between color and value can bring life to a monotonously uniform field of snow.

Following up on last January's newsletter, in which we looked at the variety of colors that some painters have used when painting snow, this month we'll see how we can bring luminosity to our paintings of snow by using contrasts of color temperature within a narrow value range. But first we need to understand how *value* affects *color*.



Let's begin with two strips of color, one warm and one cool (color), running from light to dark (value).



Now let's isolate those areas where the *value* contrast is the greatest (at the ends) and the least (in the middle). What do we notice in terms of *color*? The two squares in the middle hum. They're vibrant and luminous and colorful! The color samples at the end are comparatively dead. They don't "pop" like the middle squares. This simple example illustrates the most important rule regarding the relationship between color and value:

The closer two colors are in value, the stronger will be their temperature contrast and therefore the more vibrant (the more "colorful") they will appear.

Where there are strong value contrasts, as in the squares taken from the ends, the difference in value will overwhelm the difference in color. We see **value contrast**. Where this is little value contrast, the difference in color overwhelms what little value contrast exists and we see **color contrast**, or more precisely, the contrast in color **temperature**—warm versus cool. This holds true whether colors are fully saturated or extremely muted.

How does this affect your painting? If the impact—the focal point—of your painting is based on value contrasts, then the colors can be either saturated or muted. It really doesn't matter. The value contrasts will predominate in either case. But if you wish to push the color in your painting, then the closer the values of adjacent colors, the greater will appear the contrast and saturation of your colors. The colors will glow. This rule applies to any subject matter. First, let's look at how it works with painting snow and then we'll see how Monet used it.

Color contrasts in snow:

To the right is painting that I recently finished for a show. At the outset, I knew that I wanted the richest color contrasts to be in the foreground snow and the background light on the trees. I also knew that I wanted the snow to appear featureless, keeping any modulation of form subtle while allowing the pattern and texture of the snow in the trees to attract the eye and lead it to the light in the background.

When painting a large area of what is essentially nothing (a field of snow or expanse of sky) and when the quiet simplicity of that area is crucial and must be preserved, then value contrasts should be kept to a minimum. But in eliminating value contrasts, there's the risk that the area will appear dead, lifeless, and boring. Use color contrasts to add life to it.

In the foreground snow, I painted several thin, semi-translucent layers (after each layer dried!) varying the color temperature. Although all are in the blue to neutral family of hues, they range from green to cobalt to purple to violet. And by keeping their *values* as close together as possible, the *color* contrast is vibrant even though the colors are not right-out-of-the-tube saturated.

One of the challenges of painting such a large area of snow with so few value changes was creating the illusion that the snow was going back in space. The receding pattern of tree trunks certainly helped but I also used the path in the snow to enhance the illusion. The size of the "footprints" diminish as they move back in space. Notice, too, how the path gradually becomes lighter in value as it recedes. The path is a gradient. It's darker in the foreground, nearly the same value as the adjacent snow, where it adds color contrast. But in the background the path is lighter than the snow and so appears less as color contrast than value contrast. This change in the path's value, in relation to the adjacent value of the snow, helps reinforce the illusion of a receding plane and takes the eye into the painting.



Color contrasts in trees:

Whereas in the foreground snow the color contrasts are subtle (all the hues are within a narrow range of hues), in the background the color contrasts are much more evident. The light is shining directly on tree branches and snow in the far background while slightly in front are hemlock branches and snow in shadow. Here, I pushed subdued cools against saturated warms. And although there is more value contrast here than in the large area of snow below (a difference that is needed), I'm keeping my values relatively close so as to allow the color contrasts to predominate. **Too much value contrast kills color contrast.**

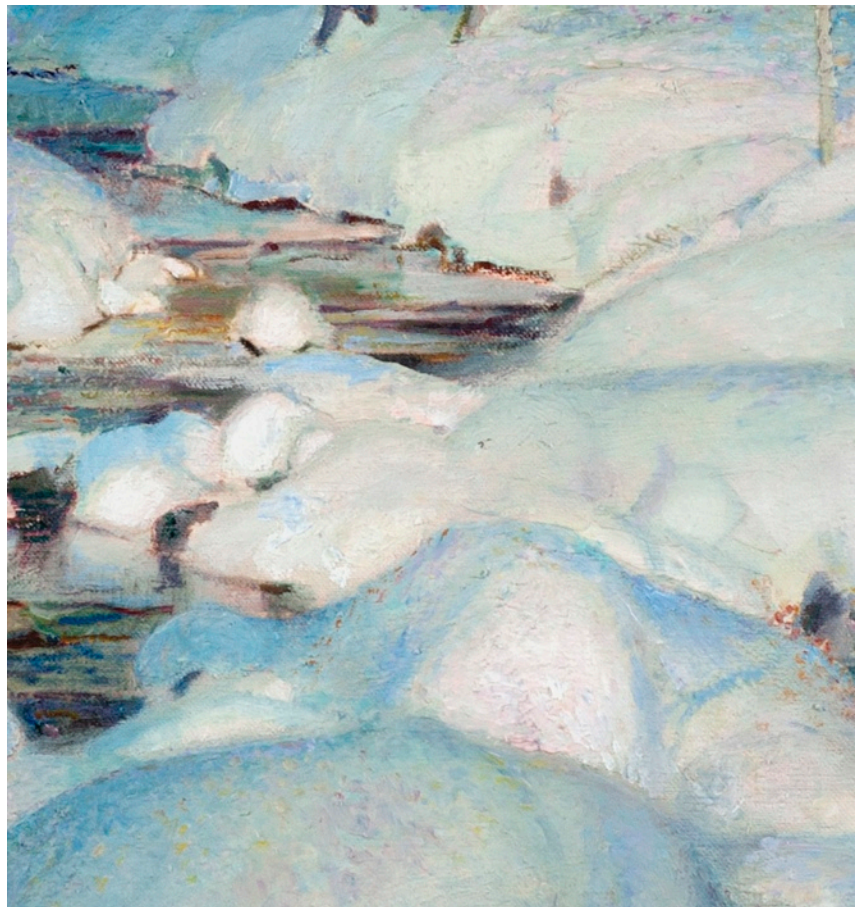
In the detail (top right) you can see how some of the snow is rather neutral, even warm, but *appears* cool against the warmer background colors. The colors of the cool snow on the branches and background warm colors appear rich because they lie within a narrow value range. Notice, too, that the darker green hemlock branches provide less color contrast—they function simply as forms in front of the light trees and help create the illusion of space rather than light.



Brian Sweetland snow:

Brian was a master at painting snow in full sunlight. In the detail at the right, notice the subtle and varied hues of greens, pinks, blues, and creams. All of them, with the exception of the slightly darker blue shadows, are nearly the same value. His snow is luminous and alive. He creates that illusion of light not by using value contrasts but by using color contrasts.

Notice, too, how differently he applies the paint compared to my painting. I prefer using thin, soft-edged layers. Brian paints more opaquely, with dots and smears of paint that are nearly uniformly hard-edged. Either method is fine. It's keeping the values close that's important, not how the paint is put on the canvas. Try both methods and see which fits best with your way of seeing and working.





Monet, the Master

This rule isn't limited to painting snow. It applies to any area in a landscape in which the value contrasts are limited to a narrow range, especially in large areas of sky, fields, and water.

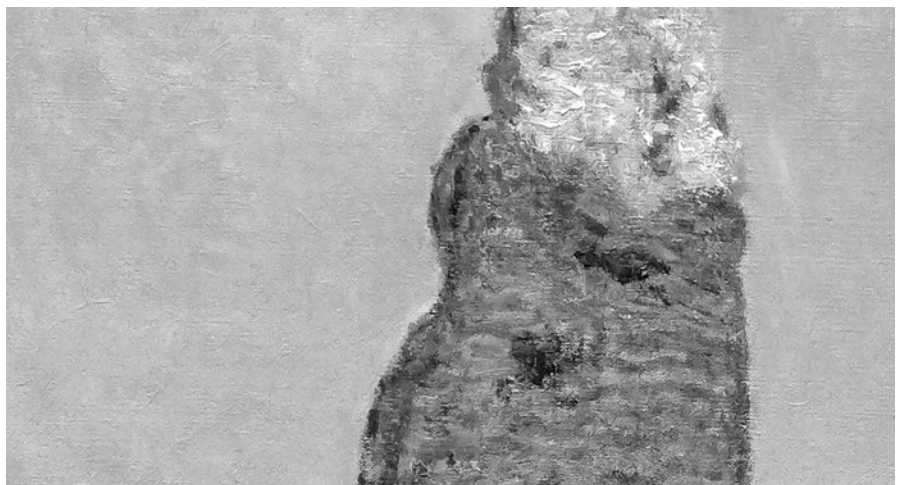
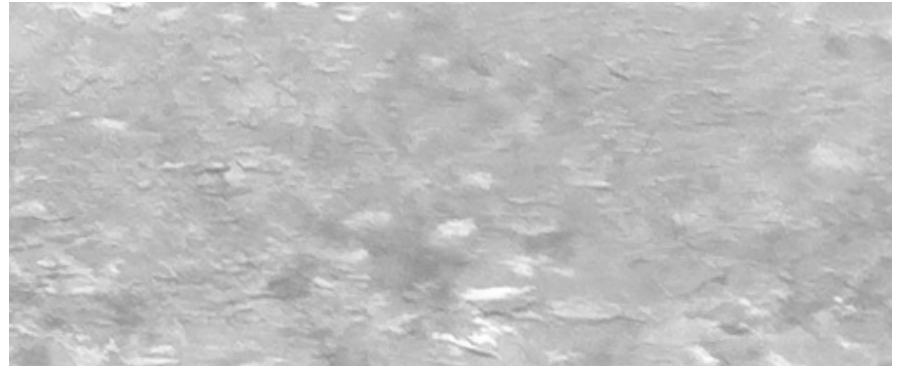
Monet understood and used this principal probably with greater mastery than any other artist. He could make the most mundane landscapes glow by employing contrasting colors within a narrow value range.

Here are two paintings from the Clark Museum in Williamstown. In the top painting I've extracted a section of the foreground grass. In the bottom painting is a detail from the sky and rock.

Notice the **complexity** of color contrasts but the **simplicity** of value contrasts. If I haven't already made this clear, it's the simplicity of close values that makes the vibrant complexity of color contrasts possible. **Too much value contrast kills color contrast.**

Now it's your turn. . .

To be alive, a painting needs contrasts. Areas of dense texture and detail must be balanced by quiet, simple areas. But those areas need to carry energy and life, too. Keep them alive by using color contrasts. Look for those subtle contrasts in the landscape. They're usually right there, waiting for us to see them. See them, paint them, and watch your paintings come alive.



2015 Workshops

February 7–14

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.

One-day workshop, April / May ~ TBA

The Deerfield Art Assoc., Deerfield, Massachusetts



This one-day, studio workshop is currently being planned. Deerfield is a beautiful, historic town in the Connecticut River valley of western Massachusetts. I'll post the details as soon as they've been set.

July 28–30

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

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.