

John MacDonald

September–October, 2021



The Tonalism Issue

When in art school in the late 1970s, my greatest influences were Claude Monet, Gustav Klimt, and George Inness. I loved Monet for his light, Klimt for his design, and Inness for his emotion. Forty-five years later, I still learn from Monet and Klimt but it is Inness and the American Tonalists to whom I feel most akin. Ten years ago, I purchased David Cleveland's monumental book, *The History of American Tonalism*. As I flipped through the hundreds of wonderful reproductions of tonalist paintings, I felt that I'd finally found a home—a community of soulmates. The Tonalists' subject matter (landscapes), their technique (suggestive and painterly), and their philosophy (a spirituality rooted in nature) made perfect sense to me. They continue to inspire and challenge my painting.

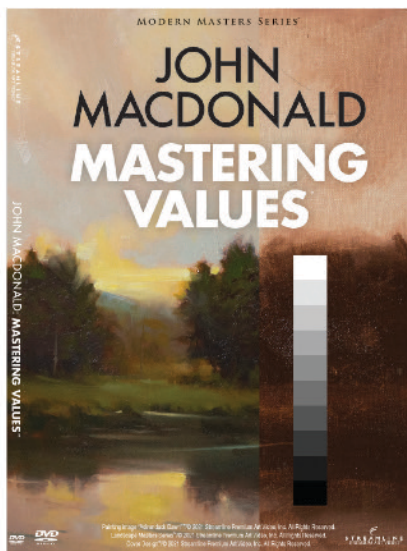
Today, Tonalism has found a new audience among many landscape painters. It may not be every painter's cup of tea but it offers an

important alternative and, dare I say, a healthy balance to the current (over?) emphasis on *plein air* and *alla prima* painting.

In this newsletter, we'll take a brief look at Tonalism: its roots, its characteristics, and its adherents and their techniques. Rather than featuring my paintings, I'll present a selection of my favorite Tonalists. After more than forty years, I'm still learning from them.



J. Francis Murphy, *Indian Summer*



New Streamline Video Available

After eighteen months, five scheduled dates for filming with four cancellations, a personal health issue and a worldwide pandemic, I'm delighted to report the new video, "**Mastering Values**" is finally available.

Unlike the previous two videos, this is not about me, my technique, or the materials I use. Instead, this is about a single component of painting—arguably the most important component: **Values**. I'd been wanting to do this for years. It was a labor of love and, thanks to the skill and professionalism of the Streamline staff, the result couldn't be better. Interested? Click [HERE](#).

Tonalism

Tonalism is movement in American art that thrived from the 1870s until the 1920s. It is less a specific style than a shared philosophy, spirituality, and intention. The paintings tend toward the moody, nostalgic, emotional, and suggestive. It was America's most popular movement between the era of the Hudson River School and the Impressionists. In 1900, George Inness was America's favorite artist but by the 1930s he and the Tonalists had been dismissed and forgotten.



Dwight William Tryon, *Winter*, 1892

Tonalism: Influences

The founding Tonalists came out of and were influenced by the American Hudson River School and its spiritual approach to the landscape; the French Barbizon painters, who moved the landscape from a staged backdrop for human activity to the forefront; and by Whistler's simplicity of design, suggestiveness in detail, and emphasis on mood. The majority of the painters in the movement were strongly influenced by the philosophies of Thoreau and Emerson, both of whom emphasized a personal, spiritual experience of nature. And being largely from New England, they were impacted by the devastation wrought by the Civil War and later by the post-war abandonment of farms and villages as the general population moved west. They lived in a time of turmoil and chaotic change. They found solace in nature's moody, quiet, and transient moments.



Camille Corot, *Paysage, Soleil Couchant*



James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne Blue and Gold II*

Tonalism: The Subject Matter is the Message

It's all about the landscape. In David Cleveland's massive book, which has become the bible of Tonalism, he features a total of 495 illustrations. Of those, the vast majority (461 to be exact) are landscapes either entirely devoid of human presence or which show only the slightest hint of the human world—a tiny figure or perhaps a distant building. The landscape dominates the scene. Among the Tonalists' body of work there are few still lifes or cityscapes. There are no portraits or interiors. Animals in the paintings are never more than small, suggestive notes. The landscape dominates all. Tonalism is a style of **landscape** painting. Painters in the style were obsessed with nature and attempted to capture the spiritual and emotional reactions they had when faced with the natural world. To convey their feelings, they focused on a mood created by soft light, thick atmosphere, and dissolved forms. Not unlike the Japanese concept of *mono no aware*, the mood came from an appreciation of beauty yet tinged with sadness over its impermanence.

The Tonalists weren't narrative painters. A story exists in time: it has a beginning, middle and end. Many of the Tonalists wanted to capture the *timelessness* lurking behind each specific place and specific moment which they believed was unseen but could be *felt*. A Tonalist painting was, as a Buddhist might say, a wordless pointing to the immediate, unfiltered experience of being in concrete place and time in nature that was beautiful, timeless and yet paradoxically transient.



Charles Warren Easton, *Sunset Trees*, c1900

Tonalism: The Technique

While the majority of Tonalists sketched and painted en plein air, most of their finished paintings were products of the studio. Being interested in expressing what they felt rather than merely recording what they saw, they placed great emphasis on memory and imagination. Many of the Tonalist painters created paintings that were entirely invented.

To convey mood, the Tonalist painters relied on ambiguity, abstraction, and simplification. They emphasized light, atmosphere, massed values and avoided sharply defined forms. They glazed, scraped, and scumbled to create multiple layers of paint, always preferring soft suggestion over hard description. Although the mood was often quiet and contemplative, the surfaces of their paintings were often highly textured with energetic and loose brushwork.

Composition: The Tonalists emphasized shapes in their compositions. They used simple divisions of the canvas, stressing verticals and horizontals, to create quiet compositions. They largely avoided using dynamic contrasts of line, rhythm, or shape.

Values: Values were massed into abstracted shapes of usually two or three foundation values, which preserved the graphic design of the composition. Secondary values were often closely related to their foundation values to ensure the structure of the composition remained clear while enhancing color contrast. Attracted to sunrises and sunsets, they usually painted in a medium to low value key. Rarely did they paint in a high value key.

Color: Most Tonalists worked in a restrained, muted palette, often with a predominant hue or tone—thus the term “Tonalist.” Warm color keys predominate. A greater emphasis was given to value contrasts than color contrast, although the latter were often used to create a subdued luminosity and richness of color despite the muted hues. Color didn’t shout but quietly glowed.

Edges: The mood in the paintings was often enhanced by the portrayal of light, particularly early morning, late afternoon, or evening light. The edges of forms dissolve in a light that filters through a dense atmosphere. Soft and lost edges predominated.

Details: Tonalism is style of suggestion rather than description. Details were loosely painted and used sparingly. Areas of active detail, and any secondary areas of interest, were almost always contrasted with more numerous, larger areas of quiet simplicity.

J. Francis Murphy, *Autumn Field* [detail]

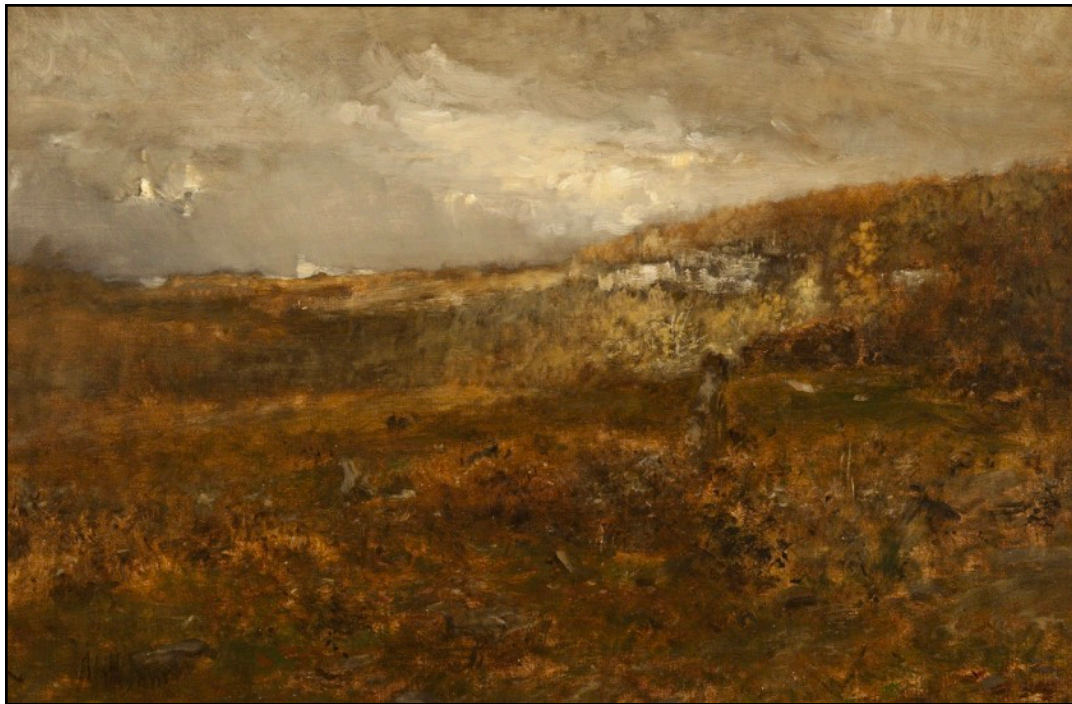


Tonalism: The Painters

In his book, David Cleveland attributes the founding of Tonalism to **George Inness**, **James McNeill Whistler**, **Alexander Wyant**, **Homer Dodge Martin**, and several others. Below are examples from my two favorites, **George Inness** and **Alexander Wyant**, both of whom paint with a loose, energetic, and suggestive style that was not found in the U.S. until decades later.

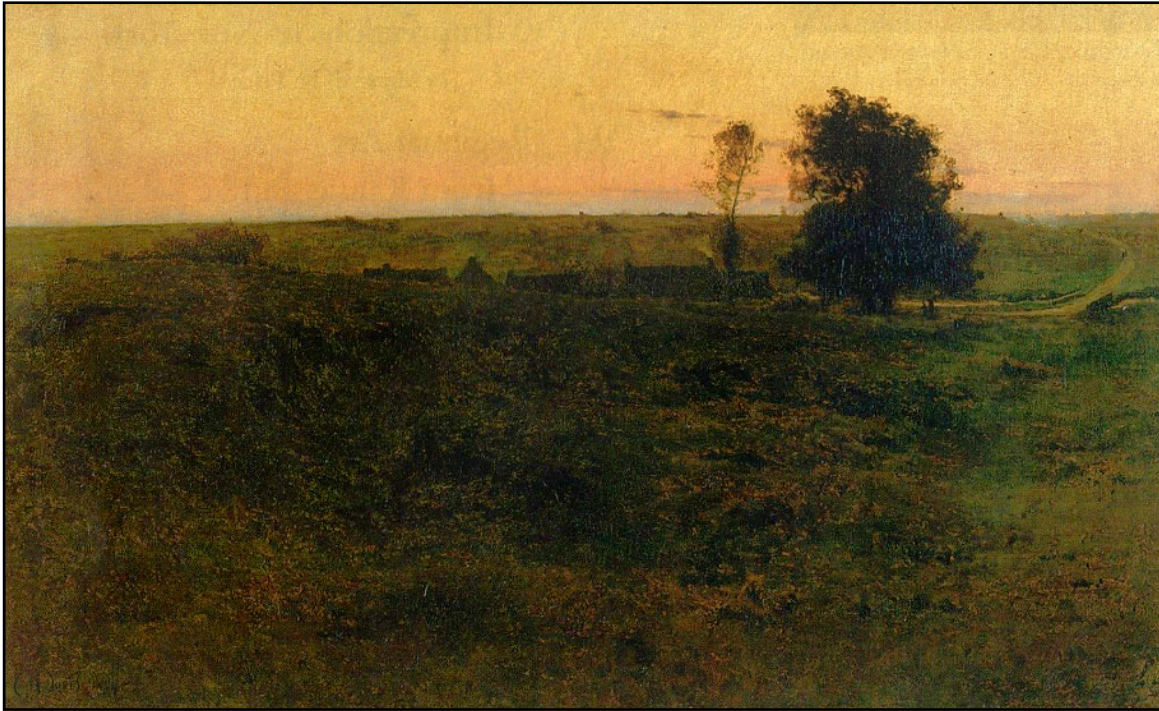


George Inness, *Home at Montclair* 1892



Alexander Wyant, *Grey Hills* 1879

Later Tonalists included **Albert Pinkham Ryder, Hugh Bolton Jones, Dwight Tryon, J. Francis Murphy, John Twachtman, Birge Harrison, Arthur Hoeber, Walter Lunt Palmer, Charles Harold Davis, Emil Carlsen,** and many others. These artists were painting and exhibiting at the height of Tonalism's popularity around 1900 and into its decline in the 1920s.



Charles Harold Davis, *Deepening Shadows* 1884



Walter Launt Palmer, *Sundown*



Arthur Hoerber, *Connecticut Idyll*, c1890



Dwight Tryon, *Twilight* 1894

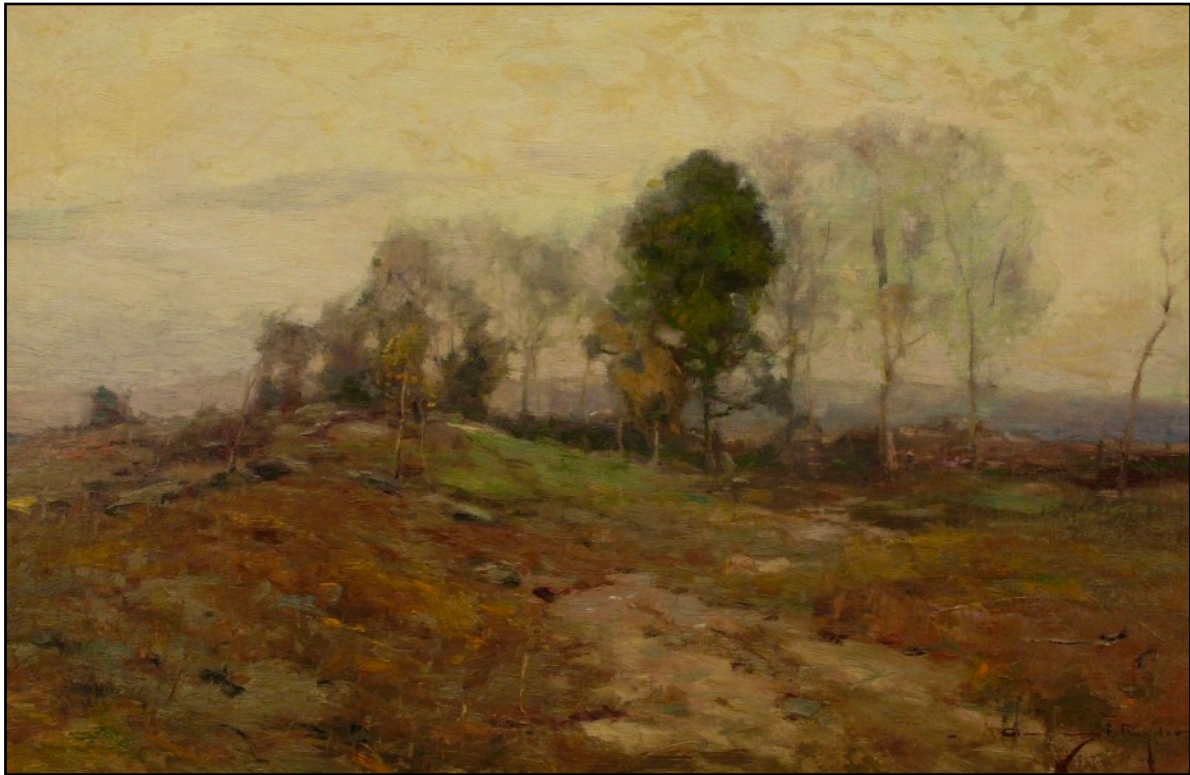


J. Francis Murphy, *Indian Summer* 1909



Frederick Kost, *Autumn* c1900

And lastly, examples from Chauncey Ryder, Emil Carlsen, and Birge Harrison.



Chauncey Ryder, *Road to Francistown* c1910



Birge Harrison, *Sunburst at Sea* c1913

Emil Carlsen, *Night - Old Windham* 1904

Finding Tonalism in Underpaintings

Generally, the Tonalists placed greater emphasis on strong graphic shapes in the compositions and simplicity in the value structures than they did on color variety and contrast. I've noticed that my underpaintings and block-ins—with their simplified compositions, monochromatic or limited color, and overall softness—often have a Tonalist feel whether intended or not. Below are two examples of underpaintings that convey a Tonalist mood.



An Asian Tonalism?

Don't bother using Google to search for the term, "Asian Tonalism" because it doesn't exist. But the American Tonalists and the classical poets and painters of China (and later Japan) share common ground. In his book, *Principles of Chinese Painting*, scholar George Rowley writes:

"Because of our inclinations toward reason, science and the expression of human emotion, it was inevitable that western painting should depend on forms. In these forms, we have valued intelligibility, convincing representation and emotional expressiveness. . . In China the emphasis on intuition, imagination and the moods of nature led to the importance of the mysterious, the intangible and the elusively expressive..."

In the mid-12th century, the Japanese poet and critic Kamo No Chomer (1153–1216), wrote: *"It is in essence, an overtone, that does not appear in words, a feeling that is not visible in form."*

And eight hundred years later, George Inness would write:

"The real difficulty is in bringing the intellect to submit to the fact of the indefinable—that which hides itself that we may see it. . . . Art is a subtle essence. It is not a thing of surfaces."

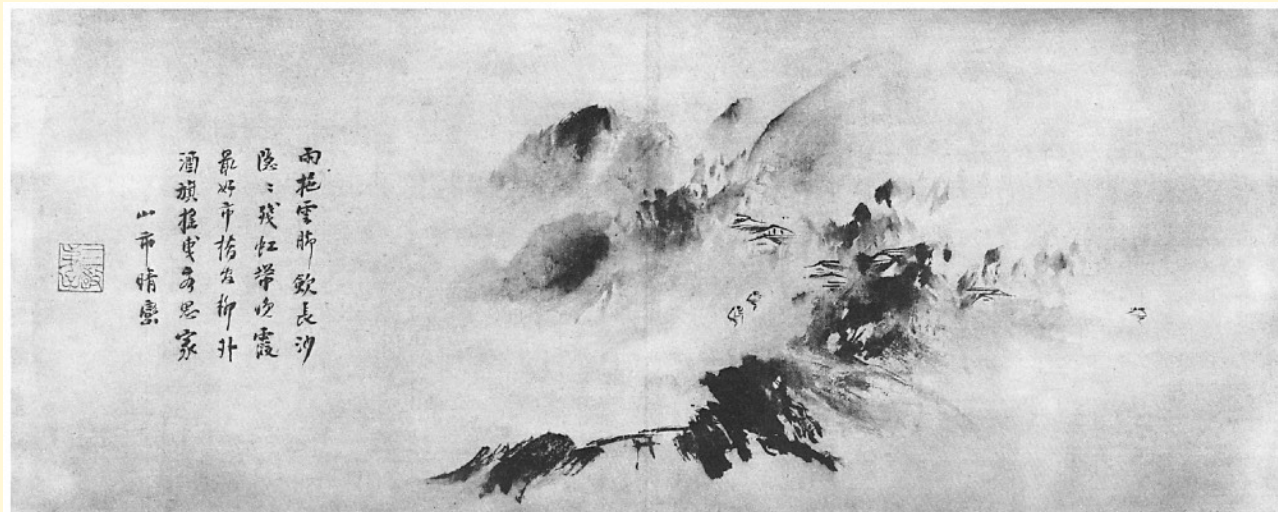
Despite being separated by centuries and vastly different cultures, the American Tonalists and many of the classical poets and painters of China and Japan shared similar beliefs about the relationship between the human and natural worlds: an appreciation of the beauty of nature, of its infinite and eternal vastness, and yet of its heart-rendering transience. Inness and Li-Po would, I believe, have appreciated each others work.



Xia Gui, *Pure and Remote View of Streams and Mountains*, 13th c.



Ying Yu-chien, *A Mountain Village in Clearing Mist*, early 13th century.



Ying Yu-chien, *A Mountain Village in Clearing Mist*, early 13th century.

New Moon

Such a thin moon! / in its first quarter
 a slanting shadow / a partly finished ring
 barely risen / over the ancient fort
 hanging at the edge / of the evening clouds
 the Milky Way / hasn't changed color
 the mountain passes / are cold and empty
 there's white dew / in the front courtyard
 secretly filling / the drenched carnations.

– Li Po (701–762)
 translated by David Young

On Yellow-Crane Tower, Farewell to Meng Hao-jan

From Yellow-Crane Tower, my old friend leaves the west
 Downstream to Yang-chou, late spring a haze of blossoms,

Distant glints of lone sail vanish into emerald-green air:
 Nothing left but a river flowing on the borders of heaven.

– Li Po
 translated by David Hinton

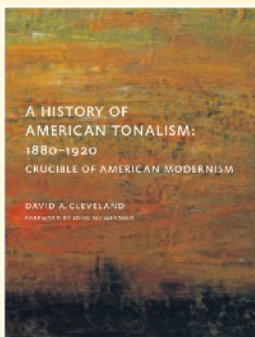
Five T'ang Poets, by David Young.
 (ISBN 0-932440-55-X)

The Selected Poems of Li Po, by David Hinton.
 (ISBN 978-0811213233)



Fan K'uan, *Travellers Among Mountains and Streams*, early 11th century.

Recommended reading ~ American Tonalism



A History of American Tonalism: 1880–1920

David A. Cleveland, Hudson Hills Press, 2010

ISBN: 978-1-55595-302-7

At 600 pages, oversized, and with nearly 500 quality reproductions, this is the Tonalist bible. If you're interested and inspired by tonalist painting, this is a must have for your library.

Like Breath on Glass –

Whistler, Inness, and the Art of Painting Softly

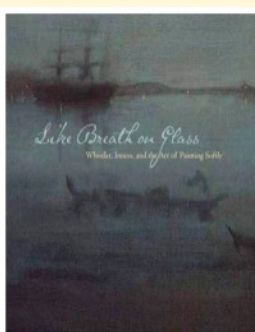
Marc Simpson, editor. Essays by various authors.

Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008

ISBN: 978-0-931102-76-9 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-0-300-13406-3 (hardcover)

A show catalog comprising 41 plates and illustrated essays.



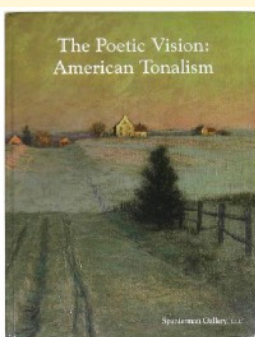
The Poetic Vision: American Tonalism

Ralph Sessions, editor. Essays by various authors.

Spanierman Gallery, LLC, New York. 2005

ISBN: 0-945936-74-5

A show catalog with a limited number of reproductions but informative essays. A good overview of the Tonalism.



Recommended reading ~ Asian Tonalism

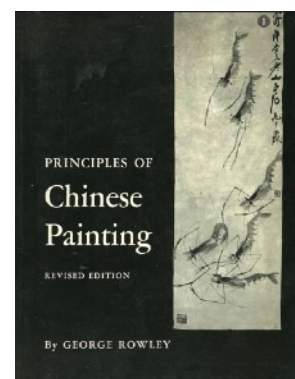
Principles of Chinese Painting

George Rowley

Princeton University Press; Princeton, New Jersey. 1959

ISBN: 978-0691003009

In a series of essays, Rowley breaks down Chinese ink paintings into various aesthetic and technical components. Although a Westerner, he describes the paintings strictly in terms of the philosophy and culture of China. It's a fascinating and challenging view of an approach to painting that is entirely different from that of the West.



Words of Wisdom

Begin doing what you want to do *now*.

We are not living in eternity.

We have only this moment,
sparkling like a star in our hand,
and melting like a snowflake.

– Francis Bacon (1561–1626)

Coming up in the next Newsletter:

As I finish this newsletter, I've not yet decided on the topic for the next. Let me know if you've any suggestions. . . Until then,

–*Happy Painting!*



As of now, all of the below workshops are scheduled to be conducted in person at the venue, depending on the state of the pandemic. Please see my website for updates.

2022 Workshops



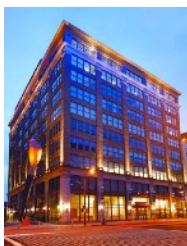
February 26 – March 5 Casa de los Artista, Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico
artworkshopvacations.com

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



May 4–10 Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art;
North Adams, Mass. MASSMoCA

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.



June 6–10 Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts;
Philadelphia, PA www.pafa.org

We will be painting in the studio using photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies. We will explore the limitations of the camera and ways to compensate for them.



October 14–16 Falmouth Art Center www.falmouthart.org

This three-day workshop will focus on painting in the studio while using photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. Open to painters of all levels of experience.