

John MacDonald

July–August 2018



WORKSHOPS

2018

I'm taking off 2018 from all teaching in order to re-write workshop materials and to concentrate on plein air painting.

Workshops are being scheduled for 2019/2020. See the [Workshop page](#) on my website for information.

2019

FEB 16–23, 2019

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

MAY 20–24, 2019

WETHERSFIELD ACADEMY
Wethersfield, Conn.
www.wethersfieldarts.org

SEPT 22–28, 2019

**HUDSON RIVER VALLEY
ART WORKSHOPS**
Greenville, New York
www.artworkshops.com

OCT. 9–15, 2019

**MASTER CLASS AT THE
MASSACHUSETTS MUSEUM
OF CONTEMPORARY ART**
North Adams, Mass.
(limited to 8 participants)

News from the Studio. . .

Social Media

Like a two year old going to the dentist (with apologies to dentists) I'm *finally* dragging myself—mentally kicking and screaming—deeper into the world of Social Media. I've had a Facebook page for several years but have too seldom updated it. Now, I'm determined to post work weekly. I've also joined Instagram and will be posting photos of paintings. I'm looking for followers! (And a very grateful "thank you" to [Jane Hunt](#) for sharing her vast experience and knowledge.)

A Must-See Exhibition

Currently on show at the Norman Rockwell museum are paintings by the American illustrators Rockwell, N.C. Wyeth, Howard Pyle, and Maxfield Parrish and their teachers from the French academies, including Gerome, Bouguereau and others. It's all figure work, no pure landscapes, but a great show. For more information, click [here](#).

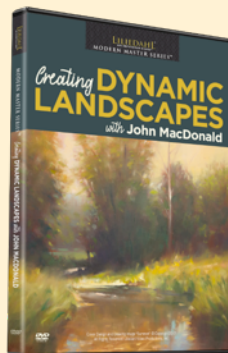
It's All About Contrasts

In my never-ending (and perhaps ultimately futile) attempt to make sense of this activity we call painting, I've lately become obsessed with contrasts (shape, value, color, edge, etc.) and how they attract and lead the eye in a painting. It's this month's topic. . .

Pod cast with Eric Rhoads on Outdoor Painter.

Among several topics discussed is using Photoshop to edit photos for painting reference. If that subject interests you, click [HERE](#) to listen. It runs slightly over 40 minutes.

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 exposition, and demonstration. Streaming is also available.

It's All About Contrast

In the previous newsletter, I wrote about how the illusion of atmospheric perspective is created by **reducing contrasts**. In this newsletter, we'll look at how contrasts can be used to create a focal point and lead the eye around the canvas. It's all about contrast.

There is one rule to remember when using contrasts in a painting:

Contrasts draw the eye.

Each of the five elements of a painting can provide contrasts:

Composition: contrasts in the sizes and contours of shapes

Value: contrasts of light and dark

Color: contrasts of warm and cool
contrasts of saturated (high chroma) and muted

Edge: contrasts of soft and hard

Details: contrasts of complexity and simplicity

Consider this painting. Why is the eye drawn so quickly to the head and hat? It's because that area contains almost all of the contrasts in the painting.

In the lower half of the painting, the edges are soft, the details are vague, and the color is nearly monochromatic. In the upper half of the painting, against a nearly perfectly uniform background, the head and hat contain a great variety of contrasts in texture, shapes, value, color, edges, and details.

Paradoxically, while portraits are the most difficult subjects to paint, they are the easiest in which to decide where to place the focal point. Where else but the face? Deciding where to place a focal point in a landscape can be much more difficult. But wherever you choose to place it, it is created by **contrasts**.



Woman in a Fur Hat, Gretchen Woodman Rogers, abt. 1915

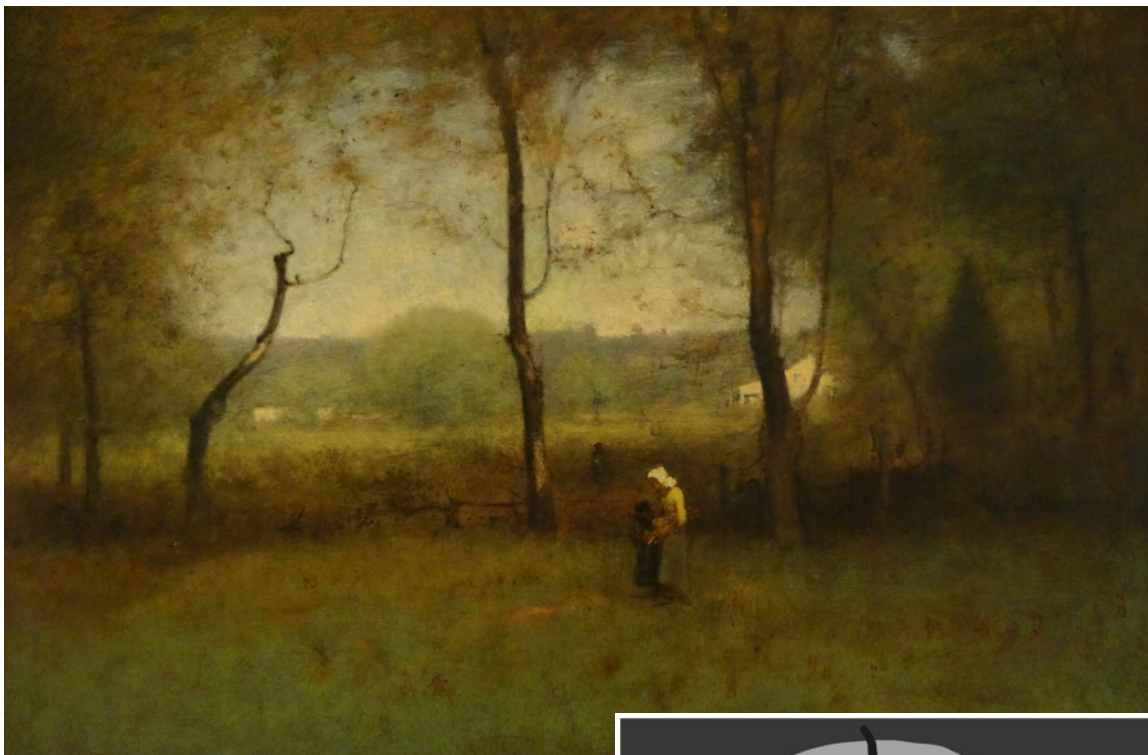
Below are several examples from the Clark Museum showing different kinds of contrasts. While all employ more than a single type of contrast in their focal points, I looked for paintings in which a single type of contrast was clearly predominant.

Shapes: contrasts in size and contour

Shapes are the building blocks of a composition. Almost every rule in composing a painting deals with shapes. By contrasting the **size** of shapes, we avoid dividing the canvas into equal portions. It gives us large voids to contrast with areas of small details. By contrasting the **contours** of the shapes, we can play horizontals, verticals, and diagonals against each other. Any successful painting is one composed of shapes that vary yet are unified. Learning to see shapes rather than things is an essential skill to develop.

When we're composing with shapes on the canvas, we're being reminded that creating a painting is not just mindlessly copying nature. Pay attention to the *design* of the shapes!

George Inness, *Wood Gatherers: An Autumn Afternoon*, 1891



Among other qualities, Inness was a master of using shapes to compose paintings. Here, he uses a semicircular opening to frame a few vertical tree trunks, which contrast with three horizontal bands. He also uses value, edge, and detail contrasts to enhance the effect but its the contrast and variety of shapes that are primarily responsible for attracting and leading the eye.



Value contrast: light verses dark

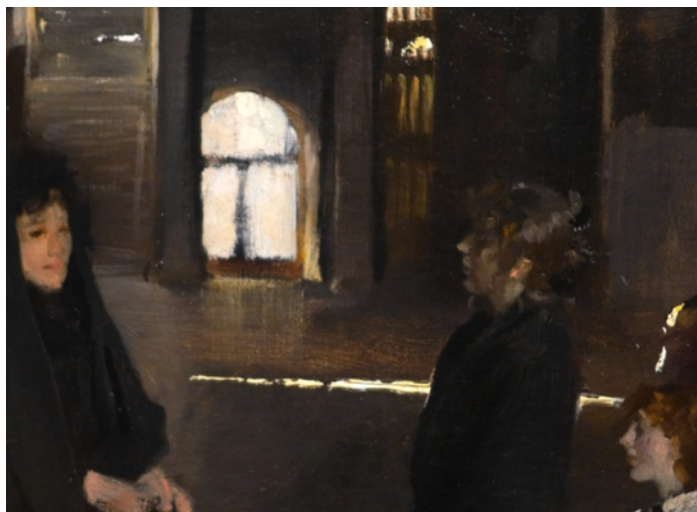
There's no easier way to create a strong focal point than by placing the darkest dark next to the lightest light with a sharp edge dividing them. (Notice that slash of light across the floor.) Value contrasts are powerful. They can overwhelm every other kind of contrast. Use them with care. Too many small value contrasts will destroy the overall value structure.

John Singer Sargent, *A Venetian Interior*, 1880–82



Considering only the values, the blacks are distributed nearly evenly throughout the painting. The lighter walls and clothing in the foreground provide some value contrasts to the blacks but it's the lightest lights in the background that eventually draw the eye. There is a clear division between the lightest values in the background and the light values in the foreground.

Notice the masterful use of diagonals which lead to the focal point and the contrast between the vertical foreground figures and the horizontal shapes of light in the background.



Color Contrast: warm verses cool / saturated versus muted

Strong value contrasts will usually overwhelm color contrasts. But in this painting, the saturated note of red in the figure's shirt is what ultimately draws the eye to the figures. It's the warmest note against a relatively cool grey background. It's also the most saturated note of color in the painting. (Also notice how the simplicity of the mountains separates and frames the more detailed sky, the figures, and the ground.)

Winslow Homer, *Two Guides*, 1877



In black and white, the figure nearly disappears into the background. The light clouds now catch the eye.



Edge Contrast: soft verses hard

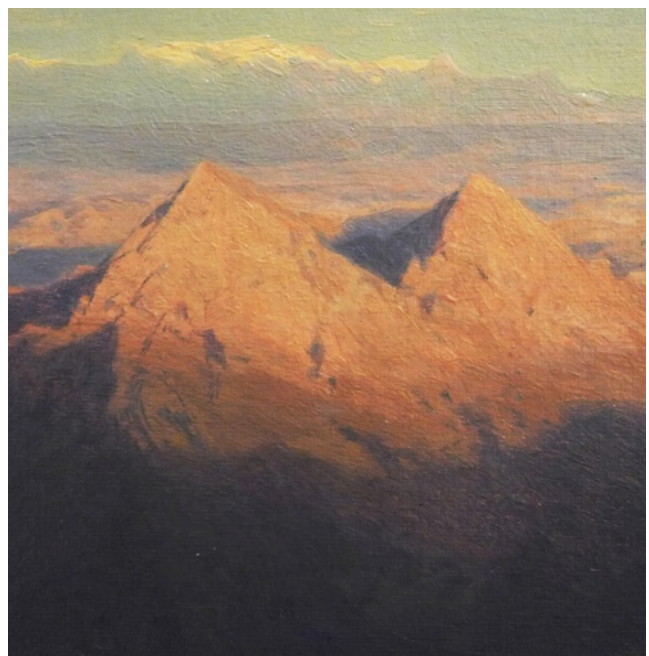
A small area of hard edges within a large area of soft edges will always attract the eye. (The reverse is also true but rarely used.) Especially when coupled with strong value contrasts, good edge contrasts will make forms “pop” from the canvas. It’s not hard edges per se that draw the eye; it’s their contrast against a larger field of soft edges that matters.

Alexander Calame, *The Mythen*, 1861



The sharp-edged shadows on the mountains—the only relatively hard edges in the entire painting—quickly bring the eye to the twin peaks, while the dark shadows against the light of the peaks heighten the effect through value contrast.

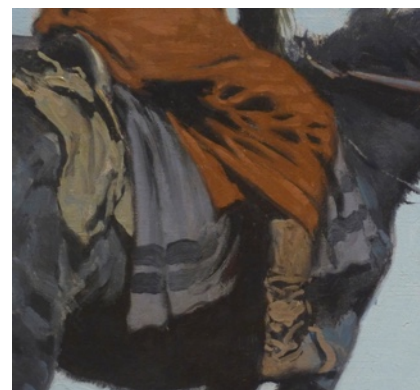
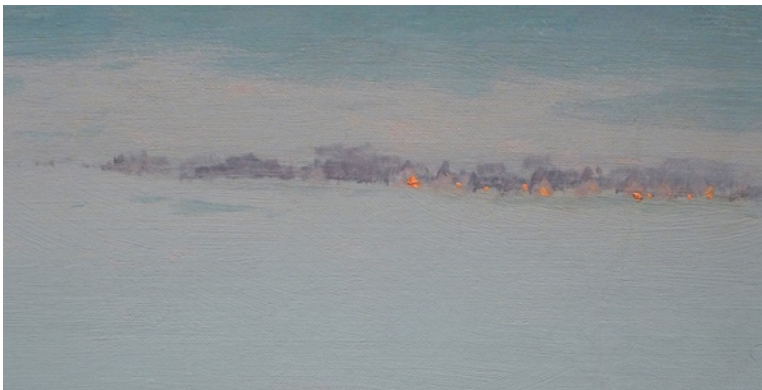
In the long shadow boundary separating the fore and mid-ground and the light peaks, the softness of the edge is largely the result of paint that has been physically blended. But in the sky, the edges of the shapes of the clouds and sky appear soft because the values are close together—a softness created *visually* rather than *physically*. Both techniques work equally well to create soft edges.



Detail Contrast: complexity versus simplicity

When choosing which details to include, keep in mind a simple rule: *Every unnecessary detail lessens the impact of the essential details.* When painting a landscape, look for areas that can be painted with a minimum of detail and contrasts (a sky, a meadow, distant mountains) so that those areas that feature details will strongly attract the eye. There are few paintings that show so clearly how effective this can be than Remington's work below.

Frederick Remington, *Friends or Foes? (The Scout)*, 1902–1905



Remington adds only a few loose, suggestive details to portray a distant camp. The camp is critical. It's necessary not only for the story of the painting but also to create a sense of scale. It's a weaker focal point that balances the primary. The two areas of details in this painting—the horse and rider and the camp—are surrounded by a simple void of close values and color. This lets the details sing while creating a mood of tranquility and silence.

Using contrasts skillfully—a few tips.

- Although all five kinds of contrast can be used to create a focal point, it's not necessary to use all of them. A quieter focal point will require only one or two types of contrast.
- Don't put contrasts where you don't want to attract the eye, especially on the edges of the canvas. They'll draw the eye out of the painting.
- A painting often has more than one area featuring contrasts. Choose the most important for your focal point, concentrate the strongest contrasts there, and then make the other areas more subtle. Multiple contrasts of equal intensity will confuse, not lead, the eye. By manipulating the strength of the contrasts, you can create a hierarchy which ultimately leads the eye to the most important area of the painting: the primary focal point.

A real world example. . .

The seascape below is still in progress. I've created four areas with strong contrast: the sky, the reflected light on the water, the mid-ground rocks, and the foreground rocks. I prefer the light on the mid-ground rocks but if it becomes the focal point, it's perilously close to the exact middle of the painting. Where then should I create the greatest contrast?



In the examples below, I've used Photoshop to change the location of the focal point by manipulating the value contrasts. (I could have also changed color, edge, and detail contrasts to strengthen the focal point but for simplicity I'll change only the value.)



The strongest contrasts in the foreground rocks.



The strongest contrasts in the middle ground rocks.



The strongest contrasts in the background water.



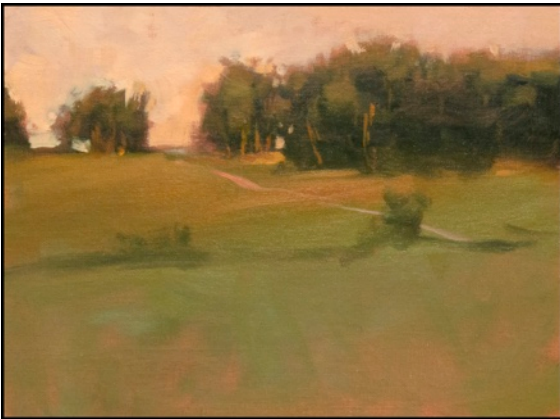
The strongest contrasts in the sky.

Compared to the unedited painting, these four versions share one attribute: the focal point is unambiguous. All other areas of contrast are subordinate to it.

Where is the best place for the focal point? Depending on where I decide to place the contrasts and how strong I choose to make them, I can create very different paintings. The mood, the sense of space and light, and even the subject matter—what the painting is about—can change dramatically depending on the location and strength of the primary focal point. There's no single answer that fits every painting. Each is unique.

First decide what your painting is about. What is its message? Usually, it's what initially attracted you to the scene; then keep that in mind as you paint. Concentrate the greatest contrasts in that area of the painting and the message will come through loud and clear.

A few plein air paintings created since the last newsletter. (All are 9" x 12")



2019 Workshops



February 16–23

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

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

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

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.



BEWARE of this SCAM

I recently received the following email, sent to me through my website.

My name is Meagan Sardana from California. I actually observed my husband has been viewing your website on my laptop and i guess he likes your piece of work. I'm also impressed and amazed to have seen your various works too, You are doing a great job. I would like to purchase one of your " Deep Winter Woods 12 x 24 Oil On Linen "as a surprise to my husband on our anniversary. Also, let me know if you accept CHECK as mode of Payment.

This being the hundredth time I've received this type of email, I promptly deleted it. Most of you have likely received emails of this sort but on the chance you haven't, please don't fall for it! I don't remember the exact details of how the scam works but all the emails share a common pattern: a spouse writing to buy a painting for an anniversary present, a few compliments about your work, and a noticeable lack of standard English.

If you ever receive any inquiry that causes concern, please feel free to contact me. I can't guarantee I can catch every scam but two minds examining it is better than one.

Words of Wisdom

The following is an excerpt from a delanceyplace.com review of the book, *Daily Rituals*, by Mason Currey.

"In his marvelous book, Mason Currey provides a brief glimpse of the work habits of 161 famous writers, painters, scientists, mathematicians and philosophers. While the details vary greatly . . ., one thing is constant for the vast majority of them. They work hard. And they work hard almost every day, belying the myth that creativity is the province of sudden inspiration rather than of commitment and a deeply seated work ethic."

Next Issue's Topic?

If you've a topic you'd like to see addressed in a future newsletter, please let me know. I'm always looking for ideas.

–Happy Painting!



"Success is sometimes the outcome of a whole string of failures."

– Vincent Van Gogh