

# John MacDonald

Newsletter ~ July 2014



## UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

SEPTEMBER 21–27, 2014

### HUDSON RIVER VALLEY ART WORKSHOPS

Greenville, New York

[www.artworkshops.com](http://www.artworkshops.com)

FEBRUARY 7–14, 2015

### CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

[www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com](http://www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com)

AUTUMN (TBA), 2015

### THE BASCOM

Highland, North Carolina

[www.thebascom.org](http://www.thebascom.org)

“One day work is hard, and another day it is easy; but if I had waited for inspiration I am afraid I should have done nothing. The miner does not sit at the top of the shaft waiting for the coal to come bubbling up to the surface. One must go deep down, and work out every vein carefully.”

-Arthur Sullivan, composer

## News from the studio. . .

I recently returned from six days of plein air painting in the Adirondacks as a participant in Eric Rhoads “Publisher’s Invitational Paint Out.” ([www.ericrhoads.com](http://www.ericrhoads.com)) On the last day, as I looked at the 650+ paintings on display (about 200 had already been taken home), I couldn’t help but notice the great variety in technique, style, and intent among the 120 painters that participated in the event. While it’s all fresh in my mind, I’d like to share a few thoughts about why painters so often enjoy painting plein air. . .

### *Ponderings. . .*

#### **Understanding Plein Air.**

Why do artists paint plein air? What are they trying to achieve? I can see four reasons for painting plein air:

##### **1. For training the eye.**

The artist’s sole intent is to practice the skills of identifying the composition, values, colors, edges, etc. in the landscape and translating those observations into paint. The painting is simply a vehicle for practice, like a musician running through scales on a piano. The sole focus is on the activity of seeing and painting and there’s no intent to produce a finished painting. It’s just practice.

##### **2. To create a study.**

Here, the intent is to explore whether or not a specific scene is worth translating into a larger painting that will be executed in the studio. The painting may be left rough or taken to a fairly finished state while on location but the emphasis is, once again, on *learning* rather than on *producing* a finished product. (Before the French Impressionists, these two

reasons were the *only* reasons artists painted plein air.)

##### **3. To begin a painting that will be finished in the studio.**

It’s a large leap from painting plein air for the sake of practice to painting with the intent to produce a finished work. In this case, the artist begins the painting outdoors with the aim of capturing the essential information seen in the landscape and then finishes the painting in the studio, with or without spending additional time outdoors on location.

##### **4. To produce a finished painting alla prima.**

This a relatively recent development, requiring quick decision making and a skilled eye. Here, the intent is to produce a finished work in a single, unbroken painting session.

Why do you paint plein air? There are concrete benefits to being consciously aware of your intent when you pack up and head outdoors to paint plein air:

##### **1. Gives you more options.**

You have choices. You can just paint for practice or you can paint to produce a finished painting. There is no “true” way to paint. If the ability to produce finished paintings alla prima in a single session is indicative of artistic superiority, then Michelangelo’s Sistine Ceiling, Rembrandt’s “The Night Watch,” and Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” must be considered inferior works. Point made, I hope.

##### **2. Clarifies your goals.**

Each of these four approaches requires (and thus trains) different skills and each presents unique challenges. If you know what your goals are for the painting, you’ll be better

able to judge whether or not you succeeded at the end of the day and assess how much you learned.

### 3. Improves focus.

Knowing exactly what you're trying to achieve during a plein air session will help you stay focused and not become distracted by expectations or problems that have nothing to do with your intent for this particular painting.

### 4. Puts the work in context

A painting created solely for the sake of practice can't, and shouldn't, be compared to one created with the intention of being a finished painting. The two are apples and oranges. At the end of the day, a painting should only be judged on whether or not you accomplished what you intended. Don't waste energy judging your work against that of other artists.

If you develop a taste for plein air painting, try all four approaches and decide which works best for you. It really isn't very important whether you can or cannot work well in all four approaches. What most matters most is discovering which way of painting leads to your best work.

## Coaching Ourselves Dealing with mistakes. . .

*[In the last newsletter, I promised a more in-depth look at dealing with mistakes. Here are few ideas to help you. . . .]*

Imagine two painters working side by side, each having made the same mistake in their work but each responding very differently:

**Painter #1:** "Oh, this tree just isn't working! Damn, I'll never get this right. I'll never be able to paint trees! I don't have enough talent. I'm just wasting my time."

**Painter #2:** "I see that tree isn't working. Hmm... I wonder why? Maybe that green is too saturated—it comes forward—and the edge of the tree may be too sharp. It really jumps out. I need to learn to mix more subtle greens and I think that I should study how other artists handle the edges of trees against a light sky.

It's not difficult to guess which painter will learn from her mistakes and continue painting and which will find painting so frustrating that she quits painting entirely.

If you want to spend a life painting, you must learn to accept the fact that you will make mistakes.

### Four steps that will help you deal skillfully with mistakes:

#### 1. Dis-identify from your work.

This isn't easy! As an artist, your work arises from the deepest part of you. It is intensely meaningful precisely because it's so personal. And yet you must be able to separate your sense of self, and self-worth, from your paintings. A mistake isn't you! Every mistake is simply an event that occurs in this particular painting at this particular time as a result of this particular decision. It's not a condemnation of your overall abilities!

**2. Find the information** within the mistake. When you make a mistake, approach it like a scientist. Look for information. What is the mistake? What specifically isn't working? A painting consists of only four elements: drawing, value, color, and edges. A problem in the painting must be a problem with one or more of those elements. Analyze the mistake, note the cause, and then try to find a cure. And don't do it again!

**3. See them as beneficial.** Mistakes are good. They tell us that we're working on the edge of our comfort zone and of our abilities. They indicate that we're in exactly the place we need to be in order to learn. Our mistakes give us precisely, and objectively, the information we need: they tell us where we need to focus in order to improve our technical abilities and skills. Our mistakes are invariably our best teachers. Making a mistake is only a mistake if we don't learn from it!

**4. Acknowledge success.** Learn from your mistakes but don't neglect your successes! Learn from your suc-

cesses, too. Just as our mistakes give us information, so do our successes. When you create a successful painting, spend time with it. Ask yourself how and why this particular painting works. Identify those specific elements in the painting, in yourself, and/or in your environment that led to such a success. Then try to duplicate them the next time you paint.

I also strongly recommend taking stock of your work at least once or twice a year. Choose what you consider to be your half-dozen most successful paintings. Study them. What are their strengths? What makes them work? Can you bring those success-making elements into every painting?

What are their weaknesses? Can you work on them to improve your skills? If you do this you'll be so busy learning new skills and improving your existing ones that you won't have time to lament making mistakes!



#### 5. My pile of mistakes. . .

The photo above is of a pile of rejects sitting in my studio—paintings that I've decided will not work and are not worth saving. Some are only blocked in while others were abandoned when nearly finished. They all await either disposal or a complete overpainting. Currently, there are 81 of them. They represent nearly a year's worth of my making mistakes. I've learned as much as I can from them and now I find it cleansing to get rid of them. They've served their purpose and I'll move on to another, hopefully more successful, painting. And the next, and the next, etc.

## *Deconstructing a Painting. . .*

### **The Painting.**

Given how much I admire and have been influenced by George Inness, it's surprising I haven't yet used one of his works in the newsletter. Let's look at this wonderful painting, "*October*," which Inness painted in 1886. A detail is shown below.

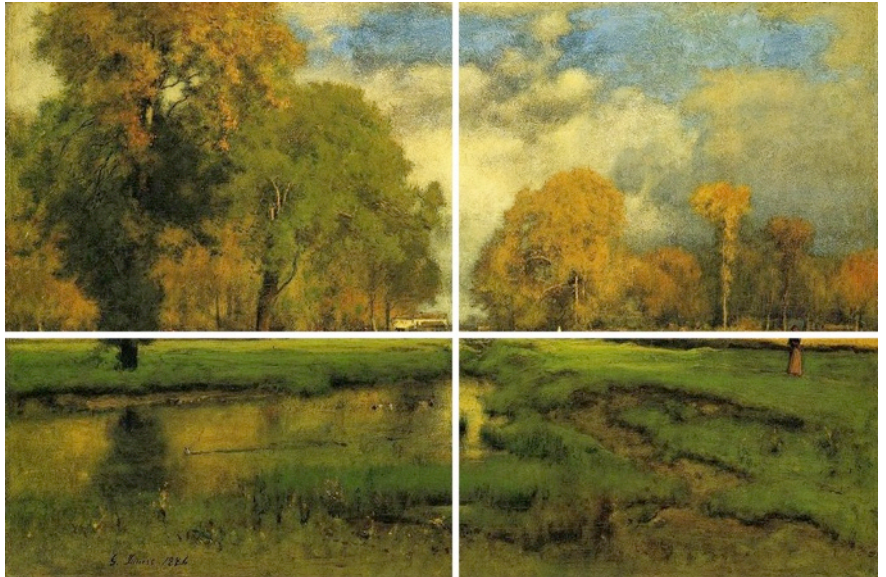


## Composition:

Inness's compositions, especially in his later paintings, were often based on a simple, nearly even division of the canvas—exactly the sort of quartering of the canvas that artists are told to avoid! Yet Inness invariably made it work. On top of this four-fold division of the canvas—a cross—he would hang a balanced arrangement of various shapes that often obscured but never obliterated the cross. Pay particular attention to the spacing and the variety of the shapes in the composition.

To lead the eye through the foreground, Inness often used subtle diagonals and then filled the background and middleground with a preponderance of horizontal and vertical lines. The cross creates a quiet but strong focal point while the various shapes add interest, variety, and movement for the eye.

Notice the similarity of composition in these four Inness paintings below:



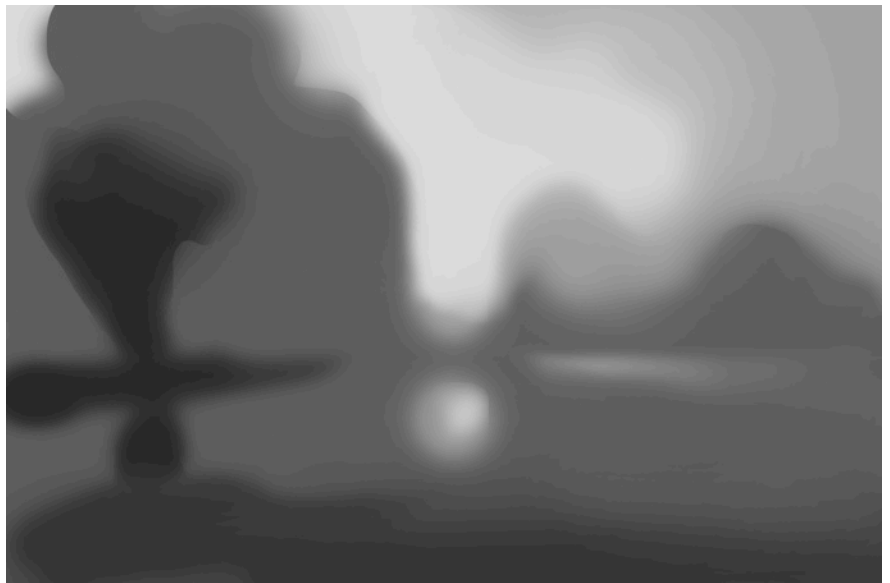
## Value Structure:

Although in Inness's early paintings he displayed a mastery of representational painting, later in his life Inness rarely used values realistically. He seldom used the simple, three-tiered value scheme seen in nature: mid-toned fields, dark trees, and light skies.

Typically, Inness used a mid-tone throughout most of the canvas and then relied on spots of intense darks and intense lights to provide interest, to create depth, and to lead the eye to the focal point.

Because he used so many horizontally and vertically edged shapes—and avoided using the diagonal lines that would create recession in space—Innesses relied on gradients in values to create his space. In most of the large masses of value in his paintings (fields, trees, skies, etc.), you'll find a gradient. In this painting, you can see gradients being used in the water, the foreground tree on the left, the fields, the sky. In fact, there aren't many foundation values in any late Inness painting that doesn't have at least a subtle value gradient.

Because of the complexity of his shapes and the non-representational use of values, it's difficult to create a simple schematic of the value structure of an Inness landscape. At right is one attempt. The foundation values could be grouped differently. But even in this simplified value scheme, I think it's possible to see a strong landscape that works well.



## Color:

Just as Inness never felt obligated to create a strictly realistic landscape using values, so too was he free with his use of color. Most of his paintings consist of simplified, large areas of warm and cool masses, balancing and enhancing each other. And notice how often his colors are rather muted but always appear vibrant. He does this by:

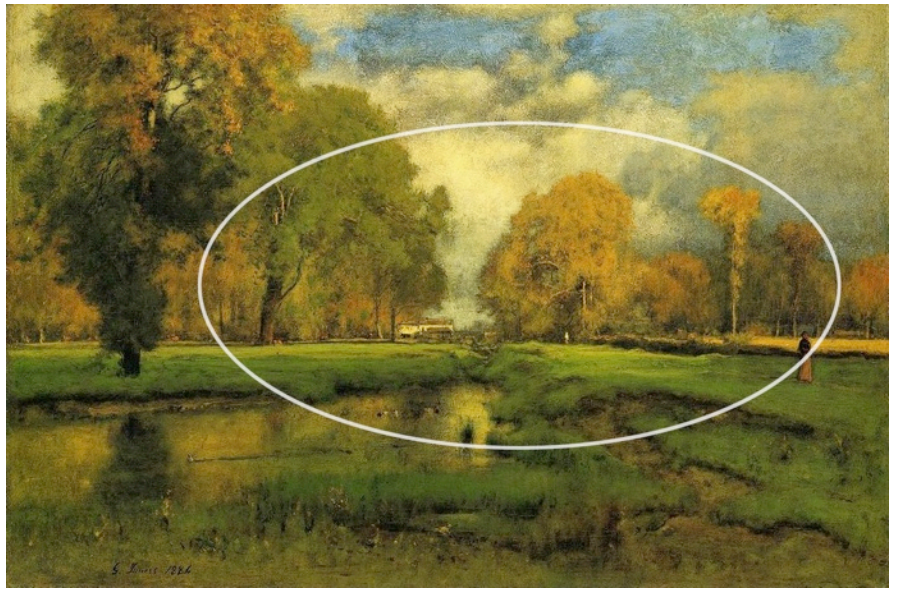
1. alternating warm and cool areas, playing them off each other. Even within an element of a single hue (a tree or a field) he will use warm and cool tones of the hue.

2. He sticks to the foundation values. By keeping his secondary values close within large value masses, he allows the colors to interact as hues and not as values, so the colors appear vibrant precisely because they're close in value.



## Edges:

Nearly every sharp edge in this painting occurs within the center. And in typical Inness fashion, most of the sharp edges are reserved for details. Where a long edge of a field is relatively sharp, Inness will break it up with an overlapping tree, house, or figure. In most of his late paintings he creates a world of large, soft forms punctuated by a few very carefully chosen, essential details. He is much more concerned about creating an overall atmosphere in which forms dissolve in light than he is in using light to sharply define specific forms. He relies heavily on soft edges to create the atmospheres. They work beautifully.



## Details

As I mentioned in the last newsletter, I consider Inness to be one of the few Western artists who understood and used detail with as much mastery as the great classic Chinese landscape painters. How does he do it?

### 1. He keeps it simple.

As Inness matured as an artist he used less and less detail, keeping only the essential details that helped establish scale, space, eye movement, and variety. And it was precisely because he used so few sharp details in images that were so quiet, that the details read so immediately and strongly.

### 2. He suggests rather than describes

At first glance, the Inness's details appear quite realistic. But on closer viewing you see that they're actually quite abstract and loosely painted. By keeping the details suggestive, Inness leaves something for our imaginations to play with. The suggestiveness enhances the soft atmosphere of his paintings.

### 3. He places them where they're needed.

Look carefully at how Inness uses details to guide the eye through the painting. He never places details randomly. The fewer the details used, the more important becomes their placement. And Inness, as with his use of color, value, and composition, was a master.

Even if you choose not to paint like him, study him. He has much to teach us.

