

# John MacDonald

January–February 2016



## UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

# 2016

FEB. 6–13 , 2016

### **CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS**

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

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

APRIL 4–6 , 2016 • *Waiting List*

### **COLONIE ART LEAGUE**

Colonie, New York

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

MAY 17–19 , 2016 • *Waiting List*

### **FALMOUTH ARTISTS GUILD**

Falmouth, Mass.

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

JUNE 9–11 , 2016

### **WEATHERSFIELD ACADEMY**

Weathersfield, Conn.

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

JULY 6–10 , 2016

### **HUDSON RIVER VALLEY ART WORKSHOPS**

Greenville, New York

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

AUG. 23–25 , 2016

### **THE GIBSON HOUSE**

Haverhill, New Hampshire

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

“To the artist there is never  
anything ugly in nature.”

-Auguste Rodin

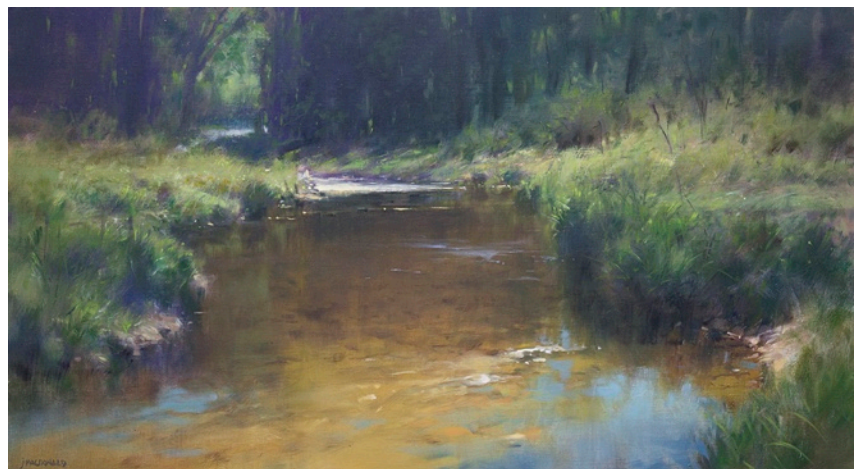
## Studio News. . .

I'm happy to report that I've joined two new galleries: Christopher-Clark Fine Art in San Francisco and the Sorelle Gallery, with galleries in Albany, New York and New Canaan, Conn. I've shipped the Christopher-Clark gallery thirteen paintings and the Sorelle gallery is currently showing eleven. You can see the new work on the gallery websites or on my personal website, [www.jmacdonald.com](http://www.jmacdonald.com)

Sorelle Gallery: [www.sorellegallery.com](http://www.sorellegallery.com)

Christopher-Clark: [www.clarkfineart.com](http://www.clarkfineart.com)

Speaking of websites, I'm redoing mine and am determined to be more diligent in keeping it updated. Look for new work to be posted regularly.



*Slow Water*, 20" x 3"

oil on linen, studio

*Showing at Christopher-Clark Fine Art, 377 Geary St., San Francisco, CA*

## The Joy of **Stealing.** Exercises for Artistic Growth

As any educator knows, learning only takes place when we try something new. If we limit ourselves to doing something we already know how to do, we never learn nor ever improve our skills. To become better painters, we must be willing to push ourselves to the edge of our comfort zone, to explore and to experiment. In this newsletter, I'm offering a few exercises that put me my edge and have helped me become a better painter. These are *exercises*, so don't be concerned about producing a finished painting. If that happens, that's wonderful, but it's not the point. Use them to open up to new ways of seeing and painting. Play, experiment, and have fun!

## *Stealing an Old Master's Palette:*

EXERCISE: Applying the color palette from an Old (or New) Master to a similar scene of your choosing.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED:

1. A good quality reproduction of an Old Master painting, preferably one you admire.
2. A photo that you'd like to use as reference for the painting. The more similar your photo to the scene as depicted in the Old Master's painting, the better the outcome. For example, my using a photo of a river scene that approximated the time of day and composition of Monet's painting made the translating of his colors to my image easier than if I'd used a landscape with vastly different lighting, subject matter, and/or local color.

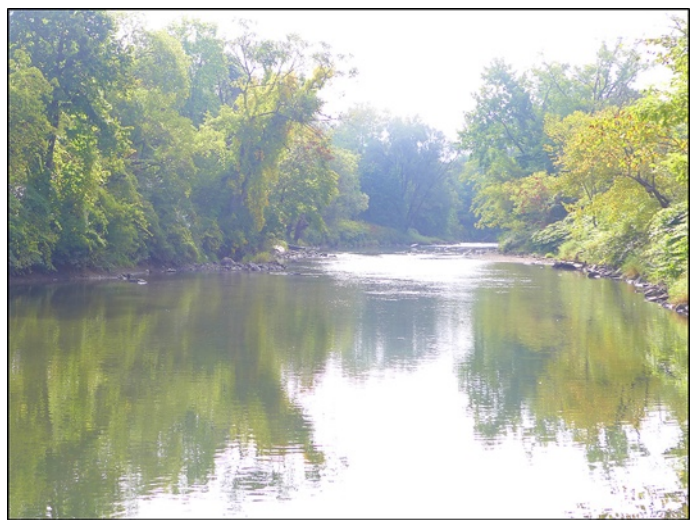
THE PROCESS: After sketching the composition on the canvas, block in the forms following the values found in your photo but the colors and color relationships from the Old Master painting. Only concern yourself with the hues of the Old Master's painting, not it's values. Once the values are established, you can focus on the color.

THE LESSON: In working in a different palette, you'll be learning to see and mix colors that are new to you. While doing this exercise, make a point of studying the color relationships and harmonies that the Old Master used. Why do they work? Try to match your colors as closely as possible to those in the painting. Take your time.

This exercise will also train you to see color and value separately, a valuable skill to have!



Monet's painting, "Morning on the Seine."



My photo of the Hoosic River in Williamstown.



The finished painting, "Morning on the Hoosic." (Titles can be borrowed, too!)

Who doesn't love Monet's series of paintings of the Seine, especially the misty, foggy scenes? While painting along the Hoosic last summer, the light and atmosphere reminded me of his work. Once back in the studio, I decided to use his palette while I painted a scene based on a photo that I'd taken that morning. I was especially interested in exploring his use of purples, greens, and rose hues and how he changed the color relationships as they receded in the distance. Working back and forth—taking the values from the photo and the colors from Monet's painting—was less confusing than I expected it to be, while mixing and working with his colors was as instructive as it was enjoyable. And at the end of the day, I was pleased with the results.

Lately, I've fallen in love with the work of the tonalist master, J. Francis Murphy. In his watercolor painting, "Under Gray Skies," he created a beautiful range of neutrals with subtle plays of warm and cool hues, all under a soft, warm light. I liked my photo below for its values and forms but wanted to explore Murphy's palette and color relationships, especially the relationship between the warm, neutral sky and the warm and cool greens of the ground. Whereas in the example above where there's a great difference between the colors in my photo of the river and Monet's palette, here the difference is more subtle, involving an overall shift to a warmer key rather than an entirely new set of hues. Comparing the two paintings to the right, I see now that I could have made the overall tone even warmer.



"Under Gray Skies" by J. Francis Murphy



My photo of a meadow in Cornwall, Connecticut



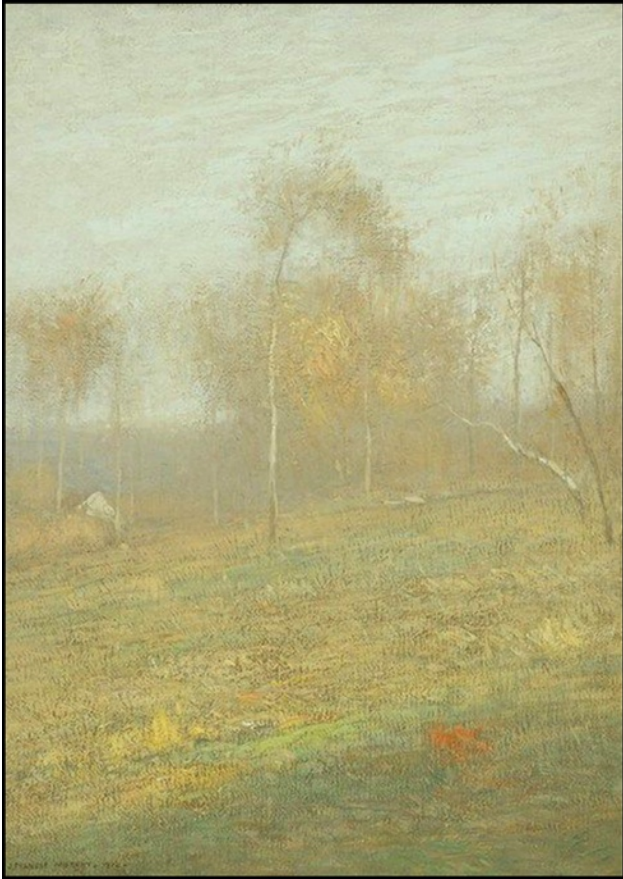
The resulting painting, "Spring Rain."



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Perhaps this will make it clearer: when doing this exercise you'll want to take the values of the photo and add the colors from the painting. If you find this too challenging, then first paint a monochromatic underpainting based on the photo. After it dries, set aside the photo and refer only to the Old Master painting as you add color over your underpainting, matching the values.



"Spring" by J. Francis Murphy



The final result.

### Stealing an Old Master's keys. High Key.

**EXERCISE:** Shifting the entire values in a photo to the lighter end of the value scale.

#### WHAT YOU'LL NEED:

1. A photo with good color contrast. Shifting the values to a high key diminishes the range of available values and therefore diminishes value contrasts. Having little value contrast, you'll need a photo with strong contrasts in color temperature.

2. A high key painting that inspires you.

**THE PROCESS:** In this case, you'll be using the values of the painting as reference while referring to your photo for the colors. Or, if you wish, you may also use the colors in the painting as reference. The point of the exercise is the shift in key.

**THE LESSON:** Painting in a high or low key is a wonderful way to hone your skills in seeing and manipulating values. Because there is a limited number of values with which we can work, the value relationships we create must be very accurate. This is also good training in seeing and learning how to use contrasting color temperatures within a limited value range.

I struggled with this painting. I'm much more of a value painter than color painter and I had to continually fight the urge to create more value contrast by adding darks. And as you can see, I wasn't entirely successful. I have too many values and too many darks. Notice how simple is Murphy's value scheme!



The original, unedited photo.

### Stealing an Old Master's keys. Low Key.

I've always been a bit of an astronomy buff and am partial to the night, especially moonlit nights. As I'll explain later, the value structure of a moonlit snow scene is relatively simple and predictable. The challenge, as with the high key painting, lies in creating interesting color relationships. In this first example, I used as reference a painting by the Pennsylvania Impressionist, George Sotter, who became renowned for his nighttime snow scenes.

**EXERCISE:** Creating a low-key, moonlight painting from any landscape photo.

**WHAT YOU'LL NEED:**

1. A daytime photo of a landscape. One with large, simple shapes of uniform values works best.
2. A painting of a moonlit scene for references, if needed.

**THE PROCESS:** In painting a moonlit scene, refer to your photo only for the forms of the landscape, using them to compose the scene. We'll steal the values *and* the color from the Old Master painting. In this example, I used my photo of the farm scene for the objects in the landscape and borrowed Sotter's values and palette. (Later, I decided that I wanted greater contrast between the distant hill and sky and so lightened the sky in my painting.)

**THE LESSON:** As with the high key exercise, this helps train our ability to work with values and with color contrasts within a narrow value range. Painting moonlit scenes is also wonderful training in learning to radically simplify values into massed shapes and then use the shapes to create interesting compositions. There are few details in a moonlit scene—it's mostly silhouettes—and so we're forced to create interest in the shapes and edges. Have fun with it!



"Silent Night" by George Sotter



My photo of a neighbor's farm, taken on a cloudy April afternoon.

Notice how flat, simple, and cool is Sotter's sky. His warm hues are limited to the foreground snow. In my painting, I wanted the sky to be more interesting and so put most of my warmish hues in the sky and created a gradient in the sky to lead the eye to the central barn and trees.

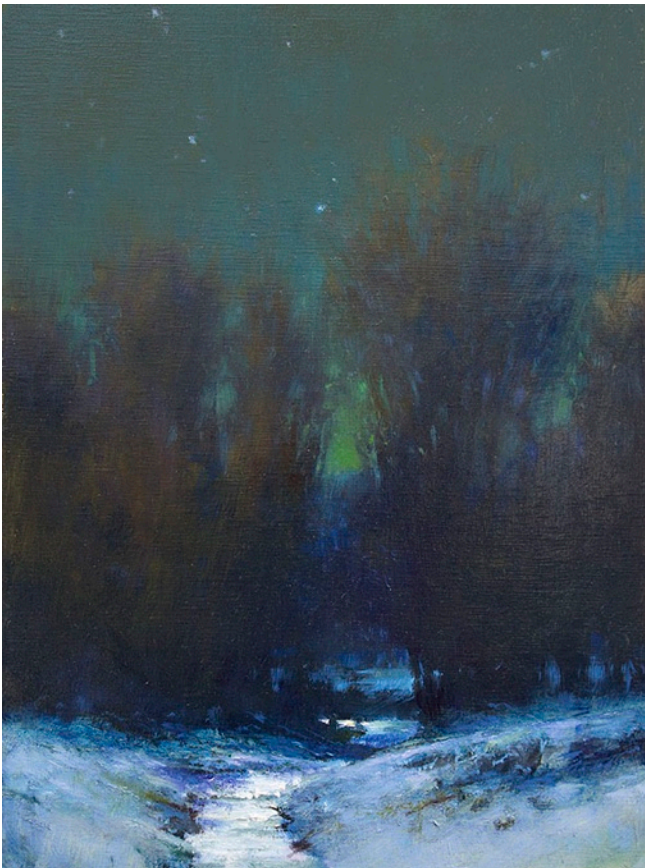




The original photo.



The edited photo.



Having spent many nights outside away from artificial lighting, I'm familiar with how moonlight lights a landscape, its colors (very few) and its values (very simple). In this example, rather than using an Old Master painting as reference, I took the original photo into Photoshop and manipulated the values and colors until it resembled a moonlit landscape as I remembered it. I was able to quickly establish the overall value structure and even begin to explore color contrasts.

In the painting, I wanted the focal point to be the distant reflection of the moon in the water and so I kept the sky simple, losing many of the edges of the trees where they met the sky.

Did I need to add the snow? Probably not. If I'd painted a summer moonlit scene the foreground (as in both photos above) would have been much darker with less value contrast but I could have introduced warm hues in the grasses to create an interesting color contrast with the greens in the sky. But by adding snow, I was able to introduce some intense blues in the distance which then made the sky and trees appear warm. In the end, I preferred those color contrasts.

You can invent your own moonlit scenes. You need only understand how they're structured in value.

Lastly, let's look at the overall value structure of a moonlight scene. Most nocturnes can be reduced to three values:

### 1. The value of the sky

Rarely is the sky lighter than a middle value. Sometimes, as in Sotter's work, it can be so dark as to nearly blend into the darkest darks. The night skies in Sotter's paintings are nearly always a single, flat value. I prefer adding a gradient to the sky: making it lighter as it gets closer to the moon. (With a shift in color, too.)

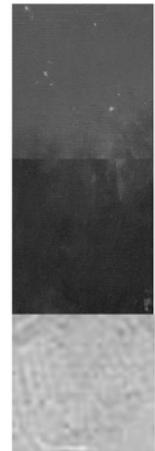
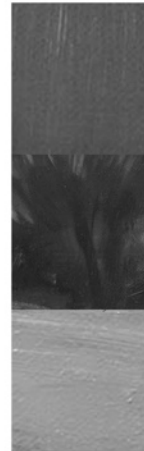
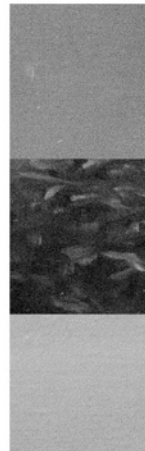
### 2. The value of the horizontal ground.

Should the ground be darker or lighter than the sky? The answer is, it depends. With snow on the ground, the sky will always be darker than the ground. That value relationship will often flip if the ground is bare. What's important is that the values differ. Notice too that values of shadows on the ground are often indistinguishable from the values of objects that are perpendicular to the ground. They become one value shape.

### 3. The value of objects that are perpendicular to the ground.

Trees, buildings, hills, any objects that are standing on the ground will have sides that receive little, if any, light. Even under a blazing full moon, these shapes will be very dark and nearly reduced to plain silhouettes. Very little detail, if any, is visible in the shadows. That doesn't mean they should look like cut-out shapes. Manipulate the edges of the shapes to create interest. Some edges will be sharp, some soft, and some lost altogether. If there is some detail, texture, or pattern in the ground or in the edges of objects against the sky, a beautiful contrast can be created by keeping objects in shadow as simple flat shapes. As holds true in any painting, if there is an equal amount of detail and value change in the ground, in the shadowed objects, and in the sky, nothing will stand out and the painting will be boring.

Here, three paintings have been converted to grayscale and samples taken from the sky, ground, and shadowed objects of each. Notice how in the two examples on the right, the sky (the middle value) is closer to the darkest darks in value. In the sample on the left, the sky is closer in value to the ground. It's important that the three values NOT be evenly spaced. The value that lies in the middle should be closer in value to either the darkest value or the lightest value. When value relationships are the same for every major value, the result tends to be a boring painting. Variety is crucial!



NEXT NEWSLETTER...  
**PAINTING WATER**



## Thank You!

A sincere thanks to those who responded to the inquiry regarding recommendations for painters who teach acrylics. I'll never give out or share the mailing list for this newsletter. However, when there are questions asked by some of you or information that I feel might benefit everyone, I hope you don't mind my contacting you through the mailing list.

If you have a question that you'd like me to pose to the list, please let me know. I reserve only the right to determine if it's appropriate to send to everyone. We all receive far too many emails and I'd rather not contribute to the problem.

—As always, *Happy Painting!*

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## Painting for Sale.

I'm now offering a painting for sale in each newsletter. These will be small paintings—8"x10" to 12"x24"—which were created in the studio or en plein air. Some will be personal favorites or will have served as studies for larger paintings. If you're interested, contact me for more information.



*Waxing Winter Moon—Study*, 2016

oil on linen panel, 8" x 16," studio



# 2016 Workshops



## February 7–14. . . *Last Call. . .*

Casa de los Artista, Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

[artworkshopvacations.com](http://artworkshopvacations.com)

This will be my third 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 **plein air** painting paired with a varied, fun-filled, and fascinating exposure to Mexican food, people, landscapes, and culture.



## April 4–6. (*waiting list only*)

The Colonie Art League, Colonie, NY

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

*Sorry, but this workshop is now full.*

## May 17–19. (*waiting list only*)

Falmouth Artists Guild, Falmouth, Mass.

[www.falmouthart.org](http://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. We will explore the limitations of the camera and ways to compensate for so them so that our paintings have the life and spirit of paintings done en plein air. Open to all.



## June 9–11

Wethersfield Academy for the Arts, Wethersfield, Conn.

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

The focus of this workshop will be painting landscapes en plein air and then moving into the studio to complete them. Open to all.



## July 6–10 . . . *filling up*

Hudson River Valley Art Workshops, Greenville, NY

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

In this workshop, we will be painting in the studio while using photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. We will explore the limitations of the camera and ways to compensate for them: while photographing and then using them to paint.



## August 23–25

The Gibson House, Haverhill, New Hampshire

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

Painting plein air, rain or shine. The Gibson House is a New Hampshire bed and breakfast that overlooks the beautiful landscapes of New Hampshire's pristine Upper Connecticut River Valley. Meals are included.

