

John MacDonald

July–August 2016



WORKSHOPS

2017

FEB. 4–11, 2017

CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico
www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com

MAY. 8–12, 2017

Half Moon Bay, CA

(See my [website](#) or click [here](#).)

JUNE 9–11, 2017

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA)

Philadelphia, PA
www.pafa.org

AUG. 7–9, 2017

WETHERSFIELD ACADEMY

Wethersfield, CT
www.wethersfieldarts.org

OCT 8–14, 2017

HUDSON RIVER VALLEY ART WORKSHOPS

Greenville, New York
www.artworkshops.com

OCT 25–27, 2017

THE LANDGROVE INN

Landgrove, VT
www.landgroveinn.com

Newsletter hiatus. . .

Nearly three years ago, my wife Deborah suggested she take a leave of absence from work so that we could take a two-month vacation in Europe. I loved the idea. We began scrimping and saving and it's paid off. We're leaving the 1st of September and will return November 6th. But it won't be all wine, baguettes, and sightseeing. I'll be packing a plein air painting kit and will paint as often as possible. (I'll try to post the results on my Facebook page – John MacDonald Paintings—as time and internet access allow.) I mention the trip because my absence from the studio will prevent me from creating a September-October newsletter. But, as the Ancient Mariner once said, I'll return “an exhausted but wiser painter.” Well, I think he said something like that. . . Look for the next newsletter in late November!

Publisher's Invitationals

In June, I attended my third Publisher's Invitational in the Adirondacks. I was more relaxed and willing to experiment (aka “screw up”) than in previous years. The results were decidedly mixed but the week was pure enjoyment. It isn't only the opportunity to focus on painting that makes these events so special. It's the chance to paint with a talented group of artists and develop long lasting friendships. I also attended last year's Fall Color Week in Maine but our upcoming trip will prevent me from returning this October. I hear that there are still a few places available. You can find more information [here](#).



“Raven's Nest,” a favorite painting location during the Fall Color Week of 2015.

Suggestions? Comments?

As always, if you have any suggestions for future topics or wish to comment on the content of these newsletters, don't hesitate to contact me.

Have a good autumn and *Happy Painting!*

Painting Water • Part III: Still Water

I confess that I felt a little lost doing the last newsletter, which addressed the topic of painting waterfalls and cascades. In the Berkshires of western Massachusetts there are few dramatic waterfalls or rushing streams. The opportunities to paint white water in violent motion are rare. Small, placid streams (part I) and lakes and ponds (this newsletter) are the norm. Ahh. . . I'm back in my comfort zone!

There are three parts to this newsletter: a recapitulation of two rules to painting water (honestly, they warrant repetition!), a few thoughts about the compositional differences between large and small bodies of water, and a discussion of the visual vocabulary of lakes and ponds. I hope you find it informative.

The Rules, once again. . .

Rule #1: Don't paint water, paint shapes. The only way to be able to see and skillfully paint the complexity of water is to see it as a group of interlocking shapes, each with a specific value, color, and edge. Shapes. You are not painting water but SHAPES! If you can acquire this skill—to see a body of water simply as a variety of 2-dimensional shapes and then carefully translate those into paint on your canvas—lo and behold, you'll step back and discover that you've created a 3-dimensional illusion of flowing water. (Yes, this rule applies to painting *anything*: cityscapes, a still-life, the figure, etc. It's a must-have skill for artists!)

Rule #2: You can't paint what you can't see. In theory, if you can see and paint shapes then you need no other information. It's not absolutely necessary to know what you're looking at when trying to paint water—it's all just shapes. That's the theory. But in practice, we can't paint shapes that we can't see and some shapes are more important than others. We need to know what is essential and what should be ignored.

Composition: size does make a difference.

A pond is not a large lake on a small scale. There are differences in the depth of space and they dramatically affect the compositional possibilities of the painting. Typically, a large lake has a distant shore. The strip of trees and hills are often a minor shape in the painting. But when painting a pond or small lake, the mass of ground between water and sky can become an important element—in fact, it can become the most important element in the painting. When painting a large lake, we need to deal with only the two large shapes of water and sky and to decide which will be the most prominent element in the painting. But on a smaller body of water we're juggling three major shapes: water, ground, and sky. We must decide which element should dominate and which should play subordinate roles. (More on this later.)



On a small body of water, the shore and trees are often the center of interest. Here, the water provides some interest. The sky is unimportant.



On a large body of water, either the sky or the water dominate. Here, the sky is the dominant element while the water is secondary.



Here, the eye will eventually come to rest on the hills and shoreline, but the water must have enough visual interest to balance the high focal point.

Lakes and Ponds • The Visual Vocabulary of Still Water

The most important visual components of a body of still water are the **reflections** in the water and the indications of the **surface** of the water. In most cases, both are needed in the painting to create a convincing illusion of a body of water as a flat, horizontal surface that recedes into distant space.

Portraying Reflections in the Water.

1. Composing the reflection: A reflection is a shape. It's much less important for the reflection to conform to reality than it is for it to work in the painting. If the shape of a reflection needs changing to enhance the composition, change it.

2. The values of a reflection: The values change in ways similar to the rules of atmospheric perspective: the lightest lights in the landscape or sky are slightly darker in the reflection and conversely, the darkest darks in the landscape or sky are slightly lighter in the reflection. That is, there is less contrast in the values in the reflection—they tend to merge towards a middle value. Generally, the clearer the water the less a change in the values. In fact, in a very muddy body of water the values may come so close to the color and value of the water that any reflections are nearly lost. (See Corot's painting at bottom right.)

3. The colors of a reflection: Obviously, the colors are dependent on the colors of the objects being reflected, but with some modifications:

The colors in a reflection tend to be less saturated than the objects being reflected. For example, the brilliant red side of a boat will be a slightly more muted red in its reflection.

The colors in a reflection are affected by the color of the water. The stronger the color of the water (the murkier, the muddier) the more all colors in the reflection will move towards that color.

4. The edges of a reflection: Generally, the edges of a reflection will appear softer, whether smeared into adjacent colors or broken up by ripples or waves. But like a shadow of an object, the closer the edge of the reflection is to the object being reflected, the harder will be the edge of the reflection. Distantly reflected objects have soft edges.

5. Details in reflections. Unless the water is perfectly still and perfectly clear (and so acting like a mirror), the reflection will always be a simplified echo of the actual object: the reflection will feature fewer and more suggested details.



STANISLAS LEPINE, unknown painting, detail.

The reflected darks are lighter than the objects reflected.



FRITS THAULOW, unknown painting, detail.

The lights in the objects darken when reflected.



COROT, *The Augustan Bridge At Narni*, 1826 detail.

The reflections take on the color and values of the water.

Portraying the Surface of the Water

Whereas a reflection appears as a flat plain parallel to the picture plane, the surface of a body of water is a flat plane perpendicular to the picture plane: *it recedes into space*. And with recession comes the need to indicate changes in scale and to see and to use gradients in value, color, edges, details, etc.

The surface can be indicated by painting any floating objects or the effects of wind and/or light on the surface. Lily pads, leaves, bubbles, foam—anything floating on the surface—can be used to create the illusion that the water is a flat surface receding in the distance. Waves, ripples, streaks of water churned up from the wind or streaks of light or patches of shadow can also be used.

Separate the reflections from the surface

It's crucial to treat the surface and the reflections differently. I often paint objects that are floating on the water with more value contrast, sharper edges, more detail, and stronger color than any of the reflections. And to further emphasize the difference, I often use soft, vertical brushstrokes in the reflections but sharper edged and thicker horizontal brushstrokes for the surface of the water. (Notice how differently Monet treats the surface and reflections in the painting at right.)

Balancing the reflections and the surface

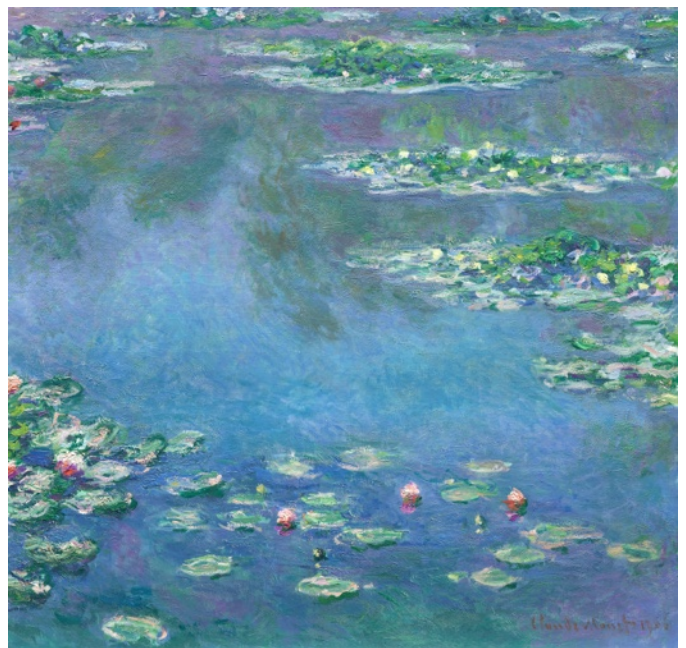
In nearly every successful painting of still water which I've seen, the artist has either emphasized the reflections or the surface but not tried to make both equally strong. If the reflections and the surface are too simple and without any detail, texture, or strong gradients, the painting tends to be boring. If both are equally complex and strong, the painting tends to be confusing.

As a general rule, if the reflections are complex and interesting, keep the indications of the surface of the water simple. And likewise, if the surface is interesting—if there are interesting and complex patterns of water lilies or strong streaks of wind and waves—then simplify the reflections. Either the reflections or the surface objects should dominate.



GUSTAV KLIMT, *Island in the Attersee*, 1902

This isn't a detail, it's the entire painting. Notice how the horizontal streaks in the distance and the small, sharp ripples contrast with the soft and amorphous hints of reflections.



CLAUDE MONET, *Water Lilies*, 1906.

This is a superb example of distinguishing between the reflections and the surface. Notice how differently he paints the reflected trees and the surface lilies. The reflection of the trees have little contrast but the lilies “pop.” (This, too, is not a detail but the entire painting.)

The Effects of Wind on the Reflections and Surface.

The appearance of a reflection is dependent on the condition of the surface of the water. If the water is clear and perfectly still, a reflection is mirror-like, with only the most subtle changes in values, colors, edges, and details. Between mirror-like reflections (no surface) and a uniformly choppy surface (no reflections) there can be seen an endless variety of interesting shapes, surface patterns, textures, streaks, and ripples, etc.

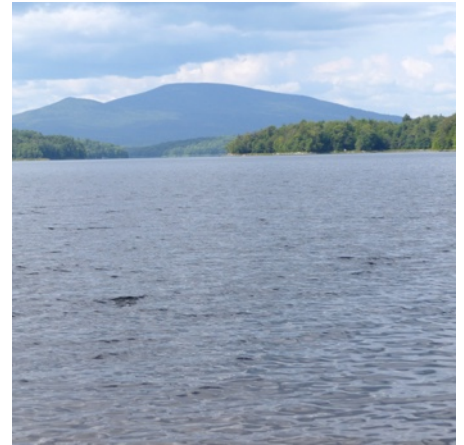
The wind will often create interesting patterns of streaks and swirls as it brushes the surface of the water, creating areas differing in value and/or texture. Look for these! They can be used to enhance the illusion of the recession in space of the surface as well as creating interesting shapes and value/color changes.



A mirror-like reflection. There is hardly any indication at all of the surface of the water. Something is needed to show the surface!



A broken reflection with streaks of wind-blown waves. Here, we see both reflections and the surface. The variety of effects can be endlessly interesting!



An unbroken surface of uniform ripples. There are no reflections, only subtle gradients. Visually, a water without any reflections can be boring.

The Effects of Light and Shadow on the Surface.

When the sky is partially cloudy, there will often be a pattern of lights and darks on the surface. These tend to be most evident in the mid and background and appear particularly strong when looking directly towards the source of light. These shapes of light and dark can be used to create an illusion of deep distance, particularly in the far background where the shapes are hard-edged and horizontal.



Hans Gude, *Sandviksfjorden*, 1879 (National Museum of Stockholm)

Gradients

Without the use of gradients, it's impossible to create the illusion of a horizontal plane receding into space. When painting still water, you can take it for granted that the water in the foreground will differ in value and color from the water in the background. Often, there will also be changes from side to side! A gradient can be a shift in value, hue, saturation, scale, edges, or even details. That is, a gradient can shift from dark to light, warm to cool, muted to saturated, large to small, soft edged to hard edged, or complex to simple. In the landscape, gradients are everywhere. Once you train the eye to see them, you cannot help but notice them in every landscape. Study this larger image below of Gude's painting, *Sandviksfiorden*. Notice the gradients in value, color, scale, detail, etc., etc. In nearly every area of this painting, he uses gradients to create the illusion of space. (He also uses gradients to create the illusion of light, but that's a topic for a future newsletter.)



and lastly. . . Scale

It should be obvious that objects, ripples, waves, streaks, etc. on the surface of water diminish in size as they recede in space. But it's surprising how often we forget that, how often we fail to indicate scale when portraying the surface of water. Too often we use the same width of brushstrokes, the same marks, or similar sized shapes as we paint the surface of water. In this detail of Klimt's painting, notice how he suggests the recession of space by changing the size, color, and value of the ripples. He enhances the illusion by placing the ripples on top of soft areas of suggested reflections. Simple but it works!



Some additional paintings worth studying. . .

Notice how the artist chose to emphasize the reflections, the surface, or both, and if and how they were painted differently. Study how the values and colors of objects change when reflected. And notice the use of gradients.



Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *Lake Keitele*, 1905



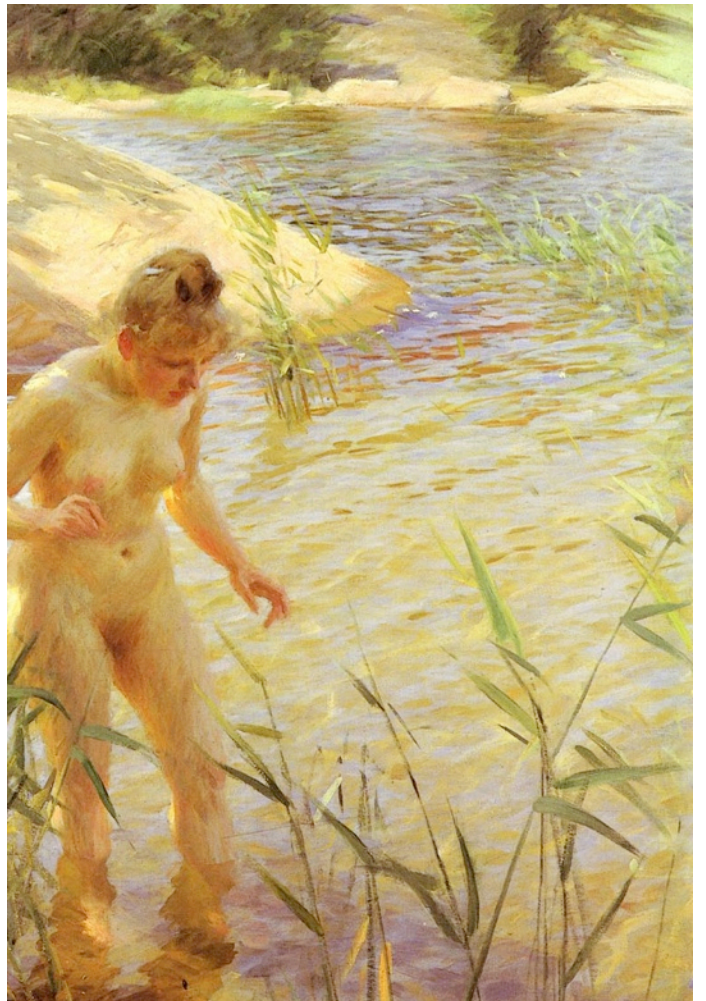
Isaak Levitan, *The Lake*. detail



Isaak Levitan, *Evening on the Volga*. detail



Vladimir Gavrilov, *Windy Day*, 1958



Anders Zorn, *Reflections*, 1889, detail

NEXT NEWSLETTER...

PAINTING WATER PART IV~The Sea



In the next newsletter I'll finish the year's theme of painting water by looking at the joys and terrors of painting the ocean, a subject matter which has only recently piqued my interest. It's challenging!

See you in November. Until then, *happy painting!*

John



Painting for Sale.

Small paintings, created in the studio or en plein air. If you're interested, contact me for more information.



Autumn Glimmer, 2016

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

2017 Workshops

February 4–11

Casa de los Artista, Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

artworkshopvacations.com

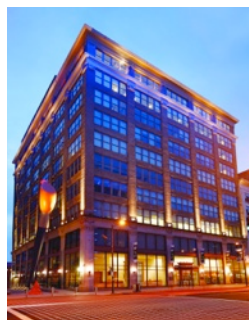
This will be my fourth trip to this venue. The studio is perfect, the food delicious, and the scenery exquisite. It's a week of serious and focused **plein air** painting paired with a varied, fun-filled, and fascinating exposure to Mexican food, people, landscapes, and culture.



May 5–13

Half Moon Bay, California

Join me on this 5 day workshop, where we'll be painting plein air along the spectacular coast of northern California. Contact me directly for more information or click [here](#).



June 9–11

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts; Philadelphia, PA

www.pafa.org

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 their limitations.



August 7–9

Wethersfield Academy, Wethersfield, CT

www.wethersfieldarts.org

A studio workshop, we will be painting from photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. We will explore the limitations of the camera and look at different ways to compensate for their limitations.



October 8–14

Hudson River Valley Art Workshops; Greenville, NY

www.artworkshops.com

A studio workshop, we will be painting from photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. We will explore the limitations of the camera and look at different ways to compensate for their limitations.



October 25–27

The Landgrove Inn; Landgrove, VT

www.landgroveinn.com

A studio workshop, we will be painting from photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. We will examine the limitations of the camera and explore different ways to compensate for their limitations.