

John MacDonald

March–April 2016



WORKSHOPS

2016

APRIL 4–6 , 2016 • *Waiting List*
COLONIE ART LEAGUE
Colonie, New York
www.colonieartleague.com

MAY 17–19 , 2016 • *Waiting List*
FALMOUTH ARTISTS GUILD
Falmouth, Mass.
www.falmouthart.org

JUNE 9–11 , 2016
WEATHERSFIELD ACADEMY
Weathersfield, Conn.
www.wethersfieldarts.org

JULY 6–10 , 2016 • *Waiting List*
**HUDSON RIVER VALLEY
ART WORKSHOPS**
Greenville, New York
www.artworkshops.com

AUG. 14–15 , 2016
ADIRONDACK PLEIN AIR
(pre-Plein Air Festival workshop)
Saranac Lake, New York

AUG. 23–25 , 2016
THE GIBSON HOUSE
Haverhill, New Hampshire
www.gibsonhousebb.com

2017

FEB. 4–11 , 2017
CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS
Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico
www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com

Studio News

What little winter we've experienced in New England is on its way out. Last year we received significantly more snow than normal and I actually tired of painting it. That was a first for me—I thought I'd never tire of painting snow. This year we've received the least amount in twenty years, barely enough to take photos, much less spend time painting it en plein air. But a snowless winter landscape, dominated by muted earth tones, offers its own kind of beauty and I love painting it. Unfortunately, the resulting paintings are often on the gloomy side, resulting in fewer sales. But that's okay. It's still painting. And as for the snow, there's always next year!

Hudson River Valley Art Workshops interview.

You can find a brief print interview with me on the Hudson River Valley Art Workshops website, complete with photos of paintings and my studio. Click on this link for the interview: innyourdreams.blogspot.com

If you find these newsletters helpful. . .

Please pass them along to your painting friends and groups. And if you have any suggestions for future topics, don't hesitate to contact me. I always welcome your feedback. Have a good spring and *Happy Painting!*



The studio, where the magic (sometimes) happens.

No More Turps!

Several newsletters ago, I wrote about the importance of creating a non-toxic studio. At that time I was using safflower oil to thin paints when needed and limited the use of solvents to cleaning the brushes at the end of the painting session. Gone were the days of having an open jar of solvents filling the studio with toxic fumes. Now, I've eliminated the use of solvents entirely by cleaning the brushes with a combination of canola oil, Citra-Solv, and water. Here's the process:

1. Wipe the brushes. Using paper towels, wipe each brush gently but thoroughly, removing as much pigment as possible from the bristles.

2. Remove the pigment. Using canola oil (any vegetable oil will do), pour three small puddles on the palette. (About a tablespoon each.) Work the oil into the brush with a painting motion and wipe the brush with towels as the oil draws out the pigment. Continue working in the oil and wiping it off, moving to the other puddles of oil as the brush becomes cleaner. When little or no pigment is seeping from the bristles, use paper towels to remove as much of the oil as possible from the brush.

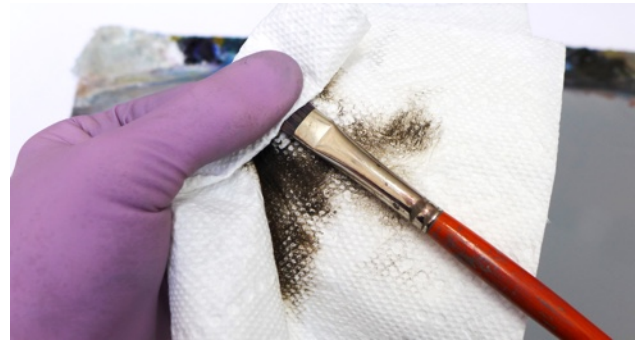
3. Remove the oil. Put the brush in undiluted Citra-Solv, gently working it into the bristles by brushing the bottom of the container. Let the brush soak for at least 10 minutes for best results, occasionally working the Citra-Solv into the bristles.

4. Remove the Citra-Solv. Remove as much of the Citra-Solv as possible with paper towels, then rinse the brushes with water. Pat the bristles with paper towels and let them dry.

That's it—no more solvents! I've used this method for four months and the brushes have remained pliable and healthy.

TIPS:

- Wear your gloves during the cleaning process. Remember, the handles may contain traces of toxic pigments. Before removing the gloves, wipe the handles of the brushes clean.
- Any vegetable oil will clean the brushes. I use canola oil because it's inexpensive and readily available.
- Any soap or detergent cleaner will remove the vegetable oil. Murphy's Oil soap or even a generic dishwashing liquid will do.
- The paint pigments will settle out of the Citra-Solv, allowing repeated use. It will NOT settle out of the canola oil, which is why I use small puddles of oil poured onto my palette. When finished, I wipe the palette clean with paper towels.
- If you wish, you can go directly from step two to step four: after wiping the pigment off the brush, clean them in the Citra-Solve and then rinse in water. I use the canola to remove the pigment so as to keep the Citra-Solv as clean as possible for reuse. The use of oil also keeps the brushes pliable. Using Citra-Solv alone seems to dry out the bristles.



1. wipe off as much paint as possible.



2. Work oil into the bristles to remove the pigment.



3. Soak in detergent to remove the oil.



4. Use water to remove the detergent.



Painting Water • Part I: Rivers and Streams

Water comes in an endless variety of forms: lakes, ponds, placid streams, muddy rivers, mountain cascades, and the ever-changing ocean. Throw in a variety of weather conditions, differences in water quality, and the changing light, and the complexity found in the appearance of water can quickly become overwhelming. Because of the breadth of the topic and the limitations on my time, I'm going to address it over the next several newsletters. In this issue, we'll look at some basic rules of painting all types of water and then dive deeply (sorry, couldn't resist) into the specifics of streams and rivers, their appearance, forms, and how we can begin to translate their complexity into paint.

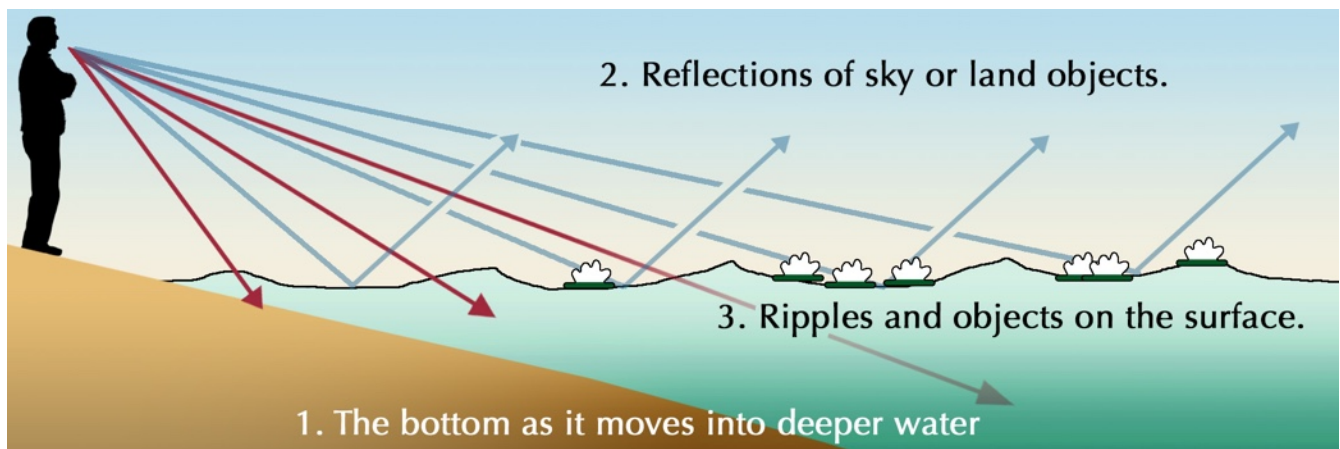
Rule #1: Don't paint water, paint shapes. The only way to be able to see and skillfully paint the complex madness of water is to see it as a group of interlocking shapes, each with a specific value, color, and edge. Shapes! Shapes! Shapes! You are NOT painting water but SHAPES. If you can acquire this skill—to see a stream as simply 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 water. It's magic and it begins with seeing and then painting shapes. (By the way, this rule applies not only to painting water but for painting *anything*: cityscapes, a still-life, the figure, etc. It's a must-have skill!)

Rule #2: You can't paint what you can't see. In theory, if you can see and paint shapes then you can stop here and ignore the rest of this newsletter. It's not absolutely necessary to know what you're looking at when trying to paint water—it's all just shapes. Well, that's the theory. In practice, because we can't paint shapes that we can't see, it's helpful to know what to look for. Let's break down the shapes. . .

The visual anatomy of streams and rivers

A stream or river typically has three essential visual components:

1. Bottom / Deep Water
2. Reflections (sky and objects)
3. Surface items (Objects, ripples, or rapids)



1. Bottom into deep water
2. Reflections
3. Surface objects, ripples, and rapids

1. The bottom into deep water.

If the water in a stream or river is shallow and clear, the bottom is nearly always visible, especially near the edges of the banks. As the water deepens, the bottom and its details will fade from view. The color will shift towards the blue in clear water or a deeper brown ochre in muddy water. The value will also shift, usually becoming slightly darker. As the water deepens and the bottom disappears we begin to see the reflections in the water.

Direction of Light

In the photo on the right, with the sun behind us and with less value contrast between sky, ground, and water, the transition from bottom/deep water to reflections is gradual. The details visible on the bottom of the stream slowly fade into the deeper color of the water which then gives way to the reflections. Notice that the entire stream is in a narrow value range (squint at the photo) with color shifts becoming more important than shifts in value. The entire stream is almost middle value.

In the photo below we look into the sun with a light sky and very dark, silhouetted trees. Notice how the bottom is only visible in the dark reflections of the trees. The reflected sky is so light that it washes out any view of the bottom. Within the dark reflections, the bottom details fade and darken as they move back into the darkest areas of the reflections (#3).

Bottom details

Because the eye exaggerates contrasts, we often paint the details visible in the stream bottom with too much value and color contrast and with edges too hard. Details should be subtle. Keep the values and colors close and the edges soft!

Deep Water

In those cases where the bank drops off so steeply that no bottom is visible, only the color of the deep water is visible, usually a dark brown or blue depending on water quality. This can be the darkest area in the stream. As the eye moves away from the bank the reflections become more evident.



2. Reflections of sky / land objects.

In nearly every case, reflections in water will follow the rule of atmospheric perspective:

- **darks tend to slightly lighten.**
- **lights tend to slightly darken.**
- **colors tend towards a single hue.** (The color cast is especially noticeable in muddy, opaque water, in which case the reflection can be nearly monochromatic in hue. See Corot's "The Augustan Bridge at Narni" below.)

An exception to the rule as applied to light values is when the viewpoint is directly facing the sun. Sunlight glaring off the water will always be lighter than any highlight in the landforms, or even the sky, as shown below:



Edges of Reflections.

Soften them. They need to be softer than the forms casting the reflections and they need to be softer than the edges of any ripples or objects on the surface of the water. In fact, that's often what creates the illusion that the ripples or objects are on the surface: it's their contrast in edges with the softer edges of the underlying reflections.

Vary them. Although the edge of a reflected form tends to be uniformly soft it shouldn't be the same from top to bottom. It doesn't matter whether or not it tends to be crisper above and softer below or broken up by ripples at the bottom or top. What matters is that it changes, it has variety.

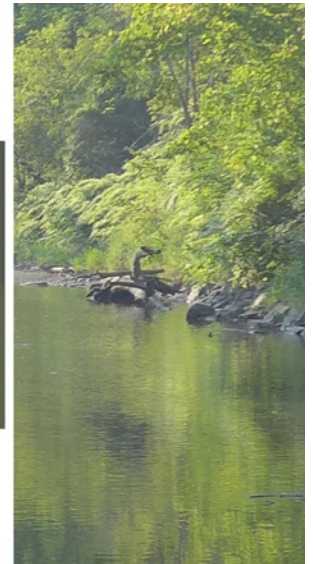


Notice how the edge of the reflected tree is uniformly, softly blurred at the top but is increasingly broken up by short horizontal ripples as it moves downward. It doesn't matter which area is broken up or soft, what matters is that the edge **changes**: it has variety and contrast along its length.

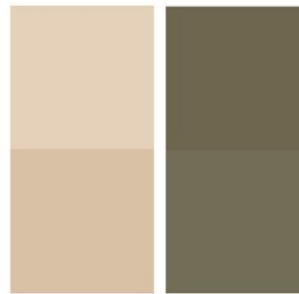
top squares: land forms



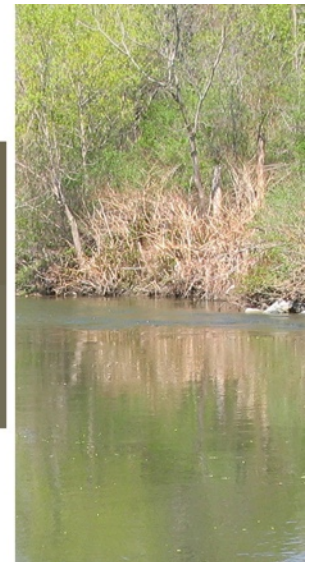
bottom: reflections



top squares: land forms



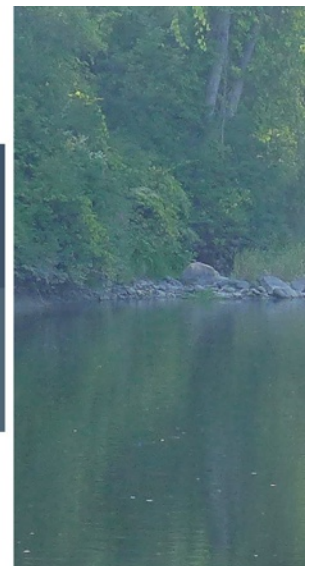
bottom: reflections



top squares: land forms



bottom: reflections



3. Surface objects, ripples, and rapids.

Painting the bottom as it fades into deeper water and then into reflections creates the illusion of the substance and reflective properties of water. But it's adding objects, ripples, and rapids that creates the illusion of the water as having a surface plane that recedes into space. It's crucial to indicate this flat surface.

The objects can be anything that floats or breaks the surface of the water: lily pads, leaves, rocks, or overturned canoes. It's often best not to try to describe any specific object—just simple brushstrokes will do just fine.

The ripples can be a pattern of a few small waves or large, choppy areas where a breeze has stirred the surface into a uniform smear of paint, slightly varying in value and/or color from the areas of flat water. Areas of calm water will show reflections. Disturbed areas often hide the reflections.

Rapids can be a subtle drop in the water level indicated by a simple line or a series of falls with rocks and white water. It's all shapes.

The reflections on the surface?

Decide at the beginning of the painting which is most important, the reflections or the surface details? It's best for the painting if one or the other dominates.

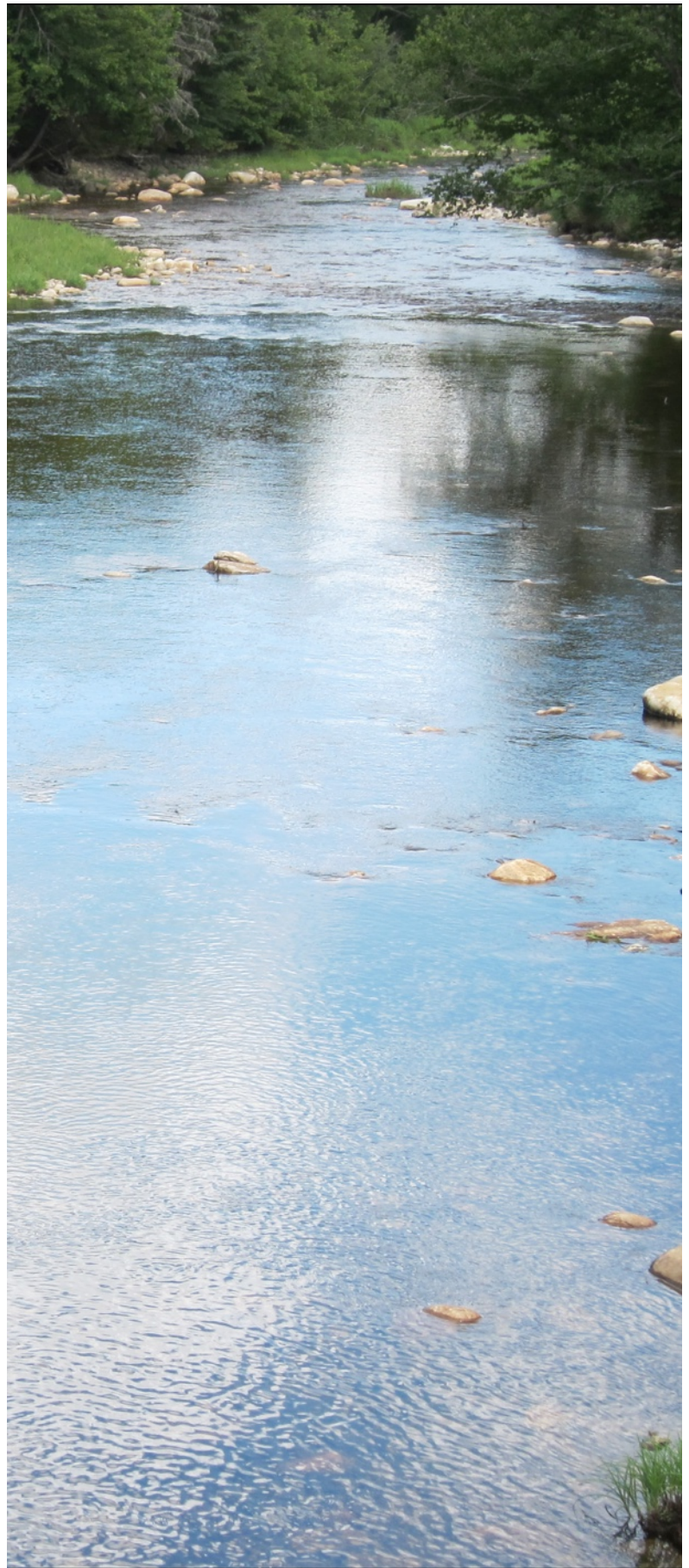
Capturing movement.

The life of a river is its movement as it dances around objects and flows between its banks. It's when painting the surface that we can convey the sense of movement. Look for those surface elements that best embody the direction of the flow and activity of the water.

Capturing depth and scale

Compose the surface elements to enhance the illusion of the receding plane of the water. Use diagonals to lead the eye back. Reduce the size of brushstrokes when painting details in the background. Simplify and soften edges as you go back. Values, colors, edges, and the size of objects should change as they recede.

Look closely at the photo on the right. It has everything: a pattern of ripples at the bottom, rocks breaking the surface leaving streaks of slightly churned up water, and a noticeable drop in the water level in the background as it passes over light rapids. Which surface elements best capture the movement of the water. What is essential and what isn't?

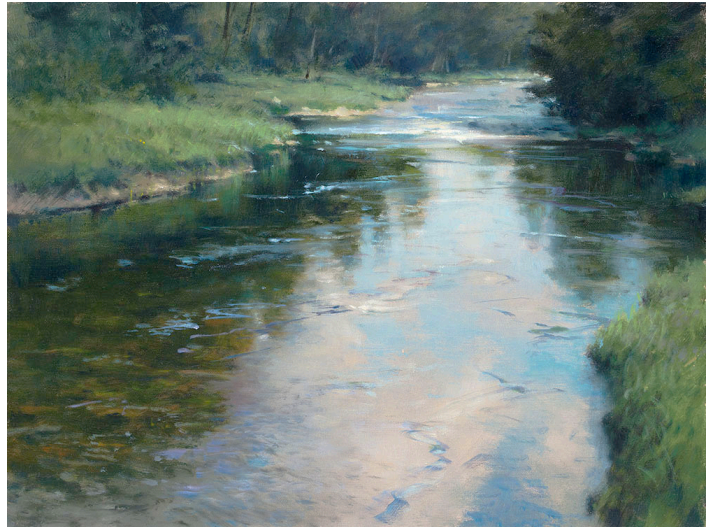


A few of my stream / river paintings. . .

On the follow two pages is a selection of my stream/river paintings, both plein air and studio work. I'm including a few paintings for which I also have photographs. Compare the painting to the photo. Which elements did I choose to include and which did I omit? Notice how I often simplified the water into shapes of value and color. I'm not trying to paint everything in the scene because I don't need to. In fact, to make the painting as strong as possible, I shouldn't!



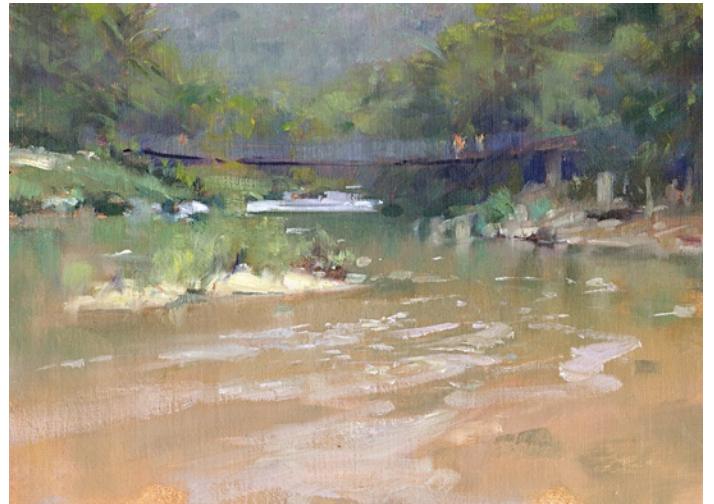
The original photo.



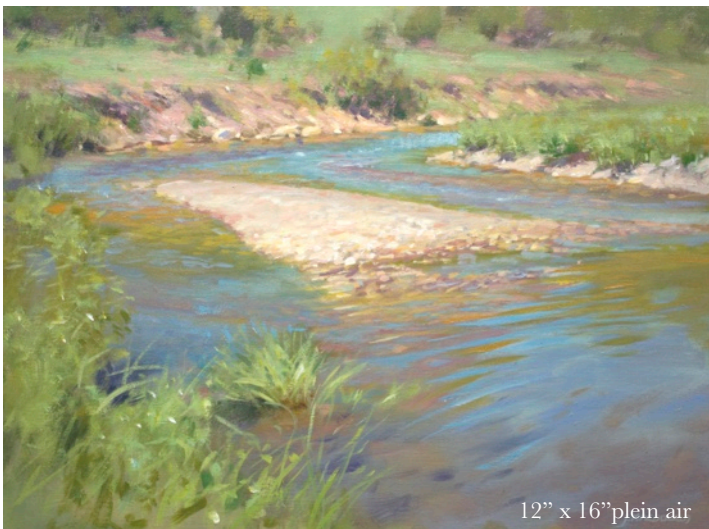
Berkshire Stream. Oil on linen. 16" x 20" studio



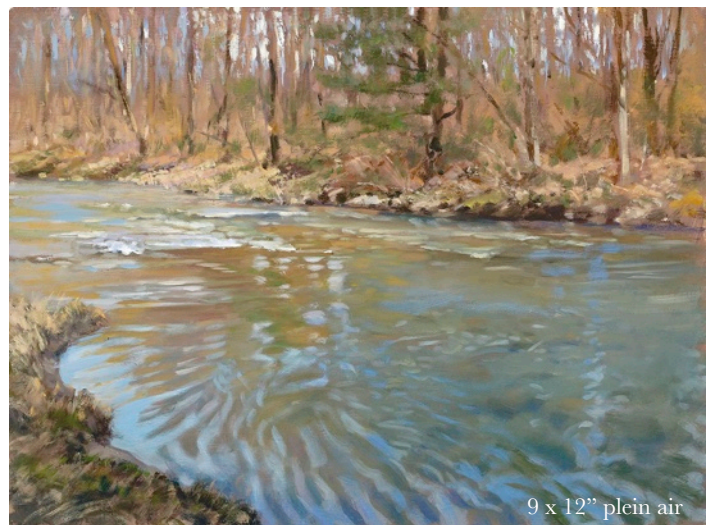
The original photo.



Bridge at the Boca. 9" x 12" oil on linen. plein air



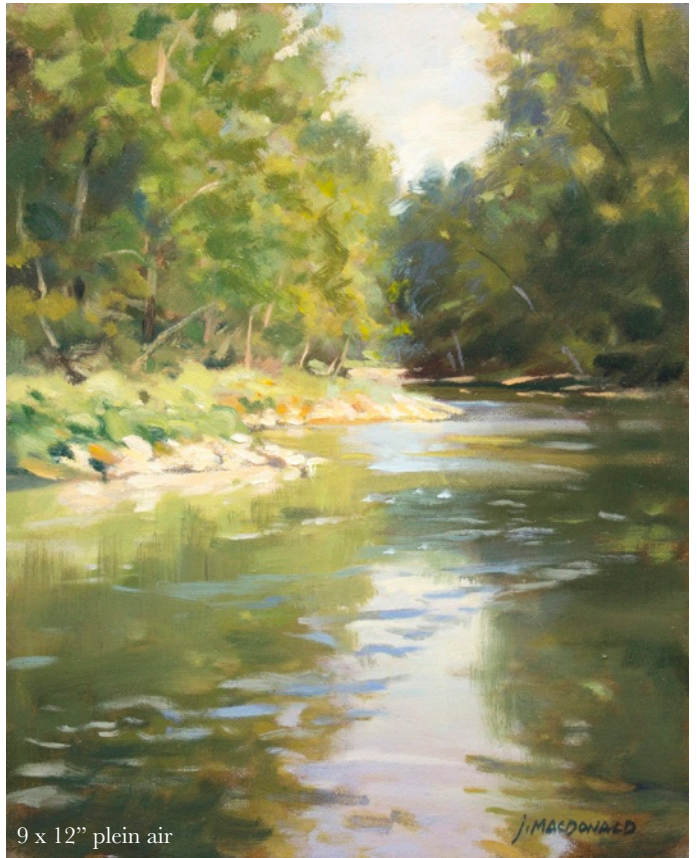
12" x 16" plein air



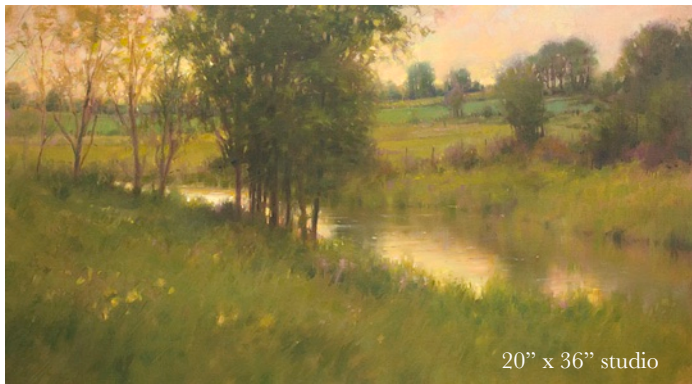
9 x 12" plein air



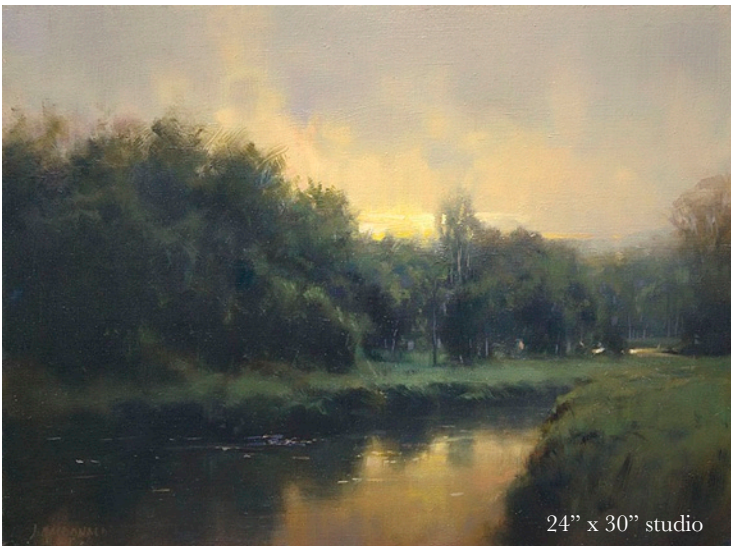
The original photo.



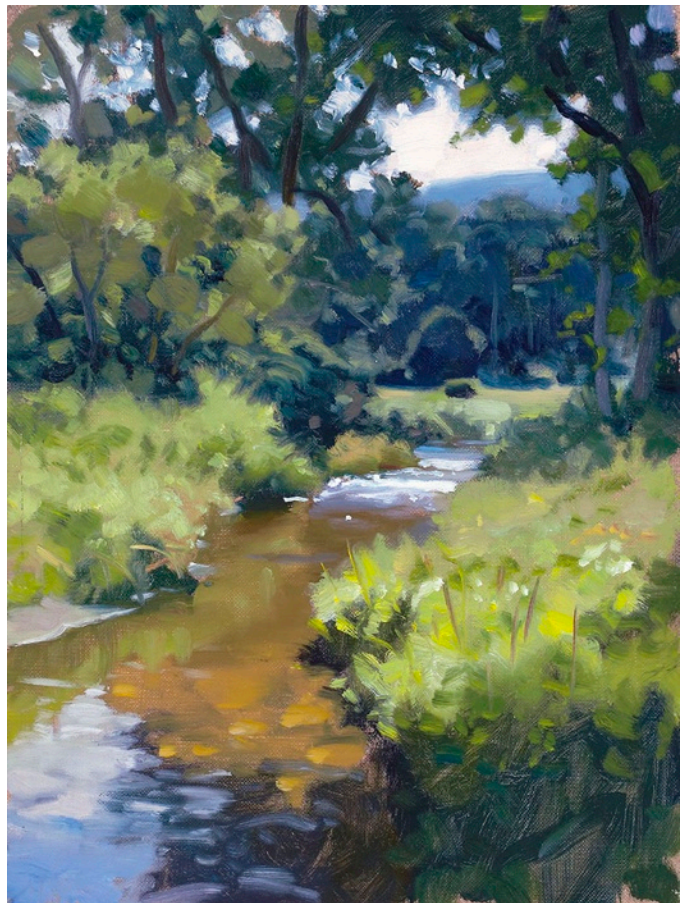
9 x 12" plein air



20" x 36" studio



24" x 30" studio



9 x 12" plein air

A few Old Master stream / river painters . . .

One of the most productive and important ways to learn to paint water is to study those who've mastered it. Below is a small selection of paintings by Old Masters whom I've studied and admired for years. They're personal favorites.

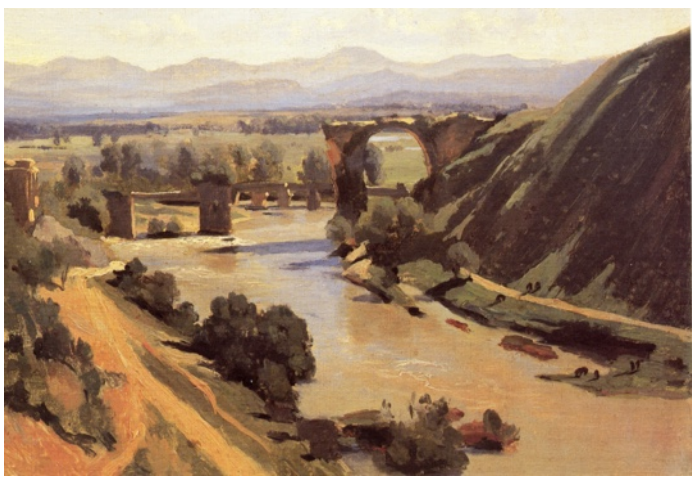
Fritz Thaulow (1847–1906)

A Norwegian painter who spent much of his painting life in France. I've never seen the work of another painter who has understood and used to such effect the surface patterns of ripples and swirls. He captures the illusion of breezes, currents, upwellings from underwater objects, and calm flat water. His marks are so accurate and natural yet painterly!





Monet. Any of his paintings featuring water are worth studying. Notice how he uses value and edge contrasts to distinguish objects and ripples on the surface from the reflections visible behind them, how he simplifies and suggests the shapes of the forms and their reflections, and how he often uses color rather than value changes to create luminosity in his paintings.



Corot. His “The Augustan Bridge at Narni” is a masterpiece of muddy water! Notice how the opacity of the water limits the values of the reflected lights and darks.



Stanislas Lépine. (1835–1892) A student of Corot who painted beautiful scenes of the Seine. Like the Barbizon painters, the emphasis is on value rather than color.



Willard Metcalf. (1835–1892) An American impressionist. He was skilled at composing the shapes of his streams and rivers, identifying their overall value structures, and then sticking with them. His water is painted simply and directly.

Sargent. Sargent painted several scenes like this—looking directly down onto a shallow stream. They're mind-boggling. He's seeing and painting shapes in such a loose, suggestive way but so beautifully and accurately capturing the complexity, clarity, and the play of light upon water that I can only sit back in awe and admire them. I don't know how he does it.



NEXT NEWSLETTER...
**PAINTING WATER
PART II**



Well. . . I'm out of time and space, limited not only by the hours spent on this newsletter but by the need to stick to a reasonable file size so it can be comfortably emailed to your mailbox.



to be continued. . .

In the next newsletter the topic will be continued with a study of mountain streams and waterfalls. We'll then move on to the topic of painting lakes and ponds. Everything that what was said about painting streams and rivers applies to painting lakes and ponds. We'll also introduce two important elements of any water painting: gradients and patterns.

Until then, *happy painting,*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John". The signature is stylized and cursive.

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. If you're interested, contact me for more information.



Icing Over, Green River, 2016

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

2016 Workshops



April 4–6. *(waiting list only)*

The Colonie Art League, Colonie, NY

www.colonieartleague.com

Sorry, but this workshop is now full.



May 17–19. *(waiting list only)*

Falmouth Artists Guild, Falmouth, Mass.

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, Weathersfield, Conn.

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 *(waiting list only)*

Hudson River Valley Art Workshops, Greenville, NY

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 . . . 4 spots left

The Gibson House, Haverhill, New Hampshire

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.



February 4–11, 2017

Casa de los Artista, Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

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.