

John MacDonald

March–April 2019



WORKSHOPS

2019

FEB 16–23, 2019

CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

[Casa de los Artistas](#)

MAY 20–24, 2019 ~ FULL

WETHERSFIELD ACADEMY

Wethersfield, Conn.

www.wethersfieldarts.org

SEPT 22–28, 2019 ~ FULL

**HUDSON RIVER VALLEY
ART WORKSHOPS**

Greenville, New York

www.artworkshops.com

OCT. 9–15, 2019 ~ FULL

**MASTER CLASS AT THE
MASSACHUSETTS MUSEUM
OF CONTEMPORARY ART**

North Adams, Mass.

2020

FEB. 29 –MAR. 6 , 2020

CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

APRIL 15–18, 2020

LANDGROVE INN

Landgrove, VT

JUNE 1–5, 2020

**PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY
OF THE FINE ARTS (PAFA)**

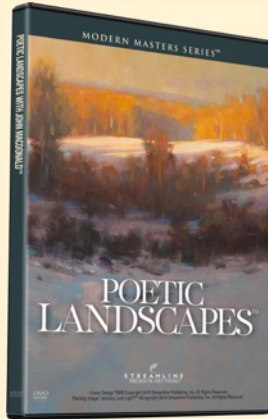
Philadelphia, PA

(registration begins 12/2019)

SEPT. 11–13, 2020

VILLAGE ARTS CENTER

Putney, VT



NEW Liliedahl Video now available!

Like the first video (click [here](#)), I concentrate on the basic elements of painting but then move to other topics, including a demo of a winter sunset.

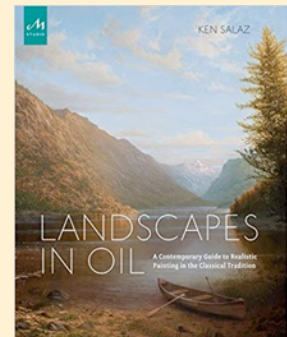
Purchase it [here](#). Online streaming is also available.

Podcast 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.

Book Recommendation. . .

Ken Salaz, a talented and successful painter working in the Hudson River School style, has recently released a book, *Landscapes in Oil*. It covers the basics as well as more advanced techniques. I was honored to be one of the artists featured in the book. It's available on Amazon [here](#).

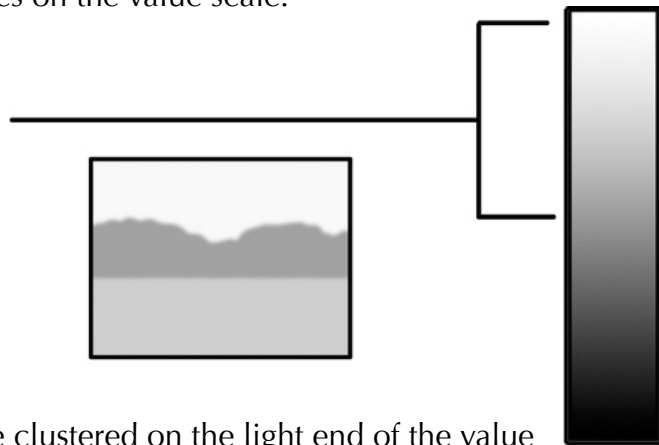


Value and Color Keys ~ Part II

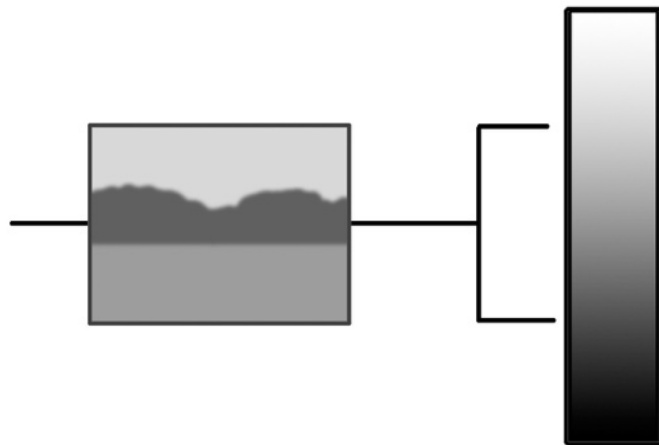
Having reviewed the principles of value in the preceding newsletter, let's now look at value keys. Regardless of whether you paint in a key based on nature or on your imagination, a key creates a mood in a painting, lends it atmosphere, and often enhances the effects of light. A key can also be used to make color sing, but more on that in the next newsletter. Let's dive in.

Value Keys

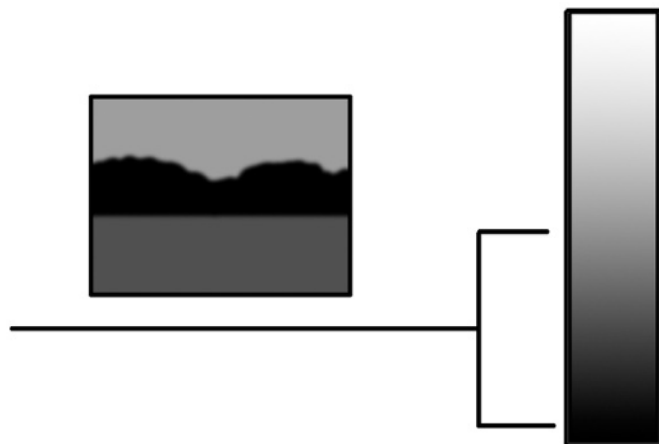
The key of a painting refers to its overall appearance in value or, more specifically, to the position of its foundation values on the value scale.



High Key: the foundation values are clustered on the light end of the value scale with a few spotted darks and middle values as accents.



Middle Key: the foundation values are grouped in the middle of the value scale balanced by some spotted darks and lights.



Low Key: the foundation values are on the dark end of the value scale, with a smattering of middle or lighter values as highlights.

The Challenge of Working in Value Keys

It's easy to see whether a single foundation value is lighter or darker than another; e.g., to see that a bright sky is lighter than a band of dark trees. It's more challenging to determine the *amount* of the difference—the *relationship* between the values. Where the values are placed on the value scale will make or break a painting. The relationships must be as accurate as possible! It's this need for accurate seeing and placing of values that can make working in value keys so difficult.



It's said that the human eye can identify nearly 120 changes in value. When we paint using values that range from nearly white to black, we have the full number of values from which to choose, giving us greater leeway—wobble room—in identifying and establishing those crucial foundation value relationships.



Contrast the above painting by Dennis Miller Bunker with this one by John Twachtman. How many values are in this extremely high keyed painting? Five? Perhaps six? When limited to so few values, the relationships between them must be nearly perfect. When establishing the value relationships in a key, we have fewer choices and therefore less room for error.

Working within a limited value range requires a firm understanding of foundation and secondary values, the skill to see and capture value relationships, and an awareness of the relationship between value and color. It's difficult—but this is no excuse to avoid painting in keys. Regardless of our skill level, working in keys is superb training for developing an eye for values and their relationships to each other.

TIP: The success of a keyed painting depends on our establishing subtle and accurate value relationships. By creating an **underpainting**, we can focus exclusively on values, making the task of identifying and establishing the relationships much easier.

Value Keys and Mood

Being a Tonalist at heart, I prefer creating paintings with a clearly defined mood, one that often conveys a sense of tranquility and silence. A peaceful mood is most effectively created by limiting contrasts. In terms of value, high contrast creates drama—it's visually noisy. Low contrast creates the visual equivalent of silence.

In this example, the scene has been limited to three foundation values. As the values merge—in this case towards the dark end of the scale—the mood in the image changes. Visually, it becomes quieter, more peaceful.

Here, the change has occurred in value only. The mood could be enhanced by working in a limited and muted color palette. Of course, the mood of a painting isn't created solely by value and color—there can also be a psychological component. As the values come together and cluster at the dark end of the value scale, the illusion of an evening scene is created. It's only natural to associate quiet with this time of day. But this effect isn't limited to evening scenes. Any painting with reduced value contrasts will usually convey a sense of quiet and tranquility.

If you wish to convey peace in a painting, avoid loud visual contrasts in value, color, edges, or lines.

There are exceptions to this rule. George Inness often worked in high value contrasts yet still managed to convey a sense of peace. He accomplished this primarily through his handling of light and in his avoidance of strong diagonals. In his compositions, he builds the paintings around a structure of horizontal and vertical lines, giving them a feeling of stability and stillness.





Transposing Keys

In the example on the previous page, the widely spaced values in the top image were compressed into an increasingly narrow (and darker) value range. But it's crucial to note that their position on the value scale relative to each other—the *relationships* of the values—changed very little. The overall range was altered but not the spacing between the individual values.

In this example, the value relationships in the original image are again compressed but then used to create a variety of keys by moving the grouped values up and down the value scale. This works only so long as the value relationships remain constant.

As mentioned above, it's the value relationships that count. If they are working well, it really doesn't matter where they fall on the value scale—the painting will continue to work well. The mood of the painting may change but not the quality of the structure.

Think of this as transposing a musical key on a piano. To change a tune from the key of C to F, the hands are moved up the keyboard while the intervals between the notes remain the same. In a painting, the value relationships should remain unaltered as they move up or down the value scale.

The value structure of a painting must be established early in the painting process. Because a value key determines the value structure, it also must be worked out at the beginning. It's extremely difficult to change keys in the middle of a painting without compromising the value structure.

Creating Keys

Nature occasionally provides ready-made keys: a night scene is dark and a bright, foggy morning is light. We can use nature's keys if we wish but we're not locked into them. Don't assume the key of the painting must match an observed key in the landscape. Deciding which, if any, key to use in a painting is a creative decision. Keys are inventions.

Below are two nocturnes by Frederick Remington, one in a dark key and one in a very light key. They're different yet both are equally convincing in their portrayal of moonlight, an illusion created by proper value relationships and a masterful handling of color.



As mentioned in previous newsletters, I believe the endless argument over working from life versus photographs is misplaced. The question should be: are we simply copying what we see or are we creating a painting? I'm not implying that copying is always wrong. It can help develop our abilities to see value, form, and color and give us technical skills such as mixing color and handling edges. It has a valuable place in our training. But as one artist has said, we're artists, not police reporters. Art isn't solely about recording facts.

Nature or photos, both will provide us with visual information on which our creativity and inspiration can act. Imposing a key on a painting is an artistic choice.

Below is a photograph of a summer daytime scene that served as reference for a painting of an autumn evening. From the photo, I took the forms of the trees and, with a few tweaks, the composition. The values and color palette came from experience sketching and observing the landscape at dusk as well as from studying similar tonalist paintings.



Beware the Middle Key ~ “Middle-Key-itis”

“Middle-Key-itis” describes a condition that results when an artist works repeatedly on a painting, darkening the lights and lightening the darks, until all the values become clustered in the center of the value scale. The result is painting that invariably appears lifeless and boring—a casualty of Middle-Key-itis. Thankfully, the cure is simple: reestablish a few strong lights and darks—but *in unequal amounts*. That is, allow the painting to remain primarily in the middle values but spot it with either more lights than darks or more darks than lights. In the painting below, Metcalf keeps most of the values in the middle register while adding a good dose of lights with slightly fewer darks. It works beautifully.

Despite the risk of falling victim to Middle-Key-itis, there is one great advantage to working in a middle key: the majority of hues are most saturated in the middle value range. In lightening a color, most pigments need the addition of white, which cools and desaturates the hue. At the opposite end, the addition of a dark pigment will also diminish the richness of a color. Most hues come alive in the middle range. If you wish to emphasize color, stick to the middle values—but don’t forget to add a few darks and lights!



Willard Metcalf, *Early Spring Afternoon—Central Park*, 1911

Not Your Average Key. . .

This discussion of keys wouldn't be complete without at least acknowledging that these rules and descriptions are only mental categories. In the real world of painting, the number of possible relationships that can be established using three to five foundation values are nearly limitless, with each configuration affecting the mood and the illusion of light, form, and space in the painting. A value key commonly used in the past—if it can be called a key at all—is one in which the values are group at the light and dark ends of the value scale with fewer middle values. In this key, the effectiveness of color is diminished (more on that in the next newsletter) while value contrasts soar into the most dramatic of effects of light possible, as can be seen in the paintings by Caravaggio below. Or alternatively, rather than creating a strong illusion of light, the lack of middle values can be used to create a value structure of strong, graphic shapes, as in these two examples by Manet. If you'd like to create dramatic lighting or a solid graphic structure, consider using this key.



Manet (below) and Caravaggio (above—cropped), using darks and few middle values to enhance the lights.



Some Odds and (finally!) Ends

Value key and value contrast are not synonymous

Keyed paintings, by definition, have a limited value range and thus limited contrast. Generally, a painting with uniformly low-contrast is boring. Some areas of high contrast are nearly always necessary to create interest in the image. Look at any successful high or low key painting and you will nearly always see a few small, bright highlights and/or small, dark shadows that break the “rule” of the key. These are necessary to bring life to the painting.

To key or not to key. . .

It’s not necessary at all for a painting to have a key. The Medfield meadow painting by Dennis Miler Bunker, used as an example above, has no key. He used a full range of value contrasts, stretching from nearly white to black. The decision to use a key depends on your intention. What are trying to say in your painting? If using a key helps you convey your message, use it. If not, then don’t bother.

Avoiding evenly spaced values

In the last newsletter, I mentioned the importance of avoiding the even spacing of foundation values on the value scale. When painting in a key, with its limited room for error in establishing value relationships, it’s even more crucial to avoid spacing the values evenly. After establishing the value structure of a painting, take a moment to ensure that the values are unevenly located on the value scale.

Keys and plein air painting

When painting plein air, the direction of our view in relation to the location of the sun will dramatically affect the values in the scene. (see the [March-April 2018 newsletter](#).) Here’s a brief summary of how our viewpoint affects the values we see:

Looking into the sun—*contre jour*—the values are often grouped at the light and dark ends of the value scale with fewer middle values and with little color contrast.

When looking directly away from the sun, values tend to be gathered in the middle of the value scale with spotted highlights and dark shadows. It’s a mid-key scene. Colors—and color contrasts—will dominate.

With the viewpoint 90° to the angle of the sunlight, there is usually an even spread of values with no key. Remember, however, that we’re not beholden to nature’s values. Use them if they work in the painting. If not, invent them.

Value and Contrast ~ Putting It All Together

When establishing the value structure of a painting and later when adding color, I find it extremely helpful to think of each foundation value as a separately keyed painting. Seen in this way, a painting consists of three to five areas (foundation values) **each with its own value key and range of contrasts**. For example, a light sky may be treated as a high key painting with low contrast, a band of dark trees becomes a low key painting with high contrast, and a mid-ground meadow is now a middle key painting with moderate contrast. Painted this way, with their unevenly spaced values and varying contrasts, the separate foundation values combine to form a single, integrated whole with variety and visual interest. This approach can work with any subject matter and in any key. Here's a seascape as an example:

The water: a high to middle key painting with a few strong lights.

The sky: a high key painting with almost no value contrasts, only a gradient that darkens at the edges.



The beach and dunes: a mid-key painting with spotted darks.

The grasses: a low key painting with a gradient lightening towards the center but with few value contrasts.

Once you understand the concepts of foundation values and value structure, try painting while keeping this in mind. You may find it as helpful as I have.

2019 Workshops

May 20–24 ~ Full (waiting list only)

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 ~ Full (waiting list only)

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 ~ Full (waiting list only)

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.



2020 Workshops

Feb 29–Mar. 6 ~ Casa de los Artistas

artworkshopvacations.com

Registration is now open. More information in future newsletters.

April 15–18 ~ Landgrove Inn; Landgrove, Vermont

www.landgroveinn.com

Registration is now open. More information in future newsletters.

June 1–5 ~ PAFA: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts; Philadelphia, PA

www.pafa.org

Registration opens December 2019

September 11–13 ~ Village Arts of Putney; Putney, VT

villageartsofputney.fineaw.com

I admit this is just filler. I needed something in this space. Yet what better way to fill it than with one of my favorite paintings by one of my favorite artists, J. Francis Murphy. There's no value key. It consists of only two values. It's so simple yet holds an entire world.



Words of Wisdom

Pedantry and mastery are opposite attitudes toward rules. To apply a rule to the letter, rigidly, unquestioningly, in cases where it fits and in cases where it does not fit, is pedantry. To apply a rule with natural ease, with judgment, noticing the cases where it fits and without ever letting the words of the rule obscure the purpose of the action or the opportunities of the situation, is mastery.

~ **George Polya, mathematician (1887–1985)**

Sit down and put down everything that comes into your head and then you're a writer. But an author is one who can judge his [or her] own stuff's worth, without pity, and destroy most of it.

~ **Colette, author (1873–1954)**

COMING UP . . .

Continuing with the topic of keys, in the next newsletter we'll dive into the wonderful work of Color!

May–June: Intro. to Color

July–Aug: Color Keys.

–*Happy Painting!*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "JOHN". The letters are stylized and connected, with a long horizontal stroke under the "J".