

John MacDonald

May–June 2016



WORKSHOPS

2016

All remaining workshops in 2016 are *waiting list only*. If you wish to join a waiting list, please visit my [website](#).

2017

FEB. 4–11, 2017

CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com

MAY. 5–13, 2017

Half Moon Bay, CA

(Contact me if interested.)

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

Studio News. . .

May and June have been busy months—with teaching workshops, creating large paintings for several galleries, but with far too little plein air painting. The busy schedule continues as I head to Wethersfield, CT tomorrow.

This Sunday, June 12, I'll make the four hour trek to Paul Smith's College in the heart of the Adirondacks to spend the week at the Publisher's Invitational event. Rubbing shoulders with fellow painters and painting some of the most spectacular scenery in the Northeast—it rarely gets better than that! If you've not yet participated, you should. [Click here for information](#).

Studio Visit by Eric Rhoads

Last week, I was honored by a surprise visit to my studio by Eric Rhoads, the publisher of *Plein Air Magazine* and the sponsor of the painting event mentioned above (and many others). Eric was in town to see the new addition at the Clark Museum and we were able to meet for a pleasant hour at my studio. Eric shot a brief video of his visit which will soon be posted on the magazine's website. I'll send details as soon as I have them.

The Greylock Gallery opens!

After the disappointment of losing *The Harrison Gallery* last December in my hometown of Williamstown, I'm delighted to report that the former director of the *Harrison*, Rachele Dario, has opened her own gallery, *The Greylock Gallery*. Located just down the street from the former *Harrison Gallery*, she's brought together a wonderful mix of talented artists. I'm thrilled to be counted among such well-known painters as John Traynor, Curt Hanson, and George Van Hook. If you're in the area, consider attending the grand opening on Saturday, June 11, from 2 to 6 PM. Unfortunately, I won't be able to attend as it's the last day of the Wethersfield, Connecticut workshop.

If you're planning a trip to Williamstown this summer, let me know you're coming and I'd be happy to meet with you at the gallery.

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. I always welcome your feedback.

Have a good summer and *Happy Painting!*



Painting Water • Part II: Cascades & Waterfalls

In the previous newsletter, we looked at the challenges and methods of painting rivers and streams. Now we move on to falling water: waterfalls, rapids, and cascades. Frankly, I do few paintings of waterfalls and raging mountain streams because of their scarcity in western Massachusetts. Only in the Adirondacks and northern sections of Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine can a painter find the large falls and white water streams that are common in the west and other parts of the country. Still, it's important to remember that it's all just visual information. Using the streams and small falls in my area along with a few photos and other paintings, we can explore the issues unique to this subject. Let's begin by repeating from last month's newsletter two rules of painting that are especially important when working with water:

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 flowing water 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 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.

And speaking of rules, in the case of falling water, let's add a third. . .

Rule #3: Big or small, the information is similar. Whether you're painting water falling over the small ledge of a tiny stream or Niagara Falls in flood, the visual elements (particularly the values and edges) are nearly identical. If you can paint one, you can paint the other, and everything in between.



Water trickling over a log or thundering over Niagara Falls. Visually, the difference is mostly in the details.

The visual anatomy of falling water ~ the big picture

Looking at the entire scene in a photo, let's first break it down into VALUES:



Photo of of a series of ledges on the west branch of the Green River, near my home. The only nearby rough water.

The values can be grouped into three foundation values:

1. The lights of the water where it is churned up and catching the light.
2. The mid-tones of the smooth water, foliage and rocks (both in the water and out).
3. The darks of the the water, foliage, and rocks in shadow.



1. White water values: a narrow range. 2. Midtones: a greater range but still grouped. 3. Darks are spotted accents.



Each scene will vary and there are no formulas. But generally, the mid-tones predominate. The lights and darks tend to be spotted accents. The values of the lights of the churned up water are very close to each; consequently, the white water becomes a dynamic, graphic element, a pattern than creates visual interest. Despite the softness of some of the edges of the white water, **there are few transitional values between the lights and the midtones.**

Let's now look at how two painters, Richard Schmidt and John Singer Sargent, approached this subject and particularly at how they structured the values.



CACHE LA POUDRE, oil on panel, 12x18. © 2009 Richard Schmidt



YOHO FALL, oil on canvas, 94 x 113 cm, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.



Squint at the black and white versions of both paintings, paying close attention to the basic value structure.

1. Do you see how few transitional values exist between the lights and the midtones? (More in the Sargent painting than in Schmidt's, but the separation of values is still evident.) Keeping the foundation values of the lights far apart from those of the midtones allows the light values of the water to become a strong graphic pattern that gives energy and movement to the entire composition. This pattern of light shapes is much more evident than any shapes of the midtones. The water sparkles precisely because the lights are kept close in value and few values lie between them and the mid values. Only in the upper left area of the Sargent painting is the separation lost, as mist fades into midtones.

2. The midtones of the foliage, rocks, and darker water are nearly identical. What visually separates these elements from each other is a change in **color** rather than **value**. Making color changes rather than value changes accomplishes two important tasks: it preserves the strong pattern of lights by omitting transitional values between the lights and midtones and, it allows greater **color** contrast—the play of warms and cools within and between the areas of foliage, rocks, and water. By keeping all the midtone values close, the temperature of the colors can create luminosity.

3. Notice the contrast in edges. They are as evident in the colored versions as in the black and white images. Let's take a closer look at how each artist used edge contrast. . .

Using contrast in edges and brushstrokes. . .

Below are details from each of the paintings, showing areas in which the artist strongly contrasted hard and soft edges. Referring to the images of the entire paintings on the previous page, notice how that edge contrast creates eye movement and how it influences the strength of the focal point. Edge contrasts (actually ALL contrasts) grab the eye.



In both these details of the Sargent painting, the value ranges are nearly identical. But on the left, the smooth gradient of blended edges, while not boring, is certainly visually quiet. Whereas on the right, the abrupt jump from light to dark creates a visual shock and emphasizes the focal point. Even in this cropped excerpt, it draws the eye.

In the Schmidt painting below, edge contrast is spread across the entire surface, with an emphasis placed on using strong brushstrokes to create edge contrast. (Schmidt being the master of brushwork!) Notice his use of a sharp edge and strong value contrast in the bottom right and how it contrasts with some of the softer edges of the falling water in the mid to upper left of the painting. Using highly contrasting edges in the water does more than create visually exciting *paintings*. Both Schmidt and Sargent are using edge contrast and brushwork to capture the reality of the subject matter: the *water*. It's this implied feeling of flowing and movement coming from their brushwork and handling of edges that gives the painted water life and contributes to the illusion of water flowing over and around rock.



The visual anatomy of falling water ~ some specifics



A few general observations about specific elements in a scene. . .

Rock details: The shallower the water flowing over a rock, the more evident the color of the rock. As the rock moves into deeper water, its edges soften and it takes on the color of the water. The value of it may or may not change but it will certainly change color (in hue and saturation) and lose it's edges. The deeper the water, the more subtle the rock.



Edge of a waterfall: At the edge of a waterfall (or any angular rock over which water is flowing) the water is shallow and the bedrock often creates a dark edge. But after it drops off the edge, it's all water. Because of the unevenness of the rock lip, vertical streaks often appear in the water, then blend and fade as the water falls. Edges are sharper and values are more contrasted on the lip of the falls, then edges soften and values come together. The mist arising from the churning of the water enhances this effect. In *Yukon Waterfall*, study how masterfully Schmidt softens his edges as the water falls from the sharply defined rocks at the top of the falls. Using values and edges, he's creating motion and atmosphere.

A few of my falls/rapids paintings . . .

Several older paintings, mostly studies and all painted in one session, plein air. None was ever taken to a finished state.



The top two paintings are from the 2013 Publisher's Invitational in the Adirondacks: The Flume (above) and St. Regis Falls (top right).



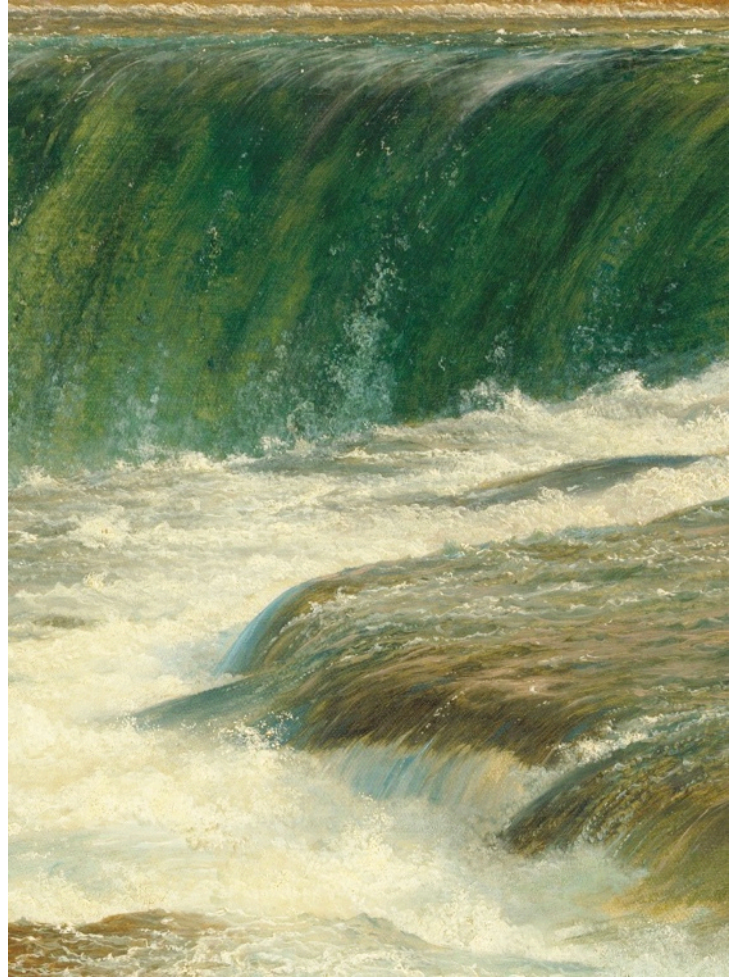
This was painted along the Green River. It's a study of the color and value changes that occur as rocks recede from a shoreline into deep water.



The two painting above were painted at the same location along the Green River in Williamstown. Both are 12 x 16.

Frederick Church, *Niagara*, oil on canvas, 40 x 90.5 in., 1857

A more detailed, less painterly work than a Schmidt or Sargent, *Niagara* is a masterpiece well worth studying. It's a huge painting, yet notice how evident is the simple value structure: how he massed values into a few shapes and respected those underlying values regardless of the amount of detail or subtle value and color shifts he created within each.



NEXT NEWSLETTER...
PAINTING WATER
PART III



I've run out of space and time without addressing the two topics promised in the last newsletter: gradients and patterns. It will have to wait until the next newsletter, when we look at the challenges of painting lakes and ponds.

Until then, *happy painting,*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John". The signature is stylized and written in a cursive-like font.

p.s.— I highly recommend Richard Schmidt's book, *The Landscapes*. It's a bit expensive but well worth the price.



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

2016 Workshops

June 9–11 (*waiting list only*)

Wethersfield Academy for the Arts, Wethersfield, 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.

Sorry, this workshop is sold out.

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.

Sorry, this workshop is sold out.

August 23–25 (*waiting list only*)

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.

Sorry, this workshop is sold out.

2017 Workshops

February 4–11, 2017

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, 2017

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.



June 9–11, 2017

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 them: while photographing and then using them to paint.



for additional 2017 workshops, please visit my [website](#).