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May–June, 2023



## A Painting's Journey: Organized Tour or Aimless Ramble?

There is no single “right” way to paint. Some artists, before touching a brush, have a crystal clear image in their mind of the finished painting and then methodically work, step by step, sure of the result of each decision, until the finished painting resembles, as much as possible, the pre-conceived image. Even if studies and sketches are omitted from the process, the painting essentially evolves through a controlled journey from point A to point B. The painter knows the destination and goes directly to it. This is an efficient process that can result in beautiful work.

At the other extreme, some artists begin a painting having a clear intention but allow the work to change and evolve as it unfolds, as mistakes and spontaneous decisions constantly alter the direction the painting is taking. This less-controlled and more chaotic process can also result in successful work.

Part of the joy of being a painter is experimenting with both approaches, either in different paintings or within a single work. We can combine logic and method with experimentation and play in an air of unrestrained freedom.

In this newsletter I give two examples of the direct approach followed by three examples of paintings that were the result of increasingly unstructured and chaotic painting sessions—trips into the unknown with ever shifting goals.



## American Tonalist Society Show Salmagundi Club, New York • April 28–May 7



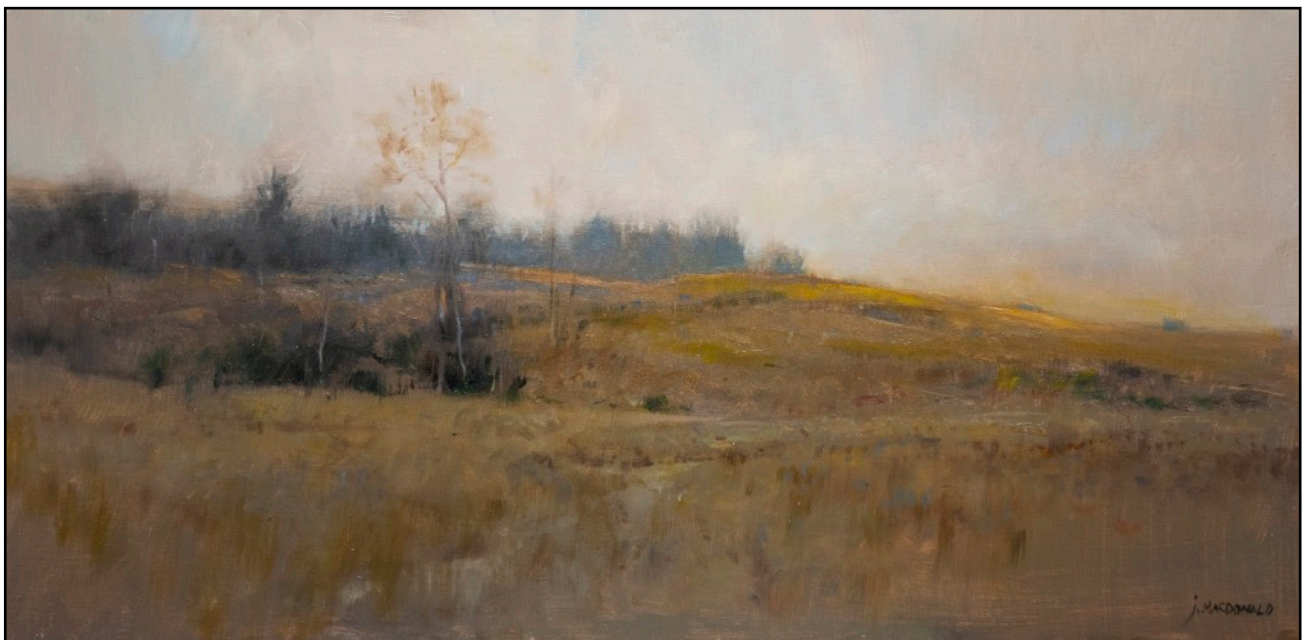
The biennial show of the American Tonalist Society opens in New York on April 28, featuring 64 paintings of the top 32 North American artists working in the Tonalist style. The opening weekend also includes demos by [Ken Salaz](#) and [Dennis Sheehan](#) as well as a presentation by Adrienne Bell, the foremost authority on the work of George Inness. For more information about the show and events, visit the ATS website: <https://www.americantonalistsociety.com/>

# The Organized Tour: The direct journey from point A to point B

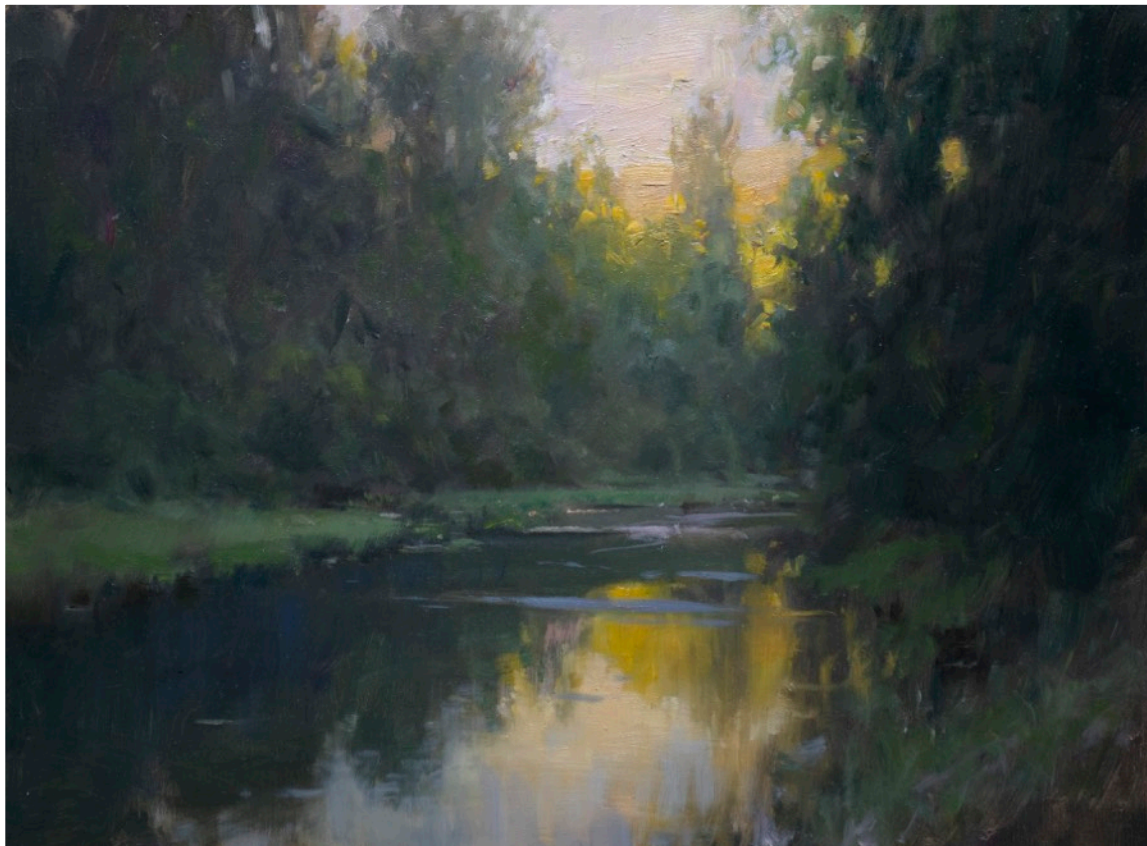
Before the mid-19th century, this was the common method of working. Before beginning, the artist formed a mental image of the finished painting in the mind, often creating studies and sketches to establish the structure, and then painted until the result matched the mental image. It's a simple approach but requires the technical skills to competently move from mental picture to pigment on canvas. Assuming we have those skills, this works best when the scene (plein air or photo) will easily translate into a good painting—the composition, values, colors, etc., are just right. The execution can be as simple as drawing in the shapes of the composition, matching value to value, color to color, copying edges, and then choosing a few essential details.



After taking the photo above, I could immediately picture the final painting. Two or three painting sessions, a few changes here and there, and it was finished.



In this photo, the potential for a good painting was equally obvious. It has varied and interesting shapes, strong value relationships, varying edges, and plenty of detail. But in contrast to the previous photo, I found the color of the greens too monochromatic—it needed greater temperature variation. I added warmth in the sky, in the distant hill, and then varied the greens. This was painted alla prima, in a single session. As with the previous example, I could clearly see in my mind the finished painting.



This approach to painting can be rewarding but it's worth noting that much of the emphasis is placed on technical skill—having the ability to match what we see. It's similar to cross-country skiing. It requires skill to do it well but the end goal is predetermined and the track is well-defined. One simply follows the path from point A to point B. Wilderness downhill skiing is very different. There is no trail, only moment to moment adjustments and instant decisions to be made with the ever present possibility of a disastrous crash. That resembles the second way of painting: a journey off the beaten track without a clear goal in mind.

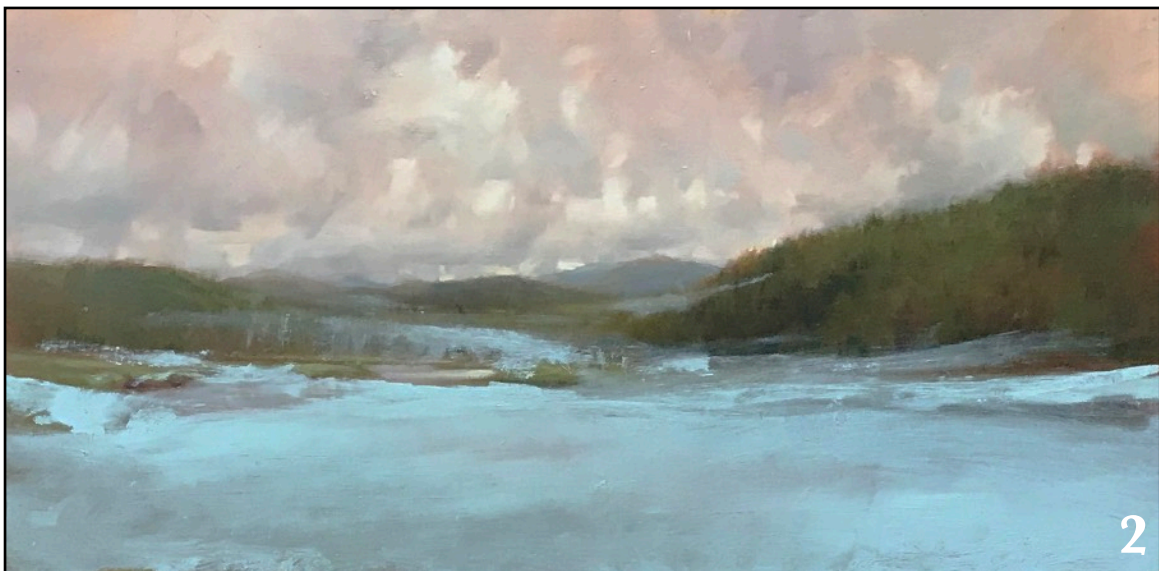
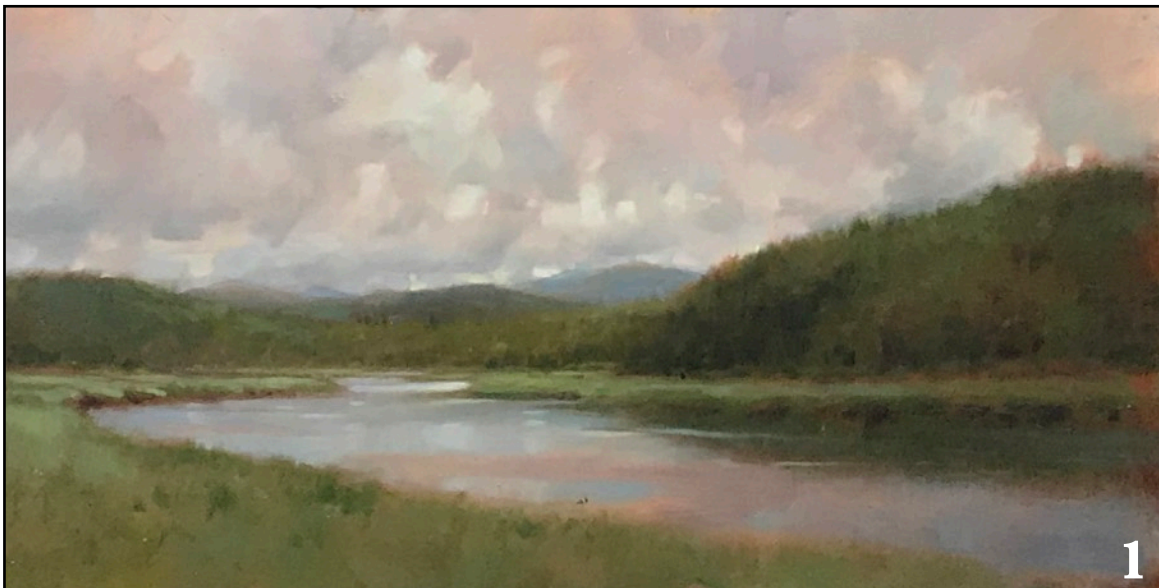
# Three Rambling Paintings:

## 1. Entering the unknown – painting over an old painting

Painting over an old painting is a perfect way to throw yourself out of your comfort zone and onto your edge, where surprises happen.

There are two ways to paint over an old painting but only one leads to the unknown. If you ignore the underlying painting, either by priming the canvas or painting opaquely over the entire surface, you may as well use a blank canvas. It won't change your painting method. The other approach is to allow the old painting to show through in selected area, which can create unexpected and unusual color/value relationships. With this method, it's impossible to predict the value and color relationships beforehand. The focus of the painting process subtly shifts from the preconceived idea in the head to the eyes—being acutely aware of everything happening on the canvas and being constantly open to unexpected results.

The painting below began as a plein air work, created in June in the Adirondacks.





Changing the seasons in a scene is perfect way to throw yourself off base. Painting in the foreground snow (#2) and adding cooler notes to the sky and hills while changing the shapes of the background mountains (#3), it quickly became a completely different painting.



After reworking some detail and adding color notes, it was time to stop. Of the four, which is the best painting? Although I was happy with the final result, I now prefer #2, with it's simple foreground of cool snow and the more graphic, brushy warm sky. Version #4 appears more polished, with it's greater variety of detail and more refined edges, but #2 has more energy and life.

More information about painting over old paintings can be found in the March-April 2020 and November-December 2021 newsletters.

## 2. Giving up a cherished, preconceived idea.

When inspired by a scene, it's not unusual to be unhappy with the painting and yet feel certain that a good painting is still there, waiting to be discovered, like a statue waiting to be freed from a block of marble. Sometimes it's better to give up the initial intention for the painting and strike out boldly across unmapped terrain. In this example, the painting began with a fairly close rendering from photo reference.

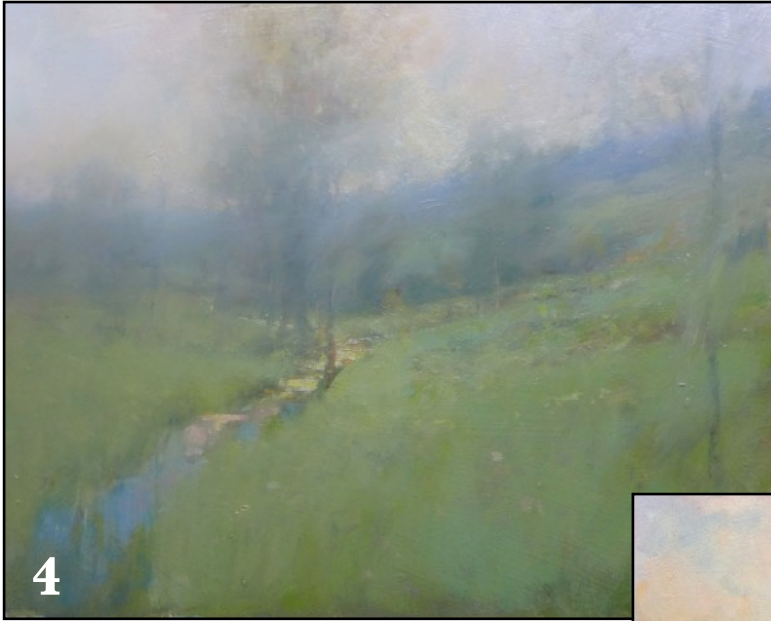
Feeling inspired by the photo, the block-in quickly came together (#1). I felt it worked and was happy with the close value structure and the simple color scheme of contrasting green and purple/pinks. So far, so good. But had I then reminded myself of the importance of keeping that simplicity in value and color as I developed the painting, I may have avoided the much longer journey that was to come.



After adding more detail, color variation, and most detrimentally, heightening the value contrasts, the original simplicity with its soft light had mostly vanished. At this point, I felt the painting was not necessarily worse, just different. Unfortunately, I continued adding more detail and more variation of secondary values until it reached stage #3. The quiet mood that had existed in the block-in was gone and it now looked overworked.

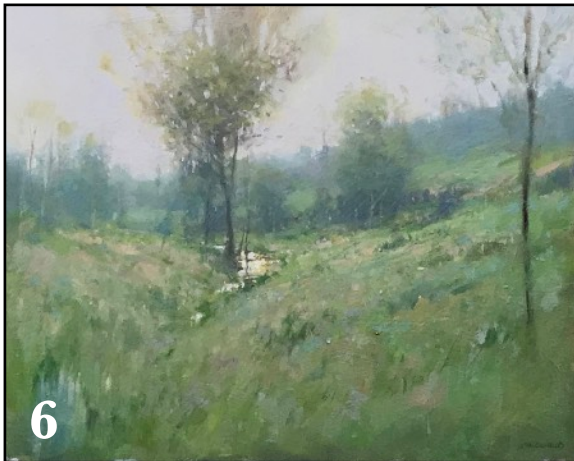
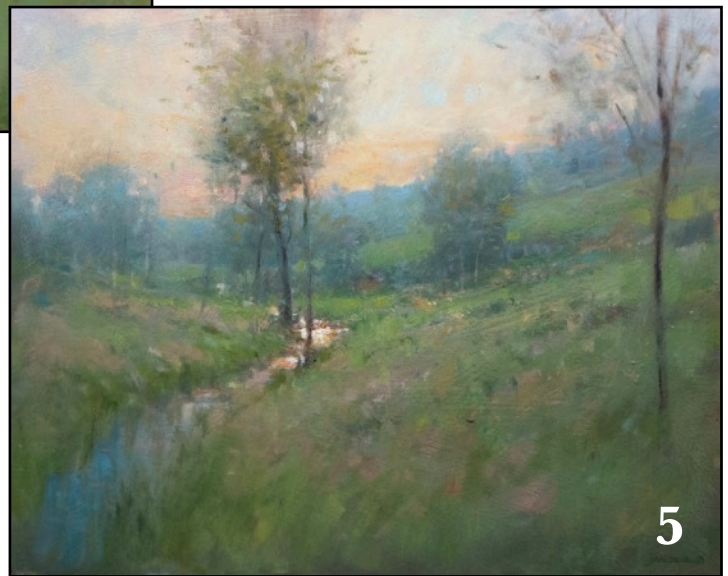
With little to lose, it was time to recapture the simplicity. . .



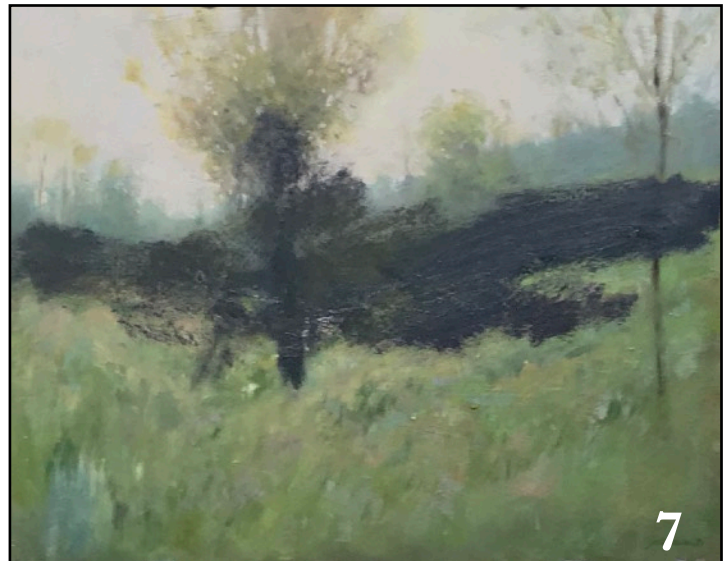


Using mostly opaque glazes, the overworked and fussy version #3 was taken back to a state similar to the block in, while allowing a few areas of detail and value variation to remain. The result was #4. Here, too, I should have stopped, or at least slowed down, but I charged ahead and repeated the very mistakes I had made after the block-in by adding too much detail and too many values #5.

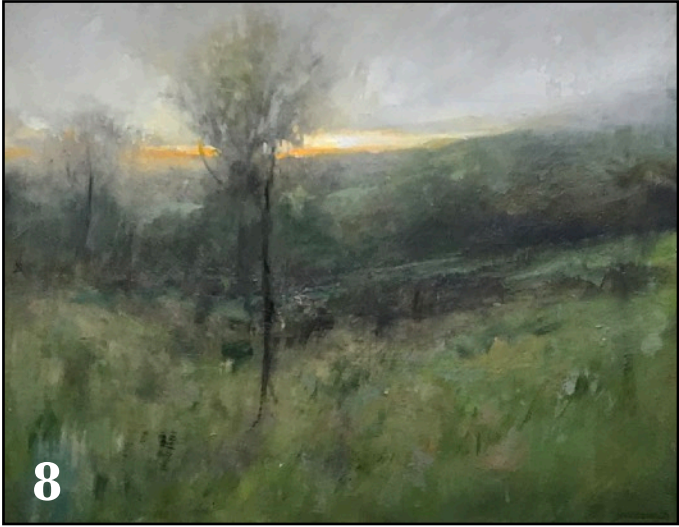
I then tried, once again, to take it back to the simpler color and value relationships of the block-in. The result was #6. Not happy with this, I was rapidly losing interest in the painting.



At this point, I had absolutely nothing to lose. Setting aside the photo reference, I began by working a dark mass over the trees and hills. I had no clear idea where the painting was going.

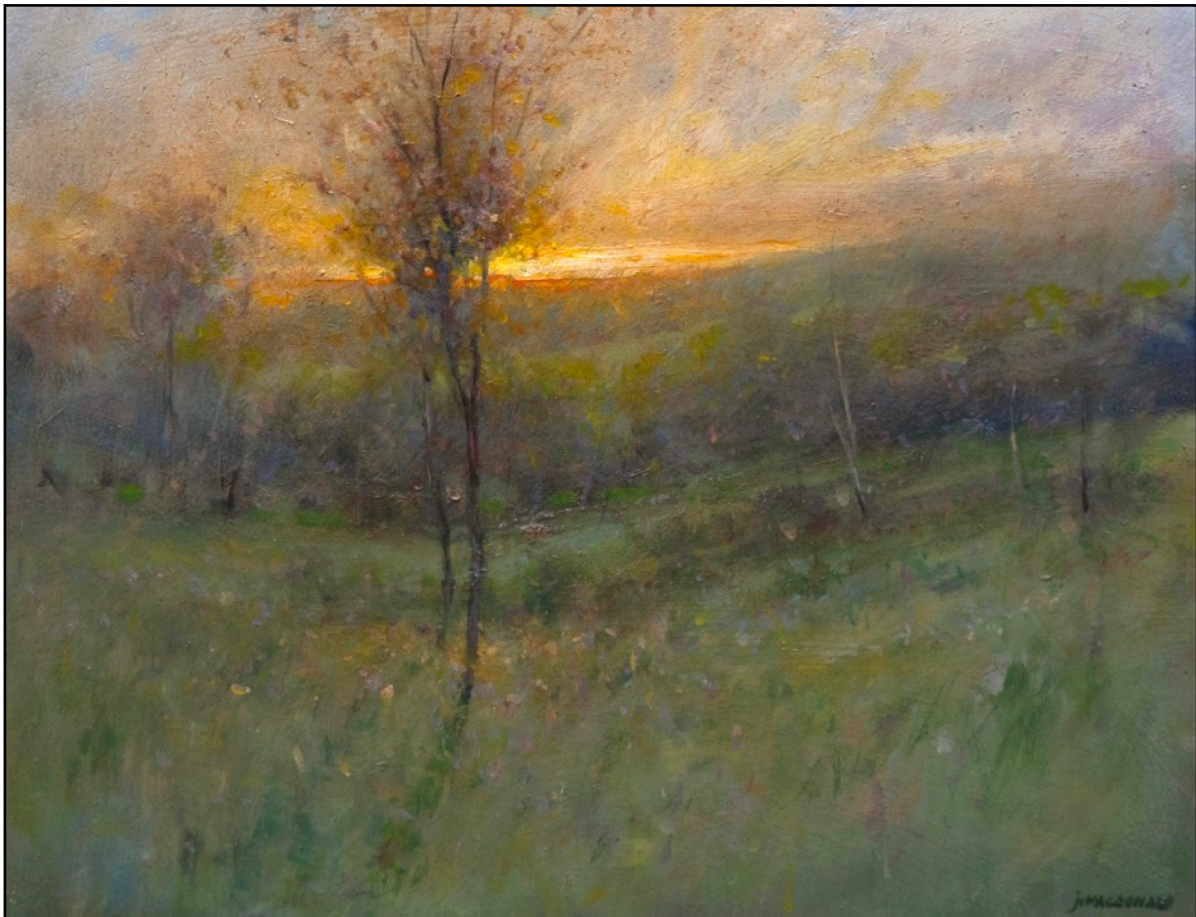






The trickle of water was eliminated and the focal point moved from the splash of light on the mid-ground to the sky. The angle of the hill was flattened, and the background line of trees was changed into a distant hill. Emphasizing the sun seemed like a good idea, which resulted in #9. Happy with that, I added more glazes and a few highlights in the foreground.

Is it finished? I don't know. As it sits in my studio, I may decide it's finished or I may see changes I'd like to make, in which case it would be off again on another journey.

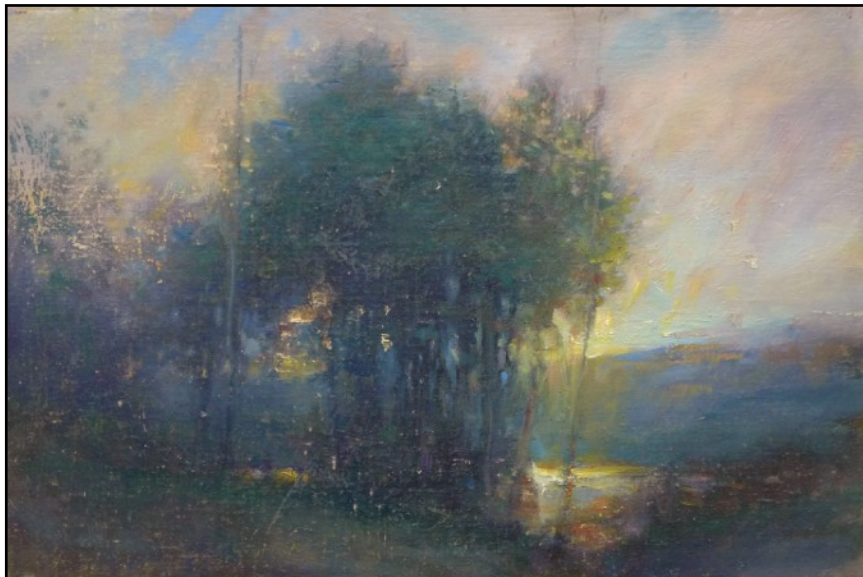


### 3. Getting lost in the wilderness. . .

In the previous example, the major shapes of the initial block-in are visible in the finished painting. A few forms were edited and colors were shifted in temperature but hints of the underlying structure remain. In this example, the original painting is almost unrecognizable in the finished painting, not as a result of simply overpainting it but because of changes made through multiple painting sessions. It began with the finished painting below (which hung in a Salmagundi Club show). I got tired of looking at it in the studio and decided to tweak it.



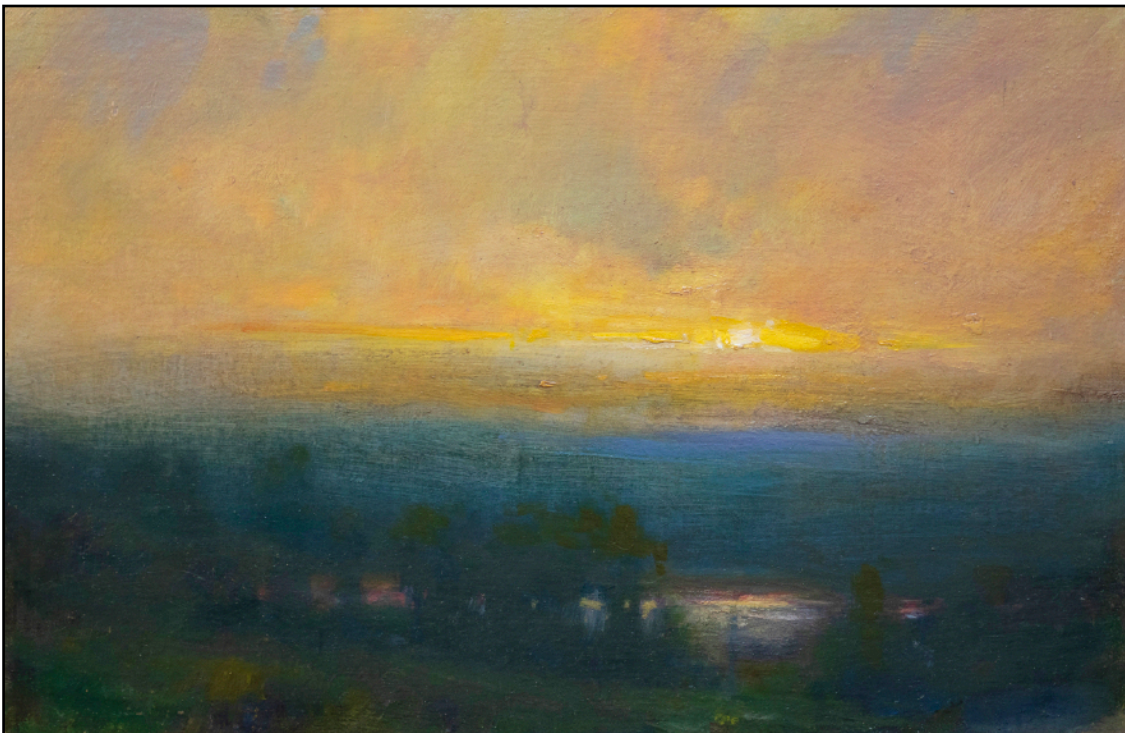
After reworking the sky and raising the background hill, it became clear the the dark mass of the tree in the center needed changing. The surface of the painting was prepared by scraping.



After several sessions of altering the trees, I decided to eliminate them completely. The intimate landscape became a vista. A simple sky was painted in but it lacked visual weight.



Several warm glazes and some opaque painting later, and below is the result. Is it better than the original version or just different? I don't know. Is it important to know? As Curt Hanson would often say, "We're painters. We just paint." That's the best advice of all: just keep painting.



## A few thoughts:

### A preconceived painting versus a discovered painting

Although the two methods of painting presented here are given as either-or choices, in practice the painting process often includes both. Some paintings are the result of short, direct, no-nonsense journeys. Others involve prolonged periods of bushwhacking, a result of “where the hell am I?” rambles. Many are a mixture of both: one area may be painted directly, with confidence rooted in knowing exactly what to do, while another area may require multiple sessions of experimentation and play. Become comfortable with both ways of painting. Don’t panic if you feel lost in a painting and don’t become too easily bored by a painting that comes so easily and quickly it seems to have painted itself.

### Working from strengths versus weaknesses

As mentioned earlier, painting towards a mental image of a finished painting requires the technical ability to be able to paint what one imagines. Having that technical facility is both a strength and a weakness. It’s a strength in that it allows us to realize in complete form what we so clearly imagine. But it’s a weakness in that we’re painting only from our strengths, from what we already know how to do. Working from our strengths is very seductive because the success rate is so high. Taking no risks, we rarely fail. And that’s the danger.

Artistic growth and learning don’t come from painting only how and what we already know. It arises from the mess of trying something new, from making mistakes, playing with different techniques, etc. There’s nothing wrong with painting from our experience and knowledge but it can’t stop there. If it does, we become formulaic painters and produce technically proficient but lifeless paintings. Technical learning should come at the beginning and then ultimately give way to a passion to express something meaningful.

### The painting is the point

If the painting works, it doesn’t matter how we got there. All the teachings of technique and concepts are training wheels – designed to get us to a competent level of proficiency, at which point the real work begins. What do you want to say with your paintings?

## Words of Wisdom

No amount of skillful invention can replace the essential element of imagination.

– Edward Hopper

Mistakes are almost always of a sacred nature.

– Salvador Dali

*Stay well,  
Be creative,  
and Happy Painting!*

