

John MacDonald

May–June 2019



WORKSHOPS

2019

SEPT 22–28, 2019 ~ FULL

HUDSON RIVER VALLEY ART WORKSHOPS

Greenville, New York

www.artworkshops.com

Using photos, working in keys

OCT. 9–15, 2019 ~ FULL

MASTER CLASS AT THE MASSACHUSETTS MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

North Adams, Mass.

Developing a large painting.

2020

FEB. 29 –MAR. 6 , 2020

CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

Plen air and Studio.

APRIL 15–18, 2020

LANDGROVE INN

Landgrove, VT

Studio: working from photos.

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

A busy May and June have resulted in a tardy newsletter. Still, I hope you find it informative and helpful. Happy Summer!

Value and Color Keys ~ Part III

Before finishing this series of newsletters on value and color keys, (which will conclude with the next newsletter), I'd like to review a few of the basic principles of color. Color is a complex and varied subject, one that would require a year of newsletters to just scratch the surface, so I'm going to limit this introduction to color to those aspects that relate to color keys.

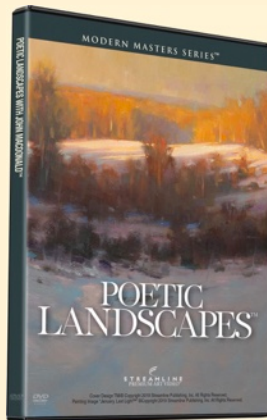
We'll review the attributes of color (something you should already know) and then take a brief look at:

Local Color

Color Relativity

Color Temperature

Color Luminosity / Vibration



NEW Liljedahl Video now available!

Like the first video (click [here](#)), I concentrate on the basic elements of painting but then move on to 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.

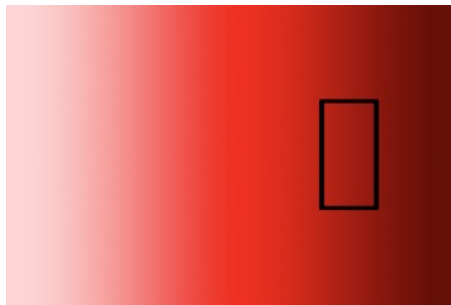
Color Vocabulary

To avoid confusion, let's review the terms that are used to describe color. Every color consists of three attributes: **hue**, **value**, and **saturation** (or **chroma**). When we use the word "color," we're describing something that consists of all three attributes.

HUE

The hue of a color is what we're describing when we use general terms such as "green," "blue," or "red" or more specific labels such as "Thalo Green," "Prussian Blue," "Cadmium Red," etc. The standard color wheel is a display of hues, showing each at the value at which it reaches full saturation.

To say, "this color is red," is to name the **hue**, and only the hue, of the color.



VALUE

The value of a color is its position on a value scale that runs from white to black. (If it's reached either extreme end—white or black—then it's changed hue.)

When we describe a color as a "dark red," we're naming not only its hue but also its **value**.

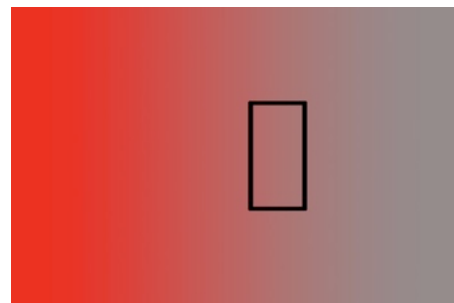
SATURATION (Chroma)

The saturation (or chroma) of a color describes the amount of neutral gray in it. A fully saturated color is at its purest; a fully desaturated color is 100% gray.

When we say a color is a "dark, muted red," we're naming its hue, value, and **saturation**.

Of the three attributes of color, it's saturation that seems to give artists the most difficulty, both in seeing and in mixing it. As with any skill, our ability to correctly identify the saturation of a color improves with practice. When analyzing a color in a landscape, we need to consider all three attributes, which includes saturation. It's not enough to identify only its hue and value.

In describing color, most artists understand the word "muted" to refer to its level of saturation, or lack thereof. But the word "bright"—the opposite of muted—often causes confusion. Perhaps it's because a "bright light" describes its value (its lightness) and therefore a "bright blue" implies a light blue. For this reason, I avoid using the word "bright" and will instead describe a color as "fully saturated," "moderately saturated," etc.



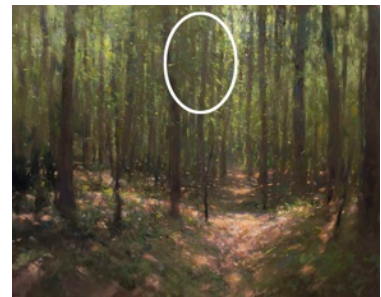
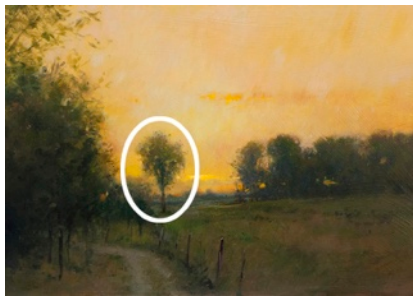
Local Color

Local Color can be defined as the color of an object that is determined by the physical properties of its surface when observed closely under white light and isolated from adjacent colors. We're describing local color when we state that an apple is red, the sky is blue, and trees are green. Knowing the local color of objects provides us with useful color information but it can also be a trap. The problem arises when our understanding of color is based on a mental description rather than a visual observation. When we "know" the local color of something, we're depending on what we think rather than what we see.

Never underestimate the power of the mind to distort our perception of color.



We know that trees are green. But which green? In the paintings below, the colors of the "green" trees may not be colors which we normally associate with the local color of trees.



When analyzing color, we can get lazy. It's easier to slap a conceptual label on what we see than to take the time to determine the exact color through focused observation. We know the sky is blue so we automatically reach for blue pigments. The mental concept in our heads prevents us from seeing the actual color, a color influenced as much by the light and adjacent colors as the physical properties of the object's surface. Yes, apples are generally red, but we must always ask ourselves, is it red in *this* circumstance under *this* light and next to *these* other colors? It may not be nearly as red as our minds tells us it is!

It's no accident that many painters struggle to paint water, glass, and atmosphere. All three are transparent – they are largely devoid of local color. With no label of local color to use as a mental crutch, we're left solely to the resources of our eyes. Learn to see color as our eyes see it and you'll be able to mix any color and paint anything. It's all shapes of color.

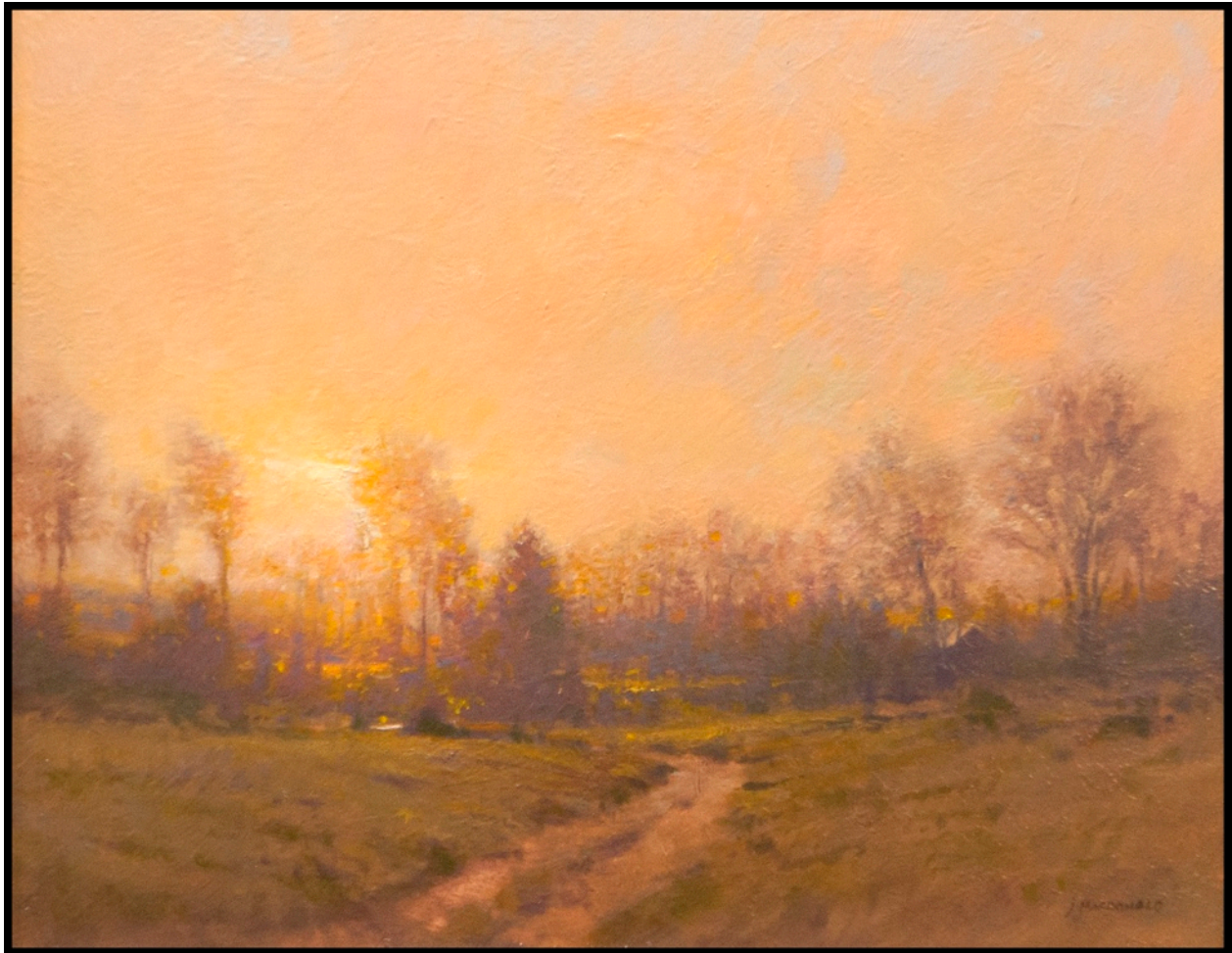
Color Relativity

The local color of an object is just one ingredient of the color that we see. The actual color is also determined by the color of the light and by the hue, chroma, and value of adjacent colors. Looking solely at one color in a scene can allow us to intellectually label it but it won't help us in our attempt to *mix* it. A tree may look green, but *compared to what?* To accurately identify a color, we must compare it to as many other colors as possible.

We're all familiar with this illustration showing color relativity—how a color appears different in different contexts. It's a good demonstration of the theory of color relativity but how do we apply it to our painting?

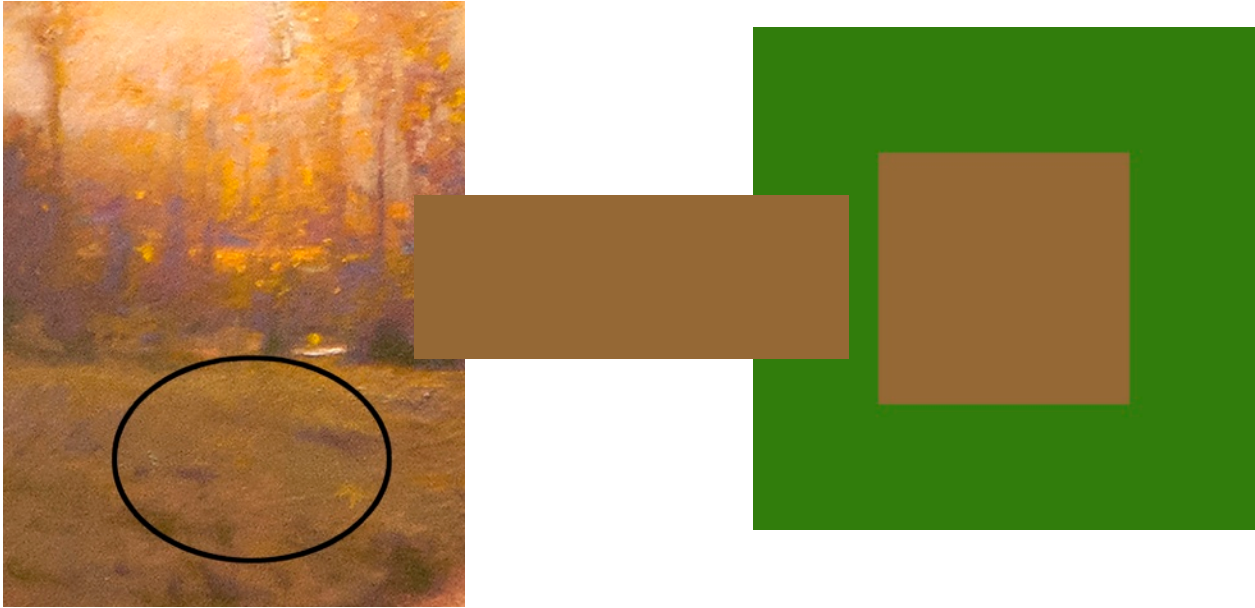


Below are three examples showing how dramatically relative a color can be. . .



In the above painting, the foreground meadow appears greenish when compared to the colors of the background trees and sky. It's greenish but is it really *green*? What is it?

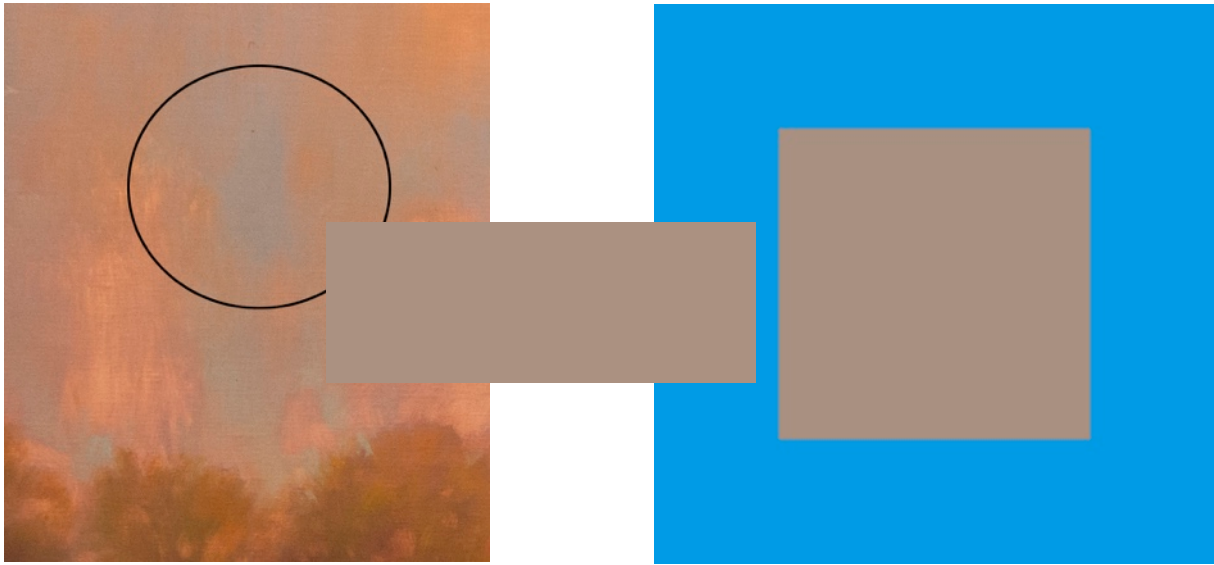
On the palette the green is actually a muted orange. It appears green only in the context of the color scheme of this painting. And isn't it obvious that the intense green color of the square on the right would be entirely out of place in this painting? It wouldn't work at all!



Here's another example, from a painting currently in progress. There are patches of blue sky in this painting. But are they really blue? A color will always bring out its complementary in an adjacent color. The orange colors in the clouds make the adjacent colors appear more blueish just as the blueish color makes the clouds appear even more orangish.



The “blue” sky in the painting isn’t blue at all! It’s a neutral, muted orange.



The challenge of mixing colors has little to do with mixing per se. The problem is **seeing**. We can’t properly mix a color if we can’t properly see it. To accurately identify and mix the colors that exist in nature, we must get out of our heads and into our eyes.

A last example, using *Spirit of the Night*, by George Inness.

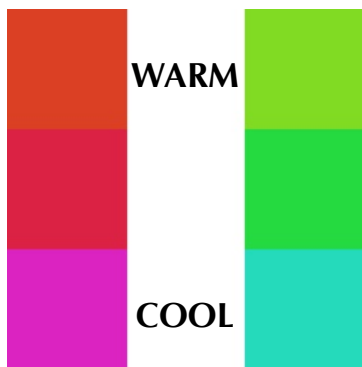
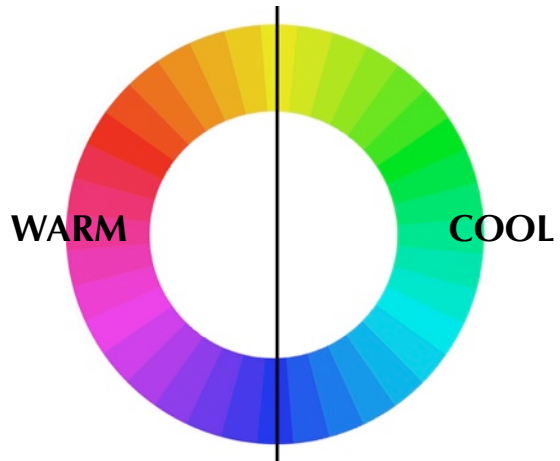


Inness often conveys a richness of color in his paintings that depends entirely on color relativity and color contrasts. Notice in this painting how the colors of the swatches taken from the sky and from two areas in the foreground meadow appear rather muted. Yet in the painting, the same colors appear much more vibrant and intense. Most of the increase in the apparent intensity of the colors comes from the contrast of their color temperature.

Color Temperature

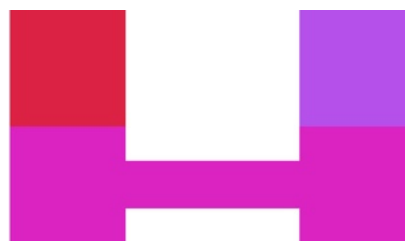
Color temperature describes the sense of warmth or coolness that a color conveys when compared to another color. It's a description based on a *relationship* between colors.

When first learning about color temperature and contrast, we're often shown a division of the color wheel in which one side is labeled warm and the other cool. Dividing temperature into two opposing sides on the color wheel is good introduction to the concept of temperature but is too simplistic to help us in our painting. Particularly misleading is the implication that we only create color contrast when we use colors far apart on the color wheel and at full saturation or chroma.



A more sophisticated and useful application of color temperature contrast is that which occurs *within a single hue*. On the color wheel, red is a warm color and green is cool but in nature either can appear cool or warm depending on adjacent colors. Because color is relative, no hue has an absolute temperature. Any color can appear warm or cool depending on the adjacent colors, as shown by the example below.

The bottom color appears cool when compared to the warmer top color.



But when compared to a cooler red above, it now appears warm.

Using two of the color samples from Inness's painting above, notice how, on the left, the same green hue appears cool when it's adjacent to the warm hue from the painting but, on the right, it appears warm when placed next to an even cooler green.



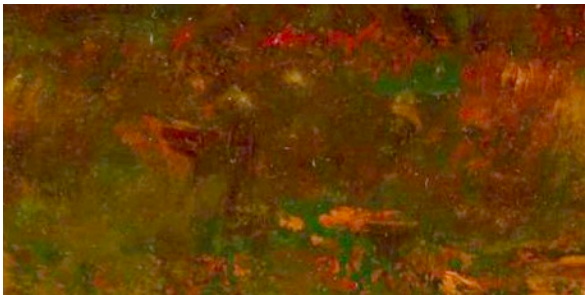
Color temperatures can be contrasted in two areas of a painting: between the large shapes of the composition (the foundation values) or between colors inside each shape. While color contrasts *between* the major shapes in a painting creates some visual interest, it's the color contrasts *within* the shapes—especially when the colors are close in value—that create the strongest effects: an illusion of luminosity, traditionally called *vibration*.



In this detail of a painting by J. F. Murphy, there is some color contrast between the relatively cool sky and the warmer ground. The greatest contrast, however, is between their values rather than between their color temperatures.



The strongest color contrasts in the painting are between the warm and cool colors *within* each of the sky and ground shapes. Overall, the sky is slightly cool but it contains both warm and cool variations. Likewise, there are warm and cool notes in the warm ground.

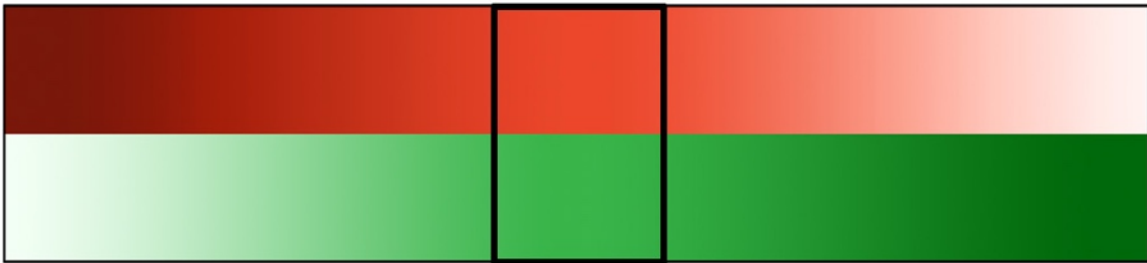


Color Luminosity / Vibration

Although I've addressed this topic in previous newsletters ([December 2014](#) and [February 2015](#)), it's such an important concept that I'm repeating it here. The principle is simple:

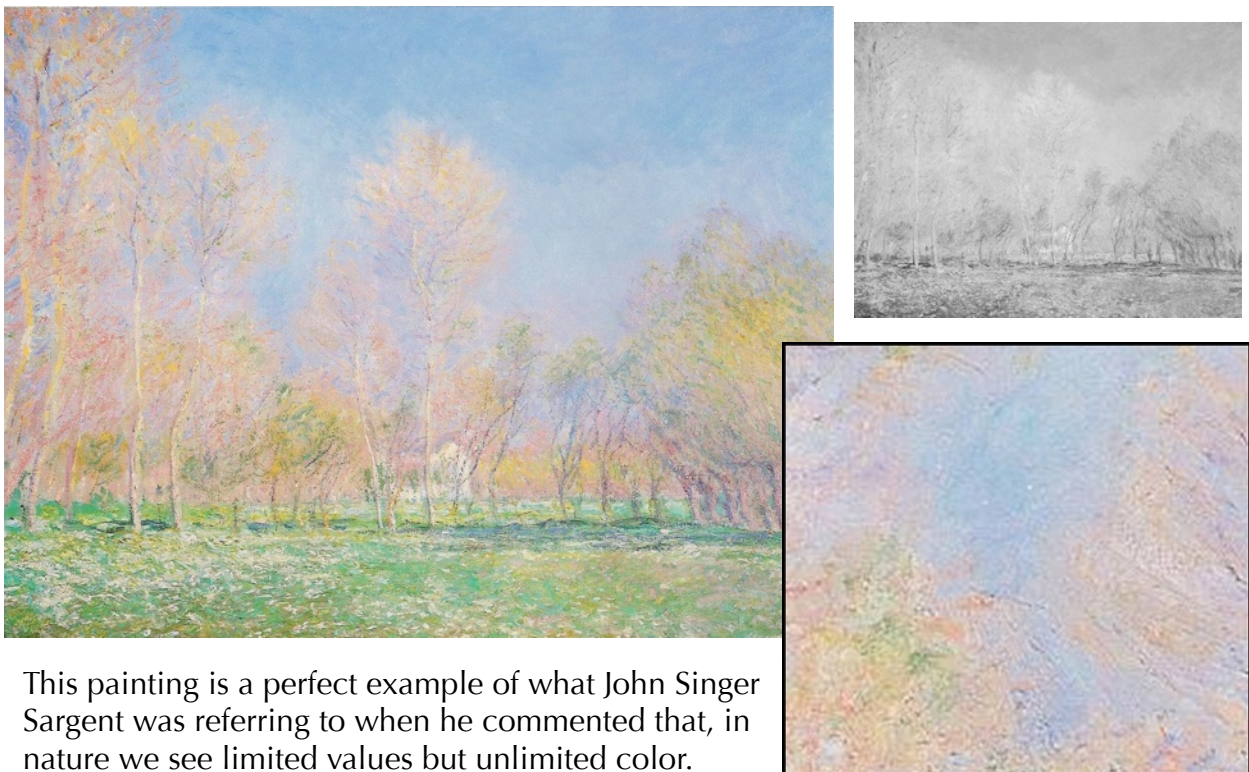
The closer the values of adjacent warm and cool colors, the greater the color contrast.

In explaining color contrast, I often use the following graphic. Notice how the colors seem most vibrant where the values become identical. Thus the traditional term, "vibration."



If you wish to emphasize color contrasts, keep the values of colors close and play warm against cool: **maximize the temperature contrast and minimize the value contrast.**

In Monet's painting below, there is some temperature contrast between the blue sky and pinkish trees but, when seen closely in the inset, even more so between the warm and cool notes *within* each area of sky and trees. The canvas is covered in multiple notes of color, almost all of which are the same value. Converted to black and white, we can see how limited is the value range of the painting. The sky and tree values are nearly identical.



This painting is a perfect example of what John Singer Sargent was referring to when he commented that, in nature we see limited values but unlimited color.

Another example from Dennis Miller Bunker's magnificent Medfield Meadow series. In the grass is a great variety of color but nearly a single value. And the light blue of the water glows because it's the same value as the grass: in the black and white photo the water is invisible! The entire painting consists of a few values within which are a great variety of warm and cool colors. It's a way of building a painting that works beautifully.



PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER. . .

All of these aspects of color—relativity, temperature, vibration—are interrelated. In his paintings, George Inness could use a gray, orangish green that appeared to be a true green because of relativity, a rich green because of color temperature, and a luminous green because of vibration. His values hold the painting together and then allow color to sing. In the next newsletter, we'll see how these aspects of color relate to color keys.

Words of Wisdom

Most creativity is a transition from one context into another where things are more surprising. There's an element of surprise, and especially in science, there is often laughter that goes along with the 'Aha'.

Art also has this element. Our job is to remind us that there are more contexts than the one that we're in-- the one that we think is reality.

~ Alan Kay, computer scientist (b. 1940)

The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas.

~ Linus Pauling, chemist (1901–1994)

COMING UP . . .

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

July–Aug: Color Keys.

Sept.-Oct: Get Sketching!

—Happy Painting!


2019 Workshops

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. We'll work with a single photo as reference, 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

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 private studio.

2020 Workshops

Feb 29–Mar. 6 ~ Casa de los Artistas
artworkshopvacations.com

Registration is now open. Contact the Casa at the above link.

April 15–18 ~ Landgrove Inn; Landgrove, Vermont
www.landgroveinn.com

Registration is now open. Contact the Landgrove Inn at the above link.

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

Registration is now open. Contact the Village Arts of Putney at the above link.