

John MacDonald

July–August 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

Plein 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

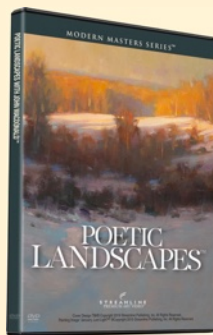
Putney, VT

Value and Color Keys ~ Part IV

Concluding this series of newsletters on value and color keys, we'll look at the challenges and complexities of painting in a **color key**. Despite some difficulties, there are advantages to working in a color key: we can create the illusion of the color of a light source, emphasize a mood, establish color harmony, and work with more sophisticated and subtle colors. A color key can give your paintings more power and more impact.



George Inness, *Home at Montclair*, 1892



NEW Liliedahl Video now available!

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

You may purchase it [here](#). Online streaming is also available.

Color Keys

To paint in a color key is to paint with a limited range of hues, with one hue dominating and all others relating to it. Color keys are usually described in terms of **temperature**: warm key or cool key. Below, the nocturne and the spring landscape are cool key paintings; the sunset and snow paintings are warm key. Each has a prominent hue that affects the appearance of all of the other hues and determines the temperature of the key.



Color keys are often used to represent the color of the light source and thus specific times of day. For example, a warm key can represent a sunset scene and a cool key a winter nocturne, as shown above. But a color key need not represent the color of the light source. It can be used instead to create a mood or emphasize the value contrasts in a painting.

Let's look first at using a key to represent the color of the light.

The Color of Light – Warm vs Cool

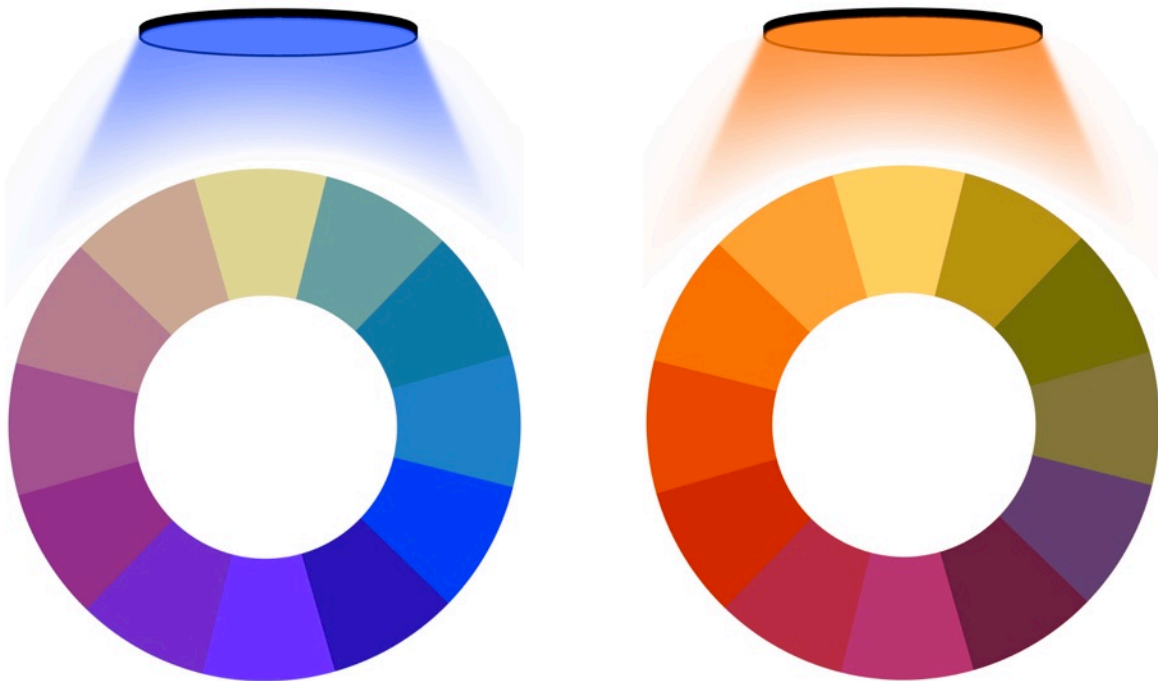
When painting the orange light of a sunset or the blue light of a nocturne, we're painting in a color key. In these circumstances, the key is determined by the color of the light, a color that affects every hue—**but not every hue equally**. Using a color wheel allows us to understand how light affects the entire spectrum of hues.

In white light, each hue of the color wheel is at its purest—fully saturated and unadulterated. The light is perfectly transparent and colorless, contributing nothing to the appearance of the hue. This light doesn't exist in nature. Natural lighting, either the direct light of the sun or indirect light from a blue or over-cast sky, will nearly always alter the appearance of a color.



How the Color of Light Changes Hues

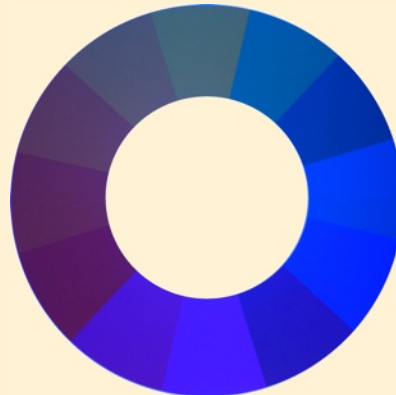
To understand how light affects color in nature, I've found it helpful to first consider what colored light does to a color wheel. Below are two representations of a source of colored light shining on a color wheel: one with a blue light, the other with an orange light.



A colored light adds its **hue** to all colors equally but the change in **saturation** of the colors can differ dramatically. Colors that are similar in temperature to the temperature of the light will change primarily in hue, with little change in saturation, but those of opposite temperature will become less saturated. The closer a color is to the complementary color of the light, the more muted it will become. Notice above that the blue light barely affects the blue hues but changes the orange hues dramatically, orange being the complement of blue. The opposite is true with the orange light. The stronger the color of the light, the more will complementary hues tend towards neutrals. If the color of the light is intense, even the complementary colors can begin to take on the temperature of the light. Under an intense orange light, for instance, every color will begin to appear warm.

Real light on a printed color wheel.

In trying to show how light affects colors, I assumed I could simply photograph a colored light shining on a printed color wheel. At Home Depot, I bought orange and blue party lights and built the setup shown below. To the eye, it worked perfectly. Under the blue light, the blue hue on the color wheel was unchanged (if anything, its saturation was enhanced) while the further the colors approached orange, the more desaturated they became. Likewise for the orange light with its complement of blue. But the effect proved difficult to photograph. Despite tweaking the setup and fiddling with settings on the camera, I could not get a photo that accurately represented what I was **seeing**. I finally resorted to using photoshop to create images that more closely matched the view from life. The color wheels shown on the previous page are the result. (It was another reminder of the limitations of the camera and the value of painting from life.)



Above are the color wheels as photographed. The camera simply couldn't capture the subtlety of the changes visible to the eye.

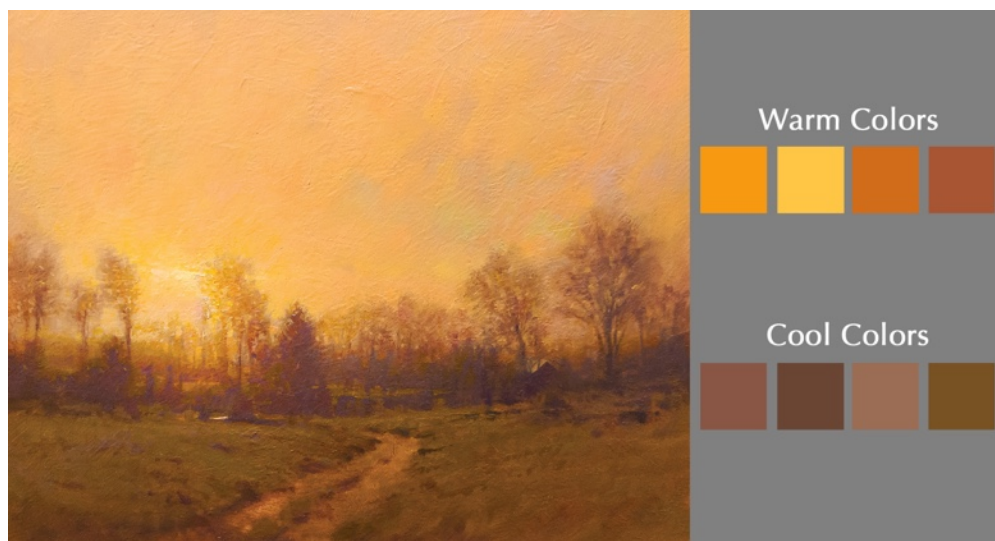
Building the light box wasn't entirely a wasted effort. It will make an ideal setting for painting a still life using differently colored lights, a chance to practice painting in color keys—from life!—in the comfort of the studio. You may want to try it.

The Color of the Light in Pigments

In the two paintings below, a color key was used to represent the color of the light. Notice how the cool hues in a cool key painting remain fairly saturated while warm hues become muted. In a warm key painting, the warm hues retain their saturation while cool hues become muted. It's a simple but effective way to create a warm or cool light in a painting.



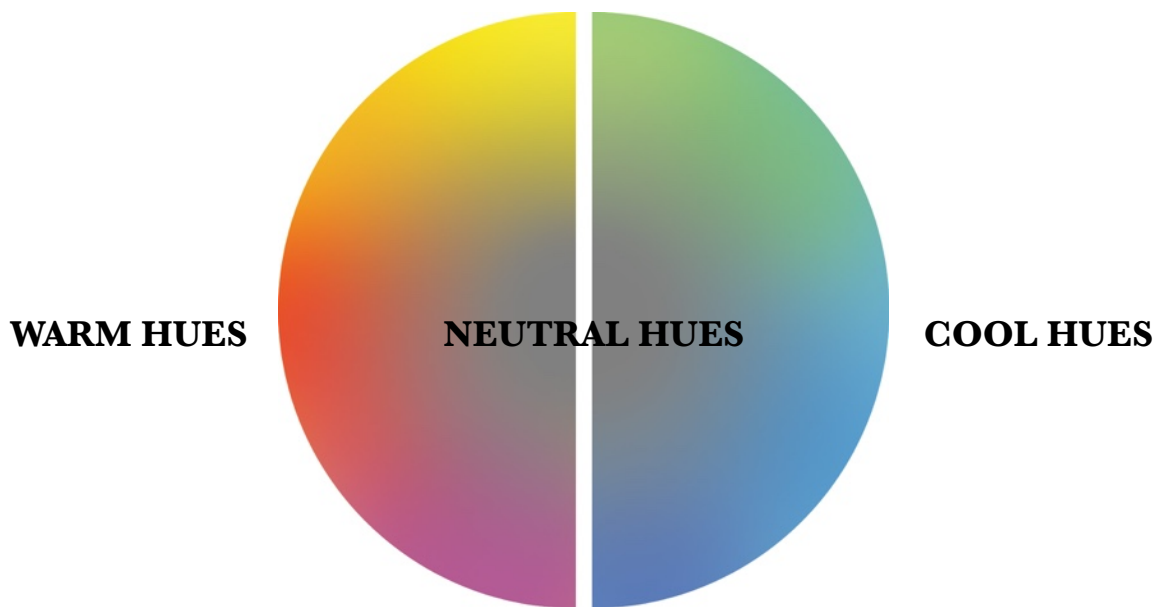
In a cool key painting, cool colors remain saturated while warm colors become muted.



In a warm key painting, warm colors remain saturated while cool colors become muted. Here, the light is so warm even the “cool” colors appear relatively warm.

Painting in Keys ~ A Simple Method

A workshop instructor of mine was fond of saying, “Put a little blue in everything you do.” He was advocating a method of using *pigments* to approximate the effects of the color of *light*. Adding blue to other blue and greens hues affects them only moderately—slightly shifting the hues while leaving saturation largely untouched. Adding blue to oranges, reds, and yellows, however, changes them considerably. Adding enough blue to the complementary colors of blue shifts them towards **neutrals**. In the color wheel below, we see that neutrals lie between warm and cool hues, allowing them to appear either warm or cool depending on the colors that surround them. We can take advantage of this by using neutral hues (grays and earth tones) to represent the cool hues in a warm key painting or the warm hues in a cool key painting. The neutral colors don’t change—the context does.



Demo Using Neutrals

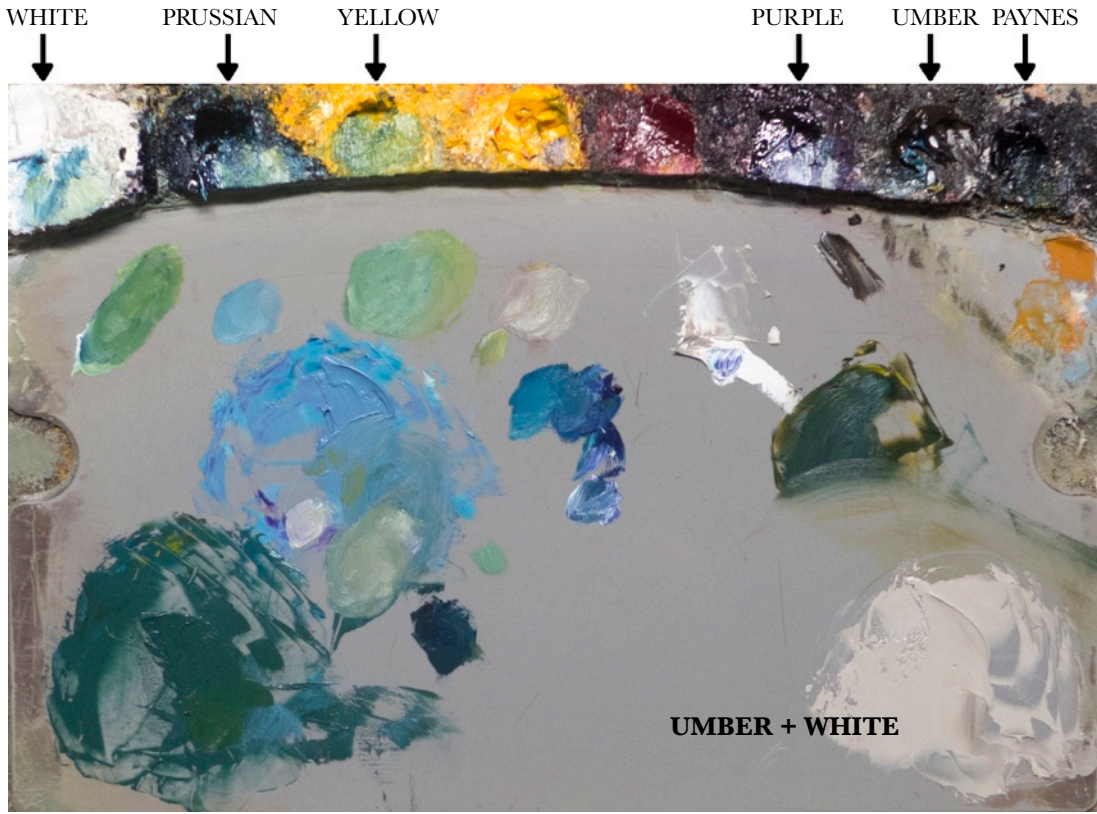
Using the photo on the right as reference, I painted two small paintings: one in each temperature key. Rather than choosing a single hue and adding a bit to every mixture (which is one possible method), I instead used only the warm or cool colors on my palette (+ a neutral), depending on the temperature of the key. For instance, for the warm key painting I left Prussian Blue untouched and used only umber and purple for any coolish hues.

For the sky in both paintings, I mixed a single pile of a neutral hue—raw umber and white. It appears relatively warm in the cool key painting and cool in the warm key painting. For the sake of this simple demo, I used the neutral almost exclusively in the sky. In most keyed paintings, artists use neutrals throughout the image, creating warm and cool notes in varying intensities. It creates subtle color relationships.





For this cool key painting, I used white, prussian blue, yellow light, dioxazine purple, raw umber, and paynes gray. I used no reds or oranges. Any subtle warm notes in the landforms were painted using purple and/or umber. In this painting, the sky (white + raw umber) appears relatively warm.





In this warm key painting, I used white, yellow light, permanent alizarin crimson, dioxazine purple and raw umber. Any subtle cool notes in the landforms were mixed from purple and/or umber. The same mixture of white and raw umber was used for the sky but here it appears relatively cool.

WHITE



YELLOW



ALIZ.



PURPLE



UMBER



Why Not Full Saturation?

In a color key painting, is it always necessary to desaturate the opposite color temperature of the key? **If you wish to create the illusion of a strongly colored light source—YES.** But perhaps that's not your intention. Many artists paint with almost full saturation in every color. Playing fully saturated cool and warm hues against each other can create brilliant, eye-catching color contrasts. That's fine if it's your intention. But be aware that you'll lose the illusion of a colored light source and, if you create an equal amount of warm and cool hues throughout the painting, you'll also lose any sense of a color key.



Above are the two paintings with fully saturated skies. The change creates dramatic color contrast but destroys the realist portrayal of light. It's your choice. *What's your intention?*

Painting in a Key is Optional

There's nothing special about painting in a color key. It's an option to consider when establishing your intent and when beginning the painting. Those created without a color key can be just as strong, moving, and beautiful as those painted in a key. In fact, most paintings are painted without a color key. Below are a few examples of key-less paintings.



Value and Color Keys ~ Using Both

Working in a value or color key is challenging but rewarding. Working in *both*—in a value and a color key simultaneously—is especially exciting. Whether painting plein air or with photo reference, consider working in keys the next time you paint. *Happy Painting!*

HIGH VALUE KEY / COOL COLOR KEY



LOW VALUE KEY / COOL COLOR KEY



HIGH VALUE KEY / WARM COLOR KEY



MID VALUE KEY / COOL COLOR KEY



LOW VALUE KEY / WARM COLOR KEY



Words of Wisdom

If I could, I would always work in silence and obscurity, and let my efforts be known by their results.

~ **Emily Bronte, novelist (1818–1948)**

Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

~ **Howard Thurman, author, educator (1899-1981)**

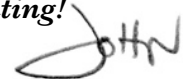
COMING UP . . .

It's time to sketch!

In the next newsletter, we'll explore how sketching can improve the quality of your paintings.

Until then,

~*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.