

John MacDonald



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January–February, 2024

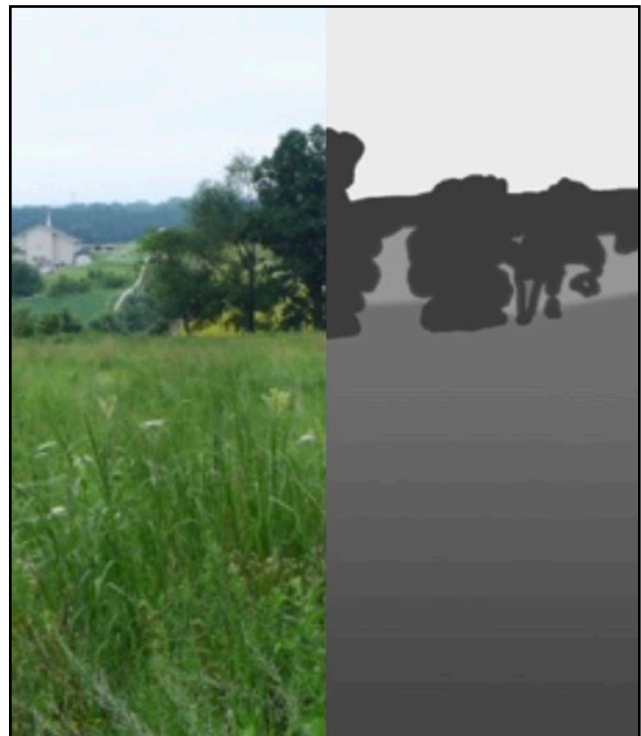
COMPOSITION: IDENTIFY

When composing a painting, we go through three steps: **Ask, Identify, Design**.

First, we must **Ask** two questions: What is my general intention for this painting and what will be its specific message? (See the September – October newsletter).

Secondly, we ask ourselves if the scene is actually paintable. (See the November – December newsletter).

Having confirmed our intentions and the quality of the scene, we move on to **Identify**. We identify the focal point, which will carry the message of the painting, and identify the major value shapes in the scene, which will provide the raw material we'll use to arrange (Design) a successful composition. We begin moving from seeing things to seeing shapes, from what nature gives us to what we need to make a painting.



PaintTube Videos



Interested in my paintings process? In “*Dynamic Landscapes*” and “*Poetic Landscapes*” I describe it in detail. If you’re interested in learning more about values—what they are, how to identify them, and how to use them in your paintings, check out the video, “*Mastering Values*.”

For more information and to order the videos, click [HERE](#).

If you’ve been enjoying these newsletters and are able and willing to make a donation, any contribution would be appreciated. If you’ve just begun receiving them, feel free to peruse them first.

To make a donation, click [HERE](#).

To the many of you who’ve already contributed~ *Thank you!*



IDENTIFY the Focal Point

Think of a painting as a theatrical production. The entire cast is needed to drive the plot of the story but there's usually a main character that provides the primary interest. So, too, with a painting. The entire painting should support its message, but it's the focal point that should drive it home. It's the area where the eye eventually settles, where the drama occurs. In art terms, it's the area in the painting with the strongest contrasts and details, where the most important lines in the composition lead. To know the focal point is to know what is essential to the painting and what is irrelevant, or at least less important. If we're uncertain where the focal point is in the scene, our message will be uncertain. Take a moment to identify the focal point—the point of the painting. As we'll discover in the following newsletters, it's the positioning of the focal point that determines the structure of the entire painting. ***A painting is built around its focal point.***





In a scene, the focal point is where the eye finally settles. In painting terms, it's almost always where the lines of the major shapes in the landscape lead and the greatest contrasts exist. Here, the diagonal lines of the background hills and horizontal lines in the distant field bring the eye to the circled area. Here are the greatest variety of shapes and details and most of the value contrast in the scene. It's a joy to find a scene in which the message and focal point align but that isn't always the case.

In the above photo, the focal point coincided with the area in the painting that most inspired me. It became my intention for the painting. When that happens, it makes composing a painting easier. But not all scenes have an easily identifiable focal point nor a focal point that we may want to use in the painting. Often, the placement of a focal point needs changing to help the painting.

In the scene below, there are multiple areas of equal contrast that attract the eye, both in the foreground and background. If we're considering a scene that doesn't have a clear focal point or muddles our initial intention, we'll need to change the contrasts in the painting.



For more information about the role of contrasts in creating a focal point, see the July-August 2018 newsletter, "It's All About Contrasts."

IDENTIFY the Value Shapes (Foundation Values)

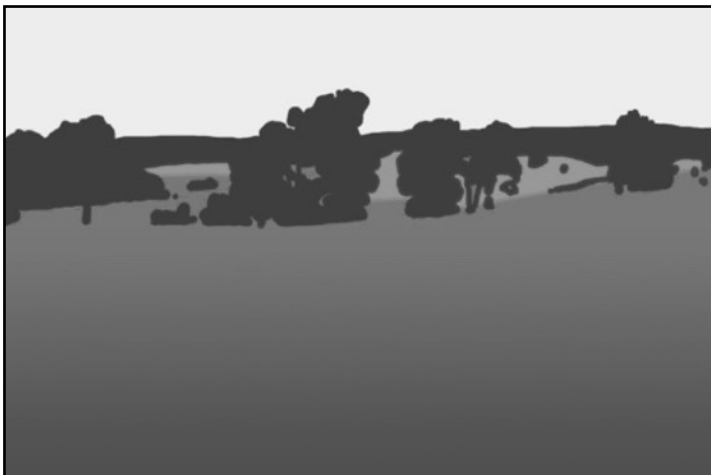
There are no tubes of paint labeled, “Dark Mood,” “Poignant Story,” or “Cute Rustic Barn.” We can’t begin to compose a painting until it is translated into the basic elements of the visual language. Inspiration, intention, thoughts and feelings must become shapes, line, color, values, etc. Of those, when composing a painting, none is more important than value.

The two to five major value shapes of a scene create the value structure of the painting. The value structure isn’t part of the composition, it *IS* the composition. And so we can’t begin composing the painting until we break down the scene into a few major shapes of value. We need to discover its foundation values.

Secondary Values and Massing Values

The easiest way to see the foundation values is to squint. Squinting blurs the edges of objects, eliminates details, and blends the secondary values into a single average value – the foundation value. This is also called **massing values**, bringing (secondary) values together to find one, underlying value of a shape. The average value of an area is its foundation value.

Here’s a simple example. In this photo, there are a variety of values within each area of the sky, fields, and trees. Some are subtle and some obvious. Each of those three major shapes has a range of values. These are secondary values. By squinting, we can mass the values into a single value, the foundation value. The foundation values are shown in the tonal study below. (Squint at these two images and you can see how closely they coincide.)



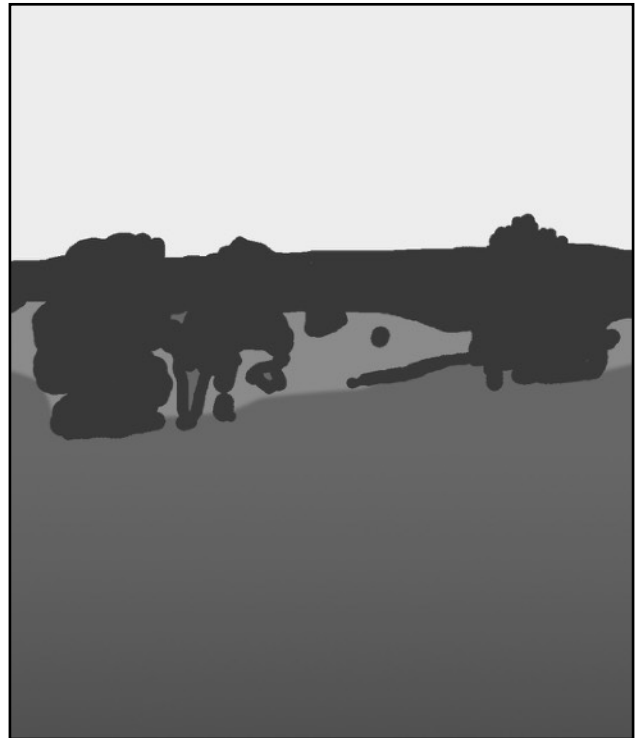
*(For a more detailed explanation of foundation and secondary values, see the **Jan-Feb 2019** newsletter)*

Seeing 2-D Value Shapes Rather Than 3-D Things

To compose a painting, we must learn to see a scene as an assemblage of *abstract, 2-D value shapes* rather than *realistic, 3-D, colored things*. **Think SHAPES, not OBJECTS.** There's no ability more important when composing a painting than the ability to see a scene as shapes rather than things. We don't design the composition with objects, we design it with shapes of value.

Values and the Edges of Things.

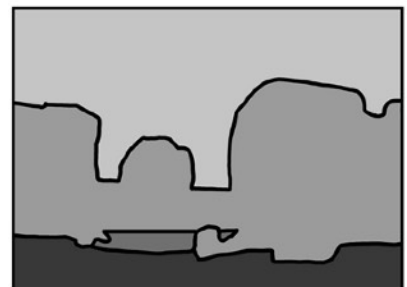
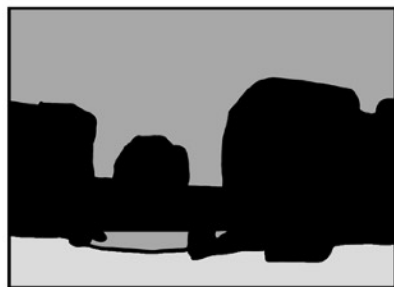
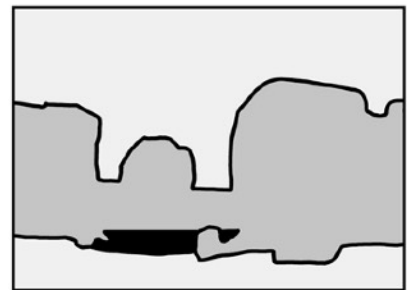
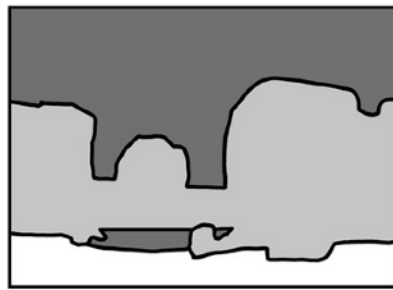
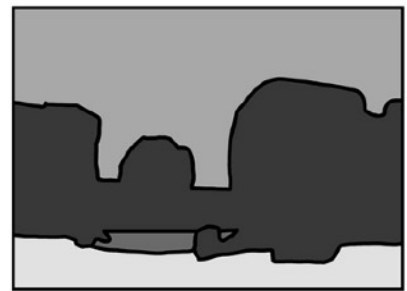
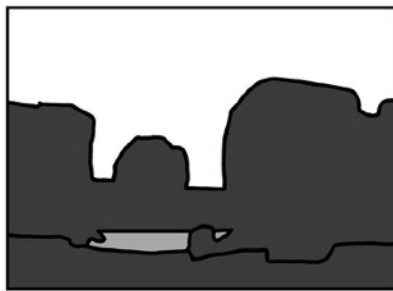
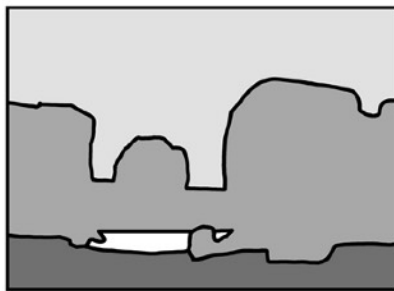
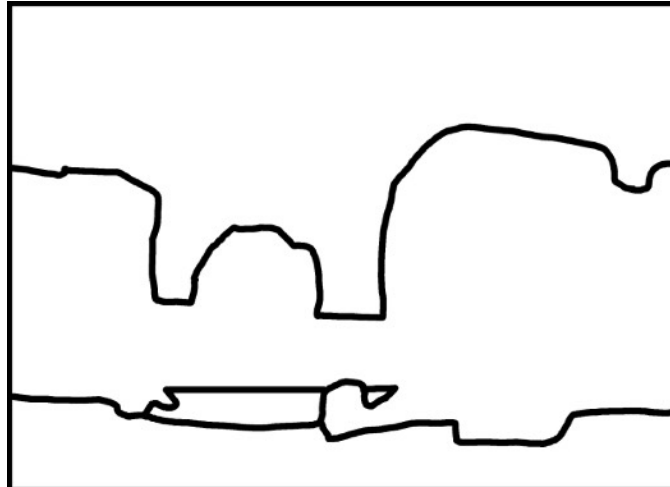
As we learn to mass values to discover foundation values, we quickly realize that values don't respect the physical edges of objects. If the values of two objects are close, they are combined into a single foundation value, regardless of what they are or where they exist in space. In this detail from the previous photo, the middle ground trees are significantly closer to us in space than the background band of trees. That's what our minds tell us: close trees, a mile of space, and then distant trees. But when we squint, their values come together and form a single, flat shape. That's what our eyes tell us. Trust your eyes. If we try to distinguish between every value of every object based on their position in space, there will be far too many values in the painting and it will be impossible to establish any value structure—the painting will fall apart. Stick to as few foundation values as possible. Two to five foundation values is ideal.



TIP: If all values are reduced to only a few shapes, how then do we distinguish the difference in space between objects without ruining the value structure? There are several ways. The most effective is to **make color changes rather than value changes**. Or, we change the saturation of the colors of the two areas, vary their edges or the ranges of their secondary values. It's always better to make changes of *any* kind than to break up a foundation value.

Shape AND Value

In the rush to begin painting, it's tempting to compose the major elements of a landscape as outlined shapes without considering their values. That never works. Even when working with only four simple shapes, as in the example below, there are thousands of different combinations of values that could be assigned to the shapes and only a few of those combinations will work as a composition for the painting. Always compose with shapes of *value*.

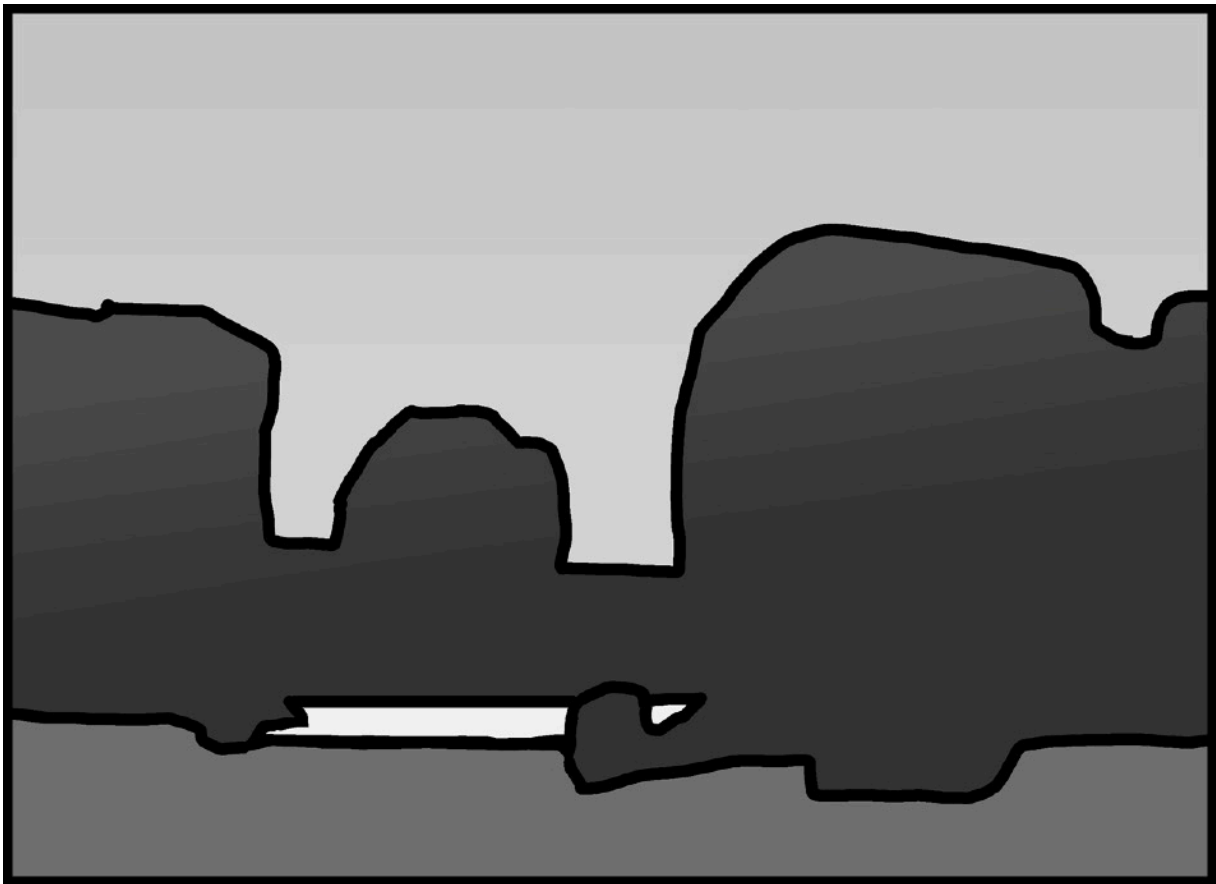


The Power and Versatility of Value Shapes

Seeing the landscape as 2-D abstract shapes of value rather than 3-D things in color is such an important concept to understand and a crucial skill to develop, that to drive home the lesson, let's skip ahead and begin with a tonal study that is fairly well designed. (Designing the value shapes into a successful composition will be the subject of the next newsletter.)

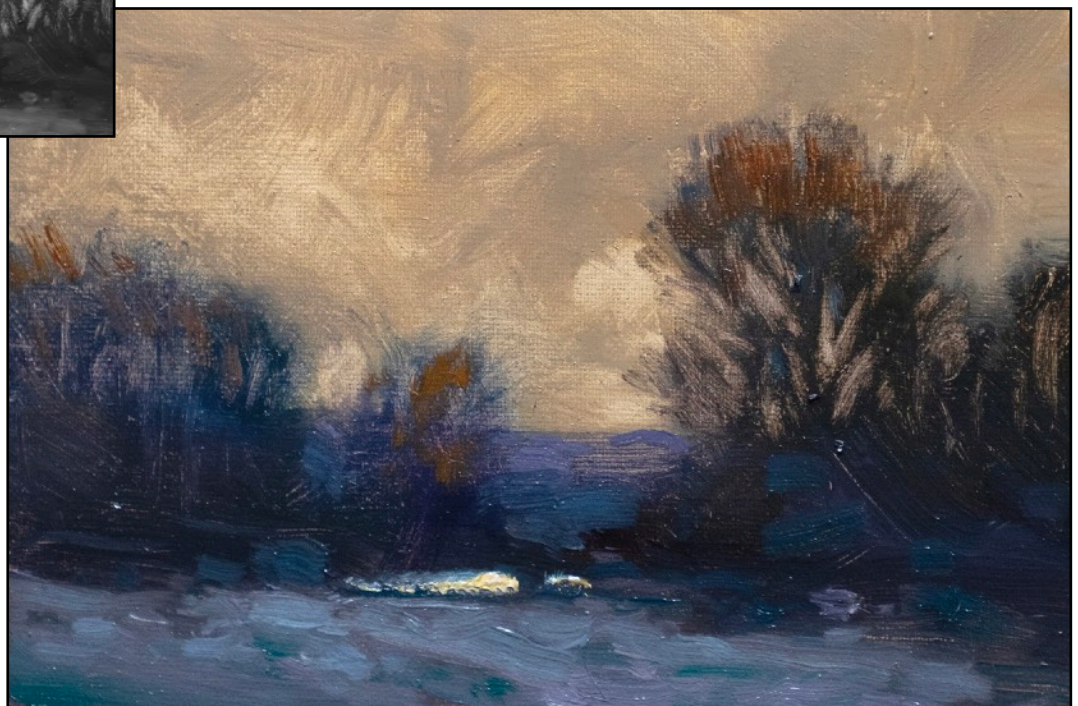
This composition isn't going to set the art world afire but it works. The shapes are varied in size, contour, and value. There is a clear focal point. But what do the shapes represent, in terms of things? ***It doesn't really matter.*** It's the design of value shapes that makes a composition work, not the nature of the physical objects.

Using this simple composition, I painted six 4" x 6" studies, each different. All are landscapes but this composition could be used for a still life or perhaps even groups of figures.



For clarity, I've enlarged the sketch. In practice, my tonal sketches are usually no larger than 2" in their longest dimension. Keeping them small forces me to ignore details and focus on value shapes. I can create them quickly with a minimal amount of fussing. The sketch I used for this exercise (left) is at actual size.

Below are two landscapes representing two different seasons and times of day, both based on the same tonal study. The color palette differs and there are differences in the details, such as the trees in full foliage versus bare trees, but the compositions and value structures are identical. A few well designed value shapes can be used to create two very different landscapes.



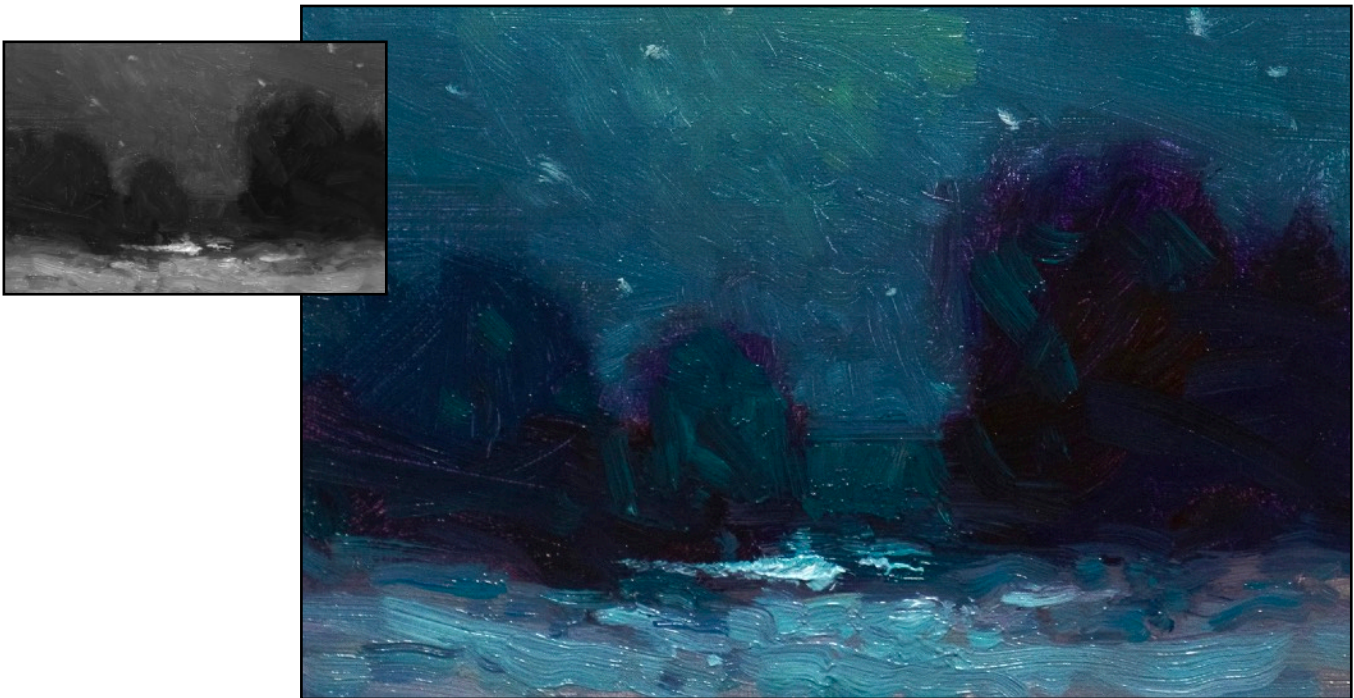


In these two examples, the same composition and value structure becomes a Southwestern desert landscape and an urban cityscape. The same value structure but different details.





Again, the same composition was used but the value relationships between the major shapes have been changed. Whether the painting is loose or tight, suggestive or highly detailed, if it's going to be successful it has to have a well designed composition and a clear value structure.



Not every tonal study can provide the basis for the variety of landscapes shown in this example. That's neither the point nor the goal. The crucial point is that **it's not the subject matter that determines a great composition—it's well designed shapes of values. *Shapes, not things.***

What About Color?

When composing a painting, color is largely irrelevant. Even if the sole reason we wish to paint a particular scene is to capture its color, we must first compose the painting with shapes of value. In Monet's painting below, there's very little value contrast between its foundation values. The painting is all about color contrast. But when Monet composed the scene, he was working with values. It's impossible to compose a painting using only color information.

(Even the Color Field painters of the '40s and '50s relied on value to compose their work. For instance, Diebenkorn was a superb colorist. But convert his paintings to black and white and it's clear that it was the values that made the compositions work, not the color.)



Color contrast is created by bringing values close together. Consequently, if we decide our intention is to capture rich color contrasts, we immediately know we'll need to work within a narrow value range. But. . . we'll still need to design the composition using shapes of value.

ASK and IDENTIFY – Practice Makes Perfect

This is the third consecutive newsletter that has been devoted to our taking a few preliminary and necessary steps before we begin composing a painting. When we're afire with the raw energy of inspiration, this kind of analysis can seem onerous and time-consuming. We're aching to paint! But the more we practice these steps of questioning and analyzing a scene before we paint, the more effectively and quickly we can decide what we want to say in a painting, judge if it can be said adequately in paint, and identify the most important elements that will allow us to say it. The result will be better a composition and a more successful painting. Onerous and time-consuming? Hardly. In practice, I've found the steps of **Asking** and **Identifying** can be completed in a minute or two, and sometimes in mere seconds. Here's an example.



Asking #1: The intention.

Although a Tonalist at heart and therefore more of a mood painter, I'm not averse to being inspired by a sunny day, something that would appeal more to an Impressionist. Inspired by the light, color, and interesting shapes in this scene, I quickly decided my intention would be to simply capture what I saw—the color and forms of the landscape. I'd be playing the Reporter.

Asking #2: The message.

Our general intention will determine the specific message of a painting. In this scene, I wanted to capture what I saw: the play of warm ground against the blue sky with spring greens scattered among the trees, and the strong contrasts in the skies and clouds. Unlike many of my Tonalist paintings, there was no need to change either the value key nor the color key. I was inspired by what I saw. It took only a minute to make that decision. The **Asking** step is finished.

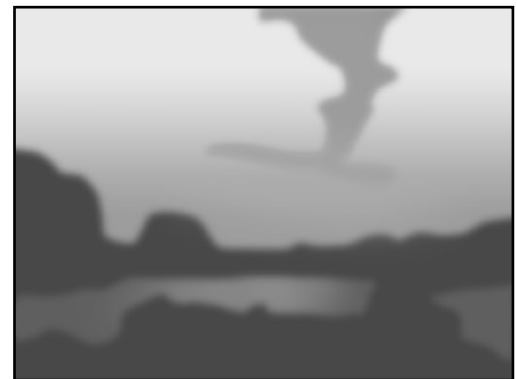
Identify #1: The focal point.

In the scene, my eye was most strongly drawn to the white cloud in the top right. It's the lightest light adjacent to the darkest value in the sky. I loved the shape and value contrast in the cloud and wanted to use it in the painting, but I wanted the focal point to be in the area at the end of the stream. I knew I would need to make changes. Having decided on the focal point, I then knew what would be essential to the painting and what would be secondary or superfluous.



Identify #2: The value shapes.

I **squinted** and identified the two to five most important value shapes and gradients in the scene. At this point, I only wanted to understand what I was seeing and to gather visual information. I wasn't yet thinking of designing those shape to create a composition for the painting.



And that's it. In only a few minutes, I've settled on my intention, clarified the message of the painting, and identified the focal point and the value structure – all of which just happen to be the most important parts of a painting. With this information in hand, I can now dive into the heart of composition: designing the value shapes to create a composition that leads the eye into the painting and to the center of interest, and that provides a structure for the secondary values, color and edge contrasts, and details. We'll look at the process of **Design** in the next newsletter.

Four-Day Workshop in Inveraray, Scotland

October 13–17, 2024

Join me for a painting workshop in beautiful Scotland. For information and to reserve a place, please email Elaine Miller: EKMiller70@gmail.com and use the subject line, "SCOTLAND with John MacDonald."



COST:

**\$1995 shared room
\$2595 private room**

**Food and travel expenses
are not included.**



Words of Wisdom

*"If I have ever made any valuable discoveries,
it has been owing more to patient observation
than to any other reason."*

– Isaac Newton (1642–1727)

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