

John MacDonald

November–December, 2020



WORKSHOPS

2021

FEB. 27–MAR. 6, 2021

[CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS](#)

NOW moved to
online workshop.

(APRIL–MAY) TBA, 2020

[VILLAGE ARTS CENTER](#)

Putney, VT

A 3-day plein air workshop.

MAY 23–29, 2021

**HUDSON RIVER VALLEY
ART WORKSHOPS**

Greenville, New York

www.artworkshops.com

AUGUST 20–22, 2021

FALMOUTH ART CENTER

Falmouth, Mass.

www.falmouthart.org

OCT. 9–15, 2019

**MASTER CLASS AT THE MASS-
ACHUSETTS MUSEUM OF
CONTEMPORARY ART**

North Adams, Mass.

www.massmoca.org

AUTUMN DATE TBA, 2020

[LANDGROVE INN](#)

Landgrove, VT

The Devil is in the Details

Whether you're creating oil landscapes, watercolor portraits, or collages in fabric, the rules governing the values in an image—how you establish the value structure and handle the secondary values—are clear, universal, and inviolable. But the rules pertaining to the **details** in a painting aren't nearly as clearcut nor universally applicable. There's much greater room for personal interpretation, expression, and preference, and no right answer to the question: "What details do I put in, what do I leave out, and how do I paint them?"

While the quantity of details in a painting doesn't determine its quality, that's little help in deciding how to make them work for you. The paintings of the Photorealists, the Hudson River School painters, and many fine contemporary landscape painters feature an abundance of details. Paintings of the Tonalists tend to feature few. Deciding how to use them can be difficult.

In this newsletter, we'll look at details: what they are, what they do, and how you can use them in your paintings.



Details: What They Are and What They Do

Details have both an explanatory and a visual function in every painting. As explanation, they allow us to identify objects in the painting by describing the texture, shape, or materials of the forms. Certain marks will indicate foliage, others will mimic bricks, etc. This is what we first learn about details and their function in a painting—they describe things.

Details also have a visual function in a painting. For instance, they can establish scale. A small brushstroke in the foreground can be used to represent a flower while the same sized brushstroke in the background can indicate a building. Details can help us establish the space in a painting.

Details will attract the eye: the greater their value contrast, the harder their edges, and the more energetic the brushwork, the stronger the attraction. Details can be used to create different areas of interest in the painting and to emphasize the focal point. We can direct where the eye will travel in the painting by placing varying amounts and different kinds of detail in different areas.



George Inness, *Edge of the Forest*, 1891

Lastly, how we paint the details and how many we include will affect the message of the painting. For instance, the details in a typical **story** painting, a Hudson River School painting, are always used to tell a narrative. They handle details very differently from those in a **mood** painting, such as a Tonalist work.

Let's begin with a brief look at story paintings. . .



Telling a Narrative~ the Story Painting

A story painting is one in which the painter's primary intent is to describe a narrative rather than evoke an emotion. The stories told by the painting point outside of the work to a mutually understood narrative based on the culture of the viewer and painter.

In these examples, Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* illustrates the creation story told in Genesis. Bruegel's *The Harvesters* describes agricultural life in 16th century Holland. Both Rockwell's *Freedom from Want* and Bierstadt's *Emigrants Crossing the Plains* describe American history or culture. In a story told in paint, details are the words. Every detail serves to make the story richer and more complete; therefore, the more the details and the more they are tightly rendered, the clearer the story. Of course, a story painting still must work as a *painting*, and what makes a great story painting isn't the content of the story but the composition, value structure, color and edge contrasts, and details.



Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, 1508-1512



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Harvesters*, 1565



Albert Bierstadt, *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*



Norman Rockwell, *Freedom from Want*

Details in a Story Painting



Albert Bierstadt, *Giant Redwood Trees of California*, 1874

The title of this painting reveals Bierstadt's intention: to portray the grandeur of the redwood forests of California. For the Hudson River School painters, the wonders of the wilderness were seen as a manifestation of God's creation. Their paintings were intended to tell that story. (It wasn't religion alone that determined the style of their highly detailed paintings. They were strictly within the mainstream of the prevailing tastes in academic paintings in America and Europe.)

In this painting, details abound. Even along the edges of the painting, they tend to be hard-edge, descriptive, and tightly rendered. With so many details calling to the eye, Bierstadt relied on contrasts of value and scale to create various areas of interest.

This type of painting isn't my favorite but that's only my preference. There's no questioning Bierstadt's superb painting skills as he weaves a rich tapestry of details in the telling of his story.



When telling a story, details are a crucial part of the painting. In a mood painting, they play a much less important role. Let's move on to explore how mood painters used details. . .

Expressing an Emotion ~ The Mood Painting

A mood painting is one in which the painter's intent is to describe an emotional experience. It is less a telling than a sharing. For the painter and the viewer, the mood evoked by the painting arises from subjective memories and experiences rather than a shared cultural background. If you wish to create paintings that emphasize feelings rather than words, you must approach the painting of details differently from a story painter—in their selection, placing, and execution.



George Inness, *Sunset Glow*, 1883–1885

A mood is an emotion, not a story. Because highly descriptive details tend to evoke stories, most mood paintings will minimize the use of details and rely on the power of suggestion. Compared to the descriptive details of a story painting, the suggestive details in a mood painting tend to be loosely painted, dramatically simplified, and sparsely placed across the canvas.

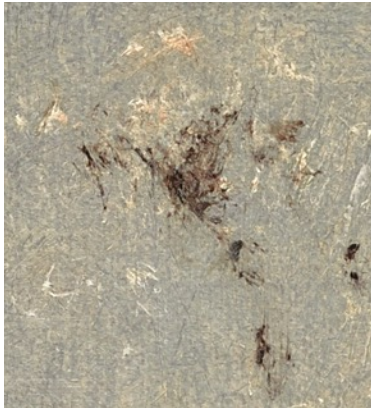
Rather than tell a narrative, the above painting invites contemplation. The soft, quiet, ambiguous nature of the details fits perfectly with the quiet, mysterious, contemplative quality of the paintings. Non-descriptive details requires the viewer to decipher them, creating a participatory rather than a passive relationship with the painting. Mood paintings rarely shout. They whisper.

“Several years before I went to Europe, I had begun to see that elaborateness in detail did not gain me meaning. . . . I could not sustain it everywhere and produce the sense of spaces and distances and with them that subjective mystery of nature with which where I went I was filled.” – George Inness



George Inness, Home at Montclair, 1892

Comparing the highlighted details in this painting with those from the Bierstadt painting, the execution of the details couldn't be more different. One is all suggestion, the other all description. This difference isn't a result of artistic skill but of intent. Both kinds of details work perfectly in their respective paintings. **How many details you use, how many you include, and how you paint them will depend on the message of your painting. What is your intent?**



Details in a Mood Painting

Details in a mood painting have little explanatory value. In fact, in some Tonalist paintings, the details are so loosely painted it's impossible to tell what object they represent. So why include details in a mood painting? For their *visual* function. They provide scale, hints of the identity of objects, indications of space, pathways for the eye, and the appearance of finish.



George Inness, Home of the Heron, 1894

In her book, *George Inness and the Visionary Landscape*, author Adrienne Bell identifies this abstract mark as a figure. Is it? Is it important to either the painting or its message that we know?



The Human Figure in a Mood Painting



No object in a painting attracts the eye more strongly than the human figure. When we see a figure, we invariably spin stories around it. Do the clothes reveal a time period and an occupation? Is the person working or resting? The larger and the more detailed the figure, the more likely it will become the focus of a story painting. It's for this reason the Tonalists kept figures small and loosely painted or avoided them entirely.

In David Cleveland's, *A History of American Tonalist 1880-1920*, nearly all of the featured images are of landscapes with the majority of those devoid of any figure. In traditional Tonalists paintings, the primary subject is never the figure.



Details from Albert Bierstadt, *The Rocky Mountains, Lander's Peak* and George Inness, *Spring Blossoms, Montclair*

Details by J. Francis Murphy



J. Francis Murphy, *Autumn Afternoon*. c1900



In this painting, there is a clear hierarchy of detail. The only sharp, descriptive details are scattered across the foreground and in the prominent tree on the left. Scratches and brush marks hint at the various textures in the ground of grasses, flowers, foliage, and stumps of slender trees—all rendered suggestively and loosely. (left)

As for the sky details, it's not clear in this photograph but in the original painting the texture in the sky is created not by brushstrokes of varying values of pigment but by the heavily impasto ground on which it was painted. Other than a gradient the sky is nearly featureless.

This is a typical Tonalist painting: the mood is created by the value structure, limited color palette, soft shapes, and quiet composition. The details are much less important in this work than they are in the painting by Bierstadt.

Details by John Twachtman



John Twachtman, *Winter Harmony*. c1890–1900



On first seeing this painting, your reaction may be, “Details? *What* details?!” What few details exist in this painting are suggestive, soft, and so close to each other in value as to be barely perceptible.

Twachtman places nearly all the detail in a band running from the bottom left to the top right, leading the eye into the painting and to the focal area slightly above center. He adds just enough hints of tree limbs—sharp edged, thin lines (left)—to create some variety in the shapes while indicating trees. Had his details been darker in value or more clearly defined, it would have ruined the hazy atmosphere and the overall mood of the painting.

Details by Mary Cassatt

Although this is a figure and a story painting, I include it for two reasons: on a personal note, I adore it; I consider it one of the greatest paintings of the figure, a masterpiece. Secondly, and more importantly, I include it because it's a perfect example of using a mixture of loose and suggestive details with others more tightly rendered, to create variety, interest, and to direct the eye.



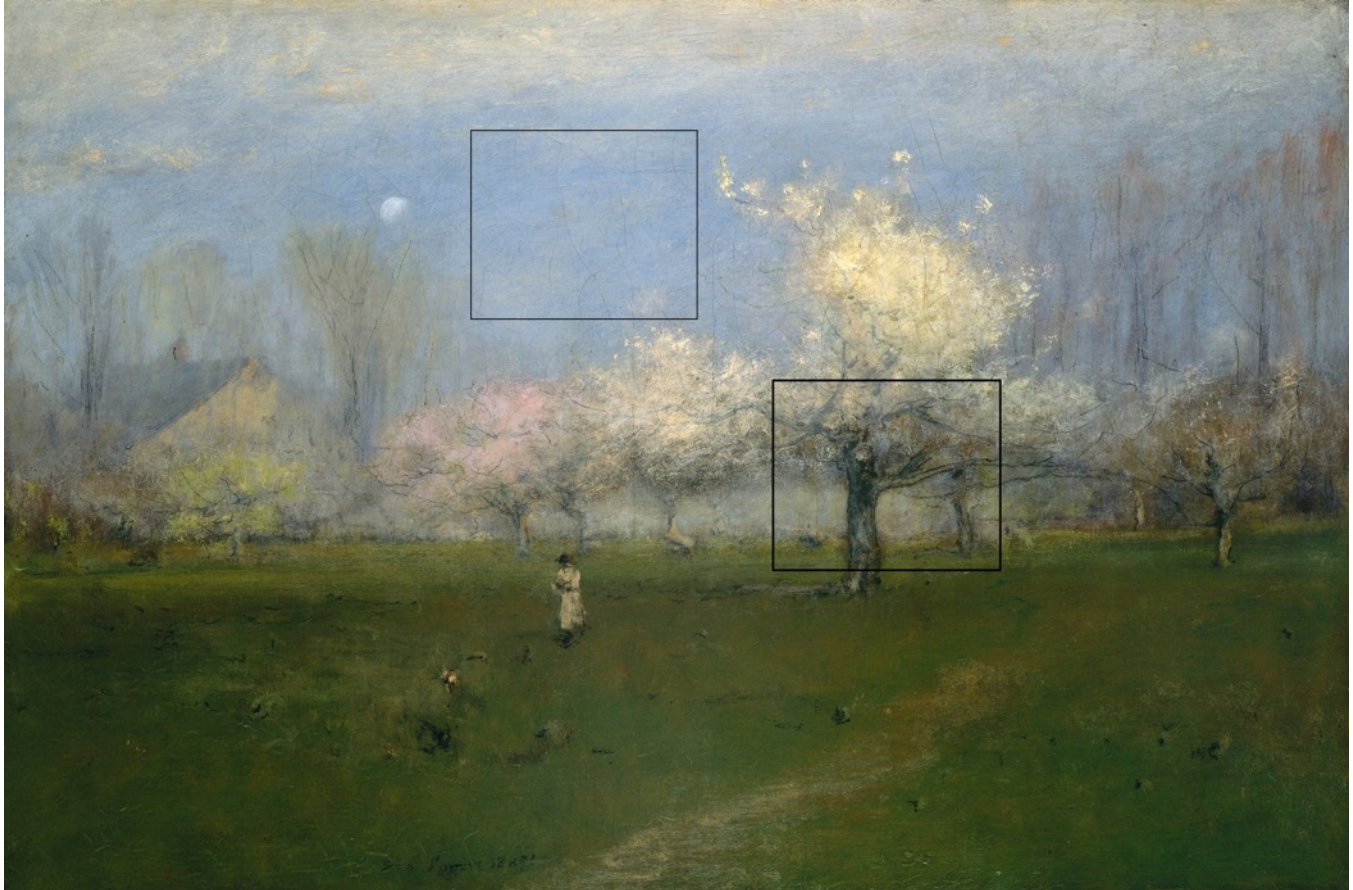
Mary Cassatt, *The Child's Bath*, 1893 [slightly cropped]

In the cropped images below, notice how the details in the face, although simple, are carefully and accurately rendered while in the background the decorative pattern on the bureau is so loosely suggested as to be almost pure abstraction. This is a wonderful example of not only deciding which details to use and where to place them, but how to render individual details differently in order to direct the eye to more or less important areas in a painting. Throughout the entire painting, there is a hierarchy of detail: the details in the faces and hands in the painting are the most tightly rendered, followed by a slightly looser handling of the clothing, tub, and pitcher, and ending with the rough, loosely suggested details in the background and floor. This isn't just copying what is seen. It's an intelligent, subtle, and brilliant use of details to ensure the painting works.

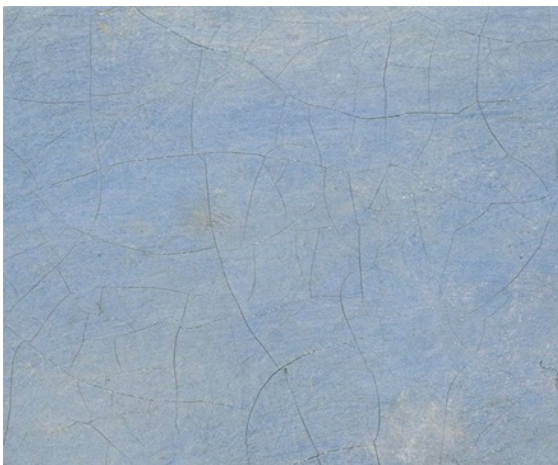


Going Beyond Details: Balancing Complexity and Simplicity

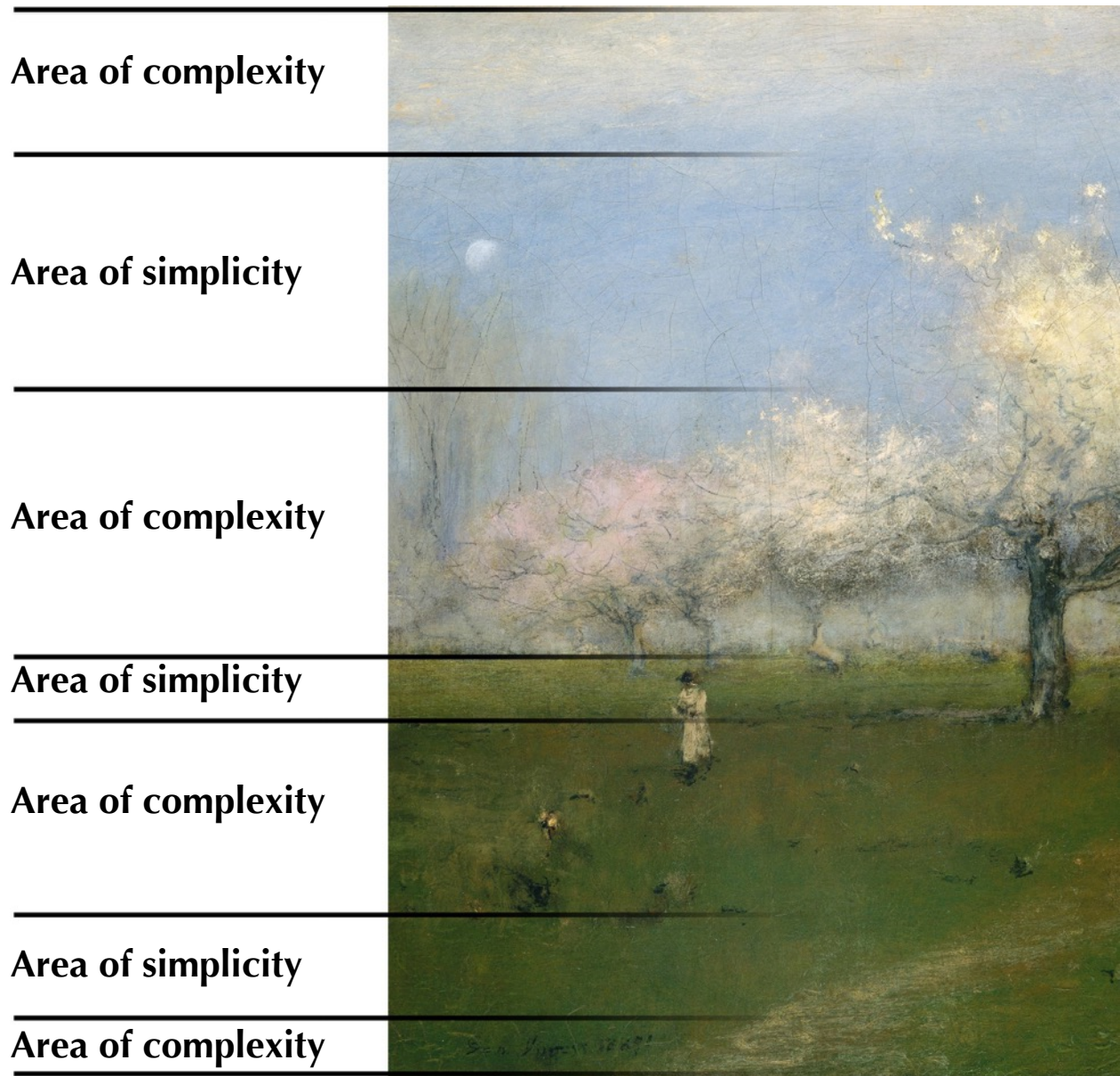
In grappling with the what, why, and how of details, I often find it helpful to think of adding details as a way of creating notes of visual complexity. Of course, to make the complexity work, it's necessary to balance it with areas of simplicity. Here's an example from Inness:



The two selections below are visual opposites: one is a flat, uniform and featureless area of color while the other is a mixture of values, colors, textures, lines, etc. One attracts and energizes the eye. The other provides the eye with a still, tranquil space of rest. Each strengthens the other.



In many of his paintings, Inness alternates horizontal bands of complexity with bands of simplicity, moving from the foreground to the background. In the example below, the most complex area is appropriately at the focal point of the figure and tree, while the complexity at the bottom and top of the painting is more limited and subtle, barely distinguishable from the adjacent areas of simplicity. If you wish to draw more attention to an area, don't assume you need to add more details to it. Consider instead surrounding that area of complexity with an area of simplicity.



When balancing complexity and simplicity in a painting, it's not necessary to do it in horizontal bands. In their paintings on the previous pages, notice how Twachtman and Cassatt juxtaposed and balanced areas of complexity and simplicity and how they used the contrast to draw the eye. Every great painting is an orchestration of variety and contrasts, including details. Happy painting!

Seven Suggestions for Handling Details in a Mood Painting (or any genre of painting.)

1. Before touching a brush, decide what you want to say with your painting. Identify those details that will be essential in conveying your message, in directing the eye, and then be willing to sacrifice all others if needed.
2. If there are two or more areas of attractive details that you simply must paint, then create two or more paintings. Don't try to say everything in one painting.
3. How a painting appears isn't necessarily a result of how it was painted. You can paint a loose, spontaneously-appearing detail with great deliberation and focus. If it doesn't work the first time, scrape it off and try again. (This was Sargent's method.)
4. The more important the details in an area, the more important the areas adjacent to it should be relatively simple. Don't dilute the impact of important details by placing numerous, superfluous details adjacent to them.
5. As the painting nears completion, every additional detail will either help it or hurt it. Slow down. After every brushstroke, ask yourself, "Is this detail necessary?"
6. Work on your drawing skills. Simplicity isn't simple and painting a detail loosely and suggestively is never as easy as it appears. (See suggestion #3)
7. No brushstroke is final; no brushstroke is sacred. It's only fitting to end with some sage advice given by the master of Tonalist detail, our friend George, who evidently didn't get it right the first time, either. . . (a fact that gives me great comfort!)

**"I paint in all these details
in order that I may know
how to paint them out."**

– George Inness

Words of Wisdom

An expert is a man who has made all the mistakes which can be made in a very narrow field.

– Niels Bohr, physicist

I've been absolutely terrified every moment of my life—and I've never let it keep me from doing a single thing I wanted to do.

– Georgia O'Keeffe

Coming up next in the Jan-Feb 2021 Newsletter:

Let's start the years with a house cleaning. It'll be a hodgepodge of topics from a long list of suggestions from readers.

–*Happy Painting!*



Depending on the state of the pandemic, the workshops below may change at short notice. Please refer to my [website](#) for the most current information. Stay well!

2020 Workshops



Dec. 7–11 Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts - ONLINE

www.pafa.org ~ **Waiting List only**

An online workshop for intermediate to advanced painters. We'll work with a single photo, using it to create paintings with different compositions, value keys, and color temperatures.



2021 Workshops

Feb 27–Mar. 6 Casa de los Artistas artworkshopvacations.com

Due to the pandemic, the workshop at the Casa on the Pacific coast of Mexico is now being moved online. More details to follow.



May 23–29 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 value keys, color keys, times of day, and seasons. This workshop is for intermediate to advanced painters.



August 20–22 Falmouth Art Center www.falmouthart.org

This three-day workshop will focus on 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. Open to painters of all levels of experience.