

# John MacDonald

September–October 2019



## WORKSHOPS

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



## Get Sketching!

*“Drawing is the root of everything, and the time spent on that is actually all profit.”*

~ Vincent Van Gogh

Having the ability to draw won't guarantee we'll create great paintings but an inability to draw can seriously hamper it. It's a vital part of every artist's skill set, one that takes practice. We can never spend too much time improving our drawing skills.

There's an advantage to being able to draw a tree that looks like a tree, but being able to render the individual objects in the landscape is only one of the benefits of drawing well. For landscape painters, creating tonal sketches and making them part of our painting process can lead to stronger, more successful work.

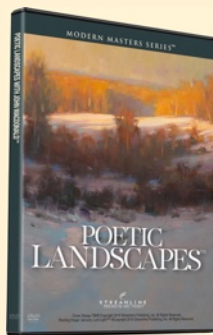
In this newsletter, we'll look at the importance of adding tonal sketching to our painting process, whether working outside en plein air or in the studio from photos. Let's get drawing!



## **NEW Liliedahl Video** now available!

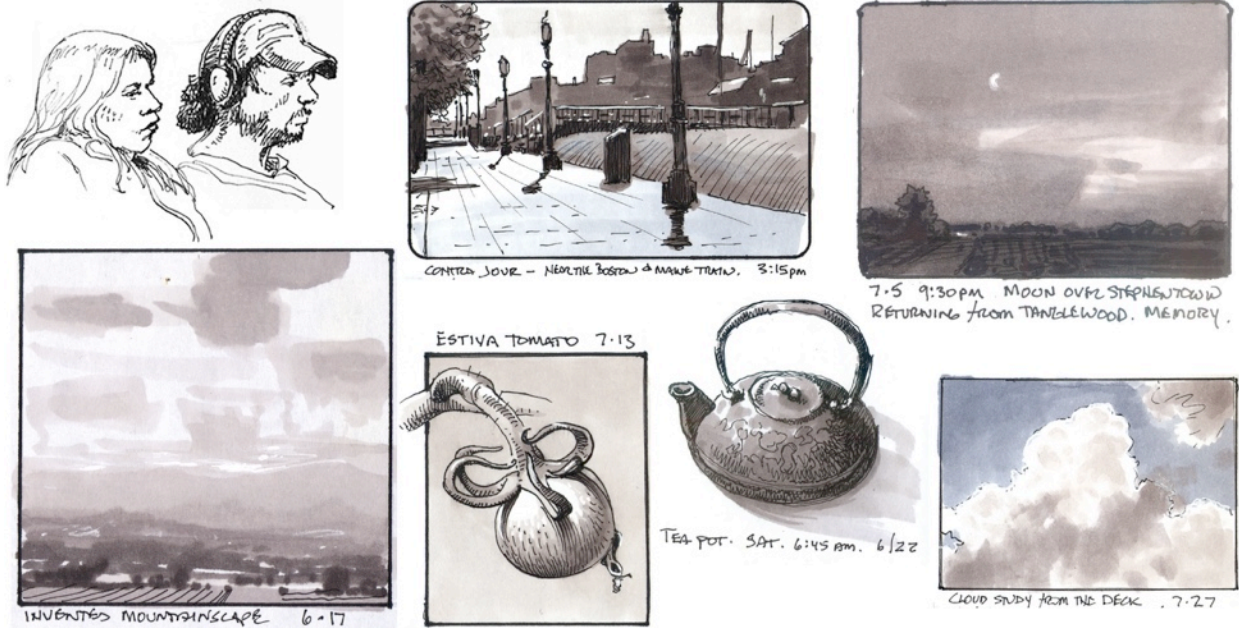
Like the first video (click [here](#)), I concentrate on the basic elements of the painting process but then move on to a demo of a winter sunset.

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



## Drawing anything, anytime, anywhere.

Make drawing a daily habit. Sketch household items, urban and interior scenes, objects from nature, from photos, from memory, or from your imagination. Developing an ability to draw anything will improve your ability to draw specific objects within a landscape.



## The Plein Air Tonal Sketch

When we find a scene that inspires us, we're often eager to get painting. But *before* we paint, there are advantages to drawing one or more tonal studies. They allow us to:

- explore different compositions
- identify the essentials of the scene
- warm up our eyes
- evaluate more thoughtfully if the scene is truly worth painting!
- establish the value structure
- locate a focal point or area
- quiet our mind



**Tonal sketches can consist of a few simple shapes and values or a fully developed drawing with textures and tightly rendered details.**





## Drawing versus Composing

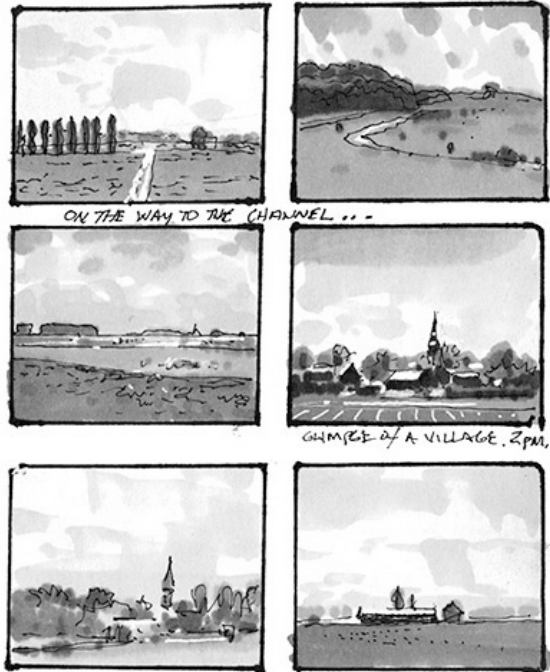
When sketching, we often begin with what interests us but then we allow the drawing to fade to the edges. This is fine practice for drawing but not for composing. To strengthen your compositional skills, draw a rectangular border that will frame the sketch. If drawing studies for a painting, the border of the sketch should match the proportion of the canvas.



When sketching within a border, we must take into account the edges of the frame, just as we would when painting. Now, we're not only drawing, we're *composing*. The sketches become explorations of values *and* composition—valuable information indeed!



Whether the study is a fully developed drawing (left) or little more than a few simple shapes of value (below), **always draw within a rectangular frame.**



## Materials and Techniques

There are as many kinds of drawing materials and techniques as there are painting media and styles. Explore them all and find what works best for you. Lately, I've been using toned markers with pen and toned paper with pencil and white charcoal. I tend to use the former for plein air tonal sketches prior to painting and the later for more developed drawings when on sketching excursions. Below, I've listed several that I've used over the last several decades, with their advantages and disadvantages.

*(For those with a drawing phobia or who wish to explore a variety of materials and techniques, I recommend visiting [sketchbookskool.com](http://sketchbookskool.com). Their online courses are superb.)*

### PENCIL 9H to 8B pencils.

**Pros:** Very portable, quick and easy.  
Nearly a full value range.

**Cons:** Difficult to get deep blacks, smudging of final drawing.



SUNSET 8/24



### PEN and INK

Crow quill dip pens, ball point pens, fine tipped markers, Macro pens, etc.

**Pros:** Portable, full tonal range, hard edges, strong graphic quality, smudge-proof.

**Cons:** Building up dark values takes time.

### Watercolor (B&W or color)

From simple monochromatic washes to a full color palette, using opaque or transparent watercolors.

**Pros:** Full range of values with the option of adding color. Relatively quick.

**Cons:** Requires a full set of painting materials: water, paper, paints, etc.

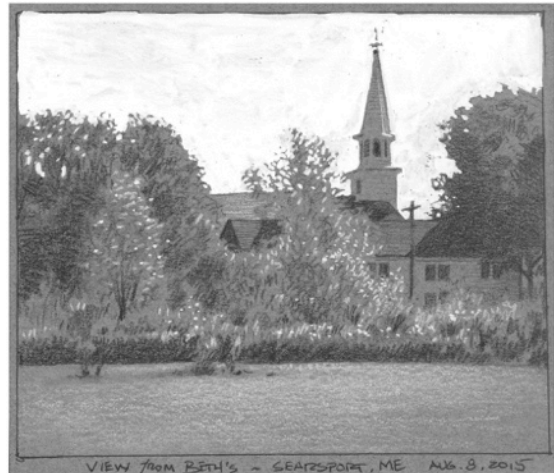




## Toned Paper (with pencil and white charcoal)

**Pros:** Like pencils, portable and quick. The mid value tone of the paper helps in judging other values. Good for nuanced light.

**Cons:** Like pencils, prone to smudging.



(In two of the three sketches above, the simple white sky was painted with white gouache.)

### **Materials:**

Pencils: Staedtler, *Mars Lumograph* 8B

White Charcoal pencils: General's #558

Kneaded eraser

Sharpener: M&R 602

Replacement blades and screwdriver.

View-Catcher viewfinder

Blending sticks.

Paper: Canson #431 Steel Gray.

(Created for pastels, I draw on the smooth side—the “wrong” side.)

Art Bin plastic box

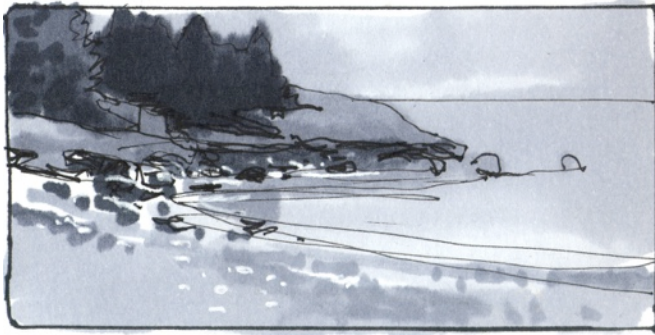
(White gouache - optional)



## Gray Markers (with or without pen lines)

**Pros:** Quick application of values, water and smudge proof. Deep blacks. Portable.

**Cons:** Values limited to specific tones. Somewhat quick to dry out. A bit expensive.



**Materials:** **Black pens** for borders, interior shapes, and details: Sakura Micron #01 and #005. **White pen** for highlights: Sakura Gelly Roll white #080. **White pencil** for overall lightening: Koh-I-Noor Progresso White pencil. **Grayscale markers:** Prismacolor Premier Cool Gray (108, 110, 112, 114, 116) and French Gray (155, 157, 159, 161, 163) with black (211).



I keep two sets of markers: a small set for creating tonal studies during plein air painting (below left) that comprises five cool gray markers and black, a Gelly Roll pen, and spare markers. For the studio and sketching excursions I use a larger set with Micron pens, warm and cool markers (five each), white Gelly Roll pens, a pencil, and spare markers.



plein air sketching set



larger set for general sketching



**SKETCHBOOKS** - The media you use will largely determine the kind of paper needed. Try various types of papers and brands of sketchbooks. I now use Crescent "RENDER" sketchbooks exclusively. The paper is medium weight and completely opaque with a slight tooth. It's perfect for markers, pen and ink, and pencil.



## Plein Air Tonal Studies: Setting up and Execution

Below is the process I use for creating a tonal sketch on location before painting. As you incorporate sketching into your plein air painting process, experiment with various materials and different ways of setting it up so you can sketch quickly and comfortably.



Setting up the tripod and Strada, the closed Strada provides a surface for the sketchbook.



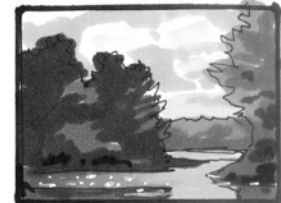
The markers and other sketching materials are held in a pocket of the painting apron.



I use a View Catcher viewfinder to draw the frame for the sketch in the same proportion as the canvas that will be used for painting.



These three sketches took no more than a few minutes each.



After deciding which sketch to use, the painting is blocked in **using the sketch as reference**, barely paying any attention to the actual landscape. The reason to do a tonal study is to establish the composition and value structure. If it works, use the sketch! Ignore the landscape as you block in the essential shapes and values. Then put the sketch aside, turn your attention to the landscape, and begin to develop the painting. . .

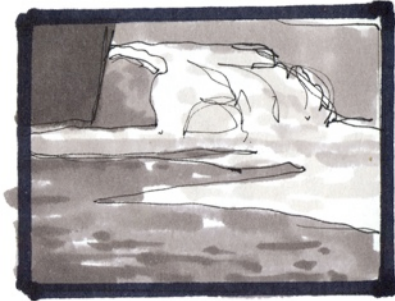
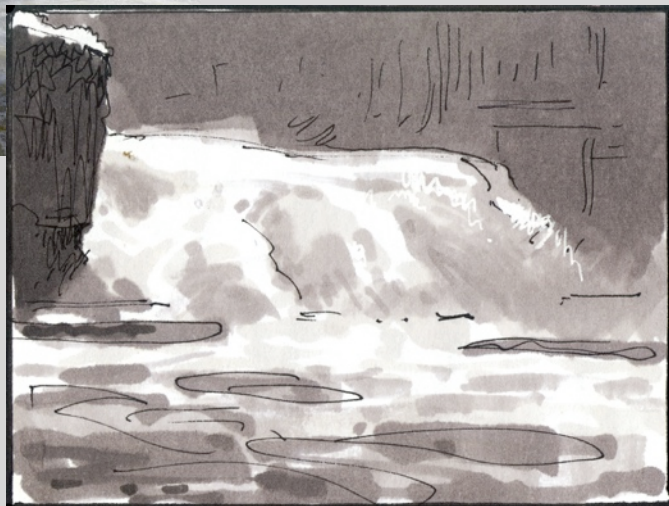


## Tonal Studies: Part of the painting process

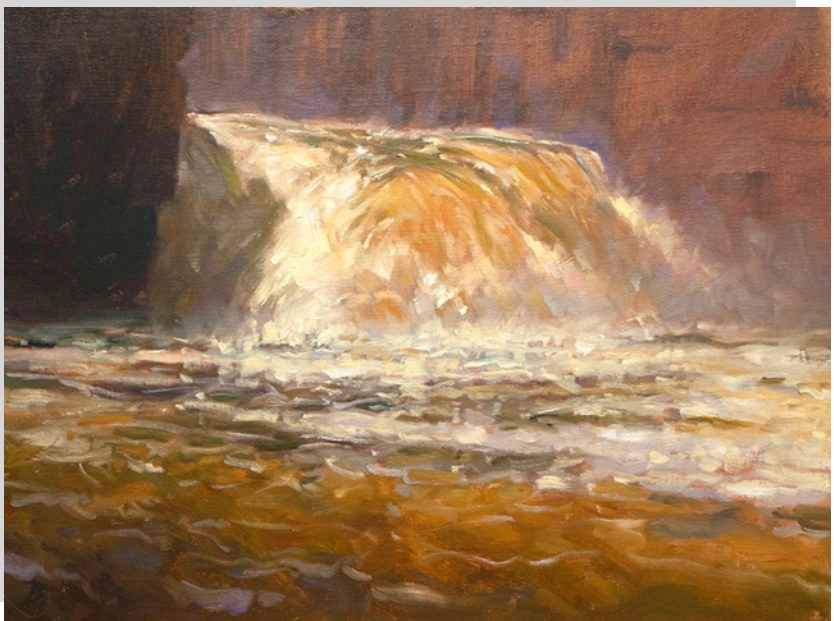
Incorporating tonal sketching into my routine plein air painting process, I've found that I approach painting more intelligently, focusing first on the simple shapes and values of the scene—the essentials—and not being distracted by attractive color relationships nor by the myriad details in the scene. It focuses my concentration and prepares me for painting.



After doing one or more small thumbnails, consider drawing a larger, more detailed tonal sketch. The more time spent looking at and drawing the scene, the more likely the final painting will succeed.



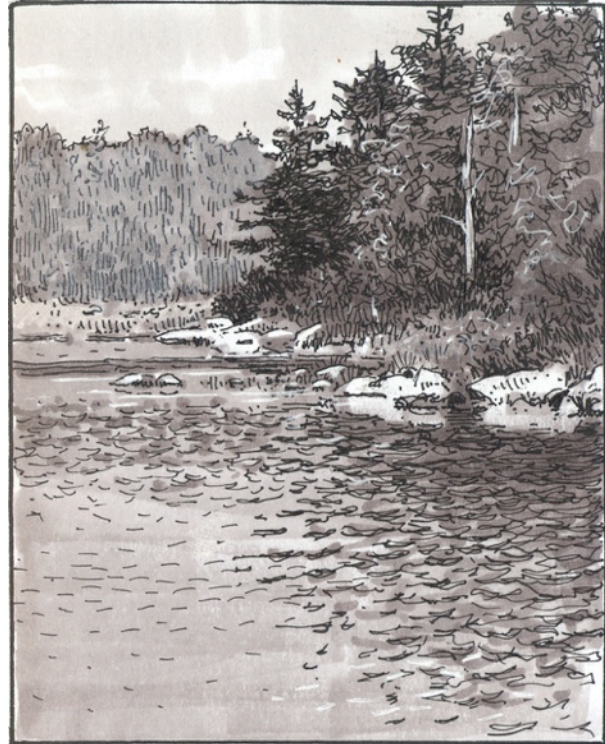
Drawing a few small tonal sketches requires so little time or effort, it should be a part of every painter's routine.



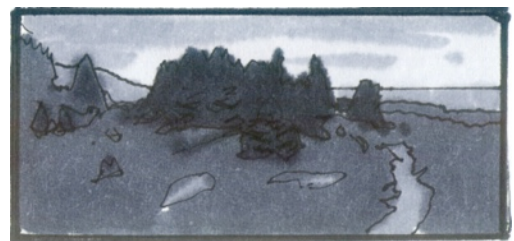
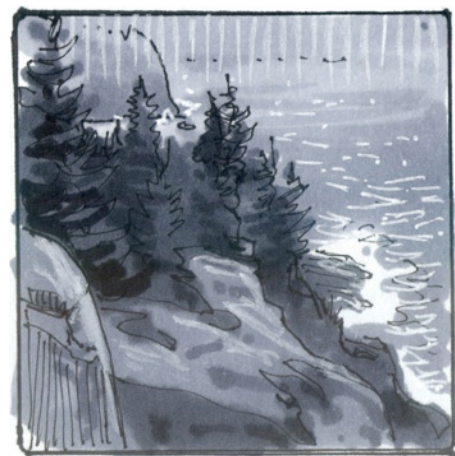
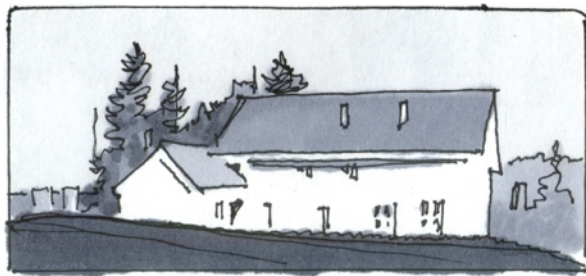
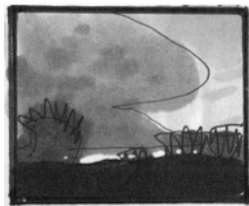
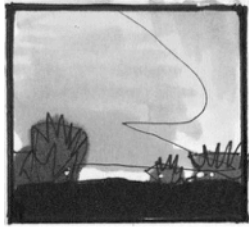


## Tonal Studies ~ Examples

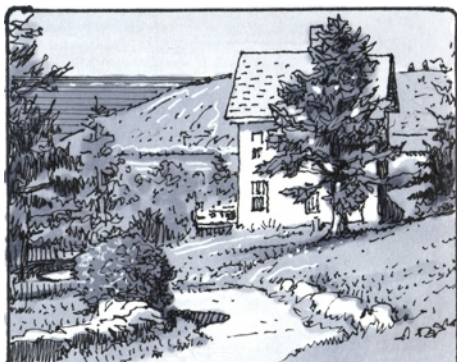
The following three pages of sketches are taken from my current sketchbook. Some were used as tonal studies for paintings, others created for their own sake. They vary in size, complexity, and technique. All the sketches are shown actual size. I hope they inspire you to sketch plein air and to incorporate the practice into your normal painting process.











The sketches were drawn around Williamstown, Mass. and during trips to Lowell, Mass.; Port Clyde, Maine; and Monhegan island.



## 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)

You have reached the pinnacle of success  
as soon as you become uninterested  
in money, compliments, or publicity.

~ Thomas Wolfe, novelist (1900-1938)

Renown means nothing  
Once we're dead and gone.  
Simple-hearted contentment  
Is all that matters.

~ T'ao Ch'ien, poet (365?–427)

### COMING UP . . .

Honestly, I have no idea what I'll do for the next newsletter. The month of November will be spent in busy preparation for shooting another video for Streamline Publications, focusing on values. When finished, I'll begin work on the last newsletter of 2019. If you have any ideas, let me know!

–Happy Painting!



## 2020 Workshops

**Feb 29–Mar. 6 Casa de los Artistas** [artworkshopvacations.com](http://artworkshopvacations.com)

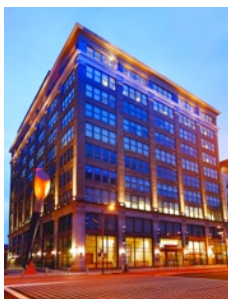
In a small village on the beautiful Pacific coast of Mexico, a week of focused plein air painting paired with a varied, fun-filled, and fascinating exposure to the delicious food, friendly people, and spectacular scenery of Mexico.



**April 15–18 Landgrove Inn; Landgrove, Vermont**

[www.landgroveinn.com](http://www.landgroveinn.com)

A studio workshop, we will be painting from photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference while staying at a cozy Vermont Inn—wonderful food, atmosphere and a large, well-lit studio building.



**June 1–5 PAFA: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts;**

**Philadelphia, PA** [www.pafa.org](http://www.pafa.org)

A studio 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. This workshop will take you from simply copying a photograph to creating a painting.



**September 11–13 Village Arts of Putney; Putney, VT**

[villageartsofputney.fineaw.com](http://villageartsofputney.fineaw.com)

A three-day, plein air workshop amidst the beauty of rural Vermont.