

# John MacDonald

May–June, 2020



## WORKSHOPS

### 2020

SEPTEMBER 11–13, 2020

[VILLAGE ARTS CENTER](#)

Putney, VT

NOVEMBER 11–14, 2020

[LANDGROVE INN](#)

Landgrove, VT

[Rescheduled from April]

### 2021

FEB. 27–MAR. 6, 2021

[CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS](#)

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

Plein air and Studio.

MAY 23–29, 2021

[HUDSON RIVER VALLEY  
ART WORKSHOPS](#)

Greenville, New York

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

AUGUST 20–22, 2021

[FALMOUTH ART CENTER](#)

Falmouth, Mass.

[www.falmouthart.org](http://www.falmouthart.org)

## Composition: think 2-D.

Painting is an art and a craft. As for the art, I can't teach anyone anything. The art needs to arise from your soul and I can't reach there. But as a craft, painting is very teachable. It's a process that can be broken down into steps; each can be understood and applied. Painting isn't easy but it really is rather simple. Think of running a sub-4:00 mile. What could be more simple than running four circles around a track? But to do it in under 4 minutes requires years of training and focused effort. Painting is a similar pursuit: simple but not easy. And it all begins with theory.

**We can't paint what we can't see and we can't see if we don't know what to look for.** Learning to paint begins with intellectually understanding concepts. Once grasped, we then learn to see those concepts in action in the scene or in the paintings of others. It ends with our applying what we've learned to see to our own paintings. (Actually, that's the *real* beginning of painting, but that's another story.) It's true that theory can be a problem. In the yearning to make painting easier and to avoid looking inept, we can allow theory to become a chain of rules that binds our creativity and stops our artistic growth—we become formula painters. But a it's risk we must take because, like it or not, learning to paint begins with theory, with concepts.

In my never-ending (and ultimately fruitless) attempt to understand what makes a painting *great*, I've been looking at the differences between 2-D and 3-D seeing, thinking, and painting.



## See you in [Sante Fe!](#)

*August 11–15*

The PACE convention has been rescheduled and relocated. I hope to see you there for a week of camaraderie and painting in New Mexico, an area of unparalleled beauty!

## Forget Right/Left Brain: Think 2-D/3-D brain.

We've all heard of the right brain–left brain split: the subjective and intuitive right brain versus the objective and analytical left brain. It's often, and incorrectly, assumed we artists live and work solely from our right brains. In practice, we need both. We must be able to switch effortlessly between right and left brain as we work, staying in the creative right brain while we paint and switching to our analytical and objective left brain to judge the quality of each of our painting decisions. This back and forth movement of painting and judging is a delicate dance that continues until the work is considered finished.

A less well known but equally important brain duality is that of 2-D and 3-D modes of seeing and thinking. When in 2-D mode, we see an image or scene as a series of flat, simple shapes that exist in a single plane in space, like a jigsaw puzzle lying on a table. There is no foreground or background, only left, right, up and down. When in 3-D mode, we see an image or scene in terms of the illusions of deep space, three-dimensional form, of light and atmosphere. In 3-D mode, the flat surface of the canvas becomes a transparent window through which we see a believable, representational, three-dimensional world. The ability to see and think in both modes is crucial because the painting process requires both and every great painting contains both.



Gustav Klimt. *Bauerngarten*, (detail ) 1907.



Albert Bierstadt. *Lake Tahoe*, (detail ) 1868

To illustrate the difference, consider the two paintings above. That by Klimt is pure pattern, with little if any indication of foreground or background. It's flat. On the right, Bierstadt's *Lake Tahoe* is deep space. Each painting pushes the 2-D or 3-D thinking to the extreme. Let's look at both ways of seeing and explore how we can understand and use them in our landscape painting.

## The 2-D Mode.

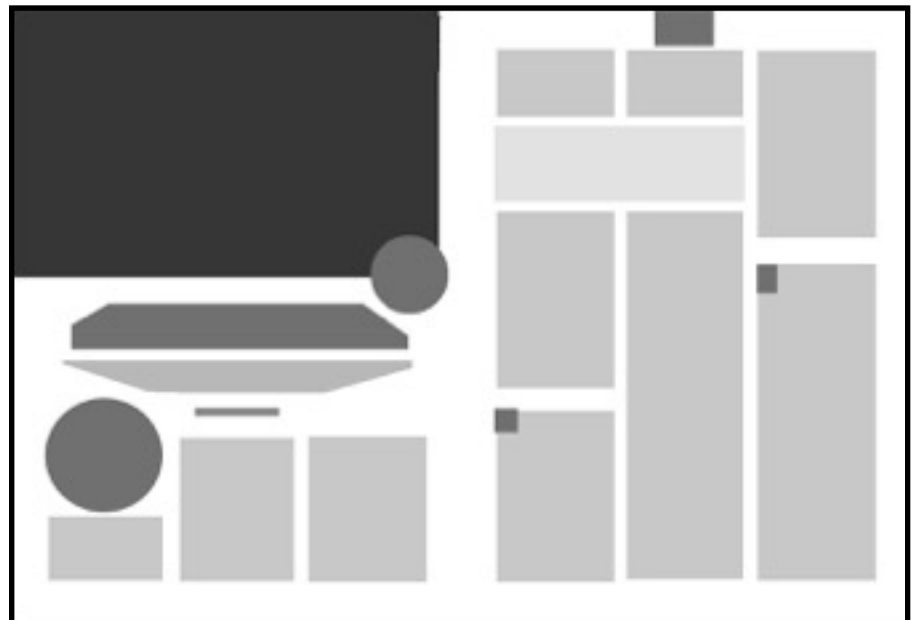
In every workshop, I've noticed that painters who've had prior experience in graphic design quickly grasp the principles of composition—even those new to painting just get it. With their background in composing layouts for publication, they're accustomed to seeing composition as an exercise in moving flat shapes within a rectangle with the aim of creating a pleasing and balanced arrangement that attracts and directs the eye. That's the very definition of composition!



A page layout consists of a variety of blocks of text, photos, headlines, pull quotes, etc. It begins with an editor, whose job is to ensure the story is well-told. The editor's focus is on the **content** of the article. It then is given to a designer.

Magazine spread © Vanity Fair 2015

When composing the page, the designer isn't concerned with the story told in the text or what is portrayed in the photographs. She is thinking strictly in terms of the shapes of the elements, their visual weight (their values), and how they're arranged within the rectangle of the page. **She ignores the content and focuses on the design.**



When composing a painting, we must do the same. We must ignore what the objects are in the landscape, look at them solely as shapes with specific values, and then arrange them as if they're flat pieces lying on the surface of our canvas. This is 2-D seeing/thinking. It's a different way of seeing the landscape but crucial to our ability to compose a painting successfully.

## The 3-D Mode.

As representational landscape painters, this is the mode we're most familiar with: creating the illusion of light and atmospheric perspective that reveals three-dimensional form in deep space. It's where we spend most of our time developing our skills. We learn how to portray local color, to soften edges to indicate atmosphere, and to use value to show light on form. In this mode, the physical surface of the canvas—the flat surface on which we move the shapes to create a composition—now becomes a transparent glass window through which we see a 3-D world.



Bierstadt used gradients, value contrasts, atmospheric perspective, scale, etc. to create the illusion of forms in deep space. Where's the surface of the painting? It's invisible! And yet the success of the entire painting depends on the 2-D composition. It lies in the background, providing the framework on which he hangs the complex illusion of his 3-D space. Both are needed to make the painting work.



The 2D/3D brain duality—that's the theory. Let's look at how to apply it to your painting.

## Fitting the 2-D/3-D Modes into your Painting Process.

Applying this to our painting is a simple, two-step process:

1. **Work in 2-D mode to establish the composition and value structure.**
2. **Shift into 3-D mode to create the illusions of space, form, and light.**

**2-D Mode:** We begin a painting by establishing the two most important components of the work: the composition and the value structure. It is much easier, more efficient, and nearly always more successful if we create the composition and value structure by completely ignoring the challenges of creating the illusion of space, light, and form. Shift into the 2-D mode and forget about 3-D! Don't make the job of composing the scene more complicated than necessary. Think solely in terms of flat shapes on a flat surface. **Think 2-D and keep it simple.**



A photo of the scene to be painted en plein air. The photo shows the content—the “story” told in objects that reveal space, form and all the 3-D attributes of the landscape. Focusing on the content and 3-D qualities of the objects at the beginning of the painting process only complicates our efforts. We must begin by seeing everything in the landscape as flat shapes of value.

**Begin by breaking down the scene into shapes.** See them as flat puzzle pieces. Identify the essential shapes and discard those that are irrelevant. If some shapes need to change to make the composition work, change them. This isn't about copying nature; it's about making a painting.



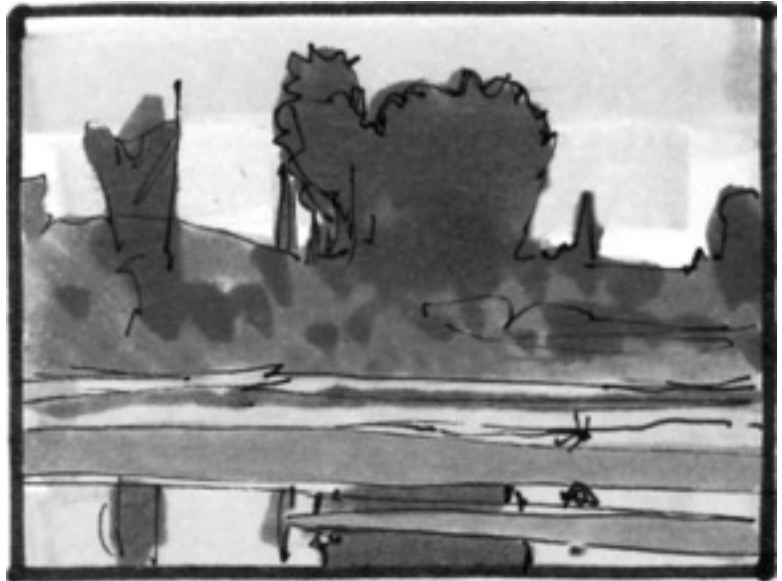
In the photo, the sheets of lily pads and their recession in space are astonishingly complex in their forms. Seeing them as a simple horizontal bands with a single value makes it much easier!

**Create tonal studies.** Composition isn't mathematics. There isn't a single correct answer but a multitude of possibilities, some successful, some not. Ignoring space and form and playing with flat shapes in a tonal sketch, we can quickly explore a variety of simple compositions. It's amazing how adequately a tiny sketch in 3 to 5 values can reveal whether or not a painting will succeed. Skipping this 2-D stage and going directly to painting, our failure rate soars. A tonal study is a 15-minute investment that ensures our hours of subsequent painting won't be for naught.



On the right is the final plein air sketch, created just prior to painting. It's small, only 2.25" by 1.75" but all that's needed to design and evaluate the composition.

Like a graphic designer, this is how we need to see the scene in order to compose it: just flat shapes that we move around, edit, and change until we have a pleasing composition that attracts and leads the eye.



A thumbnail, tonal sketch is no different than a page layout. ***It's not about things in space but about shapes within a rectangle.*** This is such a crucial concept to understand, it's worth repeating, posting on your easel, and burning into your brain:

**Composition is not dealing with things in space but with shapes within a rectangle.**

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**3-D Mode:** Having determined the composition and value structure, we're ready to paint. We move into 3-D mode and begin skillfully orchestrating values, colors, edges, and details to create believable illusions of depth, form, and light. But those are topics for future newsletters. . .

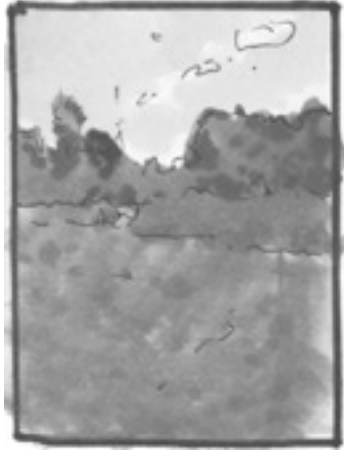
## From 2-D to 3-D: a Few Examples

Below are some recent plein air paintings. Each painting was preceded by a small tonal sketch. Notice how simple are the sketches and yet how well they provide the essential structure for the painting. It's been rightfully said that once the composition and value structure are successfully established, 80% of the work is done. From then on, it's playing with colors, edges, and details. Thinking 2-D and doing tonal sketches prior to painting is a quick way to improve the quality of your plein air paintings.



Tonal sketches do more than help determine the composition and value structure. They give us time to “warm up” our eyes, to calm our minds, and to prepare us for painting. An athlete never begins a race without warming up. Why begin a painting without warming up?





These tonal sketches are shown actual size. The final paintings were created on 9"x12" oil-primed panels.

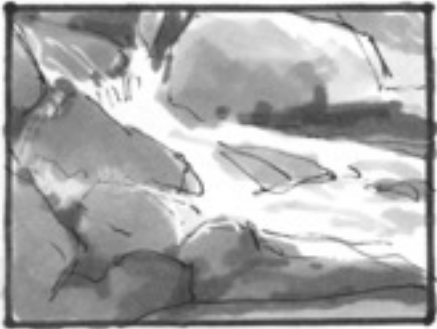




## The Challenge of the Complex Close-up

In the previous examples, all of the scenes were vistas, with large, separate value shapes that were relatively easy to identify. Painting intimate scenes—close-ups—are often more challenging. There isn't the deep space with a horizon line that conveniently divides the scene into ground and sky. The shapes in the scene are often broken up into random, scattered values.

How do we approach such a scene? Just as we would a vista: drop into 2-D mode, simplify the shapes into value masses, look for contrasts that direct the eye, and never forget while painting what is essential and what is irrelevant. Take the time to do multiple tonal sketches if necessary. When confronted with a complex scene such as these river rapids, I will not touch a brush until I'm certain of the composition and value structure. Without that guidance, I know the painting is much more likely to fail.



## Maybe it's not quite this simple. . .

For the sake of explaining the concept, I presented it as a simple, two-step process: begin with 2-D mode and move into 3-D. In practice, don't shut off the 2-D brain entirely after you begin painting. As the work progresses, it's necessary to drop into the 2-D brain occasionally to ensure that you haven't lost the value structure or the major shapes. If a painting begins to feel lifeless and overworked, it may be more than just fussy brush-work. It could be you've overly softened edges and introduced too many value contrasts within each shape, both of which will weaken the graphic quality of the composition. Repaint, blend, or scrape until you've reestablished the shapes and their value contrasts.

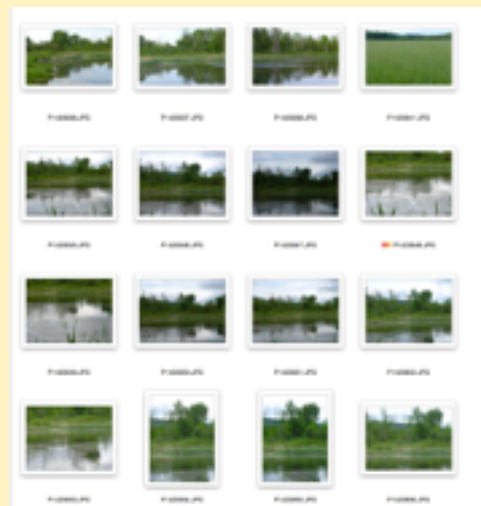
## If the sketch works, use it!



When I first began doing plein air tonal sketches prior to painting, after the sketch was finished I'd often ignore it and look only at the landscape as I began painting. Now, when beginning a painting, I ignore the landscape and look only at the sketch as I brush in with lines the major shapes of the composition and block in the values of those shapes. The problems of the composition and value structure have been solved in the tonal sketch. Why repeat the process when you begin the painting? If the sketch works, use it!

## Evaluating photos: drop into 2-D mode!

If you work from photos, you've likely experienced the frustration of trying to judge the painting potential of a folder of 100+ images. Nearly every photo software program will allow you to view photos as thumbnails the size of tonal sketches. When evaluating photos for a possible painting, view them all as thumbnails. It's much easier and quicker to judge the composition and value structure in a small, thumbnail size. If an image doesn't attract your eye in a small format, it certainly won't as a large painting.



### Finally, study the Masters!

Those of you who've suffered through the last seven years of newsletters will already be familiar with *The Swamp*, by Gustav Klimt. (I break it down completely in my very first newsletter of [March 2013](#).) It's one of my favorite landscapes, a masterful blend of 2-D decorative design and 3-D representational illusion wrapped in a magical mood of silence and tranquility.



There is also a beautiful balance of 2-D structure and 3-D representation in Sargent's mountain landscapes, Cassatt's domestic scenes of mothers and children, Inness's late landscapes, the Sistine Chapel, Monet's cathedrals and waterlilies, and Hassam's seascapes. *Every* great painting is a dynamic blending and balance of those two ways of seeing and thinking. Like Klimt, you can put greater emphasize on the 2-D qualities in your paintings or, like Bierstadt, the 3-D, but a successful painting always includes a touch of both. Use both modes to create better work.

## Words of Wisdom

In our journey as artists, there finally comes the realization that only in focusing exclusively and selfishly on our most deeply held and personal convictions do we produce work that connects us to others.

If we focus outwardly—on the market, on passing trends, on the need to impress others or garner their approval—our work will mean little to anyone.

Paint as if not a single other human being exists and you'll find your work speaking powerfully and authentically to multitudes.

— anonymous

### COMING UP . . .

I've nothing planned for the next newsletter so will consider the suggestions that have been sent in. If there's a topic you'd like me to address in a future newsletter, please let me know.

—*Happy Painting!*



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## 2020 Workshops



### 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.



### Nov. 11–14 The Landgrove Inn; Landgrove, Vermont

*(rescheduled)* [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.

## 2021 Workshops



### Feb 27–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.



### August 22–22 Falmouth Art Center [www.falmouthart.org](http://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 so them. Open to painters of all levels of experience.