

John MacDonald

May–June, 2021



WORKSHOPS

2021

AUGUST 20–22, 2021
FALMOUTH ART CENTER
Falmouth, Mass.
www.falmouthart.org

SEPTEMBER 3–6, 2021
THE LANDGROVE INN
Landgrove, VT.
www.landgroveinn.com

OCT. 9–15, 2021
MASSMOCA
**MASSACHUSETTS MUSEUM OF
CONTEMPORARY ART**
North Adams, Mass.

2022

FEB 26–MAR 5, 2022
CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS
Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico
Casa de los Artistas

Getting that *GLOW* ~ Creating Luminosity, Part I

I've been asked more than once to explain the quality of luminosity, or opalescence in a painting. I hesitated to tackle it because I wasn't clear what creates the illusion of luminosity. But it's time I make the attempt and perhaps, in the process, I'll come to a better understanding myself.

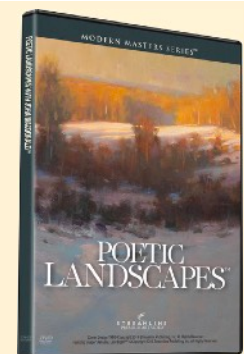
As often happens when I work on a topic, the further I dug into it the more complex it became. And when I realized there are two qualities in a painting we call *luminosity* (which are created by different means) and I began running over my 14 page limit, I knew it would require two newsletters. In this issue, we'll look at the first of the two qualities we label "*luminosity*."

I hope you find it helpful. Happy painting!



Thank you for supporting painting teachers!

I'm extremely grateful for the fact that I don't need the income from teaching to survive and can teach workshops for the love of it. But many of my fellow painters/instructors do depend on it. I know I speak for all of us when I thank those of you who have purchased videos and have attended online workshops and demonstrations. We are truly one art community when we support and help each other. *Thank you!*



Luminosity – Single Glow or Overall Shimmer?

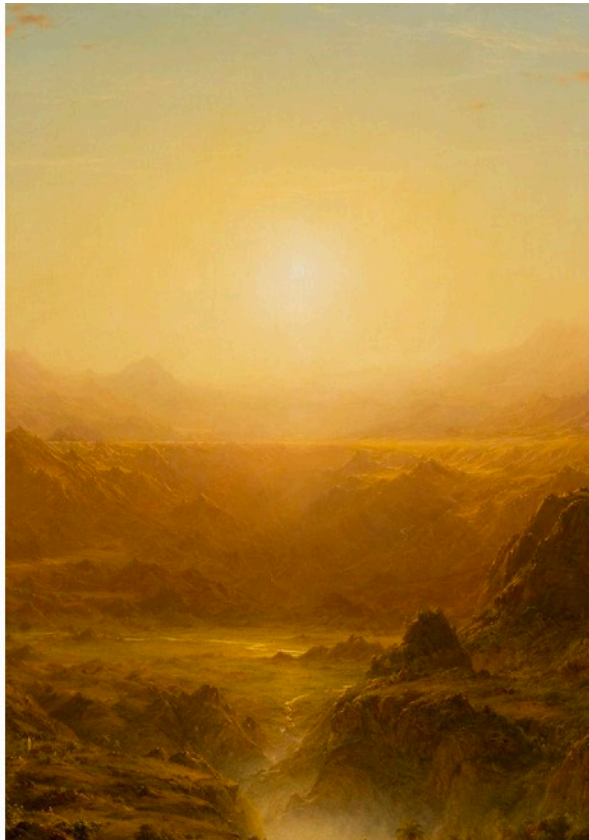
Webster's defines the word "luminous" as "radiating or reflecting light; shining; bright." In a painting, it's used to refer to the illusion of a light which glows or shimmers. But there are two different qualities we artists often labeled as *luminous* and they are created differently.

The first comes from portraying a **light source** in a painting, which can be a point source such as the sun or moon, or an area that catches the light from a source, such as a spot of sunlight on a waterfall, a wave, a tree or hill top. The light emanates from a single, defined area in the painting and bleeds out from the source, dissolving forms and creating a glow. This effect is created primarily by our using value relationships, edge contrasts, and gradients.

The second effect we tend to label *luminosity* is the illusion of an **overall light** that shimmers throughout the entire surface of a painting, whether or not it includes a light source. This was a quality traditionally called "vibration" or "opalescence." This effect is primarily dependent on how we use color contrasts. Many paintings we label "luminous" often include both.

Below are details of two paintings that display luminosity; one (left) is from the Hudson River School, painters who excelled at creating the illusion of light primarily through their manipulation of values, edges, and gradients; the second (right) is by a contemporary painter influenced by the Impressionists, who tended to use color contrasts to create luminosity in his paintings.

In this newsletter, we'll look at the first of the two qualities: **the luminosity of a light source.**



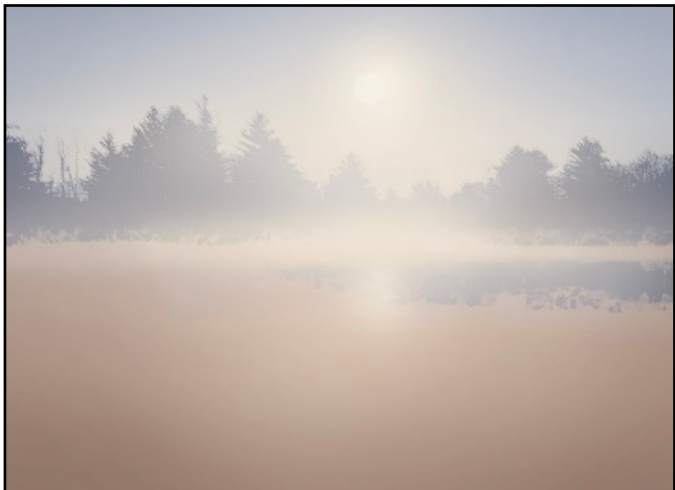
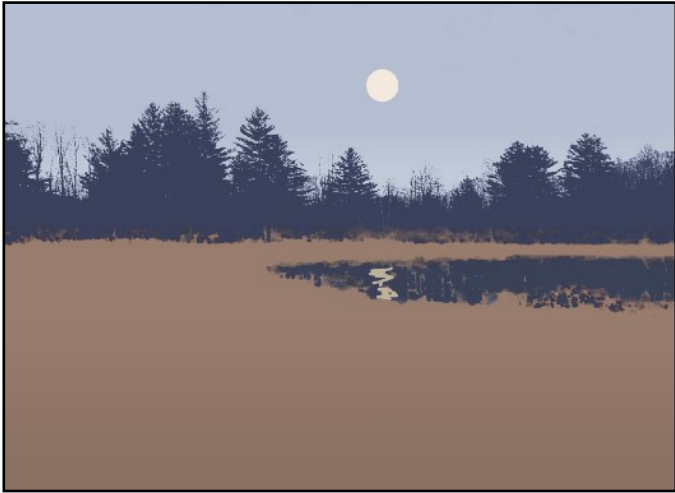
Frederic Church, *The Andes of Ecuador* (detail)



Brian Sweetland, *Dorset Snow* (detail)

Painting a Light Source ~ Values, Gradients, Edges

The successful illusion of a glowing light source uses three elements: **values**, **gradients**, and **edges**. All three work together in a painting—they're interrelated and inseparable—but for the sake of demonstration, let's look at each separately, beginning with values.



VALUE RELATIONSHIPS

Value relationships are determined by local color, the light source and the atmosphere. The stronger the light source and the more dense the air, the more the value relationships will be compressed and shifted towards the light end of the value scale as they near the light source. The light spreads outward from its source and is scattered by the atmosphere. In dense air, forms can dissolve into the scattered light and become simple soft, flat shapes, even disappearing entirely if the light is bright enough.

These three simple illustrations all work insofar as they create a believable landscape. In the top image (reminiscent of woodcut), the forms are uniformly hard edged with single, flat values. It works because the value relationships work but it doesn't capture any sense of the luminosity of light.

In the bottom two images, I made only three changes: created gradients in the sky, trees, and meadow in which their values became lighter as they approached the light; softened the edges of forms as they neared the light; and changed the value relationships by bringing all three foundation values closer together in the area of the light.

Notice that as the value gradients and soft edges are pushed to the extreme, there is not only an increase in the illusion of luminosity but also a greater sense of density in the atmosphere and of depth in space.

In the painting below, Sanford Gifford, a Hudson River School painter and practitioner of Luminism, gives us a perfect example of how to use value relationships (coupled with gradients, and edge contrasts) to create a convincing illusion of light, atmosphere and deep space.



Sanford Robinson Gifford, *A Gorge in the Mountains*

GRADIENTS

A gradient is a change in value, hue, and/or saturation (chroma) across a large shape or area of a painting. It's impossible to portray a glowing light source without using gradients. Let's look at how they help create a glowing light, beginning with this painting by Albert Bierstadt.



Albert Bierstadt, *Lake Tahoe* • [slightly cropped image]



Sampled values moving from the light source (left) to areas distant from the light (right)

In the B&W section of the painting above, samples were taken of the lights and darks in the sky and mountains from within the white bars. The values change as they approach the light source but do their *relationships*—the differences between adjacent lights and darks? Often, the value relationships become closer and more compressed as they approach a light source. And as mentioned above, a brilliant light source will usually reduce a distant form to a single value as it nears the light source, eliminating any value difference between lights and darks within the form. Even silhouetted foreground objects, which are usually much darker than distant forms, will lighten as they near a light source, especially at their edges. A painting that successfully portrays glowing light will feature gradients within nearly every large shape and form.



Frederic Church, *The Andes of Ecuador*

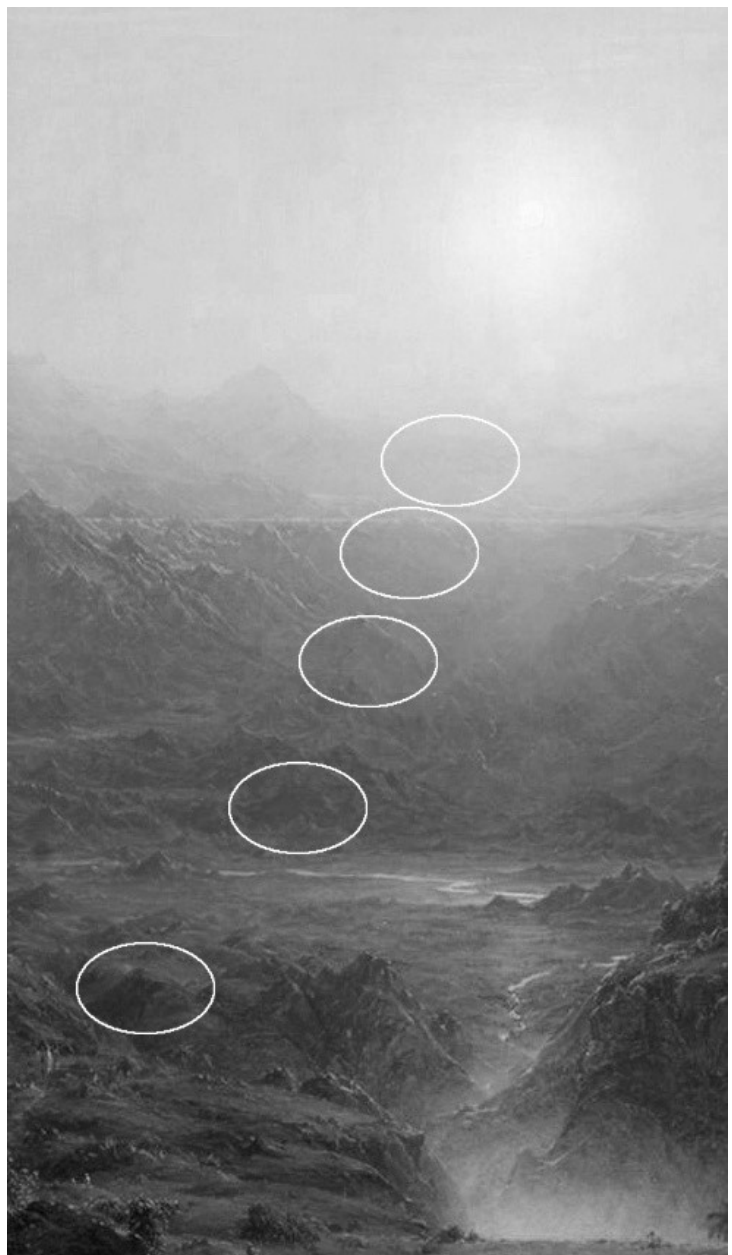
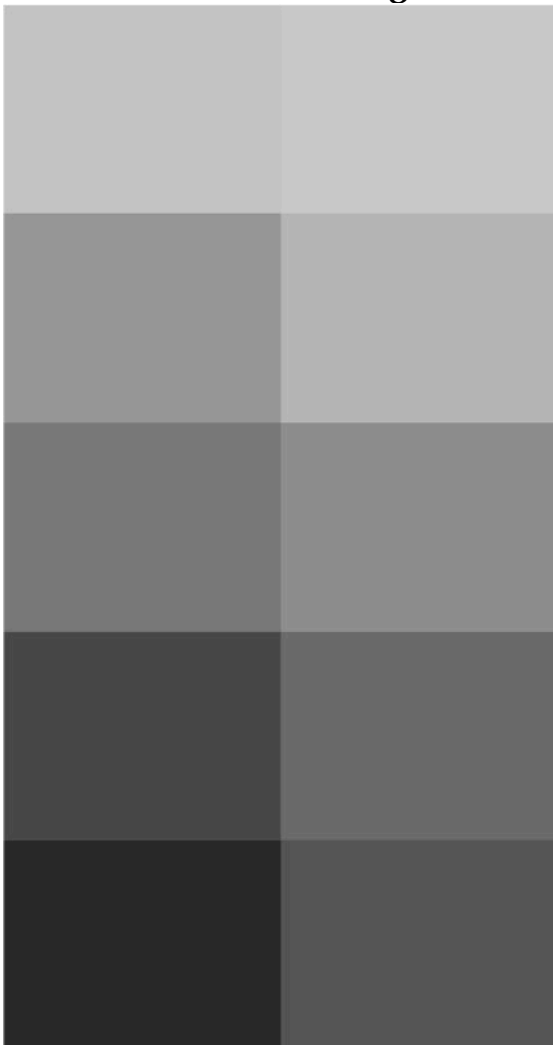
In this example by Frederic Church, it's even more obvious how all of the values slowly lighten as they approach the light source—a single, radial value gradient that runs from the sides to the center.

Below left are sampled chips of the lights and darks in the land forms. The darks change more than the lights with both converging towards a single value at the horizon, a value that bleeds into and merges with the sky.

Sampled values from the hills as the hills approach the light:

Darks

Lights



EDGES

Light softens edges. The stronger the light and the more dense the atmosphere, the softer will appear the edges of forms as they near a light source. **Edges can be *physically* softened by blending the paint or *visually* softened by bringing the adjacent values together.** Regardless of which technique is used (and it's often better to use a combination of both) the edges of forms that are of equal distance in space must soften as they approach a light source. Even the edges of a dark, silhouetted form in the foreground will soften, especially the edges that overlap the light source. In a strong light, all edges will dissolve entirely into the light.



A soft edge created by blending paint.



An edge softened by manipulating values.

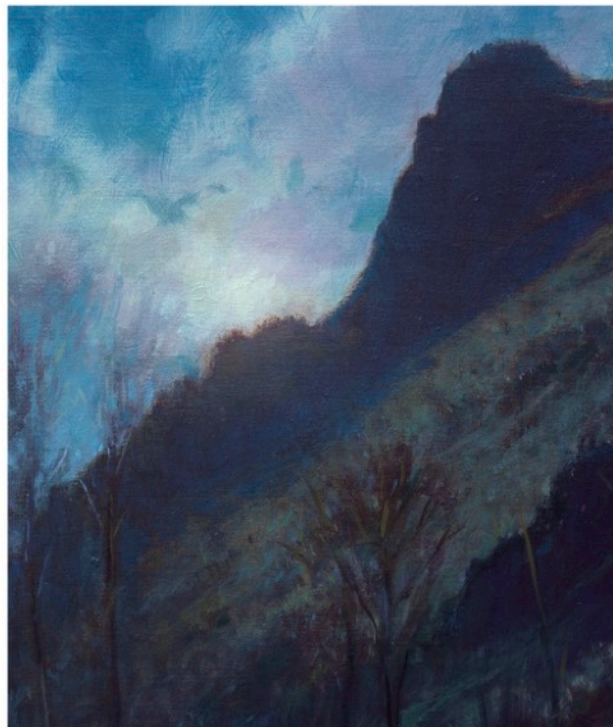
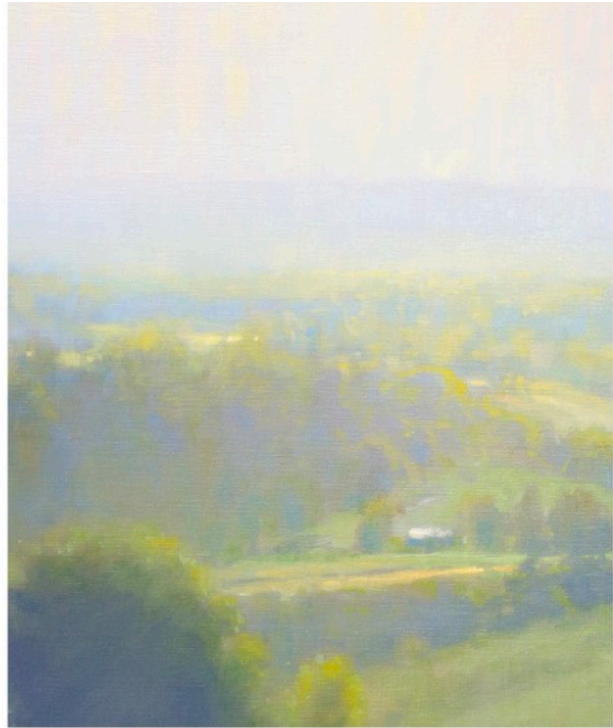


Below, Church used blended edges and edges with close values to create the affect of a spot of light on the water, with edges completely disappearing at the lightest area. *All* the values in this detail are relatively close. It's filled with light!



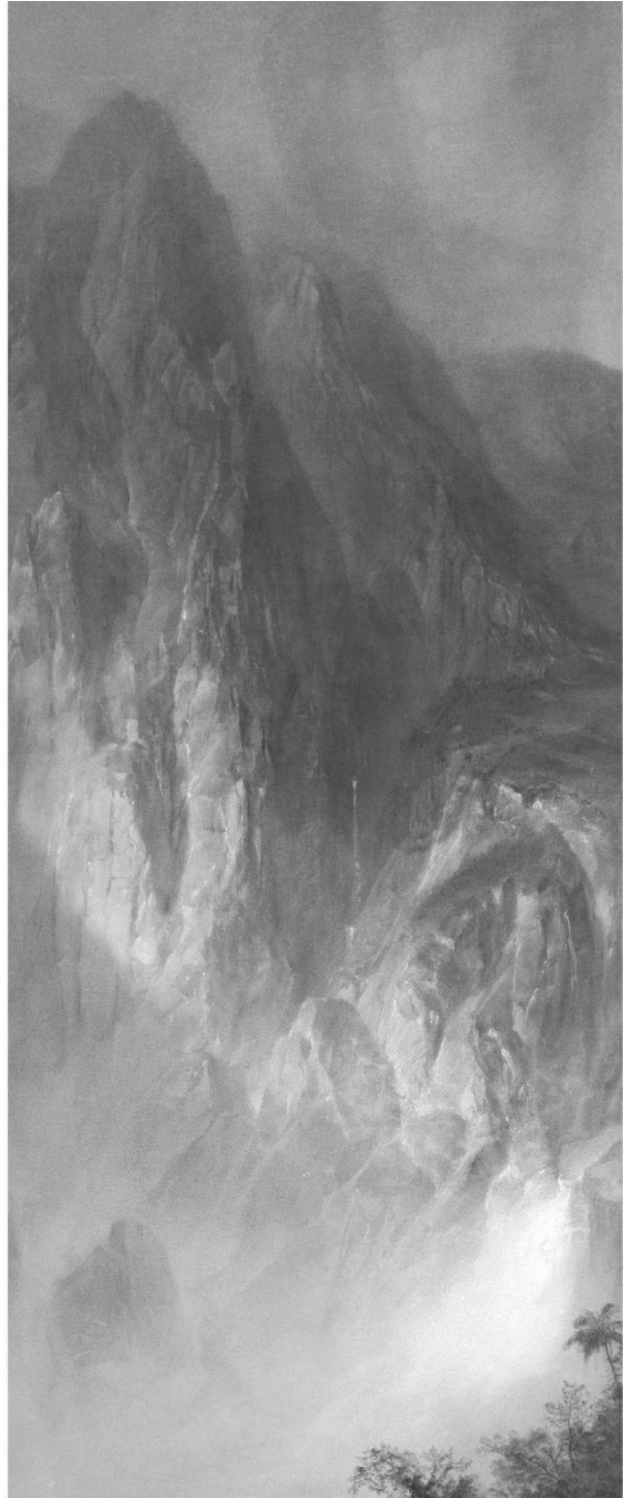
Frederic Church, *Rainy Season in the Tropics* (above, and detail below)

In these four details (Church's top left and three of mine), notice how the edges of forms soften as they approach the light, especially those of forms that overlap the source. Even in the example of a moonlit nocturne (bottom right), the edges of silhouetted forms soften. In these small reproductions it's difficult to distinguish between blended edges and those edges softened by close values but in each case, both techniques were used.



Value Relationships, Edge Contrasts, and Gradients

And finally, a larger detail from Church's, *Rainy Season in the Tropics*, an example in which all three elements are used masterfully. Study this. Examine how he uses values, edges, and gradients to create not only believable forms—the rocky hills and rushing water—but how they recede into a deep, atmospheric space filled a glowing light that falls across the entire scene.



Color in Point-Source Luminosity

When painting the illusion of a glowing light source, color may not be as important as the other three painting elements but it's not irrelevant. Color, with its ability to contrast color *temperatures*, can be used to enhance the illusion of luminosity. As forms approach the light source, color gradients in hue and saturation, and contrasts in temperature, all add to the illusion.

Gradients in Hue

Most light sources have color, whether the gold of a setting sun or the bluish light of a full moon. The colors of the forms in the landscape will often take on the color of the light, especially as they approach its source. The color of light, like its value, will bleed into adjacent forms. In the detail of my painting below, the orange of the setting sun overwhelms all adjacent colors.



Gradients in Saturation

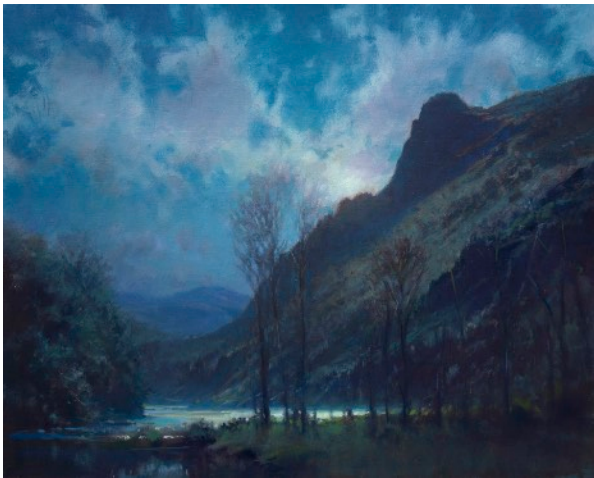
There is often not only a change in hue but also in saturation as forms near a light source. In this detail of Hassam's painting, *Boston Common at Twilight*, the warm but muted hues of the background trees increase dramatically in saturation as they approach and overlap the light.



COLOR TEMPERATURE

While forms tend to take on the color of the light as they near its source, they don't become monochromatic. In fact, to reduce colors to a single hue is to throw away the most important attribute of color—temperature contrast. So while the overall color of forms will take on the color of the light, there are still subtle temperature contrasts of warm and cool within them.

The painting below has an overall cool cast (it's in a cool color key) but there are still hues which appear warm when contrasted to the more prevalent and saturated cool hues. And where the background hill overlaps the light source (the moon), I edged the hill with a slightly more saturated warm hue, letting it contrast with the surrounding cool hues and enhancing the glow.



In Monet's painting below, the colors become slightly warmer at they approach the area of the background snowy field, but Monet still uses a variety of hues that appear cool in comparison to the overall warmth, creating a shimmer of warm and cools hues of similar values.



Claude Monet, *The Magpie Snow Effect*

Color contrast is the reason some paintings seem filled with an overall luminosity even when the light source is absent, which is the subject of the next newsletter. Until then, happy painting!

And lastly, a few examples of mine.

Painting light requires only four elements: values, colors, edges, and gradients. Work to understand the concepts, study how they operate in nature, and then put them in your paintings.



Words of Wisdom

Nothing is more dangerous than an idea
when it's the only one you have

– **Émile Chartier**

There's only the trying. The rest is not our business.

– **T. S. Elliot**

Choose only one master–nature.

– **Rembrandt**

*Coming up in
the next Newsletter:*

Part II of Luminosity–the overall shimmer of a painting. Until then, let me know if you've any questions or suggestions.

–*Happy Painting!*



As of May 1, 2021, all of the below workshops are expected to be conducted in person at the venue, depending on the state of the pandemic. Any changes will be posted on my [website](#).

2021–2022 Workshops



Aug. 20–22 Falmouth Art Center, Mass. 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.



**Oct 6–12 Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art;
North Adams, Massachusetts**

A studio workshop for advanced painters. 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 large, private studio. Please contact me directly if interested.



Sept. 3–6 The Landgrove Inn; Landgrove, Vermont

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, intimate atmosphere and working in a large, well-lit studio building.



Feb. 26–Mar. 5 Casa de los Artistas, Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

artworkshopvacations.com

This will be my sixth trip to this venue. The studio is perfect, the food delicious, and the scenery exquisite. It's a week of serious plein air and studio painting paired with a varied and fun-filled exposure to the delicious food, kind people, and deep culture of Mexico.