

John MacDonald

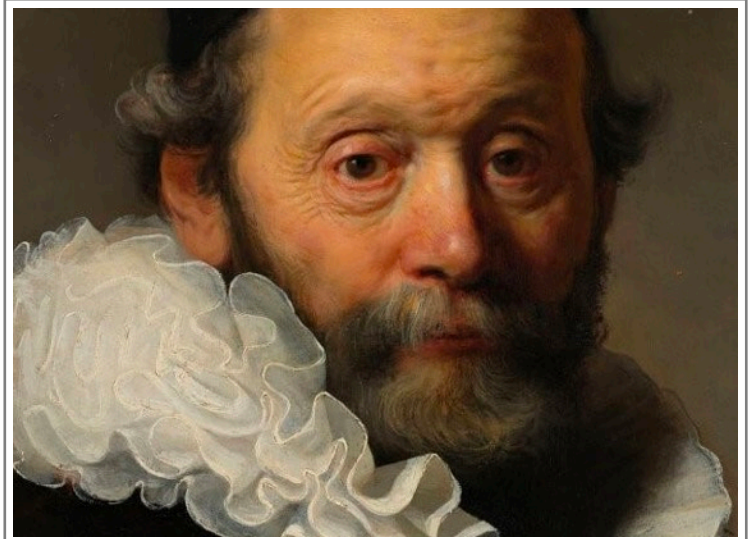
March–April, 2023



That Glazed Look

Working with Transparent and Opaque Glazes

A glaze is traditionally defined as a thin, transparent layer of color applied over a dried underpainting in which its color, and the colors of any previous layers of glazing, are allowed to show through. The technique of glazing has existed for centuries and its methods of application, the mediums and brushes used have evolved. Today, different artists advocate using different techniques and materials. Trying to summarize, much less describe in depth, each method of glazing, from the traditional to the new, is far beyond my expertise or desire. In this newsletter I'll describe the two specific ways I work with glazes. They're not the only ways to use glazes but they give me the effect I want in a painting. There are countless other methods and materials for glazing. If you find the technique beneficial to your paintings, explore them all.



American Tonalist Society Show

Salmagundi Club, New York • April 28–May 7



The biennial show of the American Tonalist Society opens in New York on April 28, featuring 67 paintings of the top 30 North American artists working in the Tonalist style. The opening weekend will also feature demos by [Ken Salaz](#) and [Dennis Sheehan](#) as well as a presentation by Adrienne Bell, the foremost authority on the work of George Inness. For more information about the show and events, visit the ATS website:

<https://www.americantonalistsociety.com/>

Transparent Glazes, Traditional Method

Transparent glazes are used primarily to create or change color. They can be applied to a small area of a painting or over an entire image to create an overall tone. Glazing with transparent pigments can be used to change color temperature, darken value relationships, shift saturation/chroma, or mute specific colors (by adding a glaze of a complementary color).

The traditional method of using glazes begins with a grisaille – a monochromatic, opaque underpainting. Multiple layers of transparent glazes are then applied to create color, each glaze comprising a single hue. The colors in the finished painting are created by the optical mixing of all transparent layers rather than the physical mixing of pigments into a single, opaque layer. The grisaille establishes the value structure, forms, and details in the painting while each succeeding layer of glaze provides color. Most of the painting process involves glazing, one layer upon another. This method requires patience, thorough technical knowledge, and a clearly defined plan. (None of which, I confess, are my strengths nor interests as a painter.)

When well done, it can result in astonishingly luminous color and a nearly photographic realism with a glasslike, perfectly flat surface.



In the unfinished painting by Maxfield Parrish (below left), it's clear how methodical and controlled were his applications of glazes. On the right, a finished work of Parrish that shows the beautiful color and luminosity that can result when done with skillful glazing.

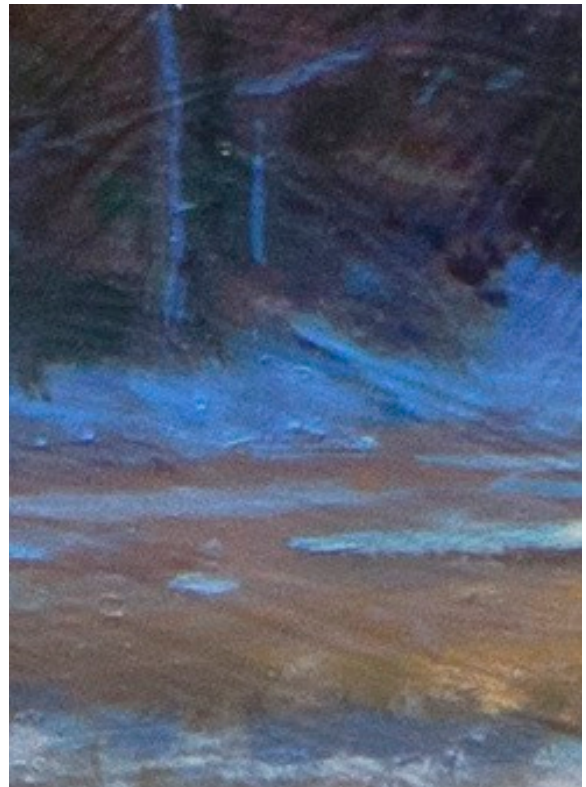


Transparent Glazes Today

An alternative method of applying a transparent glaze is to use it to create a desired effect in the end stages as the painting. Most contemporary artists, myself included, use glazing in this fashion. It's a secondary, not primary way of painting. Some paintings require it, some don't.



In the nearly completed painting above, the snow line beneath the trees needed to be darker and more intensely blue. Applying an opaque mixture would have produced the correct value but using a transparent glaze of Prussian blue and a touch of Dioxazine Purple created a blue of the right value but with a higher intensity of saturation.



CONSIDERATIONS when using transparent glazes:

- A layer of transparent glaze will almost always darken the area to which it is applied. Adding a very small amount of white may be necessary to adjust values but be cautious when adding white. The more white, the less transparent the glaze.
- Because a color mixed optically by two or more transparent layers is always more saturated (higher in chroma) than the same color mixed physically as a single opaque layer, using glazes is ideal for creating highly saturated color mixtures, especially in the lightest values where the addition of white would make the resulting color chalky, or in the darkest darks. Glazing can be used to create dark shadows that glow with color.
- Using a transparent layer of glaze of a grayed, muted color, rarely works well.
- When painting highlights, transparent glazes applied over white are perfect for adding subtle color to snow, sunlight in the sky, etc., while preserving saturation.
- A transparent glaze can be applied to a roughly painted surface and then wiped or scraped off to accentuate the texture in the brush or knife work.
- Transparent glazes are perfect for creating gradients with subtle value shifts and or smooth changes in color.

Opaque Glazes

The term *opaque glaze* seems like a contradiction in terms. If there is a specific art term for it, I'm unaware of it. It's not **scumbling**. Scumbling is the application of a thin, sparse layer of dry paint (little to no medium or solvent), to a painting in which the underlying surface is allowed to show through. Scumbling is used to create similar effects and is applied in a similar manner but the appearance is quite different. There's no mistaking the liquid quality of an opaque glaze.

The opaque (or slightly translucent) glaze is wiped or brushed onto a painting and then removed by brush, knife, or wiping to allow as much of the underpainting to show through as desired. Opaque glazes are used often to adjust values while creating an overall color tone.



In the sky in this painting by George Inness "New Jersey Landscape" [Clark Museum], a light muted, opaque glaze was painted over a darker underpainting. He controlled values and suggested forms of trees by allowing the dark to show through by scraping and wiping away the opaque layer. In some places (below), he indicated tree limbs and twigs by simply drawing into the wet paint with the end of his brush, revealing the dark beneath. It's a very effective technique for showing subtle textures and shifts in value.



CONSIDERATIONS when using opaque / semi-opaque glazes:

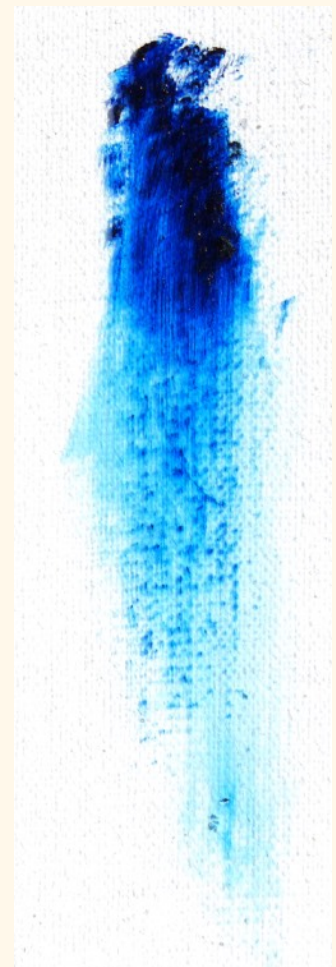
- The point of using an opaque glaze is to allow some of the underpainting to show through. If the coverage is to be totally and completely opaque, don't bother using a glaze – simply paint over the image with a standard opaque mixture of pigments.
- When working with a high value opaque glaze, the large amount of white in the glaze will often create colors that appear chalky. If that occurs, after the opaque glaze dries apply a colored *transparent* glaze to bring back saturation in the color.
- Generally, an opaque glaze should be no darker than 50% on the value scale. A very dark opaque glaze is indistinguishable from an opaque application of pigment.
- A light, opaque glaze is ideal for raising the overall value key of an area in a painting.
- An opaque glaze can be used to reduce value contrasts between the secondary values in an area by mixing a glaze that lies between the lightest and the darkest secondary values.
- Opaque glazes are wonderful for softening the edges of forms in a dry painting, when blending the pigments is no longer an option.

Transparent vs. Opaque Pigments.

When mixing glazes, it's important to determine if a pigment is transparent or opaque. In a perfect world, paint manufacturers would indicate the transparency or opacity of each of their pigments on the tubes. Of the brands I mostly use—Winsor & Newton and Old Holland—neither indicates whether a pigment is transparent or opaque. So how do we know? Most manufacturers and retail outlets list the information on their website. Or look up the PMS number from the tube on *The Color of Art Pigment Database* (http://www.artiscreation.com/Color_of_Art.html). It's also possible to use a home test. With a palette knife, scrape a small portion of the pigment down a white canvas. If it looks like a stain on the canvas and its saturation remains intense, it's likely transparent. But if the pigment completely covers the white of the canvas, even in a thin layer, it's opaque.

If using transparent glazes, all pigments should be transparent. For opaque glazes, if the most prominent pigment is opaque, some transparent pigments may be used to adjust the hue.

My current palette consists of seven pigments: White (50/50 titanium & zinc), Cadmium Yellow Light hue (a homemade mixture of Hansa and Indian Yellow), Prussian Blue, Permanent Alizarin Crimson, Dioxazine Purple, Raw Umber, and Paynes Grey. The Raw Umber is completely opaque. Paynes Grey and the white have a touch of translucency. The remaining four pigments are transparent and work beautifully in transparent glazes.



The Medium

This medium was originally based on a formula found in an online posting by Don Jusko. It can be used for retouching, glazing, or as a final varnish. (As a varnish, it's not as durable as those mediums which omit the wax and include damar varnish, yet it does provide some protection.)

Ingredients:

2 parts linseed oil

1/2 part stand oil*

1/2 part Dorlands Wax*

1 tablespoon Cobalt or Japan drier. (For a 16 oz. or 473 ml jar)

*(Reducing the amount of wax and slightly increasing the amount of stand oil will result in a more glossy surface. With less wax, the medium will be little less viscous.)

Mixing

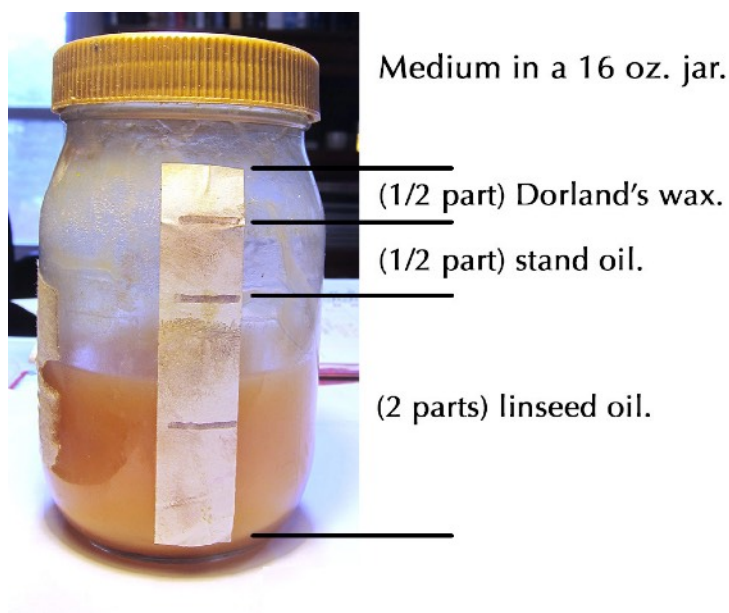
Place a strip of masking tape up the side of a standard 16 oz jar, such as a clean salsa or peanut butter jar. Mark 1" increments on the tape. (See *photo below.*) Fill the jar with 2" of linseed oil, 1/2" of stand oil, and 1/2" of Dorland's Wax. With the lid on the jar, gently heat. (A Mr. Coffee mug warmer works perfectly.) When the wax has completely melted, shake the jar vigorously for about 15 seconds, then add the Cobalt drier. Immediately cap it and shake it again thoroughly. Do NOT add the drier before the heating process. It's toxic and will give off fumes.

When the mixture has cooled, the consistency will be that of soft, room temperature butter. When applied, it immediately becomes a semi-liquid, with the viscosity of a syrup. The Cobalt drier darkens the medium but, when applied in a thin layer, it will not noticeably darken the painting. Because of the toxicity of the drier, wear gloves when applying to the painting.

Right is a half-empty jar of the medium with tape marked in 1" increments, allowing for easy mixing.

Previously, I used a medium with less drier and in which the oil comprised a 50/50 mixture of linseed and safflower oil. To speed drying time I now mix it without the safflower oil and increase the amount of Cobalt drier. It's usually dry within two or three days.

When stored, if the medium develops a semi-dry skin on its surface, simply reheat the jar and gently shake it. The congealed medium will settle to the bottom of the jar.



Using the medium for glazing.

This medium works well with either transparent or opaque glazes.

TRANSPARENT GLAZING. There are two ways to apply transparent glazes:

1. For glazing a small area of the canvas, apply a liberal amount of the medium (free of any pigment) over the area to be glazed with a paper towel or cloth. Using a clean paper towel or cloth, gently wipe off the excess so only a very thin, even layer of the medium remains on the canvas. It should glisten on the surface but not run. Using a brush, apply a very small amount of a transparent pigment directly into the medium on the canvas. If the resulting color is too strong, simply removed it with the paper towel that was used to wipe off the excess medium. If more is needed, apply more pigment. The medium will remain workable for several hours.

2. For applying a color (or a gradient involving one or more colors) to the entire painting or a large area of the painting, first mix the transparent color(s) into the medium on the palette and then apply it to the surface with a cloth or brush, removing it where needed or applying more if necessary. (In the demo below, I mix the glaze on the palette rather than directly on the canvas.)

In neither case should the medium run down the canvas. If it does, there is too much of it on the surface and it will need to be wiped off. Keep the layer of medium and pigment thin.

OPAQUE GLAZING

With a pile of the medium on the palette (the amount depending on the surface area that will need covering), mix the pigments into the medium, adjusting the amount of pigment to determine the desired opacity. If you know beforehand that you'll want much of the underpainting to show through, add more medium than pigment. If you wish for a more opaque layer, use more pigment than medium. By pre-mixing on the palette, the opacity and color of the glaze is easier to achieve than adjusting them on the fly on the surface of the painting.

Apply the opaque glaze liberally to the canvas. I often completely cover the underlying painting. With a knife, brush, or rag, begin removing the glaze to adjust the extent to which the underlying painting should show through. If too much is removed, simply reapply some glaze and begin again.

Glazing Mediums

A quick Google search for glazing mediums results in a long and varied list. Some artists advocate using pure linseed oil, poppyseed oil, or walnut oil. Pure oils work well and are perfectly adequate as a glazing medium when used in very thin layers and allowing for complete drying between application. The drawback to any pure oil is its slow drying time. I prefer a drying time measured in days, not weeks, which is why I use the mixture described above. By keeping the layer thin, it's usually dry within two or three days.

If you purchase a commercial medium, ensure is specifically labeled for glazing. Gamblin's alkyd medium and Solvent-Free Gel medium can be used for glazing. Michael Harding, Winsor and Newton, and other manufactures offer mediums specifically created for glazing. The ingredients in the medium are less important that its proper application.

DEMO: The Transparent Glaze - Spot

As previously mentioned, there are two ways to use transparent glazes: to make specific changes in a small, selected area or to create an overall tone to large areas, or even the entire image. It should be applied as a thin layer. In no case should the medium run down the canvas. The thinner the layer of medium and pigment, the more quickly it will dry.



The painting above was the result of several sessions. After the initial block in (using opaque mixtures of pigments), a layer of deep burnt orange was glazed on the horizon. I liked the effect but the dark of the warm tones on the horizon made the value of the snow appear too light. To balance the snow with the sky, it needed a darker and more saturated blue in the mid ground, below the dark trees and vegetation. Darkening the snow in the mid ground would also create a gradient of slightly lighter foreground to darker background, enhancing the illusion of receding space from foreground to mid ground.

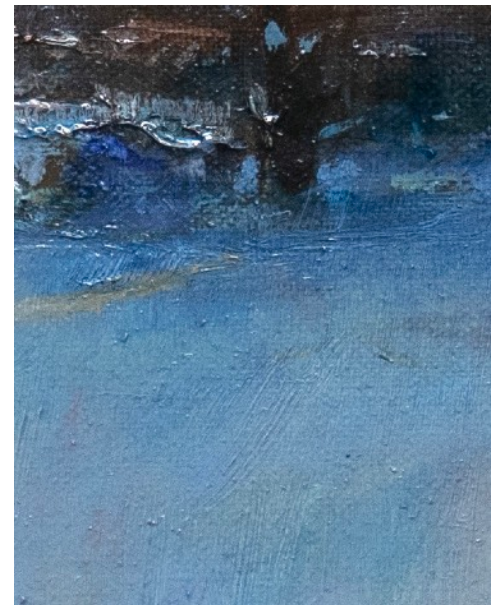
The size of the canvas and area to be glazed will determine how much medium to use. In this 12" x 16" painting, little medium was needed. A small amount was placed on the pallet (the honey colored pile) and a mixture of Prussian Blue and Dioxazine Purple was mixed into the medium. The value of the glaze is easily adjusted by adding more pigment or medium. The more pigment added, the darker will be the glaze.





The glaze is then applied with a soft brush, in this case a Robert Simmons Titanium brush with synthetic, soft bristles. (With large paintings, a cloth rag is often easier to use.) Apply more of the glaze than is likely to be needed. Because the underlying surface of the painting is dry, the glaze can be easily wiped or scraped off.

If a uniform tint is needed, carefully brush or wipe the canvas taking care to keep the value consistent. If a gradient is needed, begin with a fully loaded brush where the glaze is to be the darkest and brush down the canvas, allowing the brush to be slowly depleted of glaze.



The detail above shows how a dark glaze applied over a lighter area of the painting will pool in the low areas of the underlying brushstrokes, accentuating them.



In the final painting (left) the glaze was used to darken the snow and increase the saturation of the blue beneath the dark forms of the landscape.

DEMO: The Transparent Glaze - Overall

This monochromatic painting (below left) was created for an annual show at the Salmagundi Club. A few months later, I scumbled a few colors over the painting as part of a workshop demo (below right). Here, the existing colors and values are finally adjusted using transparent glazes.



Beginning with the ground, a dark glaze of primarily Prussian Blue was applied in a gradient, with the darkest areas at the tree line and fading into the foreground. It dramatically shifted the color temperature of the foreground from warm to cool. A very thin glaze of a yellow ochre hue (Dioxazine + Yellow) was brushed over the sky. A few notes of opaque deep yellow in the sky and opaque bluish highlights in the snow were added and the painting was nearly finished.



DEMO: The Opaque Glaze



This painting (left) was blocked in quickly, using a photo and a tonal sketch as reference. The simplicity of the composition and values worked relatively well but I was unhappy with the values and lack of atmosphere. There was too much value contrast and too equal saturation in the colors. The hard edges at the horizon destroyed the illusion of a dense, form-dissolving atmosphere. It seemed to be an ideal candidate for an overall opaque glazing.

The advantage of using a high value key glaze is that it allows us to use a large amount of white, which creates enough opacity to permit the use of transparent pigments for the color. In this case, I created three opaque glazes: the lightest and warmest for the sky, a slightly darker, bluish glaze for the mid ground, and a darker, more purple-gray glaze for the foreground. All were pre-mixed with their value and color being adjusted on the palette.

The painting after the initial application of the three glazes. These glazes are clearly opaque, which is evident by how easily they hide the darkest areas in the painting.

At this point in the process there's no need to get fussy – cover the entire painting if you wish. It's easy to change and adjust the amount of glaze by wiping and scraping. If too much glaze is removed, simply reapply more and begin again.

In the traditional method of glazing, it's crucial to plan ahead and have a very clear idea of what the finished painting will look like. I enjoy using opaque glazes for their unpredictability. I often am unsure about where the painting is going. Mistakes occur that often enhance the painting or change my intention. For me, it's a joy making dramatic changes to a painting using opaque glazes. The results are often pleasantly surprising.

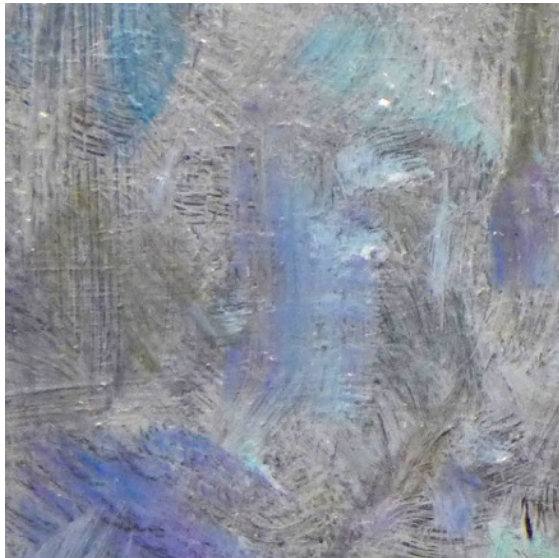




After applying the opaque glaze, I began wiping it off with paper towels. (In the process, I decided to change the composition, using the opacity of the glaze to change the height and shape of the trees.)

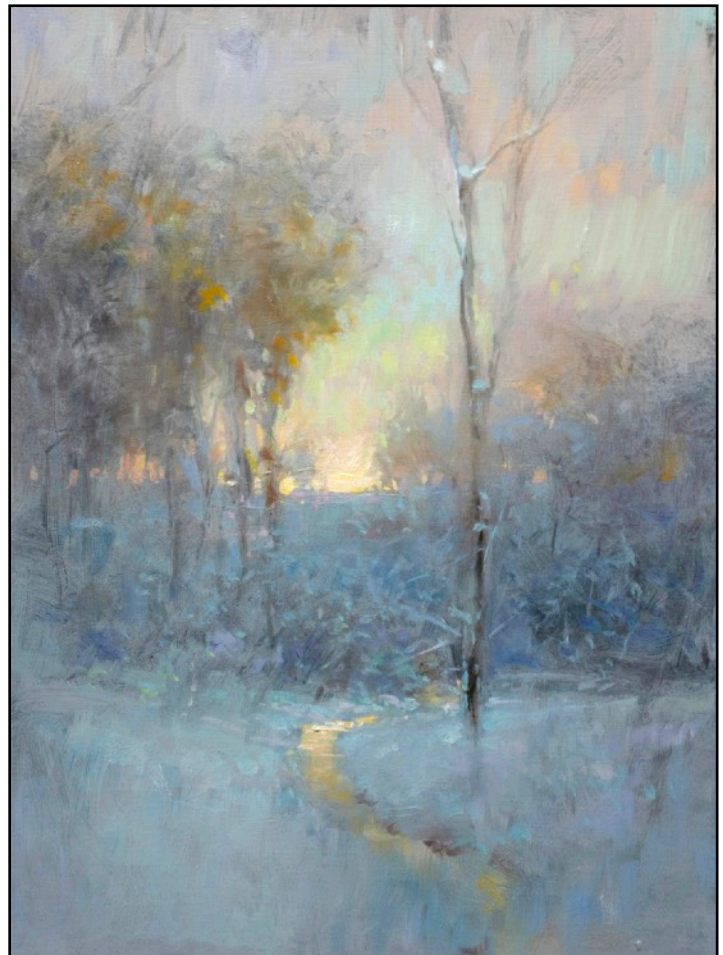
In the sky, I removed most of the glaze from the light on the horizon, less of the glaze in the sky top right, and kept it fairly opaque to hide the dark trees in the top left. In the foreground, the glaze was used to reduce the value contrasts of the secondary values to create a nearly single value and hue.

When satisfied with the values and shapes of the major forms of the sky, mid ground trees, and foreground, I then applied non-glaze, standard mixture of color on top and into the wet glaze: the warm notes in the top of the trees, the lighter highlights of blue snow in the mid ground, the dark single foreground tree, and the suggestion of a small stream.



The detail above shows how values are adjusted and textures can be suggested by wiping with a paper towel and/or scraping with a dry brush.

The painting after a few more details were added. I'll let it sit and decide how much more work is needed.



Archival Concerns

DRYING

When applying a glaze, the underlying surface **must be thoroughly dry to the touch**. If touching the surface of an underpainting leaves any residue of paint on the fingertips, an overlying glaze will mix with the wet pigment and create a semi-opaque mixture that negates the advantage of glazing. If this happens, stop, scrape off the wet paint and allow the painting to dry. Then begin the process again. This is also true when applying a glaze over another glaze. Even if the underlying surface leaves no pigment on the fingertips, if it is still tacky to the touch the new glaze layer will never properly dry and will likely delaminate.

DELAMINATION

Delamination occurs when a top layer of a glaze or pigment doesn't adhere adequately to the layer underneath, causing the top layer to crack, chip or peel away from the bottom layer. This can be caused by the inadequate drying of the underpainting, inappropriate placing of oily and lean layers in the painting, or the lack of preparation of its surface.

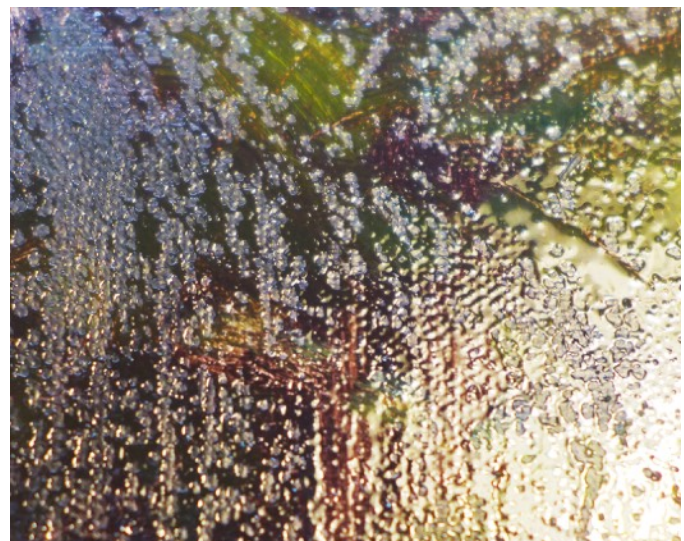
The 'Fat Over Lean' rule applies: to preserve the archival quality of a painting, layers of lean paint (less oil, more solvent) should always be underneath oily layers (less solvent, more oil). Painting a lean layer on top of a oily layer will almost certainly result in cracking and delimitation. To avoid this problem, keep the underpainting lean and add progressively more oil to all subsequent layers. The **easiest solution** is to eliminate solvents and to simply ensure that each layer contains approximately the same amount of oil.

To test for delamination, after the painting has dried gently scrape its surface with a fingernail. If the paint flakes off (as it did with one of my paintings here), the entire layer is likely to eventually chip and peel. It's unsalvageable. The only solution is to sand the painting down to the previous layer and begin again.



CISSING (“sissing”)

Cissing occurs when a glaze is applied to a dry underpainting or previously applied layer of glaze and it beads up, like water on a waxy surface. Cissing is caused by a very thin, oily film lying on the surface of a dry, underlying painting. It's easily remedied by scuffing the underlying surface with fine sandpaper or a pot-scrubber pad, or by mixing 1/4 cup ammonia with 3/4 cup water, wiping the surface, and allowing it to thoroughly dry. If the cissing is severe and not remedied, the overlying paint layer will almost certainly delaminate and ruin the painting.



For creating subtle value relationships, soft and lost edges, and the illusion of atmosphere and light, few techniques available to us beat a glaze. Try glazing in your paintings!



George Inness
Home of the Heron



James McNeil Whistler
Nocturne in Grey and Silver

Words of Wisdom

“Can anything be sadder than work left unfinished?
Yes, work never begun.”

– Christina Rossetti, poet

“Use the talents you possess for the woods would be a
very silent place if no birds sang except the best.”

– Henry van Dyke, poet

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'JOHN'. The letters are stylized and connected, with a long horizontal stroke for the 'J'.