John MacDonald

March–April 2017

Time for Trees

It's time to tackle trees, a topic rich and complex enough that it's worthy of a entire book. And in fact, there is one, which I've listed at the end of this newsletter under Recommended Reading.

I won't be giving you a book's worth of ideas but I will be passing along a few suggestions about painting trees. I hope you find them informative and useful. And speaking of books. . .

It's Back in Print!

David Cleveland's book, *A History of American Tonalism: 1880–1920* is back in print and available from Amazon for slightly over $60. It is *the* bible of the Tonalism movement at 640 pages, 9.4" x 12.3," and largely illustrated in color with high quality reproductions. It features an extensive history of the Tonalist movement and the artists associated with it.

If you're inspired by the work of George Inness, Dwight Tryon, Alexander Wyant, John Twachtman, and others–all superstars in their day–get this book. It is the art book I most often turn to when I need inspiration, ideas, or solutions to a painting problem. Highly recommended!

Combining beautifully reproduced images of their works with eloquent stylistic analyses, he positions Tonalism as America's most original, dominant, and progressive art style. This view radically challenges traditional American art history...a turning point of scholarship on the art and range of the Tonalist movement.
            - ARTnews

Painting Trees

Unless living in the desert or tundra, an artist who wishes to work in the genre of landscape painting must develop the ability to convincingly paint trees. Despite their apparent simplicity, trees can be devilishly tricky to capture in paint. Let's take a look at three of the challenges of painting trees: how to paint the outline of a tree, how to paint "sky holes," and how to paint trees located at different distances. Let's start with the challenge of portraying the most important visual component of a tree: its outer contour.

Painting The Shape: SIMPLIFY BUT DON'T STYLIZE.

The visual form of a tree, both its species and unique character, is defined by its contour, its outline. The "stuff" inside the edges isn't nearly as important, especially for trees in the distance, (More on that later.) The outside edge of a tree is extraordinarily complex: various groupings of leaves and branches in different densities moving in all directions in space–an endless profusion of details that attract and confuse the eye. But underneath the complexity is an overall shape that unifies the details and reveals its unique character. This is the shape we need to see and then paint. To see it, squint at it! Squinting simplifies the values, flattens form, eliminates details, softens color contrasts. It reveals the major shapes, which we need in order to make intelligent choices about what to include and what to omit.

When blocking in the value and shape of the tree, we need to simplify the contour. The key is to reduce the complexity while keeping the sense of a living, unique tree. Carry the simplification too far and the tree ends up looking stylized—it becomes an idea of an ideal tree rather than a portrayal of a specific and individual tree. If your trees begin to look like generic rather than real trees, you've moved from simplification to stylization. So simplify but don't be too quick to eliminate the specific twists and turns of a trunk or an odd indentation in the contour of the tree. Capturing some of those quirks in the shape can ensure that the tree appears as a real tree in a real location. Once the outline is working satisfactorily, it often takes very little detail or subtle variations of value within the outline to complete it.

(Cropped sections of the photo and of the painting on which it was based.)

Painting The Shape: SOFTEN BUT ADD VARIETY

Study the trees of masters such as Corot, Monet, Inness, etc. and you'll find they all keep the edge of the contour soft. Whether seen against background hills or sky, the edge of a tree is almost always softer in appearance that we think. Bare trees have extremely soft edges but even a tree in the height of summer, in full foliage, has a soft edge. A tree painted with too sharply an outline appears as a flat, cut out shape pasted on the landscape. A soft edge is much more realistic but the softness needs to be broken, too. A tree that consists of nothing but soft edges can appear equally flat, the only difference being that it appears out of focus. Somewhere along the contour, it's important to create a few sharp, hard edges. A variety of edges creates the illusion that some areas of the tree's edge are closer to the viewer and some are further away. It hints at the three-dimensionality of the tree. This isn't a gimmick. It imitates what we see in nature. In some areas along the contour, the foliage is dense and in some areas it's sparse. Some leaves pick up reflections from the sky, lightening the edge, while others create shadows the darken the edge. We can suggest this complexity by manipulating the hardness and softness of edges, and without having to paint every leaf on every twig!
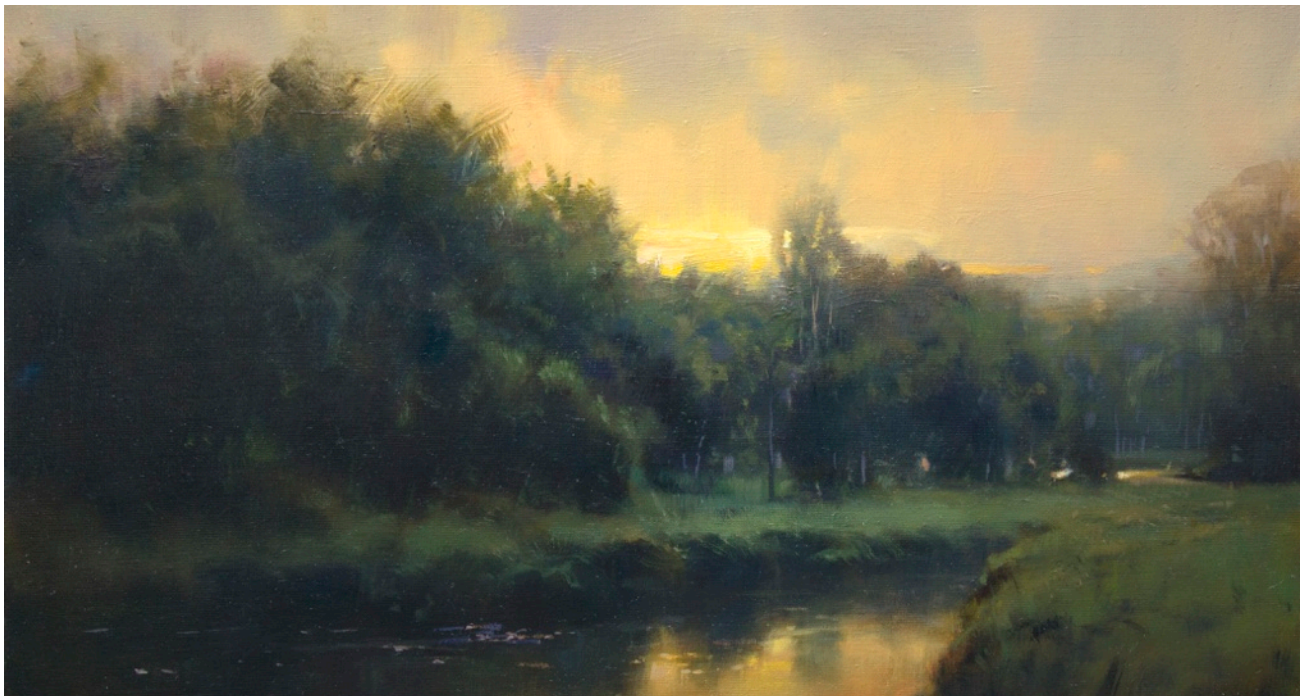
SKY HOLES.

Sky holes convey the unique character of a tree, hint at its three-dimensionality, and, depending on the size of the tree in our composition, offer us opportunities to create interesting patterns of value.

Choose them wisely. Study how sky holes appear in nature. They are not random but are related to the form of the tree: the masses of foliage and the growth of branches. It's extremely difficult to invent sky holes that look natural. Instead, study trees in the landscape and then choose the sky holes that are most essential to the composition. Some sky holes will be important (usually the larger ones), some secondary, and some can be omitted entirely.

Darken them. Sky holes are small shapes of a light value surrounded by darker values. If painted in the same value as the sky, the darker values will make the sky holes appear much lighter than sky. For this reason, it's necessary to darken the value of the sky holes, especially the holes surrounded by dark shadows.

Vary them.

Sky holes shouldn't all be of the same value nor should they have identical edges. By varying the values and the edges of the holes, you can create the illusion of light shining through different thicknesses and densities of foliage. It enhances the 3-D quality of the tree. For instance, a sky hole adjacent to a large branch or trunk will have a harder edge where it meets solid wood, but softer edges where it meets leaves. Vary the values, sizes, colors, and edges of the sky holes and, when painting multiple trees, vary the *number* of sky holes in different trees. Some trees have dense foliage, some have sparse foliage. But don't vary them randomly. Sky holes function as details that attract the eye. That needs to be taken into consideration when composing the painting. Use them to create an attractive design that leads the eye where you want it to go.

How DISTANCE affects the appearance of trees.

The farther a tree is in the distance, the more it appears as a flat, patterned shape. A tree in the foreground should read as three-dimensional but as trees recede, they become simpler and flatter. Calling too much attention to the three dimensional quality of a distant tree can hurt the illusion of deep space in the painting.

    Typically, the closer the trees, the more visible are the trunks, branches, and individual clusters of foliage or twigs. That is, the internal "stuff" can then become important subject of the painting. But as a tree moves into the distance, the *outline* of the entire tree becomes more important and its three-dimensional appearance less so. For distant trees, a simple, varied edge and a few sky holes may be all that's needed. As trees move to the horizon, they tend towards a single value with little to no detail–just an overall soft edge with a few harder spot and a little variation in the outer contour. Don't overwork a distant hill of trees!

Examples from the Clark Museum

The images on the left were photographed from several feet from the surface of the painting showing the larger form of the tree. Those on the right were photographed approximately 8" from the surface, close enough to show some detail and brushwork but distant enough to avoid triggering alarms and being shown the door. In each example, notice how the edges are treated and the sky holes painted. . .

Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot *"Road by the Water"*

Charles-Francois Daubigny *"The Creek"*

George Inness *"The Elm Tree"* (c. 1880) ~ still showing a hint of his Hudson River School phase.

George Inness *"New Jersey Landscape"* (1891) ~ a good example of his later work.

Dwight William Tryon *"Twilight November"*

Claude Monet ~ detail only

Camille Pissarro ~ detail only

J. Francis Murphy *"The Charcoal Burners"* (at the Meade Art Museum, Amherst, Mass.)

A few examples of my paintings. . .

I nearly always create an underpainting for any studio painting of 24" x 30" or larger. It's a very effective way to compose the simple shapes and establish the value structure of trees and other forms.

Two underpaintings, showing trees as simple massed values with generally soft edges. They're just shapes.

Two finished paintings in which the details of branches and light on the trunk are kept loose and suggestive.

A graphic approach to trees.

In the last newsletter, I wrote about creating the illusion of deep space. I pointed out that some artists prefer to emphasize the flat, graphic quality of forms and so create a shallower space with a more decorative composition. The same is true with trees. Rather that creating a more realistic rendering of trees using soft and varied edges of the contours, many artists prefer to keep the edges uniformly clear while emphasizing its graphic shape. John Carlson, Edgar Payne, many of the impressionists, and most contemporary plein air painters paint trees in this style. It's neither better nor worse than the approach I use; it's just another way to paint. Try both styles, or something in between. Discover the approach to painting trees that works for you! Below are details from a few paintings of artists that take a more graphic approach to rendering trees.

Edgar Payne (above left); John Carlson (above right)

Claude Monet (left); Daniel Garber (right)

This painting (right) is typical of what I've lately been doing. It's a view from the north window of my studio and just one of nearly a half dozen paintings of this view under different conditions.

This painting is not about contour or foliage or sky holes. It's about *pattern*: playing with verticals against horizontals, all the while trying to create a realistic sense of light and space. Of the two great influences in my artistic life, George Inness and Gustav Klimt, this is mostly Klimt.

Recommended Reading

Two books that treat the subject of painting trees in depth.

The Artistic Anatomy of Trees, by Rex Vicat Cole. ISBN: 0486214753
    A Dover Books reprint, originally written in 1915.

Carlson's Guide to Landscape Painting, by John F. Carlson. ISBN: 0486229270
    Also a Dover Publication, revised edition 1973 reprint, originally written in 1915. Available from Amazon.

Words of Wisdom

"An artist should never be a prisoner of himself, prisoner of style, prisoner of reputation, prisoner of success, etc."
-Henri Matisse, artist (1869-1954)

"If you be pungent, be brief; for it is with words as with sunbeams – the more they are condensed the deeper they burn."
-John Dryden, poet and dramatist (1631-1700)

"The most important ally in the study of painting is the art of thinking."
-Edgar Payne, painter (1883–1947)

(Have a favorite quote you'd like to share? Send it to me!)

Hot off the Press!

In late May, I'll be shooting an instructional video through Streamline Publishing. I'll send more information about it as soon as it's available.

Happy Painting!

2017 Workshops

May 5–13 *~ Waiting List Only*
Half Moon Bay, California
Join me on this five-day workshop, where we'll be painting plein air along the spectacular coast of northern California. Contact me directly for more information or click here.

June 3 ~ one-day demo and workshop
Deerfield Valley Art Association; Northfield, MA
www.deerfieldvalleyart.org
In this one-day workshop, we will be painting in the studio using photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies.

June 9–11
Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts; Philadelphia, PA
www.pafa.org
We will be painting in the studio using photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies. We will explore the limitations of the camera and ways to compensate for them.

July 13–14
The Berkshire Botanical Garden; Stockbridge, MA
berkshirebotanical.org
In this two-day workshop, we will be painting plein air on the beautiful grounds of the Berkshire Botanical Garden, with views of woods, gardens, and buildings.

August 7–9 *~ Waiting List Only*
Wethersfied Academy, Wethersfield, CT
www.wethersfieldarts.org
A studio workshop, we will be painting from photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. We will explore the limitations of the camera and ways to compensate for them.

October 8–14
Hudson River Valley Art Workshops; Greenville, NY
www.artworkshops.com
In this workshop, we will be painting in the studio using photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies. We will explore the limitations of the camera and ways to compensate for them.

October 25–27
The Landgrove Inn; Landgrove, VT
www.landgroveinn.com
A studio workshop, we will be painting from photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. We will explore the limitations of the camera and ways to compensate for them.