WORKSHOPS

2020

NOVEMBER 11–14, 2020
LANDGROVE INN
Landgrove, VT
[Rescheduled from April]

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2021

FEB. 27–MAR. 6 , 2021
CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS
Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico
Plein air and Studio.

(APRIL-MAY) TBA, 2020
VILLAGE ARTS CENTER
Putney, VT
A 3-day plein air workshop.

MAY 23–29, 2021
**HUDSON RIVER VALLEY
ART WORKSHOPS**
Greenville, New York
www.artworkshops.com

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

Painting on the Edge(s), Part 1

A subscriber to this newsletter recently requested that I address "edges" as a topic. Of the five components of a painting–composition, value, color, edges, and details–edges and edge contrasts have been the least mentioned in these newsletters. An in-depth exploration of edges is long overdue.

Two skills are needed to work with edges: the technical ability to create a variety of individual edges and, secondly, the ability to arrange the edges in a painting to direct the eye and create interest. As usual, the more I considered the topic, the more complex and interesting it seemed and the more information I wanted to include. With the limitations of time and space for the newsletter, I wasn't able to include it all, so in this newsletter we'll look at the first part of working with edges: how to create a variety of individual edges. Orchestrating those edges in the painting will be the subject of the September-October newsletter.

I hope you find this exploration of edges interesting and helpful.

September's workshop in Putney, VT ~ *rescheduled*

The 3-day, plein air workshop in Putney, VT, originally scheduled for September, will be rescheduled for late April or early May of next year. As soon as the date is determined, I'll post it on the Workshops/Video page of my website, where you can find all workshop updates.

What are Edges?

In painting, the term "edge" doesn't refer to the physical edge of an object in the landscape; e.g., the side of a tree trunk, the line of a field, or the edge of a cloud. It refers instead to the border where two different shapes of pigment meet on the surface of the canvas. These *painted* edges may or may not coincide with the *physical* edges of the objects in the landscape. For instance, if the trunk of a foreground tree is the same value as a distant mountain, the edge between these two very different objects may be barely perceptible in the painting. It becomes a "lost" edge. A shadow falling across a meadow isn't a physical thing but, in the painting, there will be an edge between the shadowed and sunlit areas. This distinction between visual and physical edges leads to two important considerations when we begin looking at and painting edges. First, copying the edges of physical objects may accurately represent our **mind's** understanding of how the objects exist in space but it's not how the **eye** sees objects in space. We don't need to intellectually know what we're looking at in the landscape–we just need to be able to see and paint shapes of value and color and those shapes will have very specific edges. Secondly, the edges we see that exist in the landscape may, or may not, be the edges that we need to paint in order to make the painting work. We're creating paintings, not documentaries!

In the real landscape, there's a physical edge between the mid-ground tree and sky but it's barely evident in the painting.

There's no physical edge on the hillside where the shadow and moonlit areas meet but there's an edge on the canvas.

Learning to paint edges. We must develop the technical ability to paint individual edges, from razor sharp to the very softest, and the compositional skills that will allow us to orchestrate a range of edge contrasts throughout the painting. Edge variety and contrasts affect the illusions of space and light, direct the movement of the eye, and enhance or weaken individual areas of the painting. Understanding edges and knowing how to use them goes far beyond the simple "hard versus soft" adage we first heard as beginners.

Edge and Value Contrasts.

THE single most important element in a painting is the composition. One of the most important components of a composition is how and where we direct the eye, how the eye reaches the focal point. We establish the focal point and control the movement of the eye through contrasts–value, color, edge, etc., and value contrasts are the strongest of all contrasts. Consequently, we must understand how value contrasts affect the appearance of edge contrasts and vice versa. So before we begin to explore the variety of individual edges and how to paint them, let's first look at the relationship between values and edges and the ways in which they affect each other.

How values affect edges: the greater the value contrast at the boundary between two shapes, the harder will appear the edge; whereas the closer the values, the softer the edge will appear regardless of whether the actual painted edge is hard or soft.

How edges affect values: a hard edge will exaggerate the value contrast between two shapes. A soft edge will lessen the value contrast–the two values will appear closer than truly they are.
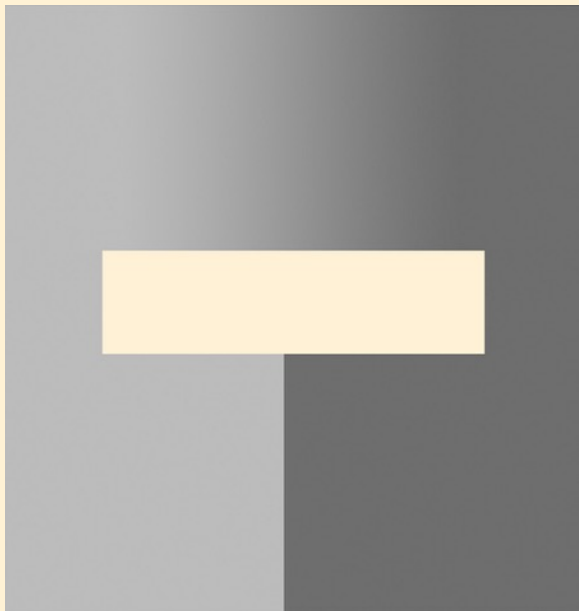
A soft edge reduces the appearance of contrast between two values. Although the two values top and bottom are identical, on the bottom the light appears lighter and the dark slightly darker–an enhancement created by value contrast and a sharp edge.

The difference between close values can nearly disappear with a soft edge. The chip on the right is the same value as the left side.

Even when an edge is sharp, it can appear soft if the two values are very close. (Distant objects, separated by a hard edge, will remain in the distance if the two values are kept close.)

The Individual Edge.

Visually, an edge can appear hard, soft, or anything in between. How we create the different edges in paint can also vary. Thankfully, the technical skills needed to create a variety of edges are quickly learned. Study the edges in nature–not what they are but how they appear to the eye. Study how skilled artists represent edges. Then experiment with different tools and techniques.
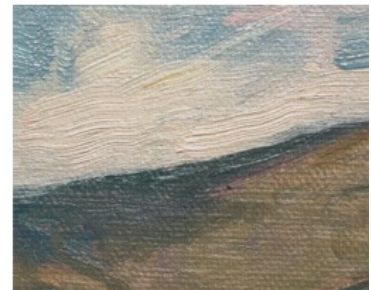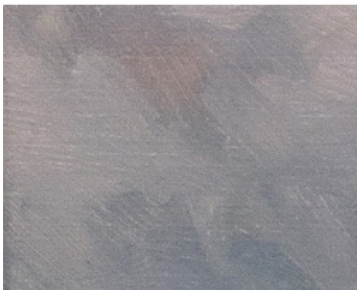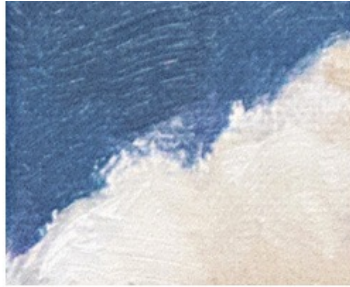
Creating a Hard Edge

The Hard Edge: Lay it Down and Leave it.

Using a brush or palette knife, lay down a stroke of paint. The paint can be heaped on the brush or applied in a thin layer; it can be wet (diluted with oil or medium) or dry. After applying the paint, avoid going back over the brushstroke. Fiddling with it will soften the edge.
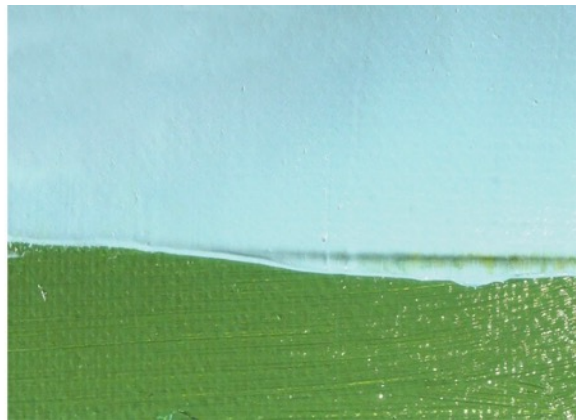
Brushed edge (left) and knifed edge (right). If an edge needs to be slightly corrected or softened, a very light touch with a soft, clean brush is usually adequate. If it needs significant changing, it's better to wipe off the entire area of the edge and reapply both pigments.

The Hard Edge: Push the value contrast.

As explained above, a hard edge can be made to appear even sharper by heightening the value contrast of the adjoining areas, even though the physical edge remains unchanged.


In the original (left), the edge of the distant hills against the sky is moderately sharp but the similarity in values with the sky visually softens it. On the right, the edge of the hill where it meets the sky has been darkened. The edge appears sharper and the eye is drawn more easily to it.

The Hard Edge: Beware the paint-by-numbers raised edge.

Unless we're painting in thin layers of pigment, it's very easy to create a raised ridge of paint along a sharp edge. A raised ridge outlining the shapes can flatten the appearance of an area, destroying spacial illusion. Ridges will also catch light falling on the painting, creating lines that may be distracting. And if we later make changes to the painting, the lines will make visible those shapes that we painted over and wanted to eliminate.

To avoid creating a ridge, paint the underlying area slightly larger than necessary, tapering off the paint with a soft edge. Then, when applying the second application of pigment, allow it to slightly overlap the first layer to create a sharp, but ridge-less, brushstroke.
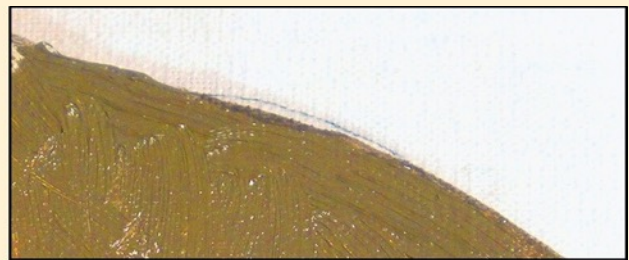
A sketched line on canvas, ready to paint. The first color is painted directly to the line with a
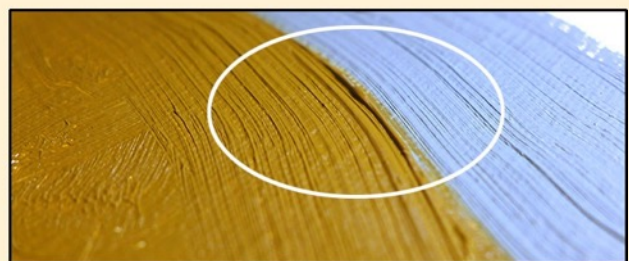

hard edge. The second color is painted directly against the first, creating a ridge of paint.

Creating a Soft Edge

The Soft Edge: Blend the pigments

To blend an edge, use a soft brush, finger, rag, or knife to form a smooth transition from one area to the other. The pigments of the areas to be blended can be either wet or dry, that is, they may be thinned with solvents, medium, or be of a thicker consistency. For a smooth blending devoid of brushstrokes, use a soft brush, working from both colors towards the middle.
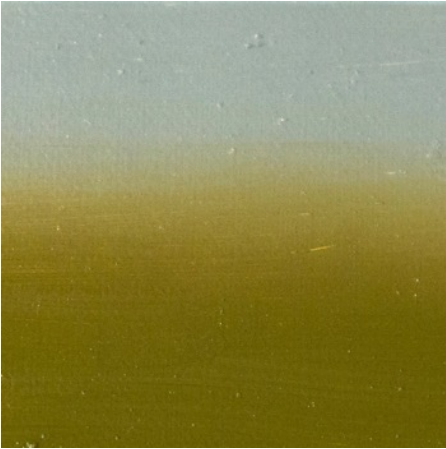

Detail from a painting by John Singer Sargent

The Soft Edge: Apply "Broken" brushstrokes

A broken brushstroke results when one pigment rests on top of an underlying pigment with minimal blending. Although the minuscule fragments of pigments are hard-edged, they are too small to be resolved with the eye and the overall appearance of the edge will be soft. This also can create an appearance of texture. An edge of broken color is busier to the eye than the smooth transition of a physically blended edge, a difference that can be used to grab the eye.

To apply a broken brushstroke, use a stiff brush loaded with pigment and lightly touch the brush to the surface. Both the paint to be applied and the underlying paint should be fairly stiff. If either layer is soupy or runny, the pigments will tend to blend rather than remain separate. And trying to paint dry pigments on top of a very wet layer is nearly impossible–the pigment will stay on the brush as the stroke slides across the surface. It won't stick to a wet surface.
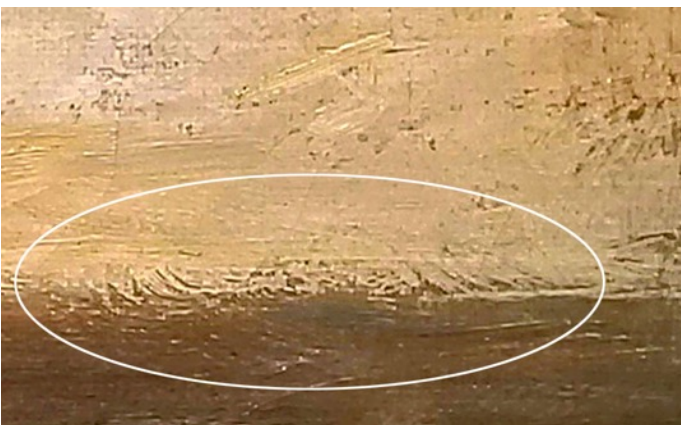
Detail from a painting by J. Francis Murphy

The Soft Edge: Bring Values Together

As mentioned above, the boundary between two areas of equal or similar values will appear to have a soft edge even if the actual edge is sharp. If you wish to keep a sharp edge but avoid attracting the eye with strong visual contrast, bring the values of the two shapes closer together at the edge. In the example below left, the values of the darker green have been lightened at the edge and the values of the lighter blue-gray have been darkened at the edge. The actual edge between the two shapes is relatively sharp but appears soft because of the similarity in values.

**Lightest light**

Values darken at the edge.

Detail from a painting by Monet.
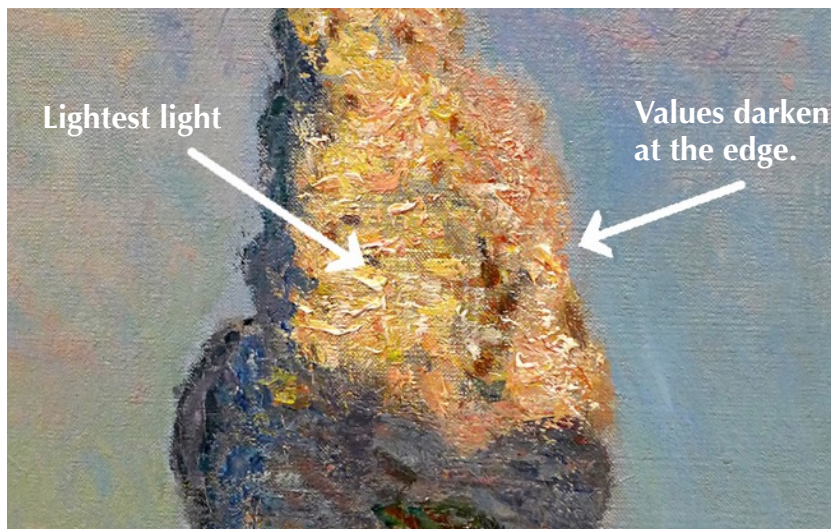
In the detail on the right, Monet places the lightest light of the rock on the left, adjacent to the dark shadow. He then darkens the right side of the rock, bringing it closer in value to the sky. Bringing those two values together visually softens the edge.

The Lost Edge.

When the values of two bordering shapes are identical, the edge between them will entirely disappear, regardless of whether the edge is soft or hard. This is a "lost" edge. It creates a spacial ambiguity and is an effective way to subtly suggest the difference between two shapes in space and form without attracting the eye.
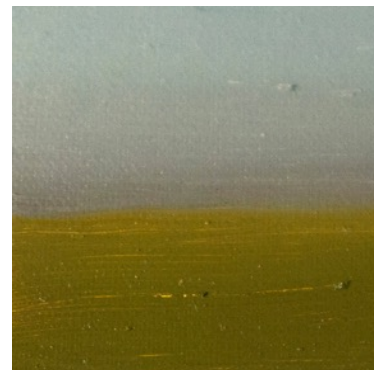
In this detail of Sargent's, *Simplon Pass*, he brings the values of the cliff and more distant mountain top together. The edge is lost, despite there being a clear difference in color temperature. More than any other attribute, values determine edges. Creating equal values will almost always eliminate edges entirely.

Softening edges when reworking a dry painting.

When reworking a painting, it's impossible to blend an edge if the underlying surface has dried. To create the appearance of a soft edge, the easiest solution is to apply broken color, but the painting may instead require a blended edge. To create the appearance of blending, apply a thin layer of oil or medium (or retouch varnish) to the dry painting. Then working directly into the wet varnish, apply a minimal amount of paint to the edge with a brush, tapering off the paint at the edge. It won't recreate exactly the appearance of wet-into-wet painting but it can be close.

The original painting (left), ready to be reworked . . .


Wet pigment on a dry painting.

Working into a layer of medium or oil.

On the left, I worked the blueish sky color into the tree. The underlying dry paint allowed no blending so the edges appear uniformly hard. On the right, I first applied medium, brushed the sky color to the edge of the tree and, using soft brushes and my finger tip, smeared the paint slightly at the edge, wiping off or applying more paint if needed. It's not perfect but it works.

Creating variety in a long, single edge.

Many landscapes will require our painting long, unbroken edges on the canvas: a long line of trees, the edge of a foreground meadow, a line of mountains silhouetted against the sky, etc. If the edge of that long line is treated uniformly, the shape will tend to appear flat and refuse to recede in space. It will appear cutout, as if it's sitting on the surface of the painting. And frankly, a long, uniform edges is just plain boring. Variety adds interest and subtlety to a painting.
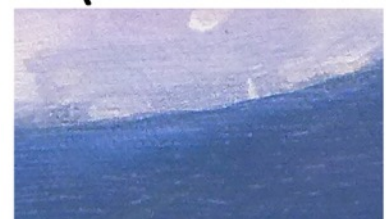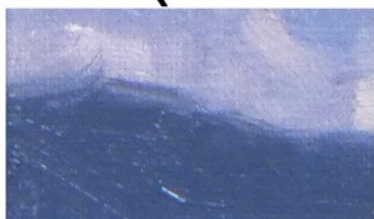
Deciding how to vary a line will depend on how you want to direct the eye and what areas you wish to emphasize. These aren't insignificant decisions. How you orchestrate the edges in a painting can make it or break it. And that topic will be the subject of the next newsletter. . .

– Until then, Happy Painting!

Recommended Reading

Books about the craft of painting (in no particularly order):

Alla Prima II, Everything I Know About Painting–and More, Richard Schmid
    Stove Prairie Press 1-800-939-9932; (ISBN:978-0-9778296-0-6)

Painting with Impact, David Curtis
    2010, Batsford, ISBN 9781906388430

Fill Your Oil Paintings with Light and Color, Kevin Macpherson
    1997, North Light Books, ISBN 978-1-58180-053-1

Landscape Painting Inside and Out, Kevin Macpherson
    1997, North Light Books, ISBN 978-1-1200658180-755-4

Color and Light - A Guide for the Realist Painter, James Gurney
    2010, Andrew McMeel Publishing, LLC, 978-0-7407-9771-2

Carlson's Guide to Landscape Painting, John F. Carson.
    1953, Sterling Publishing Co. (out of print but available used)

Mastering Composition, Ian Roberts ***Personally, my favorite book about composition.***
    2007, North Light Book. ISBN 978-1-58180924-4

Landscape Painting, Asher Durand and Birge Harrison (especially the section by Birge)
    edited by Darren Rousar, Velatura Press. ISBN 978-0-9800454-5-1

Books about being an artist:

These books won't tell you anything about painting. They're about dealing with those internal issues that keep us from being as creative and fearless with our art as we should be.

Art and Fear, by David Bayles & Ted Orland.
    1993, The Image Continuum, ISBN 0-9614547-3-3

Fearless Creating, by Eric Maisel
    1995, Tarcher / Putnam, ISBN 0-87477-805-0

Coaching the Artist Within, by Eric Maisel
    2005, New World Library, ISBN 1-57731-464-6

And from the Aug-Sept. 2015 newsletter, recommended books about drawing:
    Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain by Betty Edwards
    Lessons in Classical Drawing by Juliette Aristedes
    The Keys to Drawing by Bert Dodson
    The Artist's Complete Guide to Figure Drawing by Anthony Ryder

Words of Wisdom

Art is like baby shoes. When you coat them with gold, they can no longer be worn.
– **John Updike,** *writer*

Choose only one master – Nature.
– **Rembrandt,** *painter*

I know what I have given you.
I do not know what you have received.
– **Antonio Porchia,** *poet*

Depending on the state of the pandemic, the workshops below may change at short notice. Please refer to my website *for the most current information. Stay well!*

2020 Workshops

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

(*rescheduled*) 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

May 23–29 Hudson River Valley Art Workshops; Greenville, NY
www.artworkshops.com
A studio workshop for intermediate to advanced painters. We'll work with a single photo as reference, using it to create paintings with different value keys, color keys, times of day, and seasons. This workshop is for intermediate to advanced painters.

Feb 27–Mar. 6 Casa de los Artistas 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 20–22 Falmouth Art Center **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.