

John MacDonald

March–April, 2020



WORKSHOPS

2020

JUNE 1–5, 2020

[PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF
THE FINE ARTS \(PAFA\)](#)

Philadelphia, PA

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

A time of trials and waiting. . .

This was a newsletter that did not want to be written.

Five weeks ago, as I began writing this, I felt a sore throat and a drop in energy. It went downhill from there. Some of the symptoms, which thankfully remained mild, matched those of the coronavirus. After three weeks of rest, fully recovered and finally back in the studio, I intended to resume work on the newsletter only to have my 8-year-old computer crash. Normally, I would have whined and kicked something nearby but, in these difficult times, it was a stark reminder of the difference between tragedy and inconvenience. No big deal. I'm well and in the studio and finally able to finish this and send it out.

If you're spending most of your time isolated, as you should be, this newsletter will give you suggestions of what you can do with the studio time. I've raided previous newsletters for ideas and created some new content.

Use the suggested projects in this newsletter to evaluate your work, to explore and play with technique and subject matter, and to stretch yourself during this trying and unsettling time. May we all come through it unscathed.

I wish you and your family continued health.

~ Be safe, be well, and happy painting!



See you in [Santa 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!

Studio Projects for a Difficult Time

In recent conversations with other painters, I've noticed a trend emerging during this challenging period: nearly all are taking time to reassess their art. They're evaluating their goals, technique, subject matter, and their strengths and weakness. When the entire world has shifted beneath our feet and day-to-day living seems full of unknowns and dire possibilities, the natural resistance we often feel to trying something new in our art can be less frightening. Take advantage of this opportunity of isolation and quiet to venture into new painting territory.

Below are a some painting projects to consider. Some are taken from previous newsletters and so are described only briefly. (Refer to the indicated newsletter for more information.) There are also a few new suggestions which are explained in more detail.

THE PROJECTS

Paint in a Value Key

Paint in a Color Key

Paint in a Stolen Palette

Paint in a Limited Palette

Paint over a Failed Painting

Paint from a Tonal Sketch

(Sickbed sketching)

Are you eager to get started, push your boundaries, and learn something new? Before blindly jumping in, why not begin by taking a moment to consider your current approach to painting, your skill level, preferences, and strengths and weaknesses. Begin with a self-critique. . .

First, critique your work ~ [\(November–December 2017 newsletter\)](#)

It's easier to determine where you want to go with your painting if you begin with a clear idea of where you've already been. In the Nov.-Dec. 2017 newsletter you'll find a step-by-step, self-guided critique that you can apply to your work. It will take only a few hours but the benefits gained are vastly greater than the time expended. You'll discover what is and what isn't working in your paintings and where you'll need to work to improve your skills.



Project #1: Paint in a Value Key ~ [\(March-April 2019 Newsletter\)](#)

Using a photo or plein air study for the subject matter and the composition, combined with other reference for the value structure, create a work in a high or low value key. You'll sharpen your skills in seeing and manipulating values, which are the bedrock of any successful painting.



My photo, a painting by J. Francis Murphy for inspiration, and the new, low-key painting.

Project #2: Paint in a Color Key ~ [\(July-August, 2019 Newsletter\)](#)

A similar exercise to working in a value key, in this project you create a warm or cool key painting by limiting your palette. It will train your eye to see subtle differences in color temperature.



Using a photo, create a painting with an obvious temperature key, warm or cool.

Project #3: Steal from the Old Masters ~ [\(September-October 2019\)](#)

This is wonderful exercise in color mixing as you attempt to match the hues from an old master.



Steal the colors from an master, combine it with one of your photos, and create a new painting

Project #4: Painting in a Limited Palette

There are many advantages to working in a limited palette: it's easier to create color harmony, it allows us to create an overall tone in hue or temperature, and it is superb training for seeing and using sophisticated color mixtures and subtle temperature contrasts. Nearly any group of colors can be used for creating a limited palette. A traditional group consists of a cool black (Lamp Black or Payne's Gray), white, Yellow Ochre, and Permanent Alizarin Crimson. For a more saturated range of colors, you may wish to try pure primaries: White, Cadmium Yellow Light, Cobalt Blue, and Cadmium Red Deep. For nearly a decade, I worked with a limited palette consisting of white, Cadmium Yellow Light, Prussian Blue, Permanent Alizarin Crimson, and Raw Umber. Devise your own limited palette and play with it.

The palette for the painting below consisted of Cadmium Yellow Light (hue), Dioxazine Purple, Raw Umber, and Paynes Grey, a rather unusual mixture that can be used to capture the pale yellow greens and muted purples of spring.



A tonal sketch and photo for reference (above). Within two days of taking the photo, the greens began appearing. I wanted to capture that moment. The painting, still in progress, (below).



Project #5: Painting Over an Old Painting

When purging the studio of failed paintings, I usually cover the old work with opaque primer. But occasionally, either out of laziness or a desire to experiment, I'll paint directly over an old painting, allowing portions of the old image to remain—if they work in the context of the new painting. Allowing areas of the old painting to remain visible often leads to color juxtapositions and contrasts I wouldn't have dreamed of creating. If you try this, let go of preconceived ideas of what the painting should be and allow it to be a conversation between the old and the new. Being open to whatever happens often will often the painting into surprising directions.



For this painting, I used two plein air studies and a photograph for reference. Of the two studies, I preferred that which gave greater emphasis to the distant rocky outcrop. The other (top left) was truer to the actual view but I felt it was less interesting, with a weaker focal point.

The base painting

When choosing an old painting to cover, the color in the base painting is less important than its values. Painting a high value key painting over a dark painting can create mismatches that can affect your value judgments. It can also create archival problems. (See below).

In this case, the moonlit painting was a bit dark but the values in the new scene were also mid-to dark in value. Importantly, the darkest values in the paintings were in the lower half of the canvases.



Abandoning the initial concept.

I intended to paint this scene as a bright, summer day, similar to the plein air studies. But after sketching in the dark hill, the preexisting moonlit sky and bare foreground trees worked so well I abandoned the initial concept and decided to paint it as a nocturne. This is typical of the unforeseen but fortuitous accidents that can happen when painting over old paintings.



The resulting painting, still in progress.

Warning: Painting over an old painting can be an archival disaster.

Delamination—the separation of one layer of paint from another—can be a serious problem when painting over an old surface. If the old painting has an oily, slick finish it must be thoroughly abraded to accept new paint. Sand the surface of the old painting with sandpaper or scuff it with a 3M pad. Avoid using steel wool. And do it outside—don't breathe the dust!

Oil paints tend to become more translucent as they age. Over time, images underneath may begin to subtly appear. Be careful of large differences in values between the new painting and the old, and particularly avoid painting a high-key painting over a low-key ground.

Project #6: Painting from a Tonal Sketch

This exercise should push you to the edge of your comfort zone. Here, you create a painting based on nothing more than a thumbnail tonal sketch, borrowing from the sketch the composition and value structure (assuming they work) and inventing the color. This will train you to see shapes rather than things, to keep the brushwork loose to *suggest* objects in the landscape rather than to *describe* them, and to let go of preconceived ideas of the painting as surprises and mistakes take it in a different direction. The key to this exercise is to approach it as a form of play. Choose which areas are to be warm, cool, or neutral, then begin. Be willing to wipe paint on and off, to smear, to scrape and to let the painting unfold spontaneously. In the example below right, I mixed the pigments directly on the canvas rather than pre-mixing them on the palette.

Both tonal thumbnails studies were sketched using Prismacolor grayscale markers and a white, Sakura Gelly Roll pen. Both paintings are 9" x 12" – a size that allows for quick painting and with little pressure to create a finished, polished work.



The sketch top left was drawn from life, the sketch above was based on a photo. The intention is to capture the composition and value structure while minimally suggesting detail.

Project #7: SICK BED SKETCHING

(This is the one project I hope you don't need to do.)

If you're ill and need to rest—and if your condition allows it—you need not avoid art-making completely. For the three weeks I was sick, the symptoms thankfully remained mild enough that I could spend time sitting and sketching. Some of the sketches below were from life, drawn while looking from a window of our rural home; others were based on photos. I was less concerned with creating studies for paintings than to keep exercising the visual muscles. It also proved to be a pleasurable distraction. Avoid the illness if you can but don't stop sketching!



Words of Wisdom

"As light fades and the shadows deepen, all petty and exacting details vanish, everything trivial disappears, and I see things as they are in great strong masses: the buttons are lost, but the sitter remains; the sitter is lost, but the shadow remains; the shadow is lost, but the picture remains."

~ James McNeil Whistler

"There is only the trying. The rest is not our business."

~ T. S. Elliot

"Sit down and put everything that comes into your head and then you're a writer. But an author is one who can judge his own stuff's worth, without pity, and destroy most of it."

~ Colette

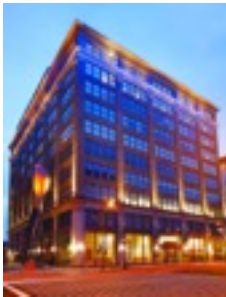
COMING UP . . .

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!*



2020 Workshops



June 1–5 PAFA: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts; Philadelphia, PA www.pafa.org

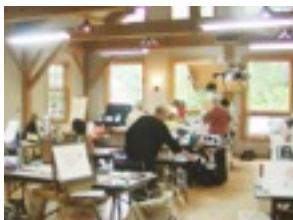
A studio workshop for intermediate to advanced painters. We'll work with a single photo, using it to create paintings with different compositions, value keys, and color temperatures. This workshop will take you from simply copying a photograph to creating a painting.

(This workshop is currently full.)



September 11–13 Village Arts of Putney; Putney, VT
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

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.