

John MacDonald

May–June 2017



WORKSHOPS

2017

JULY 13–14, 2017

Berkshire Botanical Gardens
Stockbridge, MA

berkshirebotanical.org

****Waiting list only****

AUG. 7–9, 2017

WETHERSFIELD ACADEMY
Wethersfield, CT

www.wethersfieldarts.org

****Waiting list only****

OCT 8–14, 2017

**HUDSON RIVER VALLEY
ART WORKSHOPS**

Greenville, New York

www.artworkshops.com

****Waiting list only****

OCT 25–27, 2017

THE LANDGROVE INN
Landgrove, VT

www.landgroveinn.com

****Waiting list only****

2018

I'm taking off 2018 from all teaching in order to focus on rewriting my workshop materials, concentrate on my painting, and to take a workshop or two myself.

Workshops are currently being scheduled for 2019. See the [Workshop page](#) on my website for information.

Workshops, Videos, and Painting Madly

It's the last week of June as I begin this newsletter. Those who bother to pay attention to such things will notice that this is the May-June newsletter, which gives me only a few days before it's already obsolete and time to move on to the next. I'll blame the delay on my having one of the busiest two-month periods that I've ever experienced.

Aside from ten days in Florida with my elderly mother, the time was spent teaching workshops in California, Philadelphia, and Massachusetts; going to Texas to shoot two videos for Streamline Publishing; and spending a week non-stop painting in the Adirondacks at the [Publishers Invitational](#). Between events and in my studio, my easel called more insistently than my computer and I spent the time painting. But with the busy time behind me, I can finally turn my attention to the newsletter.

In preparing for the workshops and the videos, I was reminded (as I always am) that the most essential skills to develop have nothing to do with technique: using virtuosic brushwork, a secret medium, or the most expensive brushes or paints. It's all about the basics. The best artists spend their time deepening their understanding of, and skill at using, the basics: composition, values, color, edges, and details. Having spent much of the last eight weeks focusing on the basics, it's only appropriate to make them the topic for this newsletter. I'll present one aspect of each that I believe to be essential for every artist to understand and, as much as possible, master.

To illustrate each, I'll use *Summertime*, by the American Tonalist, J. Francis Murphy. (1885, 14" x 19").

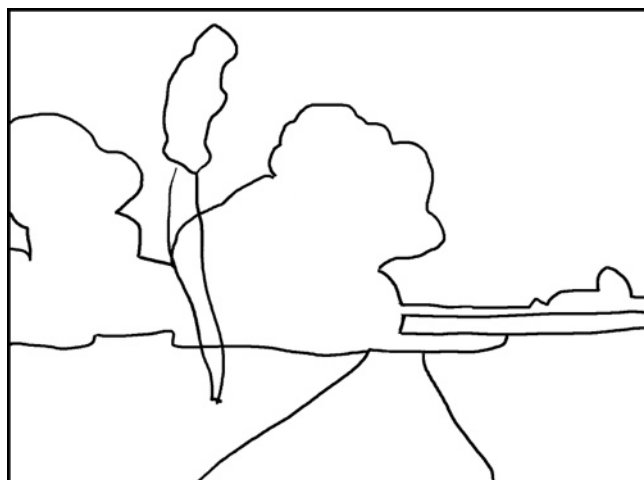


COMPOSITION

There are nearly as many rules for creating successful compositions as there are painting genres. All of the rules are useful and often lead to more successful compositions. But in the hands of an experienced painter, all of the rules can be broken—all of them but one:

Don't say more than one thing in a painting.

Rarely does nature give us an ideal landscape, a scene with a single focal point and a composition so perfectly arranged that all we need to do is copy it. We're usually confronted with various focal points, multiple areas of interest, and a array of discordant shapes. We find ourselves attracted to a dramatic sky *and* the light on the trees *and* the colors of wildflowers in the foreground. We want to paint it all! But if we do, we will have conflicting areas of interest that will confuse the eye and dilute the message of the painting. A painting must deliver **one** message clearly and unambiguously. If there are two or more interesting aspects of the landscape that you want to include in a painting, resist that temptation and instead create two or more paintings. *Always—always—say only one thing in one painting!*



Notice how Murphy sets the center of interest in the painting in the area below and right of center. He simplified the trees and dramatically simplified the sky. There are numerous areas of minor interest created by details, value contrasts, and varying shapes but all are subordinate to the main focal area. Notice, too, how he has created a mood, which for the Tonalists was often the message of the painting. The choice of details, value structure, secondary values, and limited color palette—all reinforce the one message.

Tips for Creating a Composition with One Message.

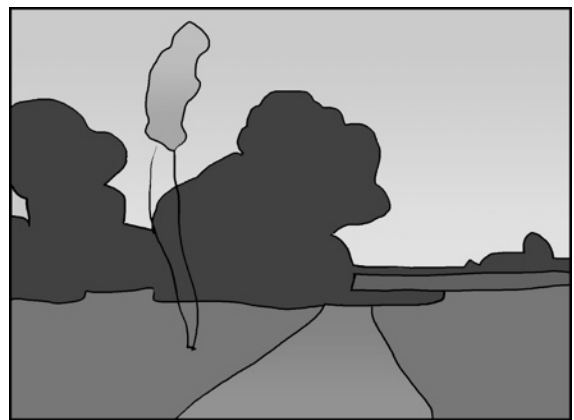
1. Looking at a chosen landscape (photo or plein air), ask yourself, "Why do I want to paint this?" The answer to that question will often give you with the focal area and the message of the painting.
2. Structure your composition around the message. Is a dramatic sky the point of the painting? Then drop the horizon line so the sky fills the painting and simplify the landscape under it. If it's a barn and surrounding trees, zoom in so they dominate the painting. If it's foreground wildflowers, raise the horizon line, eliminate the sky and simplify the background. A clear message creates strong paintings.
3. While painting, keep the message in mind. Don't be seduced by attractive but unessential things.
4. Simplify! Any detail, value change, color contrast etc. that detracts from the impact of the message should be eliminated. You're an artist, not a reporter. You need to make wise choices!

VALUES (Primary Values)

When composing a scene, most artists begin with an outline of the two to five major shapes of the landscape. But composing in line isn't enough. There's too little information in an outline. It's impossible to determine whether a composition will work or not until a value is assigned to each shape. These are the foundation, or primary, values of the painting. They express the composition and provide the structure for the entire painting. If the composition and value structure do not work, the painting will *not* work.

Simplify, by massing, the values in the composition.

It's usually easy to identify whether a primary value is lighter or darker than another. It's more difficult, and more important, to determine *how much* darker or lighter. It's crucial to discover the value *relationships* between the primary values and to determine their location on the value scale. Their position and relationships will tell us whether the scene has a high value key, low value key, or it has full value contrast.



Squinting at the painting above, the image can be simplified to four values (above right) or, taking the massing of close values even further, to only two values (right). Either value structure works. The shapes are varied in size and contour and well balanced. (And notice the sky gradient.)

Tips for Creating a Strong Value Structure with Primary Values

1. How do we see values? SQUINT. Squinting eliminates details and secondary values and makes it much easier to see the major forms in the scene as simple shapes of values.
2. Think 2-D shapes, not 3-D objects. When squinting, if the values between two different shapes are indistinguishable, then merge them, regardless of what they are or where they are located in space.
4. Avoid having the values of the major shapes evenly spaced on the value scale. Vary their relationships. (Notice in the illustration above how the values in the ground are grouped together and, with the exception of the thin foliage of the foreground tree, obviously darker than any values in the sky.)
3. If a form in the landscape (often trees, hills or mountains) consists of an equal amount of highlights and shadows, it must be changed. Make either the lights or darks predominate.

VALUES (Secondary Values)

The secondary values are those subtle (or not so subtle) value changes that occur *within* the shapes of the primary values. They create textures, details, and lights and darks within forms. In some shapes, the secondary values may be very close together on the value scale, in other shapes, there may be a greater value contrast. But to ensure the value structure remains intact and the painting continues to work. . .

Always respect the primary values.

If we fail to keep the primary values in mind, we will invariably exaggerate the contrasts we see within each shape until the value ranges in the shapes begin to overlap. The differences between them will be lost and the structure of the painting, with a resounding crash of finality, will collapse.



In this grayscale image of the painting, notice how little value contrast exists in the sky. All the secondary values are extremely close. There are slightly stronger secondary value contrasts in the trees and finally, an even much greater contrast in the middle ground, at or near the focal point. By adjusting the value contrast in different areas of the foreground, Murphy leads the eye into the painting. It all works beautifully.

Tips for Working with Secondary Values.

1. When first adding secondary values, it's often helpful to deliberately reduce the contrast we see, keeping the secondary values as close as possible to the primary value. It's much easier to increase the contrast of secondary values later, as the painting progresses, than to try to reestablish the primary values after having destroyed the structure by creating secondary values with too much contrast.
2. When you see a subtle value contrast within a primary value, try changing the **color** rather than the value. The value structure will be maintained and the color contrast will be enhanced.
3. Varying the range of secondary values from one primary value shape to another makes for a more interesting painting. But be careful! Keep the strongest contrasts near or within the focal area.

Color Relationships

There are many different aspects of color: attributes of color (hue, saturation, and value), color keys, color harmony, and color luminosity. Related to all of these aspects is the concept of color *temperature*: cool versus warm. Rather than being an attribute of a single color, it describes a relationship between two or more colors. Understanding and using temperature contrasts brings color to life.

Think color *temperature* ~ cool versus warm.

Color temperature affects every aspect of color and its appearance. Not only are the major shapes of the composition often an overall warm or cool, an entire painting can be in a warm or cool key. To make color come alive, contrast warm and cool hues within each primary value shape. Remember, the closer in value are two colors, the greater the color temperature contrast and the greater the sense of luminosity.



This painting is in a warm key: the warm hues are fairly saturated while cool hues are muted. But within each primary shape there are also warm and cool hues. And notice the temperature contrasts (and very close values) in the color samples on the right, taken (from top to bottom) from the sky, the tree highlights, and the road.



Tips for Working with Color Temperature.

1. Study the work of Monet. All the Old Masters worked with color temperature but none did it with such mastery as Monet. Study how he used color contrasts in the context of value relationships.
2. As mentioned in the Tips for Secondary Values box, keeping the values of two colors close not only enhances color luminosity, it maintains the structure of the primary values. Two birds with one stone.
3. To create a warm key painting, use saturated warm hues with neutrals (grayish hues) acting as the cool notes. In a cool key painting, use saturated cool hues and neutrals as the warm notes.
4. There can be temperature differences between the primary value shapes (e.g. warm sky and cool ground) but because color contrast (luminosity) is created only when value contrast is limited, the strongest color contrasts will exist between secondary values *within* a primary value.

Edge Variety

Edges come in three flavors: hard, soft, or lost. Edges can be softened physically, by blending the paint, or optically, by bringing values close together. When values become identical, the edge is invisible and is “lost.” Contrasting edges enhance the illusion of space (differing edges appear to be in different locations in space), attract the eye (thus affecting its movement in the painting), and add visual interest.

Vary edges to create contrasts that direct the eye.

The greater the value contrast between two areas, the more a hard edge between them will grab the eye. Even if values are somewhat close, a hard edge will still attract the eye. Use that edge contrast to direct the eye where you want it to go. Edge contrasts can also be used to create subtle, secondary focal points.



Notice the variety of edges in the two details above and how the eye is attracted more strongly to some areas than others. And in the bottom detail, notice how the lightest highlight in the ground grabs the eye, a result of not only a very sharp edge but the strong value contrast between the highlight and the ground.

Tips for Working with Edges.

1. Keep strong edge contrasts within the focal area. Minimize contrasts at the sides of the painting.
2. A painting with a few hard edges in a mostly soft-edge painting, or visa versa, is more interesting than a painting with equal amounts of soft and hard edges.
3. Whether an edge is soft or hard is often of less importance than that it is *different* from others.
4. Any long, unbroken line in a painting should have some variety in its edge.
5. For softening edges, a paper towels or a finger are often the best tools.

Details

Details provide scale, texture, points of interest and description. They are also seductive, enjoyable to paint, and too often superfluous. Every landscape is awash in far too many details. Choose wisely!

Identify the details that are essential. Omit the rest.

Details attract the eye equally so every detail that is added to a painting will dilute the power of those already present. Outside of the focal area, keep details loose, suggestive, and minimal. Use soft edges and minimal value contrasts to control the extent to which they call attention to themselves.



There is a hierarchy of details in this painting. There are almost none in the sky and only suggestive hints in the background trees. Most of the details are concentrated in a band running across the lower third of the painting, with less at the very edges of the painting. Notice where there are areas of more or fewer foreground details and how Murphy uses value differences in the details to soften or enhance contrasts.

Tips for Working with Details.

1. Areas with detail are most interesting (and powerful) when they are adjacent to areas void of detail.
2. Be especially wary of adding too many details to the foreground, to the bottom of the painting.
3. Keep details loose and suggestive. Suggestion is almost always more interesting than mere description.

A final word: it's all about contrast.

Painting is complicated. So much goes into making a successful painting that it's impossible to reduce it to simple rules, an outline, or a formula. Still, if forced to sum up in a single phrase what I believe makes for a good painting, I would say it's the skillful handling of contrasts.

It's all about contrasts: contrasts of edges, shapes, color temperatures, values, details, brushwork, lines, paint thickness, etc. It's contrasts that first attracts the eye, directing it around the painting, and giving it a resting point. Want a focal point that grabs the eye? Put the lightest light next to the darkest dark with the sharpest edges and strongest detail. The eye will go there. Want a painting that sings with color? Minimize value contrasts so color contrasts predominate. Want dramatic lighting in your paintings? Use strong value contrasts where the light hits forms but soften them at the light source. It's all about contrasts.

Improve your understanding of contrasts, learn how to manage them, and you'll be well on your way to producing the best paintings possible.



Charles Warren Eaton. Maine Pines. 1900 (12" x 22")

Words of Wisdom

How difficult it is to be simple

-Vincent Van Gogh

There is nothing worse than a sharp image
of a fuzzy concept.

-Ansel Adams, photographer (1902-1984)

Can anything be sadder than work left unfinished?

Yes, work never begun.

-Christina Rossetti, poet (1830-1994)

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

Streamline Video

The shooting for the video(s) took place the last week of May. I've been told they should be released late autumn. When they're ready to be released, I'll let you know!

Happy Painting!