

John MacDonald

September–October, 2022

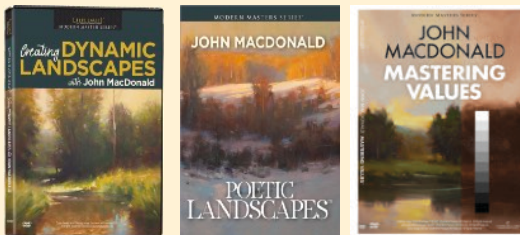
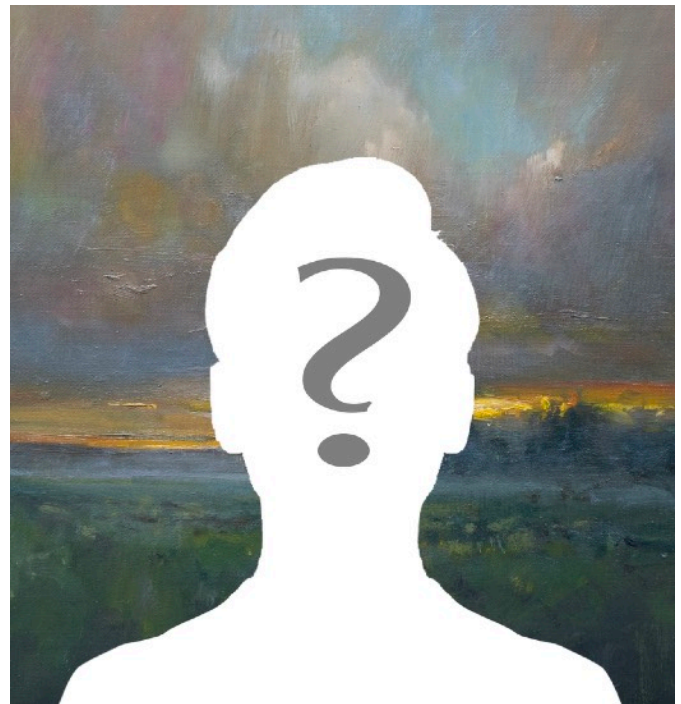


What Kind of a Painter Are You??

Knowing *what* you want to paint, *why* you want to paint it, and *how* you want to paint it, will help you build the skills needed to paint the “*what, how, and why*” beautifully.

In last month’s newsletter, I stressed the importance of beginning a painting properly, with the most crucial step being the need to identify our intention for a painting. *What is this about?*

There are nearly as many reasons to paint a certain scene, or part of a scene, as there are painters but, for convenience’s sake, let’s create five categories of painters: the **storyteller**, the **reporter**, the **poet**, the **virtuoso**, and the **designer**. This isn’t just an intellectual exercise. Each has a different intention and focus when beginning a painting. It’s helpful to determine which category fits us because deepening our understanding of why we paint in general can help us determine the message of individual paintings. Furthermore, it can help us identify the specific skills we need to become better painters in our style.



PaintTube Videos

Interested in my paintings process? In “*Dynamic Landscapes*” and “*Poetic Landscapes*” I describe it in detail. If you’re interested in learning more about values—what they are, how to identify them, and how to use them in your paintings, check out the video, “*Mastering Values*.”

For more information and to order the videos, click [HERE](#).

If you’ve been enjoying these newsletters and are able and willing to make a donation, any contribution would be appreciated. If you’ve just begun receiving them, feel free to peruse them first.

To make a donation, click [HERE](#).

To the many of you who’ve already contributed~ *Thank you!*



WARNING: What you're about to read isn't to be taken literally. The roles described here are but simple generalizations. Others would list different roles with different names, or none at all. However, the point of this newsletter is valid: **our intention creates our role and each role requires a different set of skills with a different focus.**

Understanding the differences between these roles and knowing which you prefer will help you determine which skills you need to become a better painter within your style.
(More caveats and information can be found at the end of the newsletter.)

**What is your message? What do you want to say in your painting?
Let's look at five roles you can play as a painter.**

The Storyteller

The Storyteller focuses on the literal content in a painting, on its narrative. The subjects and objects in the painting are primary. A painting of a barn isn't just an abstract red shape in the landscape, it's a structure that speaks of agriculture and local history and, depending on its condition, whether the farm (and society) is healthy or in decline. In most story paintings, the landscape is a mere backdrop. Since Ancient Egypt, this was the only respectable role of a painter and it lingers today—there are still instructors who warn students that “every painting needs a story,” which is absolutely true *if* you're a storyteller. Here are some examples of “story” paintings, beginning with the obvious and ending with two “story” landscapes.



It's no accident that the vast majority of story paintings include the figure and/or human-made objects: buildings, interiors, ships, barns, etc. Paintings that prominently feature the figure and human objects will always trigger a narrative in the mind of the viewer, whether intended by the artist or not. If you wish to avoid creating a story, avoid using figures in your work.



Millet's "The Angelus" (above) tells a powerful story which is conveyed by the figures. Eliminate the figures and what remains is a beautiful landscape that has a message but it's a mood, not a story. Traditional story landscapes always include the figure or man-made structures, no matter how small or how much they appear to be dominated by the landscape. In Coles painting below (from the *Voyage of Life* series), the small figure creates the entire story despite its small size on the canvas. Viewers will always be attracted to figures in a painting. Use them wisely.



The Reporter

The primary interest of the reporter is to capture, as honestly and clearly as possible, what is seen in the landscape. For the reporter, the artist is an Eye that examines and records. Some painters may concentrate on one aspect of a scene more than others, such as light, water, receding forms, etc., but generally, the Reporter paints what nature gives her. Whether working from life or photographs, the best paintings in this genre are never mere copies of what is seen, yet all place an emphasis on approximating the values and colors and rendering the forms as they are.



Clockwise from top left:

Camille Corot, *The Augustan Bridge at Narni*

Fritz Thaulow, *(title unknown)*

Isaak Levitan, *After the Rain, Plyos*

David Curtis, *(title unknown)* David Curtis is a superb, English painter who works equally well in oils and watercolors and in all landscape genres.

John Baeder, *John's Diner with John's Chevelle*

The Poet

The Poet's intent is to convey his or her *feelings* that arise in reaction to the landscape, feelings usually expressed through mood. George Inness and the Tonalists typify the poetic landscape. In their attempts to convey a timeless mood in a landscape, the Tonalists frequently omitted all figures and human structures, knowing that any figure in a landscape, unless painted very small and non-descriptively, would not only draw the eye but create a story in the mind of the viewer. The Poet usually works with large shapes, soft atmospheres, muted color, and deep space. Many of the paintings of the Poet are pure inventions, created without any reference whatsoever.

George Inness, *The Song of the Heron* (right); Charles Eaton, *Sunset Trees*, (below); Whistler. *Nocturne Blue and Gold-Southampton Water* (bottom).



The Virtuoso

For the Virtuoso, the emphasis is less on *what* is painted than on *how* it is painted. The point of the painting is the *paint handling itself*– the surface of the painting and how skillfully the paint was applied. Below are examples from three virtuosic masters.



Cecilia Beaux, *The Man with the Cat* (above left); Richard Schmid, *Joy* (above right);
John Singer Sargent, *Landscape at Broadway* (below).



The Designer

The Designer concentrates on the shapes of the composition, with an emphasis on clear, usually hard-edged outlines. More attention is paid to the graphic quality of the large shapes than to what occurs within them. Soft edges and subtle gradations are often omitted to deliberately flatten the space in the painting. It's all about the design. With an emphasis on the abstract quality of the composition, some paintings can become nearly pure abstractions. A Designer's paintings are representational but never photographic.



Clockwise from top left: John Carlson, (*unknown title*); John Little, *Old Rue St. Paul*; Gustave Klimt, *Island in the Attersee*; Vincent Van Gogh, *Irises*.

(John Little is a terrific painter who lives and paints in Montreal, Canada.)

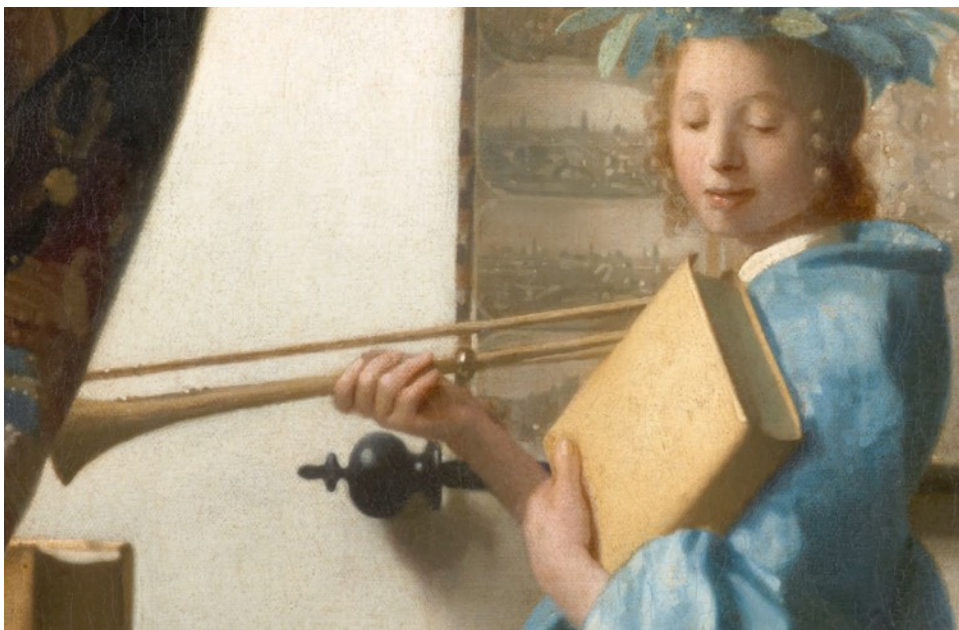
~ Primary Skills Required for Each Role ~

For the Storyteller: Drawing and Rendering

Figures and objects carry the narrative in a story painting; consequently, having the ability to render form, especially the figure and human-made objects, is crucial. Good drawing skills are mandatory. A Poet can take liberties with the appearance of a tree or rock in a landscape and no one would know or care, but a figure must read instantly and accurately as a human being. There's little room for error when establishing forms and proportions. If you wish to be storyteller, work on your drawing skills and your ability to render form in paint.

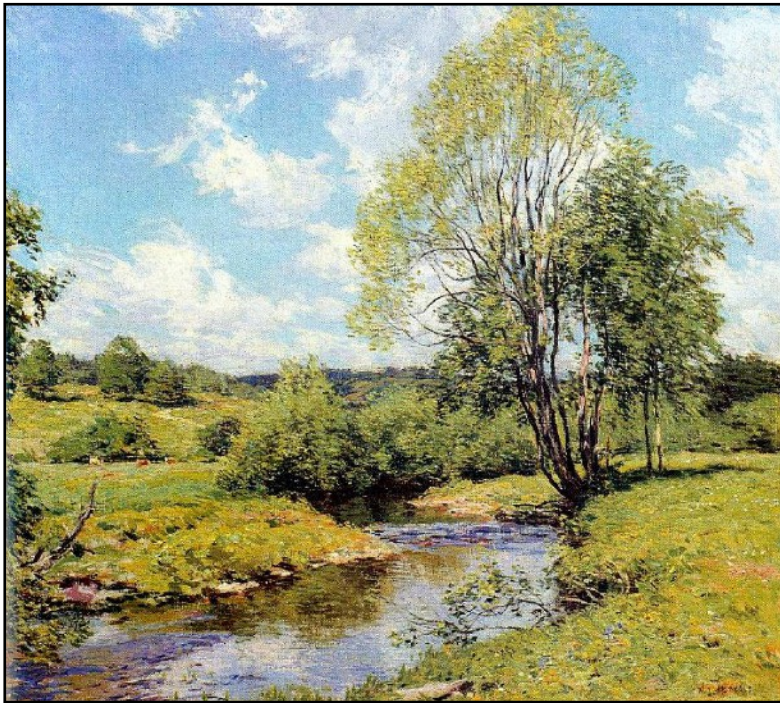


Johannes Vermeer, *The Art of Painting*

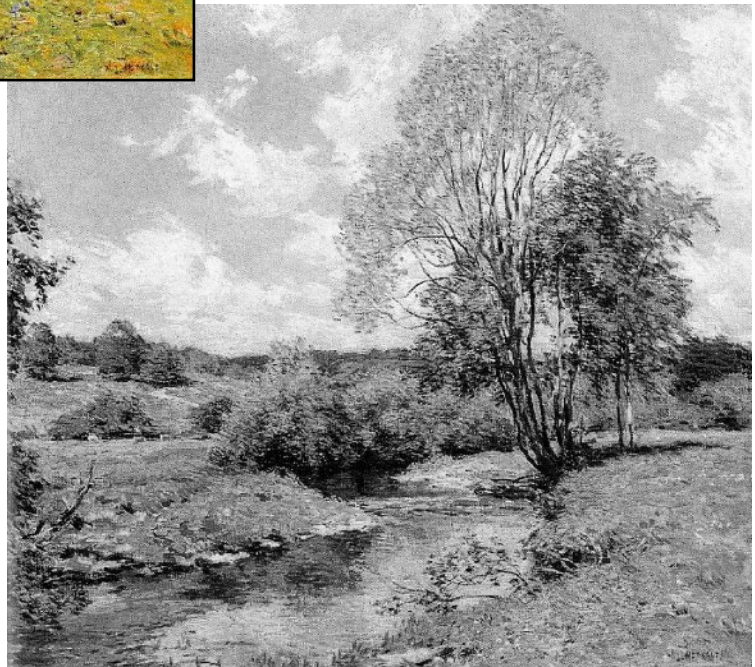
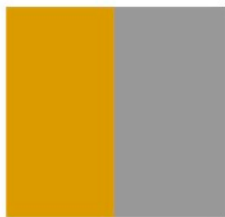


For the Reporter: Value and Color

For the reporter, who is most interested in recording what is seen, the subject matter can vary widely. Even within the landscape genre, anything the eye sees is fair game: figures in the landscape, cityscapes, seascapes, barren landscapes, winter scenes, etc. As with the Storyteller, good drawing skills are important, especially if the painting includes the figure or human-made objects. But because the intent is to translate into paint what is seen, as honestly and directly as possible, the most important skill to have is the ability to see and understand values and identify and mix colors. If you spot a green in a landscape and want to replicate it, you'll need to understand both its value and color and how it is influenced by surrounding values and colors. Nailing the values and mixing the colors accurately are key to becoming a good reporter.



Willard Metcalf, *Green Idleness*



For the Poet: Value and Edges.

The majority of paintings we consider poetic or moody often employ a soft atmosphere with subtle light, lost edges, and hazy forms. Because it is value that creates the illusion of light, space, and form, color is nearly always secondary to values in a mood painting. A good understanding of and an ability to portray light and deep space is necessary. And because a soft atmosphere blurs shapes as they recede, having the skills to use soft edges and subtle edge contrasts is paramount. The edges in a Poet's painting are the opposite of those of the Designer.

Dwight Tryon, *Twilight November*



For the Virtuoso: Painting Techniques.

To be a virtuosic painter, it's necessary to have superb technical skills in the use of any instrument or method that is used to apply the paint: brushes, palette knife, glazing, working thick and thin, etc. It also requires the confidence to work directly and the patience to focus on a single brushstroke and redo it if necessary. The goal is to carefully, deliberately, and slowly paint in a way that the brushwork appears spontaneous, loose, and quickly done. As Richard Schmid once commented, the way a painting appears isn't necessarily how it was painted.



Richard Schmid, *Joy*



For the Designer: Composition and Pattern

Every painter, regardless of the role he or she plays, needs good compositional skills. But a Designer requires an even greater ability to compose and an exquisite sensitivity to flat pattern and design—of how shapes interact to lead the eye and create a rhythm and flow in the painting. Shapes are hard-edge and the space is flat. It's no accident that those artists with graphic design in their backgrounds tend to excel when playing the role of the Designer.



Tom Thomson, *The Jack Pine*. (Thomson was a member of Canada's Group of Seven)

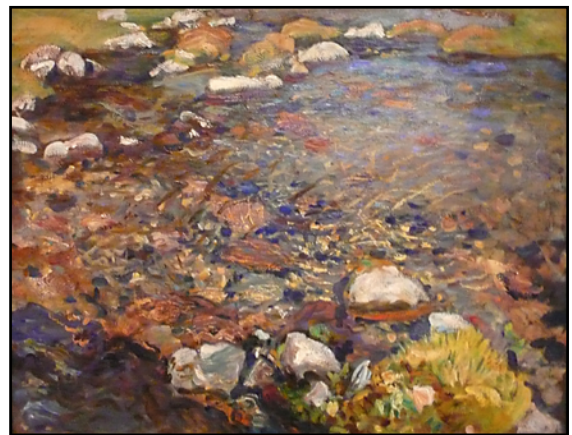


One Artist ~ Five Roles

The intention we have for a painting determines the role we'll play. But like actors, few painters stick to a single role during an entire career. Approaching different paintings with different intentions not only creates a more exciting body of work but takes us into new territory. We try, we fail, we learn, and we repeat that process again and again, eventually becoming better painters.

Some artists fearlessly tackled not only all roles but also all genres. Below are examples from John Singer Sargent playing five different roles in five different paintings.

Clockwise, from top left: *An Out-of-Doors Study* (**Storyteller**); water painting—unknown title (**Reporter**); *Boats in the water off Capri* (**Poet**); *Heaven* [mural] (**Designer**); and, finally, the portrait *Lady Agnew of Lachnaw* (**Virtuoso**). (Notice the subdued brushwork in the *Capri* painting.)



Last Thoughts. . .

One intention per painting, please. . .

Every painting needs one message—and *only one*. In the chapter on composition in his booklet, “*Landscape Painting*,” Birge Harrison wrote, “*Don’t try to say two things on one canvas.*” Great paintings always have a single, unambiguous message, the result of the artist having a single, clear intention. Know what you want to say and don’t get distracted.

Multiple roles in one painting.

Painting theory is one thing, actually painting is another. The reality is that we often play multiple roles in a single painting. A story painting can have a noticeable mood and be painted with bravura brushwork that leaps off the canvas, but if all three—story, mood, and brushwork—demand our attention equally, then the painting will suffer for it. Our intention demands that there be one **primary** role. “*Don’t try to say two things on one canvas.*”

Different Intentions for different paintings.

Our intention determines our role during the course of a painting, so stick with that role! But, as shown by the examples of Sargent’s work (above), it’s perfectly fine to have different intentions, and thus different roles, for different paintings. When painting in the studio, especially on large works, I work as a Tonalist—the role of the Poet—but when painting plein air, I adopt the role of the Reporter, honing my skills in seeing values and mixing colors. And in every painting I try to learn the technical skills of the Virtuoso. No rule says we can only play one role throughout our career.

Intention versus Style.

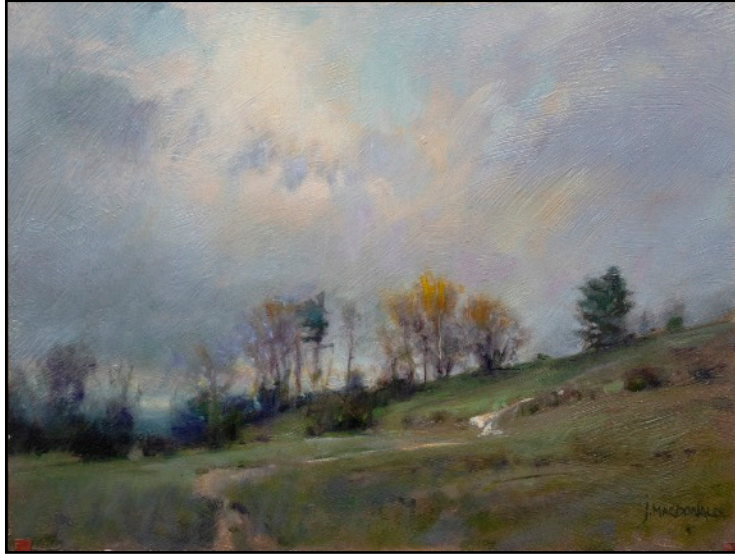
It’s helpful to distinguish between intention and style. Our *intention* is the message we want to convey in a single painting. *Style* is the unique character that runs through our entire body of work—it’s the sum of our intentions. I say little about style in these newsletters because I believe that a style should arise organically and spontaneously as we paint day by day, year in and year out. Almost without exception, every artist I’ve known who has spent their careers by trying to exactly copying someone else’s style ends up as a mediocre painter. Learn from others’ styles, then move on. Don’t just copy them. A style should arise out of us like a plant grows out of the ground—silently, slowly, and naturally. Just continue to paint and don’t worry about having a unique style—it comes with time.

It’s still a painting.

Whether a painting is a story, poem, report, performance, or design, it must *always* work as a painting—with a good composition, a clear value structure, interesting color contrasts, effective edge contrasts, and well orchestrated details. Any kind of painting, if painted poorly, will be a failure, regardless of how well a story is told, nature is recorded, a mood is captured, etc. It’s the painting that carries the message, so paint it as well as possible.

Painting raffle to benefit the American Tonalist Society.

All proceeds will be used to promote the American Tonalist Society's show, "Shades of Grey II" at the Salmagundi Club in New York City, April 28–May 7, 2023.



Tickets may be purchased via PayPal using the Society's account name: **americantonalist@aol.com**. The amount paid will indicate the number of tickets purchased. Ticket prices: 1 for \$15, 2 for \$25, and 5 for \$50

Words of Wisdom

"KNOW THYSELF"

– Carved in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo, c2000 BCE.

(Good advice to painters passed down from 4,000 years ago. "Know Thyself" was the first of three inscriptions. The other two were "Nothing in Excess" and "Certainty brings Ruin.")

2022 Workshops



October 14–16 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.

- THIS WORKSHOP IS FULL. WAITING LIST ONLY •

Following the October 2022 workshop, I'm retiring from teaching in-person workshops. I may continue to offer the occasional Zoom workshop and/or private sessions. Any future online workshops will be posted on my website: www.jmacdonald.com