

John MacDonald

November–December, 2022



Confessions of a Workshop Teacher

Lessons learned from nearly 20 years of teaching painting workshops.

During the summer of 2003, I taught my first workshop, a one-day plein air event at the Clark Museum in my hometown. At the time, I questioned the decision. Moving from the solitude and security of the studio to stand in front of a group of painters eager to learn . . . I was terrified, not least because I didn't think I was good enough to offer them anything. But as I moved beyond my fears and gained a little experience, the joy of teaching became pure bliss.

Four weeks ago, in mid-October, I taught my final in-person workshop, having decided several years ago that I'd retire in my 65th year. I'll miss teaching workshops but it's time to move on. (Rest assured, these newsletters will continue.)

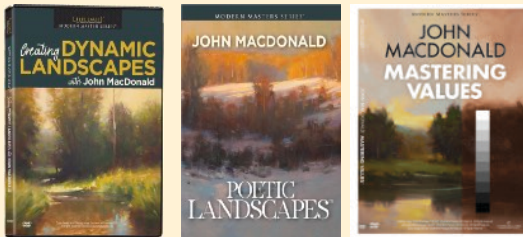
It was only after several years of teaching that I began to notice that the majority of painters in the workshops struggled with the same, small group of issues—technical and conceptual challenges—that prevented them from reaching their full potential as painters.

This newsletter will feature five of the most common and vexing problems that I saw in nearly

every workshop. I'll describe the issues, suggest solutions, and recommend previous newsletters for reading. And if it's any consolation, these are issues which I, too, still find challenging and work on continually. Painting never gets easy.



The studio at the Casa, one of my favorite workshop venues: artworkshopvacations.com



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!*



Problem #1: Poor Drawing Skills

Of all the problems painters struggled with in the workshops, the most universal and debilitating was poor drawing. Having solid drawing skills allows us not only to convincingly render objects in a painting but also, and more importantly, it gives us a heightened sensitivity to the rhythm of line and to the relationships between shapes, a skill that is crucial when **composing** a painting. If the ability to draw only pertained to objects and forms, it wouldn't be nearly as important to landscape painters as it is for portrait artists. After all, the proportions and details of a tree can be endlessly varied but there's little room for error if painting a nose. Drawing well isn't limited to rendering objects. I saw it in every workshop: the better the drawing skills of the painters, the better were the compositions of their paintings and the quality of their brushwork.



A good example showing the difference between drawing skills used to render objects and those skills used to compose a painting is Van Gogh's "Starry Night." The trees and buildings in the painting are rather crudely drawn yet the painting is exquisitely composed. Look at his charcoal or pen and ink drawings and it's immediately evident he had superb drawing skills, so if he chose to roughly draw an object in a painting, it was a be-

cause of his intent, not because he lacked the skill to draw it well. If you lack drawing skills, you can draw only one way—poorly. But having good skills, a painter can choose to draw crudely, loosely, or photo-realistically. It opens up a world of options when painting.



"Drawing is the root of everything." – Vincent Van Gogh

Solution: Draw, Draw, Draw!

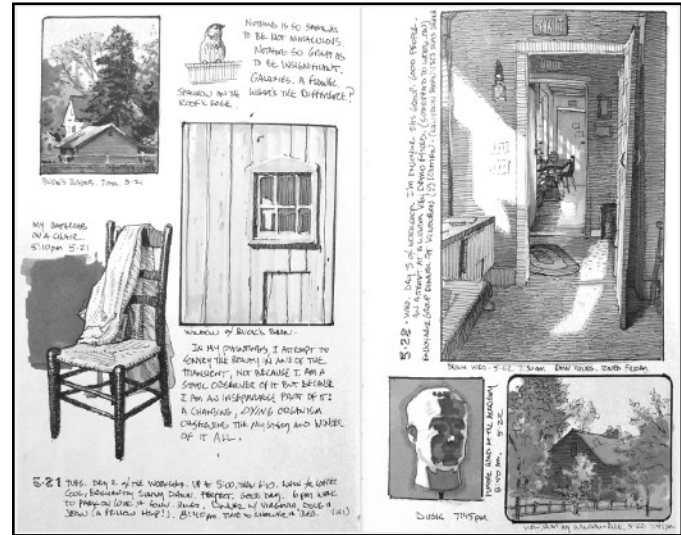
There's no quick fix for poor drawing skills. It can take years to learn to draw well. The only way to improve is to draw, draw, draw and then draw some more. Even if you're solely a landscape painter, don't limit drawing to landscapes and natural forms. Join a figure drawing group. If you can draw the human figure well, drawing a tree will be easy.

1) Keep a sketchbook and use it

Drawing is a muscle: use it or lose it. If you don't practice drawing when you don't need it, you won't have the skill when you do. Draw everything and anything you see.

2) Learn from others

Take a sketching workshop or sign up for a drawing class. Do anything you can to interest and motivate yourself to draw. (For urban sketching, try sketchbookskool.com or lizsteel.com)



3) See shapes, not things.

Drawing teaches us to see 3-D objects as 2-D shapes, an essential skill for composing and painting landscapes.



4) Draw before you paint.

Before beginning work on the Sistine Ceiling, Michelangelo created numerous studies. He didn't want to be solving drawing problems while he was painting. It's good advice: work out the drawing of objects *before* painting.

Problem #2: Enslaved by the Image

When working en plein air or from photos, many painters thoughtlessly follow the reference as if the goal of art were to make a perfect copy of what is seen. This approach will always lead to weak or failed paintings for the simple reason that nature never gives us a perfectly composed scene with flawless values, perfect color contrasts, and just the right amount of details. Successful painters understand that copying everything in a scene results in copying those elements that won't work in a painting—that are redundant, superfluous, or distracting. Great paintings are landscapes *translated*, never copied. (Or, as so many Tonalists did, even created entirely from the imagination.) Elements in nature must be simplified, changed, eliminated, or invented.



The above photo was featured in the July-August newsletter of this year, in the context of choosing a scene to paint. In that newsletter, I wrote:

*“Here’s an attractive scene near my home. Is there a good painting here? Probably, but not if I simply copy this photo as it is. In the photo, the two willow trees on the side “bookend” the center. The strongest contrasts in the foreground are directly below the strongest contrasts in the background. The sky is the same size in the photo as the hills. The path is too wide, the overall shape of the dark trees in the mid ground is uninteresting. The more I study the photo, the more I see other problems. Yes, it’s a pretty scene but the goal is to create a successful **painting**.”*

Adopt the mindset of experienced painters and simply take it for granted that, no matter how inspirational a photo can be, changes large and small will be needed to create a good painting.

SOLUTION: Create, Don't Copy!

The most effective way to move away from a literal interpretation of a photo is to force yourself to adopt an entirely different value structure and/or color palette for the painting. It will instantly break the habit of mindlessly following the photo. There are other ways we can choose to move away from the photo. The most common are:

Changing value keys

Stealing from the Masters

Painting Over an Old Painting

Changing the season or time of day

Changing color keys

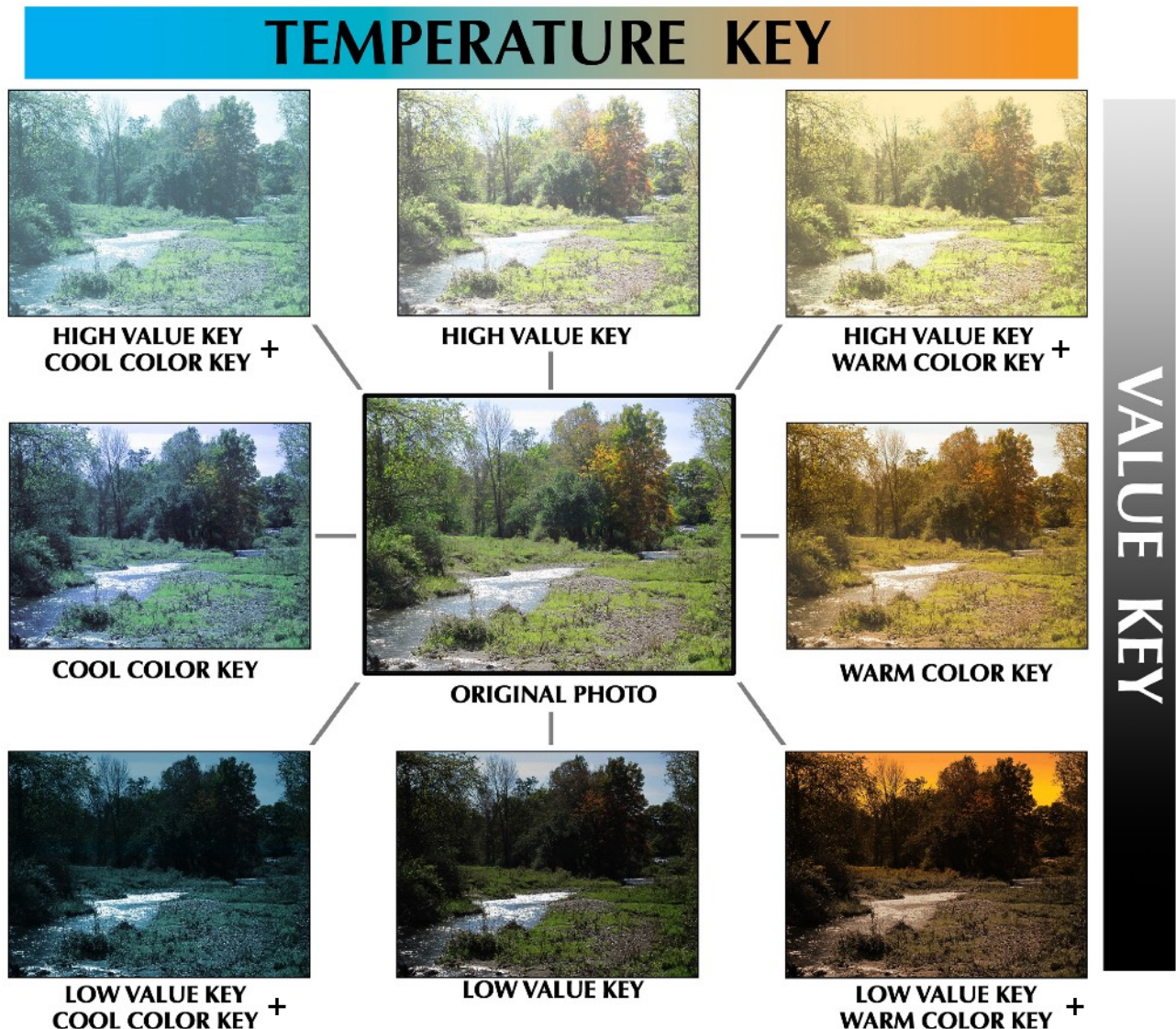
Using a Limited Palette

Painting Directly from a Tonal Sketch

Combining two or more photos

In this newsletter, I'm giving examples of only the changes in keys and using a painting from an old master. An explanation of the other suggestions can be found in the recommended newsletters and the *Outdoorpainter.com* article, listed below.

Changing value and/or color keys. Here, I use a single photo to demonstrate the concept. One photo can result in eight alternative approaches to making a painting.



Three examples of going beyond the photo:

Changing the Color Key

Below, a winter photo that is quite cool has been translated into a warm, winter painting.



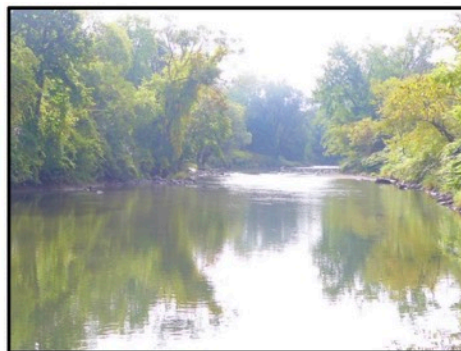
Changing Seasons and the Time of Day

Here, a summer photo has been used as reference for a winter dusk painting. Where to find reference for the winter palette and light? Refer to photos of winter scenes, the paintings of winter dusks by other artists, or a more challenging option: invent what is needed, based on memory.



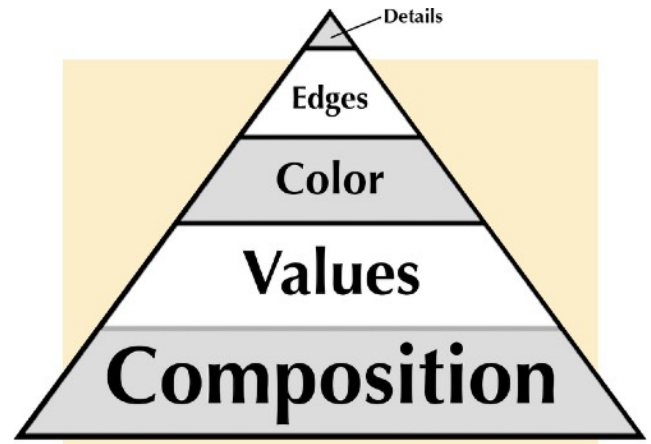
Stealing from an old Master

I took the palette from a Monet and combined it with my photo (middle) to create the painting (right). (On the back of the painting, I credited Monet with the color scheme. Stealing from other artists is okay but give the other artist credit!)



Problem #3: Seduced by Color and Detail

Only five elements comprise every painting: composition, values, colors, edges, and details. In the workshops and videos, I used the pyramid (right) to show that these five elements are not of equal importance. There is a hierarchy, with composition being by far the most important element, followed closely by value relationships. (It's nearly impossible to adequately compose a scene with only outlined shapes. Values must be assigned to the shapes in order to see the critical value *relationships* between the shapes of the composition.) Finally, color contrasts, edge contrasts, and details follow, in that order of importance.



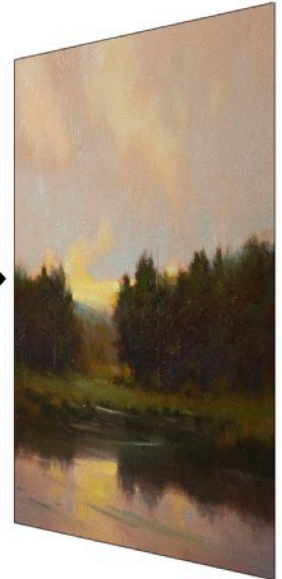
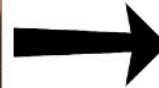
Our painting process should be designed around this hierarchy. And because the composition and value structure are absolutely critical to the success of the painting, then it's only logical to begin the painting process by focusing on composition and values. Color is in the middle of the hierarchy. It can be dealt with after establishing the composition and foundation values. Lastly, details are the least important of the five. Details can wait until the painting is well under way. *To begin a painting by focusing on color and fussing with details is like trying to build a pyramid from its point upwards. It will always be unstable and will inevitably collapse. And so too with a painting. Don't start with the details!*



There are beautiful color contrasts in this photo and (as with almost all photos) more than enough detail to play with, but will it make a good painting? That will depend on whether or not the larger shapes can be effectively designed and their value relationships established to create an attractive and interesting composition. When judging a photo as possible reference, start by examining the essentials. If it doesn't offer good shapes and values, it's irrelevant how attractive are the colors or details. Using it as reference is unlikely to result in a good painting.

SOLUTION: Stop, Pause, and *Think!*

Before touching a brush, stop and think. Remind yourself of your intention: why are you painting this scene? Then move to the composition, designing value shapes until the result will allow the message to be conveyed. Then consider the color scheme and placement of details. There's a good reason that many of the old masters began their paintings with sketching and drawing, then moved to a full underpainting, and only then worked on color and added the needed, essential details.



Begin with Intention . . .

compose with shapes of value. . .

establish secondary values. . .

and *then* decide on the color palette and details.



The paintings of **Thomas Moran** (1837–1926) feature beautiful color contrasts with ample details, which are often what first attracts us to his paintings. But behind the luscious color and detail lies a well composed structure with often dramatic value contrasts. He established the overall structure first and then proceeded to the color and details.

Problem #4: Wanting Everything in the Painting

Painters seduced by details and color and feeling compelled to copy everything they see in their reference will invariably create complex and confusing paintings, often with too many focal points. We must identify the essentials and be willing to simplify or eliminate the rest.

Whether painting from a photo or plein air, nature gives us far more visual information than we need in a painting. But it's difficult to learn restraint. We all have a tendency to forget the message and the focal point as we fall in love with every area of a scene. We want to put in all the detail and luscious color we see. It's a tendency and a habit we need to avoid.

“Emphasize the emphatic and keep it simple. . . It’s hard to restrain yourself from being caught up in every single range of values, every single range of tones . . . It’s hard to stop being trapped into the Siren’s song of tonal complexity – you shouldn’t put all phenomena into every painting.” – Brian Sweetland

SOLUTION #1: Slow down!

Determine why you want to paint the scene, which will reveal the focal point and help you decide what will be important to include in the painting and what will be a distraction. And then, as you paint, **SLOW DOWN**. Step back after every few brushstrokes. Ask yourself if the brushstroke you just added to the painting was truly necessary. Did it help or hurt the painting, reinforce or obscure the message? There are few techniques that will keep you from overworking or adding too much superfluous junk to a painting than slowing down and evaluating your choices after every few brushstrokes. You’ll be able to keep the overall intention of the painting in mind, catch mistakes immediately, and avoid overloading a painting with unnecessary stuff.



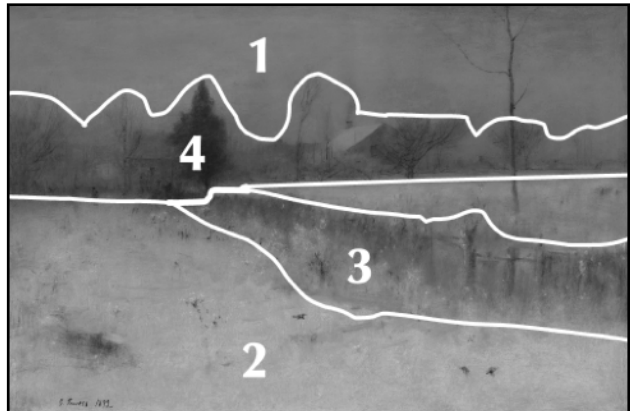
This photo from early spring features emerging green foliage. There's a hazy mistiness of green and purple throughout the image. That's what I want to capture. Above is the block in. Although far from finished, I've stopped painting in order to spend time evaluating it. I know that the more details and value contrasts I add, the painting will have less atmosphere and the sense of that green mist I want to portray. I deliberately stopped because I know, as I start working details and secondary values into the painting, I'm likely to go too far. It's far easier to go slowly and keep the painting working than to rush and then need to spend hours of repainting.

For this winter painting, I eliminated or simplified the details in the snowy banks in the lower half of the painting. Had I included those dark, shadowed shapes in the snow in the foreground and middle, they would have detracted from the detail in the light and trees, where I wanted the eye to rest. All those foreground details aren't needed to convey the message of the painting!



SOLUTION #2: Balance areas of complexity with areas of simplicity.

It was George Inness who showed me the importance of varying and balancing the amount of details and contrasts within the major shapes of a composition. A painting in which every compositional shape features equal amounts of detail and contrasts will appear confusing, while those with too little will seem boring. Inness would structure his paintings so that the shapes contained different amounts of details and contrasts in a clear hierarchy.



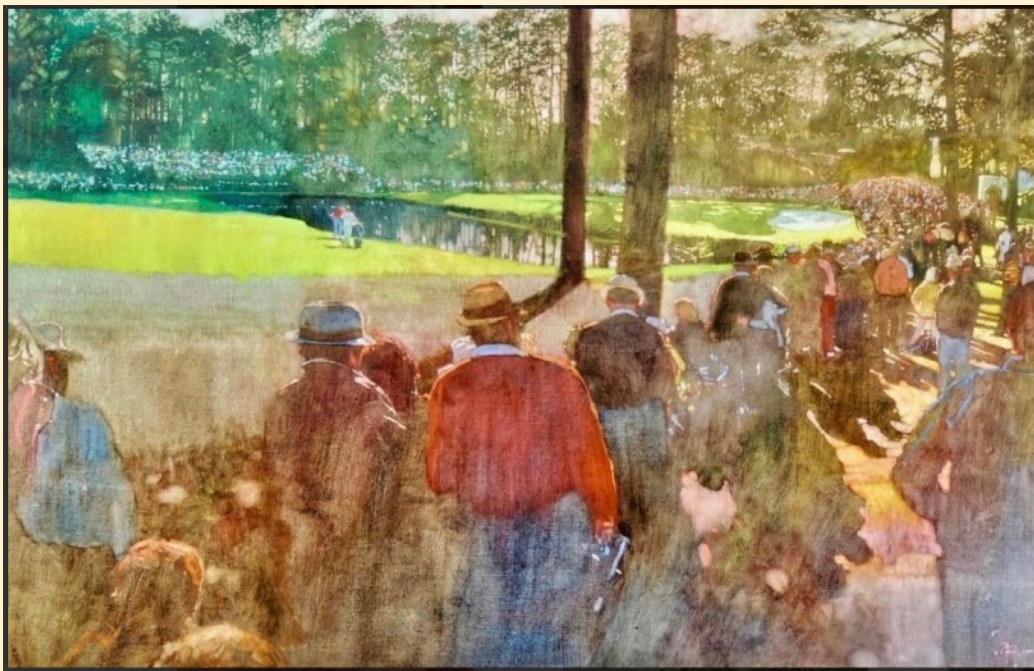
In this painting, the sky (1) is the simplest shape, consisting a nearly a single value with very subtle color contrasts. The foreground snow (2) is only slightly more complex, with scattered, suggestive details and close shifts of value. The fence line (3) is noticeably more complex in detail and value contrast but it's the horizontal band (4) that features the most detail and contrasts. It's no coincidence the focal point is in #4. Yet it's the simplicity of #1 and #2 that allow the focal point to attract the eye. It's the nothing that allows the something to stand out.

Problem #5: Wanting Easy Answers

“I want to paint just like you.”

My style of painting developed slowly, a result of years of work to understand concepts and discover techniques that would allow me to convey what I wanted say. The same is true for any experienced painter. Part of that development comes from learning from other painters. Wanting to understand the work of other artists is normal and beneficial. It's never a problem unless the desire to learn leads only to our wanting to copy them. Copying is a form of laziness, a desire to adopt the surface attributes of an artist's style without spending the effort and time to understand the concepts that led them to their style in the first place.

As an illustration major in school, I fell in love with the work of Bernie Fuchs. From the 1960s through the 1970s, he was considered one of the top illustrators in the U.S. He had developed a style of using oil washes that created wonderful color and light, often by lifting off paint to create highlights. His style was unique, yet within a very short time, some illustrators began imitating his technique. Their work never had the same quality. Bernie is still revered and remembered. No one remembers those who merely copied him.



SOLUTION: Learn from others but don't merely copy.

Make the effort to understand the painters you admire, both their concepts and techniques, then apply what you've learned to your intentions and style of painting. That's how styles evolve. Yes, copying another's work can be part of the learning process but it only works if you take what you've learned and apply it to your work, staying true to your artistic voice.

That's why these newsletters exist. I want to share concepts and techniques not so you can learn to paint like me but so you can discover more quickly what it means to paint like *you*. That's far more beneficial than only learning to copy the surface technique of my paintings.

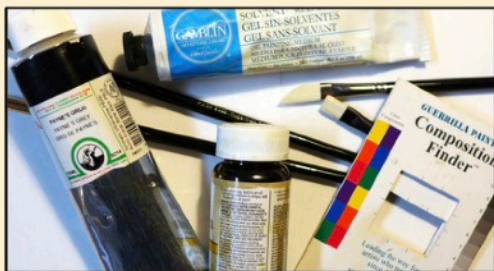
“I just need the right materials”

Far too much emphasis is placed on having the “right” brand of brushes, paints, media, panels, linen, etc. Yes, it’s better not to use student-grade paints on cardboard with brushes that fall apart but, otherwise, the brand of the materials isn’t going to matter much. (Yes, watercolor demands quality brushes but my gripe isn’t with quality, it’s with the emphasis on brands.)

Let’s conduct a mind experiment: Here I am, at the world’s most prestigious plein air competition, facing off with John Singer Sargent. Painting the same scene, we stand side by side.



I’m using the most expensive and exclusive brands of paints, media, brushes, easel, and paper towels.



Poor Johnny Sargent has this...



Who’s going to win? (Hint: what makes a great painting, the materials or the painter?)

SOLUTION: Discover the materials that work for you and just paint.

It’s the painting that matters: the message and how you convey it. Less important is the technique you use, how you paint, whether with a brush or palette knife, loosely or tightly, slowly or quickly. Least important of all is the brand of materials you use. In my workshops, there were painters who used Rosemary brushes with Old Holland paints on the finest Belgium linen. I also had painters on a budget who brought only the materials they could afford. I *never* saw a correlation between the materials used and the quality of the paintings. Focus on your painting and less on the brand of materials you use. After all, if there were a brand of brushes or pigments that really allowed us to paint like Sargent or Sorolla or Beaux, wouldn’t every artist already be using them? I certainly would!

Recommended Newsletters

Problem #1: Poor Drawing Skills

- Aug-Sept 2015 – a list of recommended books about drawing
- Nov-Dec 2018 – the tonal study
- Sept.-Oct. 2019 – sketching
- May-June 2020 – thinking 2-D rather than 3-D

Problem #2: Enslaved by the Image

- Dec. 2013 – using two photos
 - April-May 2015 – painting from photos
 - Jan.-Feb 2016 – stealing from Old Masters, part I
 - Sept-Oct 2018 – stealing from Old Masters, part II
 - Mar.-April 2019 – value keys
 - July-Aug. 2019 – color keys
 - Mar-April 2020 – a summary of six projects
 - Jan-Feb. 2020 – a few examples of paintings based on photos
- See also <https://www.outdoorpainter.com/7-art-studio-projects-for-difficult-times/>

Problem #3: Seduced by Color and Detail

- Sept. 2013 – underpaintings
- May-June 2017 – the basics of painting
- Jan.-Feb 2020 – identifying the essentials
- Nov.-Dec. 2020 – dealing with details
- July-Aug. 2022 – starting a painting

Problem #3: Seduced by Color and Detail

- Jan-Feb. 2020 – identify the essentials
- Nov.-Dec. 2020 – dealing with details

John Pototschnik
(www.potoschnik.com)

A painter based in Texas, John has been doing a series of paintings in which some sections of the paintings are in color while others are monochromatic. They're perfect examples of the fact that it's value, not color, that creates the illusion of light, space, and form. Nice work, John!



In Memory of Steve Doherty • November 2022

The Streamline blog, *InsideArt*, (well recommended) recently posted a notice that Steve Doherty had passed away. Beside being a dedicated painter, Steve was the editor of *American Artist* for 42 years and *PleinAir* magazine for 7 years, as well as an author of several books. Although not recently in contact with Steve, I owe him some credit for what reputation and success I have as a painter.

In 2012, I was asked to be the judge for the Quick Draw competition for Plein Air Vermont. Prior to announcing the awards, I gave a brief talk about the challenges of plein air painting. Evidently, Steve liked what he heard because he later ask me to submit an article to PleinAir magazine. From there, I began attending the Publisher's Invitationals and was then invited to be on the faculty at the Sante Fe Plein Air Convention, which led to filming three videos for Streamline. His interest in my work in 2012 started it all.

He was a serious painter and yet equally dedicated to helping artists and spreading the joy of painting. His energy and generosity will be missed.



Words of Wisdom

“Nothing is more dangerous than an idea when it's the only one you have.”

– **Émile Chartier, philosopher**

“The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas”

– **Linus Pauling, chemist/author**

Have a wonderful and healthy Holiday Season

Happy Painting!