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July–August, 2022



The Start Determines the End

“The most important ally in the study of painting is the art of thinking.”

– Edgar Payne, in *Composition of Outdoor Painting*

The beginning is the most important part of the painting process, with the success of a painting usually being determined before we even touch a brush, before we begin painting.

Creating a painting can be broken down into four steps. First, we choose a scene to paint based on an inspired attraction. Secondly, we must then clarify why we wish to paint that particular scene, which is our intention for the painting. Next is the building of a structure for the painting based on analysis of the scene and our knowledge of painting. Finally, we paint—drawing on our inspiration, analysis and knowledge of technique.

Those crucial first three steps come into play at the beginning of the painting process.

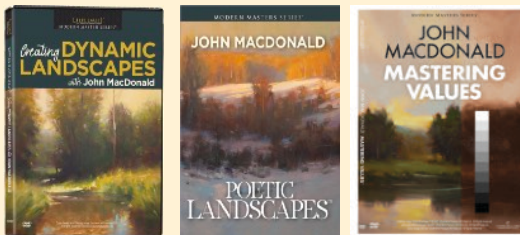
POET and ENGINEER

So much emphasis is placed on the importance of inspiration in the painting process—our blissfully

and spontaneously painting while “in the flow”—that we often forget how much analysis, judgment, and sheer thinking goes into a good painting. If we wish to produce good paintings, we need to be both a poet *and* an engineer. Paintings that are all poet can be full of feeling but usually appear amateurish. Paintings that are all engineer can be dazzling displays of technical prowess but are almost always soulless and lifeless. It’s only when heart and mind combine do great paintings result.

But when beginning a painting, we must first adopt the role of the engineer. As Edgar Payne reminds us, we need to practice the art of thinking—focus on creating a solid composition and a good value structure in the painting and then we can throw ourselves into the role of a poet and romp and play with color and details.

Let’s look in detail at starting a painting.



PaintTube Videos

Interested in my paintings process? In “Dynamic Landscapes” and “Poetic Landscapes,” I go into 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!*



Choosing the Scene

No one can tell us what should inspire us nor how we can seduce the Muse. Each of us has a unique voice, which can be found only by painting, while constantly developing and strengthening the connection between our warm hearts and our cool heads. Different artists are inspired by different scenes and even by different aspects of a single scene. But choosing a scene to paint based solely on inspiration is but part of what results in a great painting. We also need the intellectual and technical skills to judge whether a beautiful scene can result in a beautiful painting. Here are a few guidelines to consider when choosing a scene:

Create, don't copy. Nature gives us beautiful scenes but it's not her job to give us beautiful paintings. There are stunning scenes that will never translate into successful paintings. Rare is the scene that is perfectly composed with the right value and color relationships and with details in perfect locations. If we copy what we see—whether painting plein air or from photos—we copy the flaws in the scene into our painting. The result can be a good copy but it's always a poor painting. Take it for granted that we'll need to make significant changes to the elements in the scene as we translate what we see into paint. Representation is *translation*, not copying.



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*.

Separate the Story from the Structure.

Norman Rockwell is one of the greatest American storytellers but it's not his stories that make his paintings work *as paintings*. The content, message, story, etc. of a painting and its structure are two entirely different things. Don't confuse the content of a scene: an old barn, a pretty seascape, a foggy meadow; with the visual information that is needed to create a good painting: the design of the shapes, the value relationships, color contrasts, edge contrast, and the placement of details.



In Rockwell's painting, *Freedom from Want* (1943), it's the story that appeals to us (those of us from the States) on an emotional level. But working behind the scenes is a superb composition with a masterful handling of values and color. This is an incredibly detailed and busy scene but it never feels overworked or too busy because of the strength and simplicity of the design. The focal point is unambiguous and the eye is led there by his handling of value and drawing.

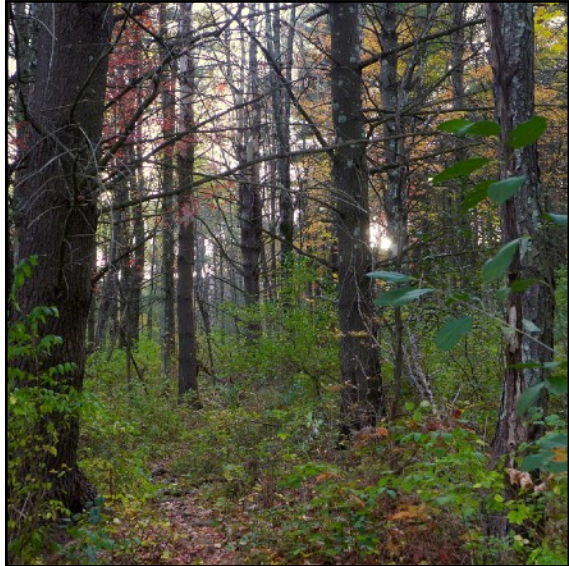
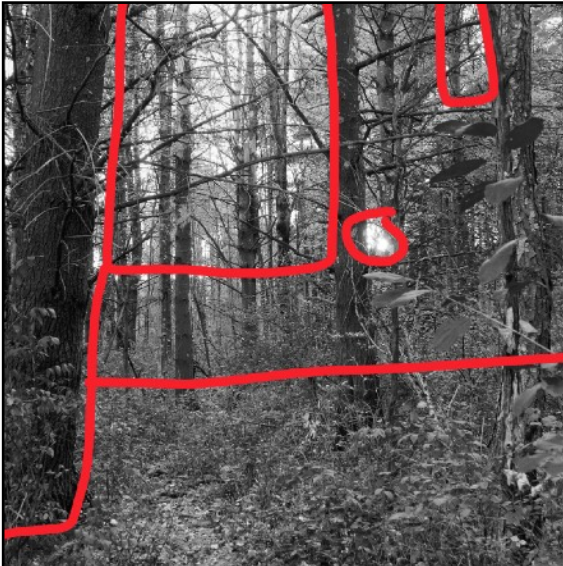
The composition is symmetrical yet offset by other elements (the woman serving the turkey, the framed print on the wall, and the varying heights of the heads of seated figures) which break and hide the symmetry. It's beautifully composed, structured, and painted. It's those elements, not the emotional story, that make this work as a painting.



Look for large shapes, not little things. Even if our intention is to tell a story, we still must build a solid structure for the painting. The structure is based on the composition and the values relationships of the major shapes that comprise the composition. Don't get distracted by little details or minor effects, no matter how beautiful or how wonderful the story they tell.



After the initial flash of inspiration draws us into a scene, identify the largest shapes and decided if they can be worked into a good composition. When feeling inspired by a scene, I immediately look for simple, large shapes. In the lake photo above, by squinting I can easily reduce the scene to three shapes: sky, water, and the land. The forest scene below is much more complex but the process is the same. Can it be broken into large shapes? In this case, it can. But if not—if I can't simplify a scene into two to five shapes—I'll move on to a different location or photo.



Asking “Why”

The single most important question to ask ourselves before we begin painting is “Why?”. Why do we want to paint this scene? What is the attraction, the source of our inspiration? What’s our intention? (Thank you to [Bob Masla](#) for giving me this word). It’s *essential* we understand exactly why we want to paint a scene because the answer to this question will determine the message, the focal point, and the composition. If we don’t know why we want to paint a scene or what we find so attractive in it, our painting will fail. We must be clear on what we want to convey in the painting and to keep it in mind during the entire painting process, from the initial tug of inspiration to signing the finished painting. Ask yourself, *What’s the point of the painting?*



Being by nature a Tonalist, I have always gravitated to the mood of a landscape rather than the any story told by the objects within it. In this scene, I’m attracted to its soft and quiet mood, the subdued lighting, the muted and uniform color of the landforms, the pattern of lily pads and clouds, and especially the sky near the horizon just left of center – the subtle patterns of clouds and the interesting silhouettes of the trees. If that’s to be the center of interest in the painting, then I know that I must avoid being seduced by other areas of the painting or non-essential details or value/color relationships.

Identifying, at the very beginning, the point of the painting helps keep me on track during its development, ensuring that the painting will have a single, clear message.

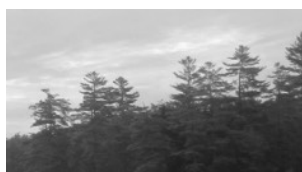
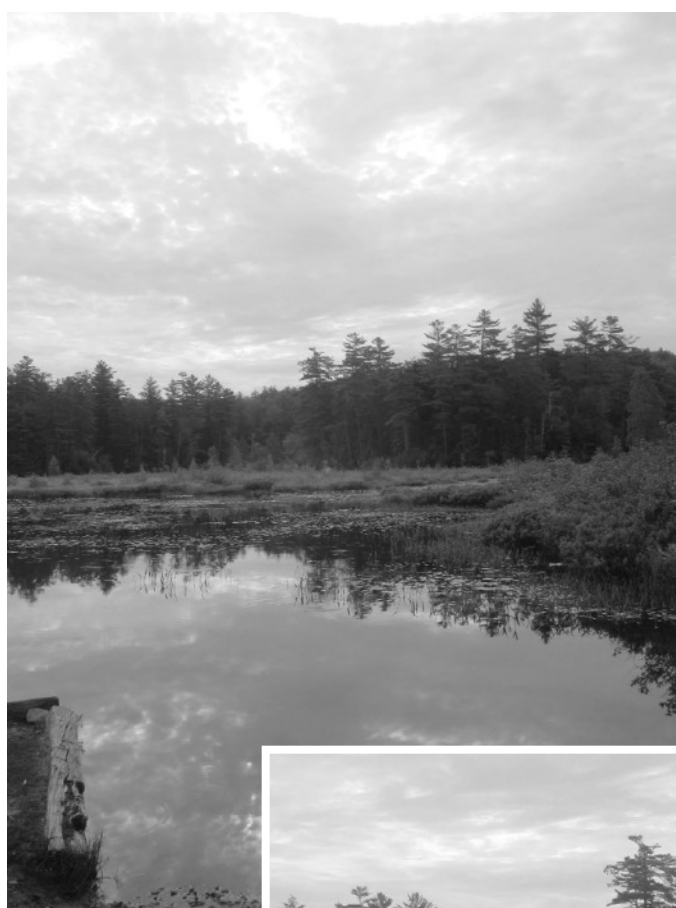
Building a painting is no different than building a home. No homebuilder starts by choosing the colors of the bathroom towels. The initial focus is always on developing the overall plan of the house, building a solid foundation and then framing the floors, walls, and roof, almost all of which will be hidden when the house is finished. Concentrate on building a good structure for the painting and then worry about the color of the towels.

Identify the Essentials

The scene has been chosen and our intention is clear but intentions must be expressed concretely. We have only paint and the visual vocabulary in which to express our intention. It's not enough to know that I want to capture the mood of a morning lake scene, the pathos of an abandoned barn, or the majesty of a sparkling dawn sky. What is it *specifically and concretely* that creates the effects we see and which inspire us? Every painting consists of only five elements: composition, values, colors, edges, and details (in that order of importance). We need to identify *in painting terms* what we're seeing in the landscape that fuels our inspiration and intention. For instance, if it's the light in a scene, we need to analyze how to create the illusion of that light using value relationships, edge contrasts, and color contrasts. At this point in the process, intention is being translated into technique through analysis and thinking.



Being attracted to the light in the sky at the horizon and the landforms below it, I take time to analyze their value relationships, the variety of the edges of the trees and distant hill against the sky, and the patterning of the lily pads and shadowed edges of the grasses. The more time spent on understanding the scene, the more likely the painting will work.



Design the Composition

Paintings succeed or fail in their compositions. It is the single most important component in a painting. Skipping through the stage of composing the painting will almost always guarantee a weak or failed painting. The more time spent establishing a good composition, the less time will be spent later in correcting mistakes or trying to save a dead-on-arrival painting. Create a good composition in values and two-thirds of the work is complete.

GUIDELINES FOR COMPOSING THE PAINTING

A painting must convey only one message. A painting with multiple messages—focal points of equal weight—will always fail. Identify what the message is and everything else should be minimized or eliminated. All other rules of composition can be bent or broken except for this rule. Before starting to design the composition, settle on the message and keep it constantly in mind.



In this simple example, the sky and its reflection are equally interesting but I cannot make both equally interesting in the painting. To keep from splitting the focal point, either the sky or the water must dominate. If I fall in love with both and want to paint both, the only solution is to create two paintings. One message per painting!

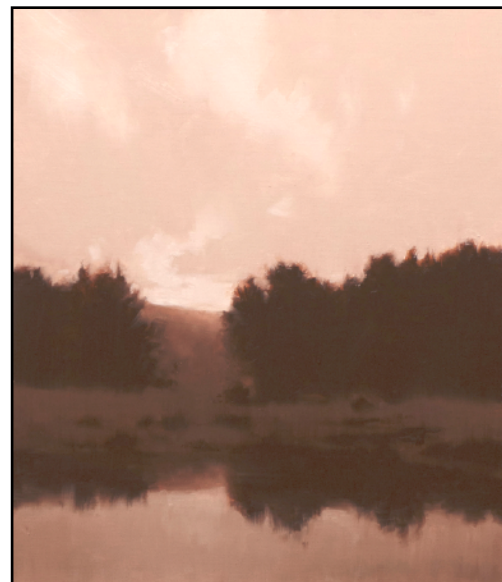
Gather as much visual information as possible.

The more visual information at hand, the better. Use photos (even if painting plein air), sketches, color studies, etc. Sit with the scene for awhile, study it. Don't be in a rush to get painting!



Michelangelo didn't paint the Sistine Ceiling alla prima. Hours of preparation preceded the work. Painting a landscape is no different. Do the homework first!

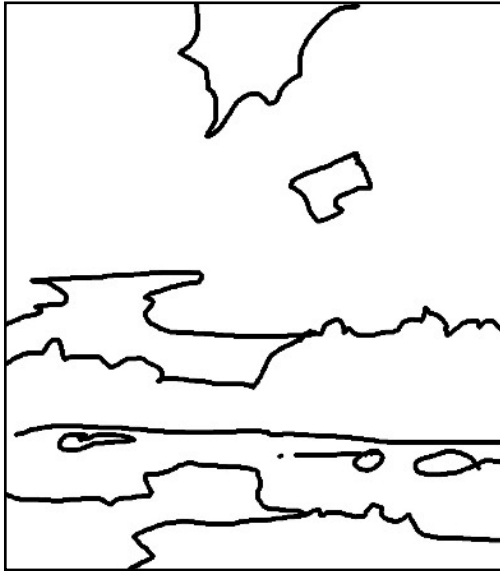
Think big at the beginning. A secret to composing is to concentrate on only the two to five largest shapes that make up the scene. Unless essential for the focal point, ignore all details and small shapes, all color relationships, and anything other than the most important large shapes.



This was the block in of the underpainting for the Mastering Values video. Notice that it's only a few shapes of values with hints of gradients. This is what we're looking for when analyzing a scene: shapes of value.

Work with flat shapes of VALUE, not with outlines. The values of the largest shapes—and their relationships to each other—will make or break the composition. When sketching a composition, using only outlined shapes is worthless. It's only when we assign values to the shapes and establish the correct value relationships will we be able to adequately judge the composition.

How to see large shapes of values? *SQUINT!*

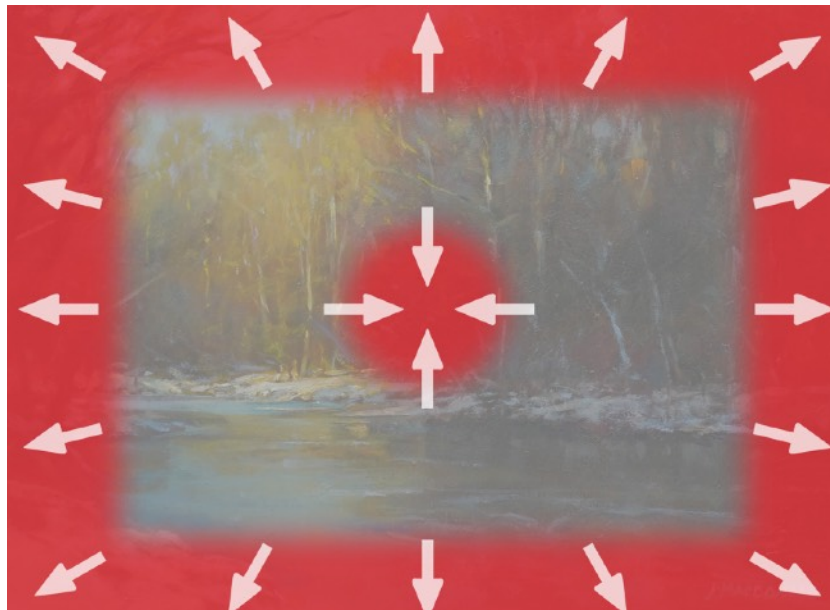


As a compositional sketch, outlined shapes without values tell us nothing. We can assign a hundred different values to each shape but only a few of the combinations will work. If we make these decisions while painting, we're much more likely to be distracted by color and detail and forget about values. We must establish the values of the shapes and their relationships at the beginning. The tonal sketch (above) and the blocked in underpainting (left) gave me the information I needed to conclude that the composition would work.

Forget Color. Color is irrelevant when composing the painting. Value, not color, creates the illusion of space, light and form and allows us to judge if the composition will work. It's much easier to focus on the composition when free of the distraction of color.

Forget 3-D. It seems counterintuitive, but working with 2-D shapes of values and their relationships is the most effective way to create the illusion of 3-dimensional space and light. Even in the simple block-in (above) there is a convincing sense of light and space. Establish correct value relationships and the illusion of space and light will appear.

The Square-Bagel Theory of Composition. Avoid placing a focal point dead center, which will trap the eye, or on an edge of the canvas, which will lead the eye off the painting. If the composition works, the focal point(s) can be nearly anywhere in the unshaded area below.



The Focal Point(s). A successful painting can feature multiple focal points *so long as they don't attract the eye equally*. Most good paintings will have a hierarchy of areas that attract the eye, with the focal point simply being the strongest. Learning where to place them and how to vary and modulate their strengths depends on developing an ability to sense how the eye moves through a painting. The more sensitive we are to eye movement in a painting, the more skilled we become in structuring our own paintings using multiple points of interest.

Contrasts. Focal points are created by contrasting values, colors, edges, shapes, amounts of detail, etc. The stronger the contrasts we put into an area of the painting, the more the eye will be drawn to that area. In the two examples below (taken from the July-August 2018 newsletter) notice how the focal point shifts from the foreground (left image) to the background (right image) solely by changing value contrasts and adjusting color saturation.



Zoom In – Zoom Out. A single scene can result in dramatically different compositions simply by zooming in or out. Painting a small section of a scene often creates a sense of intimacy. Pulling out from the same view can convey a feeling of space and openness. Because it can dramatically change the message of a painting, when choosing to zoom in or out, revisit your intention. Is the resulting image in line with what you want to say in the painting?

Using the photo, if I wish to convey a sense of atmosphere and open space, with the focal areas being the sky meeting the background trees, I'd choose the image on the right as the basis for the painting. But if my intention is to show the patterns of the lily pads and the light on the water and create a more intimate scene, I would zoom in, as in the image below.

Determine your intention and then decide if it requires zooming in or out.



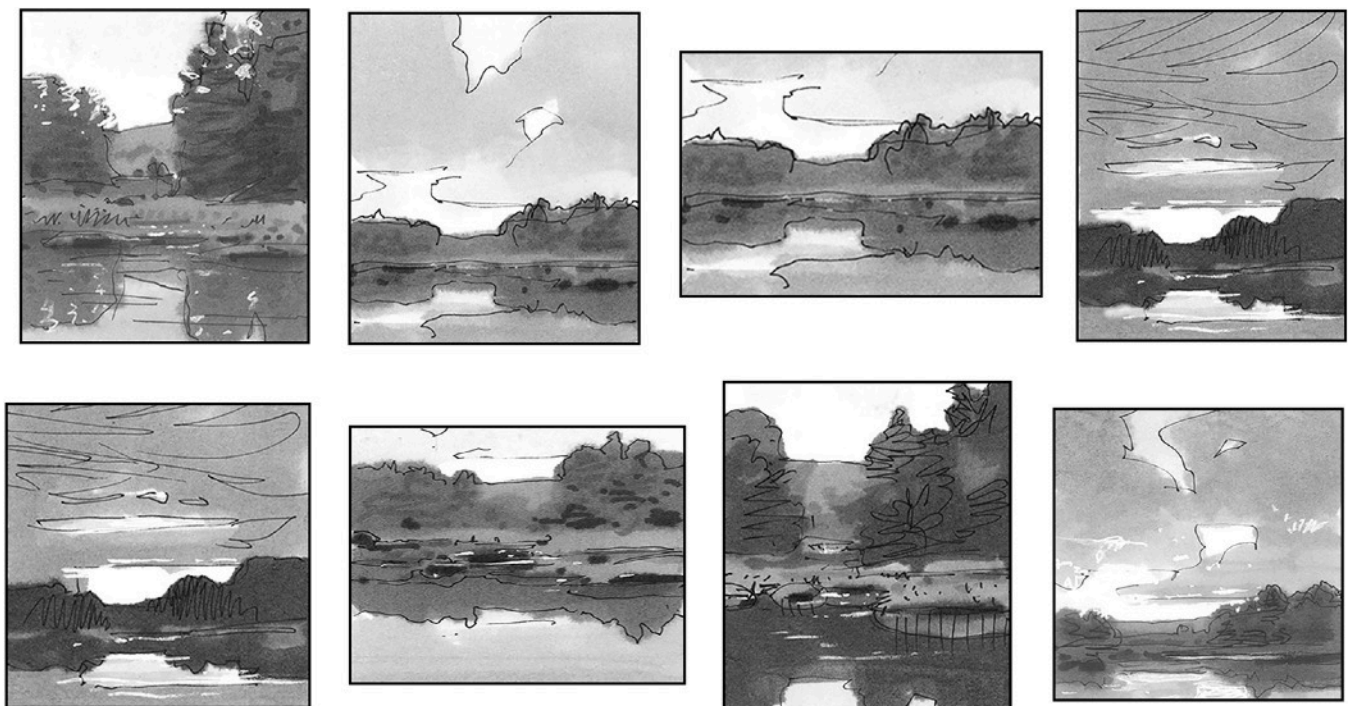
A single scene with good shapes and values can provide us with multiple paintings as we vary not only formats and the cropping of the scene but by changing the lighting or even the time of year.

Different Formats, Different Cropping. A scene with good painting potential can be composed in different formats and/or cropped differently, which can subtly affect the message or mood of the scene. When on location, use an adjustable viewfinder as an aid. Below is photo that was cropped in several different formats. (Taken from the April 20015 newsletter.)

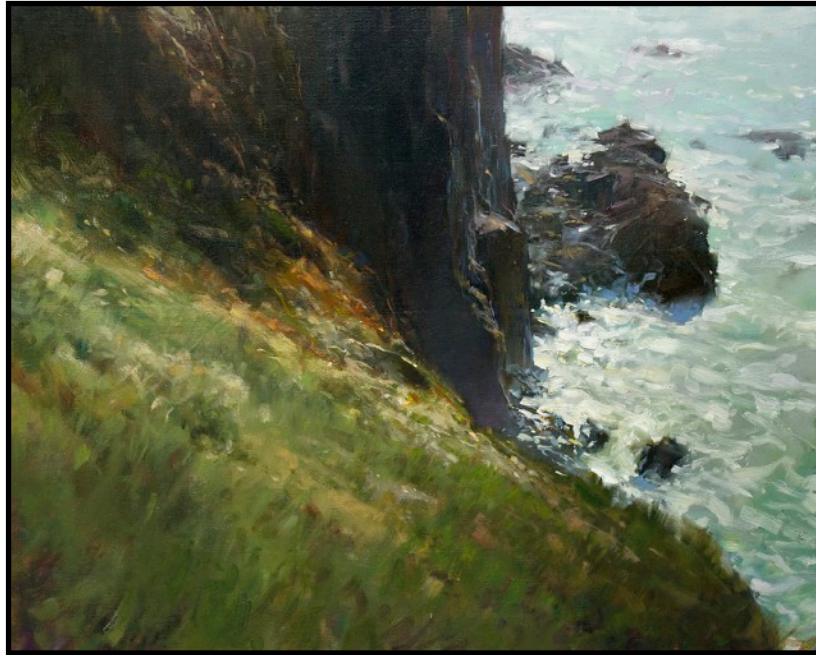


Tonal Sketches. Creating small tonal thumbnails is an ideal way to quickly explore different compositions in a variety of formats. They provide us with a quick, efficient way to identify what we most need before we begin painting: the format of the painting, the major shapes of the composition and their value relationships, and the focal point.

Sketching also quiets our minds, warms up the eyes, and gives us time to become more familiar with the elements of the scene. Working in a small format forces us to simplify and to identify only the essentials. Working solely in values allows us to identify the crucial value relationships between foundation values and frees us from the distraction of color.



Get off to a good start. When inspired by a scene, we're always tempted to jump immediately into color. But slowing down, thinking about what and why we're painting, then working out the composition and values first, will always lead to a better painting. Try it!



Water and Rock, oil on linen panel

24x30

Words of Wisdom

“Don’t cling to a mistake just because you spent a lot of time making it”

– *unknown*

“Life is short, art is long, opportunity fleeting, experience treacherous, judgement difficult.”

– **Hippocrates**
(460–400 BCE)

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