

# John MacDonald

November–December 2016



## WORKSHOPS

### 2017

FEB. 4–11, 2017

#### **CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS**

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico  
[www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com](http://www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com)

MAY. 8–12, 2017

#### **Half Moon Bay, CA**

(See my [website](#) or click [here](#).)

JUNE 9–11, 2017

#### **Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA)**

Philadelphia, PA  
[www.pafa.org](http://www.pafa.org)

AUG. 7–9, 2017

#### **WETHERSFIELD ACADEMY**

Wethersfield, CT  
[www.wethersfieldarts.org](http://www.wethersfieldarts.org)

OCT 8–14, 2017

#### **HUDSON RIVER VALLEY ART WORKSHOPS**

Greenville, New York  
[www.artworkshops.com](http://www.artworkshops.com)

OCT 25–27, 2017

#### **THE LANDGROVE INN**

Landgrove, VT  
[www.landgroveinn.com](http://www.landgroveinn.com)

### *Back in the studio . . .*

It's been a month since our return from Europe. The nine weeks spent there are already fading into pleasant but distant memories. The food was delicious, the people gracious, and the landscapes as numerous and beautiful as they were varied. Given a choice of revisiting two places with the sole purpose of painting, I'd unhesitatingly choose Venice and Toledo. But honestly, from Lisbon to Venice, there wasn't an unattractive spot among the lot.



Setting up to paint above the Rio Tajo (Tagus River), Toledo, Spain.

While in Europe, I was reminded that painting on location has benefits beyond the obvious one of creating paintings. When painting, we're looking at the landscape with such an open and intense concentration that we experience the place and its moment in time with a depth and a quality of presence that is outside the experience of most people. Yes, I took photos, more than 4,000, but it's those locations I painted that I remember most vividly, that have become the most memorable. Fortunately, this kind of looking and painting can take place as easily in the comfort of our backyards as it can in the most exotic locations. Where and what we paint, interesting and unusual as they may be, are never as important as *how* we paint. Quality time matters.

### **Happy Holidays and a Happy New Year.**

I wish you and your loved ones a safe and enjoyable holiday season and wish for all of us a year filled with hours of happy and successful painting.

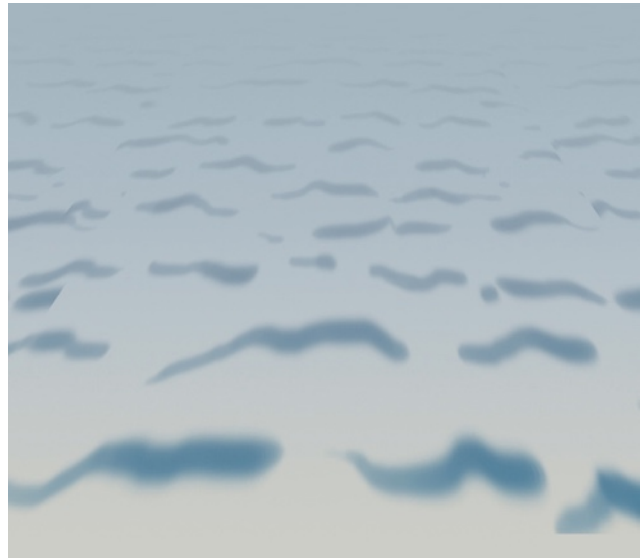
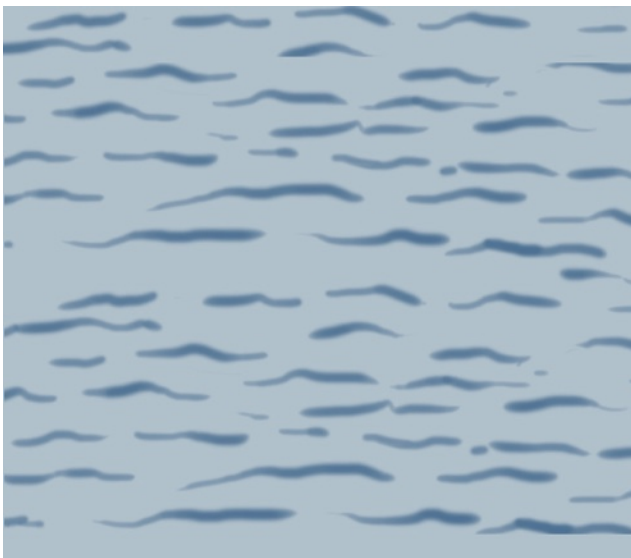
## Painting Water • Part IV: The Sea

This is the final issue of the “Painting Water” newsletters. First, a caveat: of all possible motifs involving water, a seascape is the one in which I’m least familiar. Other than a two-year period of plein air painting along the ocean on Cape Breton Island in the mid-1980s, I’ve painted relatively few seascapes. I don’t consider myself a marine painter and have only recently begun painting seascapes again, after vacationing along the Maine and California coasts. If your passion is painting the sea, then explore the website of the [American Society of Marine Artists](#). Many of the finest contemporary painters of seascapes are members.

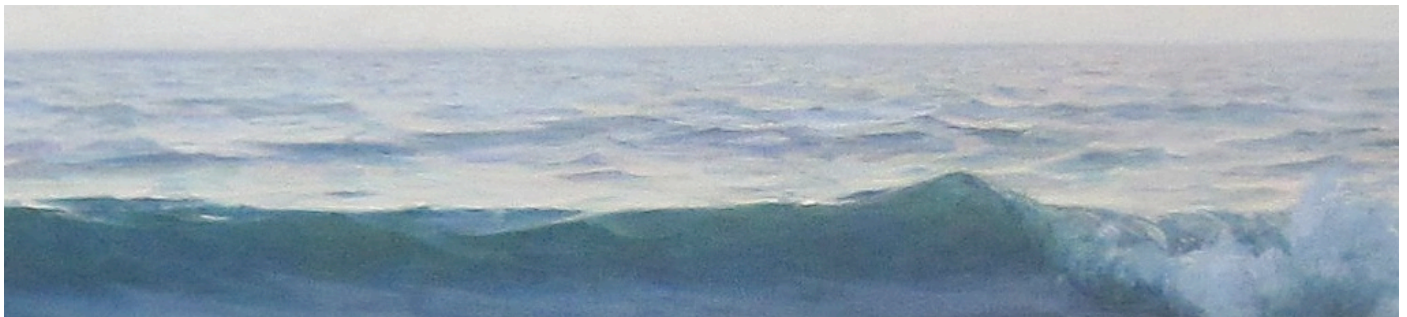
Given my limited experience with marine painting and the limitation of space in this newsletter, I’ll address only two elements specific to painting seascapes: portraying the deep plane of the ocean surface and capturing the appearance of breaking waves—the surf. Both are worth long study.

### The Surface – Scale and Gradient

When painting the surface of the sea and intending to create the illusion of a horizontal plane receding in space, the two most important components are the change in **value** (a gradient) and the change in **scale**. (See the two previous newsletters that address both topics.) Regardless of how the light is illuminating the surface or how calm or agitated it is, the changes in scale and value (a gradient) create the illusion that the surface of the water is receding from us. Both these components are essential; without them, water appears flat. In the simplistic illustrations below, notice how the image on the left appears to be a flat pattern parallel to the picture plane while the other, on the right, appears to recede into space. It’s astonishing how even in these simple images, the changes in only scale and value (a gradient) can create the illusion of space.



Below is a detail of Alexander Harrison’s, “*The Wave*.” He creates the illusion of a vast surface of water that extends into deep space by changing the **scale** of the waves and the **values** of waves and reflected sky.



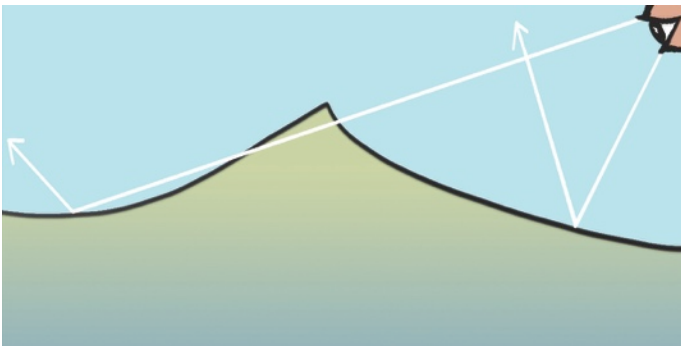
## The Surface – Seeing Water or Sky

The variety of colors and values on the surface of the sea can be overwhelmingly complex. For the sake of simplicity, let's look at the two factors that most determine what we're seeing on the surface: reflections of the sky (with or without distant landmasses) and the pattern of the waves on the surface.

### Reflections on the Surface

The colors and values of the **sky** determine the colors and values of the reflections. Those areas of water that are flat, lying between waves, will reflect whatever is in the sky. The *complexity* of the reflections will be determined both by the complexity of the sky (clouds, light, etc.) and the complexity of the surface (gentle ripples or stormy waves). Two other factors influence the appearance of the reflections.

The range of values and color saturation in the reflections will be narrower than what is being reflected. That is, the lightest lights in the sky will be darker in their reflections and the darkest darks will be lighter. Saturated colors in the sky tend to become more muted in their reflections. Secondly, as the reflections recede into the distance they will tend to shift in value and color according to the principles of atmospheric perspective. In most cases, the reflected areas in the foreground will be closest in color and value to those in the sky. In the color swatches below, notice how the colors of reflected sky darken and cool as they receded.



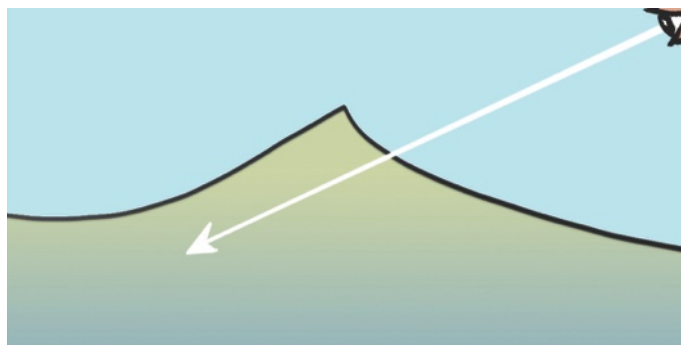
Surfaces of water parallel to the ground reflect the sky.



Atmospheric perspective affects the reflections as they recede into space; in this case, becoming darker and cooler.

### Waves on the Surface

The depth and clarity of the **water** determine the color of the waves. Think of waves as windows cut into the flat surface that allow us to see into the depths of the water. If we're near the shore, the water tends to be shallow and we often see the ground through it, which will affect the colors and values. But as the waves recede from us and enter deeper water, the color tends to become more uniform. Waves are almost always darker than the surface reflections because the ocean depths tend to be darker than the sky. The waves also will change according to the rules of atmospheric perspective, as will any light foam or froth on them.



As the surface of the water curls upward in the form of a wave, we are looking into the depths of the water.

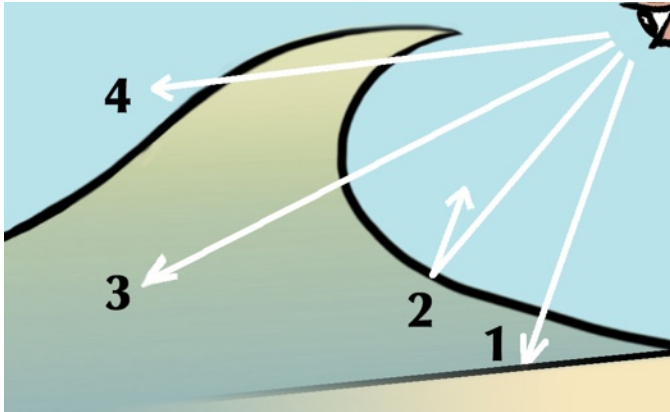


Atmospheric perspective also affects the colors and value of the waves as they recede towards the horizon.

## The Surf – Seeing Water, Sky, and Ground.

Now I'm really beginning to wonder what I've gotten myself into. . . The visual complexity of a breaking wave is worthy of a life-time of study and exploration in paint, exactly what I haven't done. Still, there are some simpler aspects of the subject that I feel adequately competent to address.

If the surface of the sea is about distance and atmosphere; the surf is about **movement**— the arc of a curling wave, the flying foam, and the sheets of agitated water sliding up and down the surface of the sand or crashing over rocks. The essence of a breaking wave is movement. The single greatest flaw I see in beginners' paintings of surf is the hard, frozen quality of their waves and whitewater. **Water moves.** Before looking at how we create the illusion of movement, let's look at the anatomy of a breaking wave. (If you wish to know than is necessary about the terminology of waves, visit this surfing [website.](#))



### Visual anatomy of a curling wave:

Depending on the angle of the sun, depth of the water, and the form of the wave, we can see any or all of these aspects of a curling wave:

1. The bottom sand or rocks.
2. Reflected sky or the overhanging curl of water.
3. The depth of the water.
4. The light seen *through* the wave as the wave tapers and thins towards the top.



All four can be see in this photo: Warm tones from the sandy bottom (1), sky reflections (2), water depth as the becomes shadowed (3), and a hint of the cooler light shining through the translucent top of the wave (4).



In this detail from Alexander Harris's "The Wave," he gives us three of the four. Missing is the color of the bottom, which can be the result of the back lighting in this scene or the depth of the water or both.

## Portraying the Movement of Waves and Whitewater

To capture the nature of surf, we must at least suggest the movement of the water. We do this most easily by manipulating the **edges** of the forms and applying the paint with loose, lively **brushwork**.

When working with the edges of the waves and whitewater, keep in mind the importance of edge contrast. If we soften *all* the edges, the result will be a painting of a badly out of focus frozen wave. For the soft edges to read as movement, there must be a few hard edges creating contrast. Remember, too, that the soft edges between two areas can be created visually—by keeping the values of the two areas close—or physically—by blending the paint. If the values of two areas need to be different, then often we'll need to physically blend the paint to create a soft edge between them. Edges can usually be softer than we think.

It's perfectly possible to create a sense of movement by manipulating only the edges but we can enhance that effect dramatically through our brushwork. Vibrant, loose brushwork has an energy that can suggest movement to even the most still forms. When used to portray waves and whitewater, it can give them life and energy even if our edge contrast is minimal. Below are details of two paintings that employ both edge contrast and brushwork to convey the movement of water; the first is Winslow Homer's, the second mine.



In this detail from Winslow Homer's "*High Cliff, Coast of Maine*," notice the contrast of edges in the water among the rocks and the nearby spray. Even the subtle hard edge (arrowed) provides the contrast necessary for the spray and wave forms to read as water in motion. Notice, too, the vigorous brushwork—nearly smoothly painted areas of spray contrasting against energetically painted swells and small waves. (And I can't help but point out his masterful use of values. The rocks are a low-key painting, the water high-key.)



A detail from a painting of mine. The primary focus of this painting was the challenge of capturing the movement of the wave and whitewater. I spent an hour or more manipulating the brushwork. (Comparing this now to the Homer painting, I could have used a few harder edges to enhance the contrast as he did.)

## Where Water Meets Rock

One last item before I assemble a variety of seascapes and wrap up this newsletter. . .

For me, one of the most beautiful contrasts in a seascape is the dramatic value difference between light water meeting dark rocks, as shown in Homer's painting. This value contrast can create a fascinating pattern of lights and darks that lend an interest to the painting beyond the beauty of the water itself. Consider taking advantage of this contrast when the scene offers it. (See the entire Home painting below.)

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### Seascape examples: some personal favorites and a few of mine.

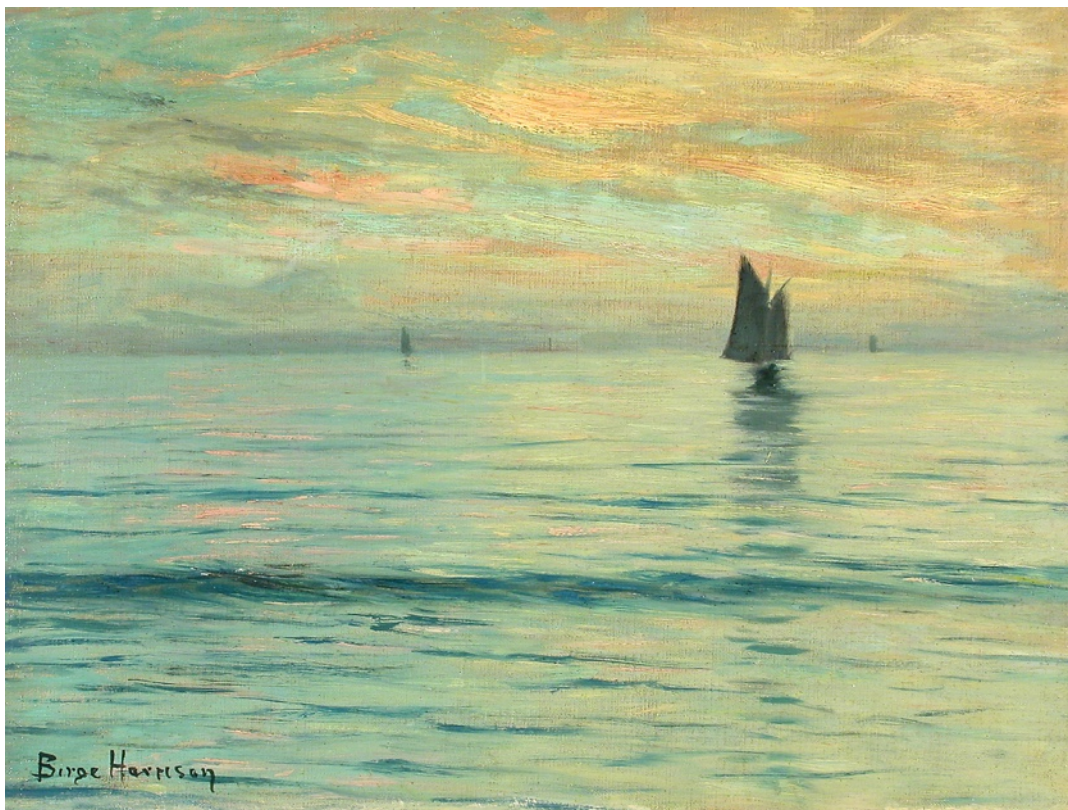
I include these paintings knowing that the color and values are likely inaccurate—there's simply no substitute for seeing the painting in person. Nonetheless, it's possible to learn from reproductions so long as we're not looking for extremely subtle bits of visual information. Study the paintings below in the context of what this newsletter addressed: the gradients and change in scale found in the surface of the water, and the edge contrast and brushwork used to create the illusion of movement in the surf. They're evident in all these examples.



Alexander Harrison "The Wave," 1885 39" x 118" Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts



Winslow Homer, "High Cliff, Coast of Maine" 3 1894 30 x 38" Portland Museum of Art (Maine)



Birge Harrison, “*The Great Mirror*” 1885 17 x 23” Woodstock Artists Association and Museum  
A masterful display of color contrast: cools against warms within a narrow range of values.



David Curtis, “*Gathering Storm, Nanjizal Beach, Cornwall*” 24” x 30”  
David Curtis is a contemporary British painter. He’s a master at capturing the sparkle of light on water.



A sampling of my seascapes, all from 2014 or 2015 and painted using sketches and/or photos for reference.

Sizes run from 9"x12" (left), 24"x24" (below), to 20"x36" and 12" x 24" (following page).







# Plein Air Painting Kit

Several people asked me about the plein air kit that I used in Europe. In deciding what to take, the most important considerations were weight, size, and ease of transportation. I decided my usual plein air easel, a Soltek, would be too large and heavy. During the 2015 Fall Color Week in Maine, Eric Rhoades had demonstrated his plein air kit, designed for easy travel. I remembered being impressed by its compactness. He was kind to share the information and I based mine on his recommendations. Every item I took on the trip is listed below:

## Components:

1. Strada Micro
2. MeFOTO Backpacker tripod.
3. Mapa Trilites #994 gloves
4. Viewfinder and grayscale
5. painting apron
6. Multimedia Artboards (9"x12")
7. PanelPak carrier, cardboard supports for artboards and clips.
8. container for paints
9. safflower oil and small cup
10. Paints:  
Gamblin titanium/zinc white  
W&N Griffin Alkyd tit. white  
Cadmium Yellow Light (Utrecht)  
Prussian Blue (Utrecht)  
Permanent Aliz. Crimson (W&N)  
Raw Umber (Vasari)
11. Canvas brush holder (short)
- 12 Brushes. The handles were cut short to fit the holder.
13. Palette knife
14. Baseball cap. (not shown)
15. Small shock cord. (not shown)\*



Everything fit in a small backpack and set up quickly and easily in the field.



Total weight: 10 lbs., nearly the weight of the Soltek alone.



## NO SOLVENTS!

It's worth noting that I took no solvents, which saved weight, space, and eliminated the serious problems of transportation and disposal. I used safflower oil to thin the paint and to remove pigment from the brushes. After painting, the brushes were then cleaned thoroughly with soap and water and allowed to dry.

\* The shock cord was used to secure the 9" x 12" panel to the easel when set up in a vertical format.



Although so much more could have been said about painting water, after this issue I'm moving on to other topics. Spending an entire year focusing on water was instructive for me and, I hope, for you. As I continue to paint water, in all its forms and under varying conditions, I'm sure to revisit the topic in future newsletters. There's so much still to learn!

Regarding next year's newsletters, I have no firm plans. Rather than addressing a single topic, I'll be presenting items as the fancy strikes, beginning in the next newsletter with an exploration of painting trees, specifically, how to create the soft, textured edges of trees as seen against the sky. (Preview: soften those edges!)

If you have specific topics you'd like to see addressed in a future newsletter, please let me know!

Happy holidays and, as always, *happy painting!*

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## Quote of the day.

*Passages and quotes that stimulate, inspire, and challenge us to become better painters.*

“A young painter once stood behind the veteran Jules Breton while he was at work upon one of his important pictures . . . It was delightful to observe the ease and dexterity of his every stroke. The youth spoke enviously of the joy it must be to have attained to his perfect facility of technique and to know every time a picture was begun that it could be carried through easily to a successful end.

‘My dear boy,’ was the reply, ‘you will never reach that happy land here below. I sweat blood over every one of my pictures, and there is never a one that is not at some time a failure. Every new picture brings a new problem, and who knows if we may be able to solve it. But if there were no new problems we should all cease painting; for there would be no more art.’ ”

—Birge Harrison, *Landscape Painting*, 1910



Jules Breton, *Song of the Lark*, 1884

# 2017 Workshops

## February 4–11

Casa de los Artista, Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

[artworkshopvacations.com](http://artworkshopvacations.com)

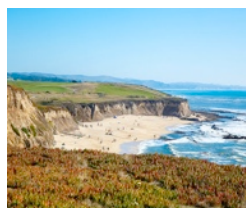
This will be my fourth trip to this venue. The studio is perfect, the food delicious, and the scenery exquisite. It's a week of serious and focused **plein air** painting paired with a varied, fun-filled, and fascinating exposure to Mexican food, people, landscapes, and culture.



## May 5–13 ~ *Waiting List Only*

Half Moon Bay, California

Join me on this 5 day workshop, where we'll be painting plein air along the spectacular coast of northern California. Contact me directly for more information or click [here](#).

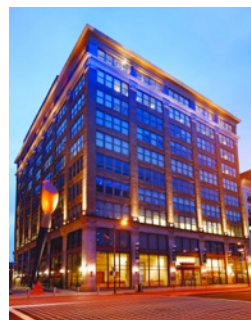


## June 9–11

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts; Philadelphia, PA

[www.pafa.org](http://www.pafa.org)

In this workshop, we will be painting in the studio while using photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. We will explore the limitations of the camera and ways to compensate for their limitations.



## August 7–9 ~ *Waiting List Only*

Wethersfield Academy, Wethersfield, CT

[www.wethersfieldarts.org](http://www.wethersfieldarts.org)

A studio workshop, we will be painting from photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. We will explore the limitations of the camera and look at different ways to compensate for their limitations.



## October 8–14

Hudson River Valley Art Workshops; Greenville, NY

[www.artworkshops.com](http://www.artworkshops.com)

A studio workshop, we will be painting from photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. We will explore the limitations of the camera and look at different ways to compensate for their limitations.



## October 25–27

The Landgrove Inn; Landgrove, VT

[www.landgroveinn.com](http://www.landgroveinn.com)

A studio workshop, we will be painting from photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. We will examine the limitations of the camera and explore different ways to compensate for their limitations.

