John MacDonald

Newsletter ~ October 2014

UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

2015

FEBRUARY 7–14 , 2015
CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS
Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico
www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com

JULY 28–30 , 2015
THE GIBSON HOUSE
Haverhill, New Hampshire
www.gibsonhousebb.com

SEPT. 8–11 , 2015
THE BASCOM
Highland, North Carolina
www.thebascom.org

"If I were asked to supply a formula for the making of an artist, my recipe would be, one part genius and nine parts hard work."

-Birge Harrison, quoted in *Landscape Painting*, this month's recommended reading.

News from the studio. . .

A few weeks ago, I returned from a workshop in Greenville, N.Y., eager to get back to painting. But the memories of working with such a talented and energetic group got the better of me. I immediately arranged with the owners of the Gibson House in New Hampshire to offer a 2 1/2 day plein air workshop next July. I hope some of you will join me there. And speaking of workshops, there are 10 more days before the expiration of the $100 discount for the workshop in Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico. There are still a few open spots remaining. Think about joining me in warm, sunny Mexico this February. . . it's a magical venue at a spectacularly beautiful location.

Resources . . .

Recommended Reading

One of the participants in the recent Greenville, N.Y., workshop sent me a wonderful book, *Landscape Painting*, edited by Darren Rousar and published by Velatura Press. (ISBN 978-0-9800454-5-1) It consists of selected writings of Asher B. Durand (1796–1886) and Birge Harrison (1884–1929). The former was a prominent Hudson River School painter and the latter one of the leading lights of the Tonalist movement. Birge's lectures are particularly valuable as he offers very specific advice on dealing with the essential elements of a painting: composition, value, color, light, etc. It's readily available and well worth the read. (Thank you, Joan!)

Tips & Techniques

The Non-Toxic Studio

Each winter, as I pay the fuel bills and contemplate another upcoming birthday for this aging body, I think about the importance of keeping my studio as free of toxic materials as possible. Having reduced my palette to one toxic pigment (Cadmium Yellow Light), I've decided to reduce my use of turpentine and mineral spirits as much as possible. And it's not only health concerns that are driving the decision—my goal is to be able to save on fuel bills by avoiding the need to ventilate my small studio, especially during the very long, very cold New England winters.

I admit this is hardly a new topic. Concerns about the toxicity of artist materials have been around for decades and I sheepishly admit that I've been behind other artists in following recent trends towards creating a safer, healthier studio. But having decided to make that leap, I strongly urge you to also consider eliminating the use of turps or mineral spirits (even Gamsol) in your studio.

Turps/spirits served three purposes in my studio:

1. to thin the medium
2. to thin paint mixtures
3. to clean brushes, both during painting and at the end of the day.

The medium. For years, my preferred medium was a mixture consisting of 1 part Stand Oil, 1 part Linseed Oil, 1 part Dorland Wax, 1 part Turpentine, and 2% Cobalt Drier.

At the beginning of a painting session, I would apply a thin wash of the medium over the entire painting (when it was dry!) and then work directly into it. Alas, a large painting produced a significant amount of fumes from the evaporating turpentine. In order to eliminate the turpentine, I've recently tweaked the formula. I'm now using:

1 part Stand Oil
2 parts Linseed Oil

1/2 part Dorlands Wax
2% Cobalt Drier.

I've noticed no difference in the working quality of the new medium and as it's much less toxic, I can breathe easier. (Cobalt Drier is toxic but by using only a minuscule amount, I need worry only about ingesting it. Using such a small amount, I won't need to ventilate.)

Thinning paint mixtures. Some brands of paint come out of the tubes so viscous and dense with pigment that some thinning is necessary. Rather than using spirits, I now add a few drops of the medium.

Cleaning brushes while painting. I've always preferred using a minimal number of brushes while painting–sometimes only one! I frequently wiped the brushes with paper towels and then swished them in a can of turps to keep them clean and the paint mixtures unadulterated. It worked well.

Now that I want to eliminate the use of thinner, I use more brushes: one for warm pigments, one for cool, one for the darks, one for the lightest lights, etc. I limit my cleaning to wiping the brushes with paper towels as thoroughly as possible. The little pigment that remains in the brush is rarely a problem. Eliminating the use of spirits to clean the brushes during a painting session means that there's never an open can of spirits in the studio and therefore never a need to ventilate while painting.

Cleaning brushes at the end of the day. Some artists have told me that, when finished painting for the day, they clean their brushes using safflower oil. Last week, I finally tried this, hoping that it would truly end any need to ever use spirits. The brushes cleaned nicely but I wondered whether or not the pigment would eventually settle out of the oil, as it does in spirits, allowing the oil to be reused indefinitely. Unfortunately, after 6 days, I see that the jar of oil is still as cloudy as ever. There's not yet any evidence of pigment settling to the bottom of the jar. (I'd love to hear from you if your experience has been different.) So, it's likely that I'll continue to use Gamsol to clean my brushes when I'm finished painting for the day. The jar of Gamsol will be exposed to the air for only a few minutes. I can minimized further evaporation by wiping the clean brushes thoroughly.

Or. . . I may use Citrus-Solv to clean the brushes.

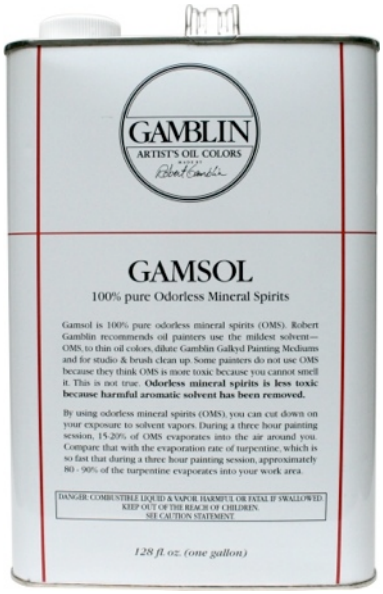
Citrus-Solv. Three years ago, at the suggestion of a fellow artist and friend, I spent the winter using Citrus-Solv as a substitute for spirits. I used it in my medium, to thin painting mixtures, and to clean brushes. I've since heard of several artists using it. Dick Blick sells it on their website as an oil painting solvent.

There's no question it does a wonderful job cleaning brushes and, according to its advocates, it will not hurt the paint film when used to thin paint mixtures or used as an ingredient in a medium. I decided to stop using it partially on the urging a friend–an expert paint chemist and conservator–who had questions both about its safety and its stability in the paint film. And, frankly, I simply got sick of the smell of oranges.

I may go back to it as an end-of-the-day brush cleaner even though, when using it three years ago, I found that it dried out the bristles of the brushes. If I decide to use Citrus-Solv rather than spirits, I'll dip the brushes in safflower oil after using Citrus-Solv and wipe them with a towel to remove excess oil. The oil should keep the bristles fresh.

Leaving the brushes dirty. Or you can simply not clean them at all. Evan Wilson, a terrific figure painter, uses 10 or more brushes when painting, each for a narrow range of colors. At the end of the day, he simply puts the brushes in a pan with the bristles lying in a little safflower oil. The next day, he wipes them with paper towels and begins again.

If you have any ideas or suggestions, let me know. I'll include them in the next newsletter.



Deconstructing a Painting. . .

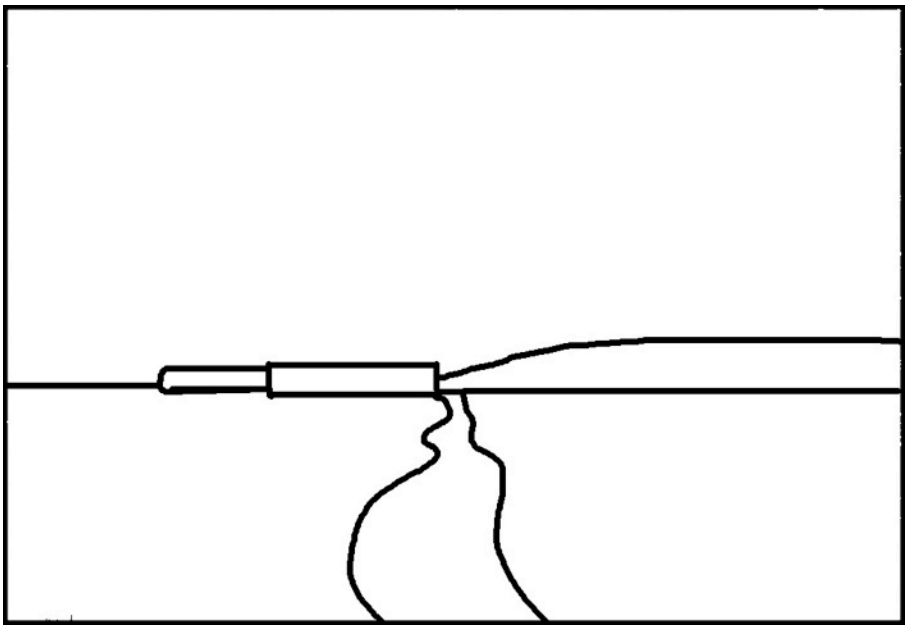
In keeping with the change of seasons, let's look at two winter paintings that feature snow. Both were painted by the American, John Twachtman. Both the American Impressionists and Tonalists claimed Twachtman as one of their own. In these two paintings–and another two that I'm including below–you can see elements of both movements in his work.

Along the River, Winter, ca. 1887–88 Oil on Canvas, approximately 15" x 22"

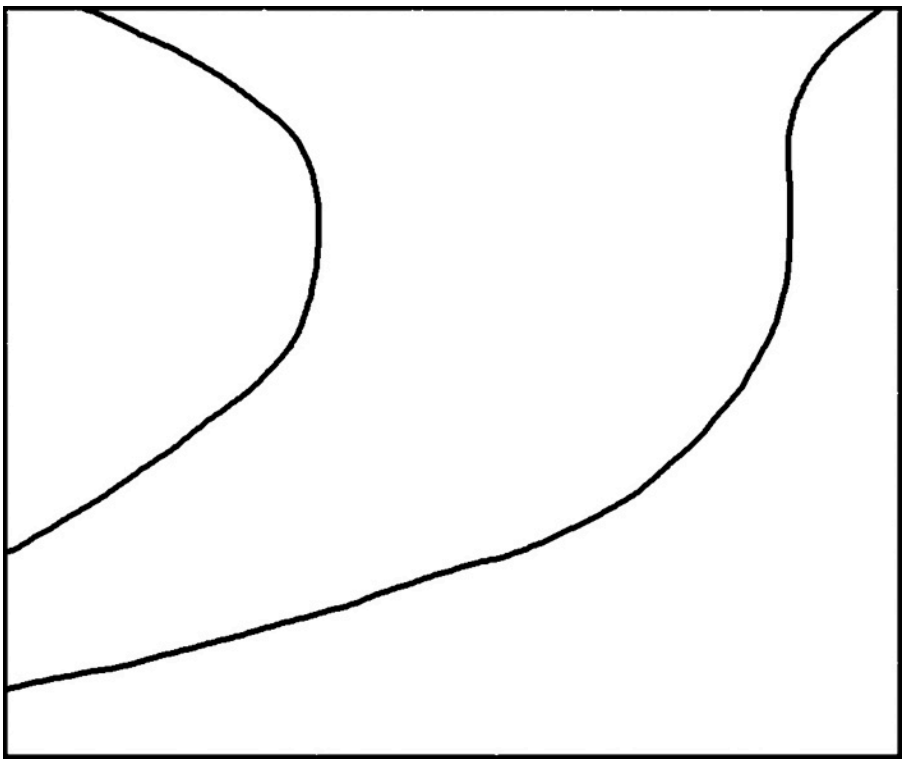
Icebound, ca. 1890–95 Oil on Canvas, approximately 25" x 30"

Composition:

The composition of "Along the River, Winter" is a beautifully constructed assembly of flat shapes–balanced and varied. The subtle diagonals, nearly in the center, take the eye directly to the focal point and the strong horizontal shapes keeps it there. Notice, too, how the more organic shape of the foreground tracks contrast with the more severe and uniform rectangles in the background. It's a very simple but effective composition.

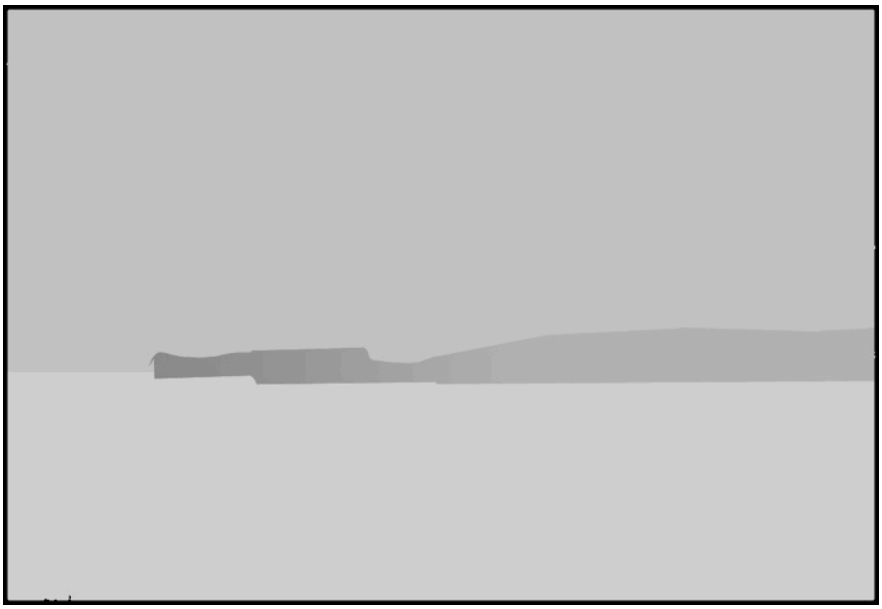


The composition of "Icebound" couldn't be more different. From a vista of deep space we move to a more intimate scene in shallow space. Here, the composition is built around the curve of the stream, moving the eye from bottom left to the upper right in one great, sweeping gesture. With such a strong movement upward, the eye would tend to get swept right off the canvas. Twachtman prevents that by layering horizontal bands in the distance that block the eye. Yes, it's likely that those bands of snow and shadow were in the landscape. But it was Twachtman's genius to include them, knowing that they were necessary.



Value Structure:

He uses simple shapes and simple values. It's a very effective use of the typical, three-value structure of many landscapes. He introduces a subtle gradient in the small, central shape which creates a nice sense of space and atmosphere. It's interesting how well even this highly simplified and monochromatic version of the image conveys a sense of depth, space, and light. And it does so even without the lines of the tracks. The values and shapes work!

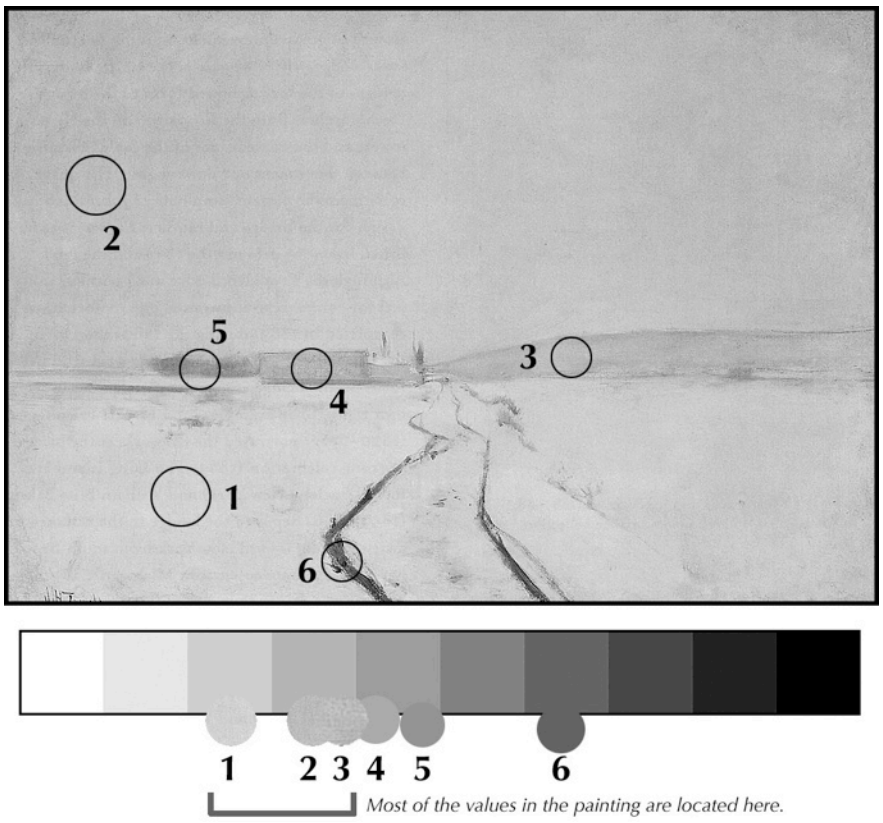


Much of the visual interest in "Icebound" is found in the pattern formed by the stream and the strong gradient that moves from dark in the lower left, to light in the background. The gradient reinforces the sweeping curves of the composition and creates a convincing illusion of depth and atmosphere.

Twachtman keeps the value structure very simple–it's essentially one flat value plus one value gradient–so it doesn't detract from or compete with the complexity of the pattern in the center of the painting. With such a strong pattern, it's better to keep the values simple!

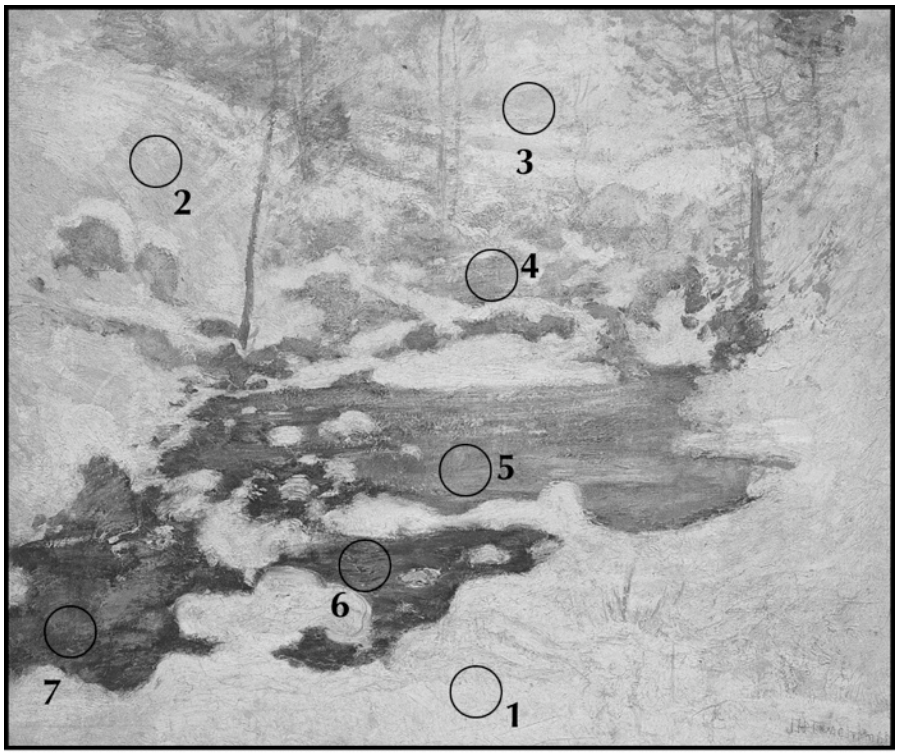
Value Key &Contrast:

Seen in black and white, what jumps out is not necessary the key, which lies on the light side of a middle gray, but the lack of contrast. Eliminate the darkest values in the tracks in the foreground and nearly every value in this painting can be found within a very narrow range near the middle of the value scale. Twachtman perfectly captures the subject–an overcast, hazy, winter day–by keeping the values close (low contrast) and in the middle.



In "Icebound," the key is also in the middle register but there is greater contrast, a larger range of values, and the values are more evenly distributed. In this black and white image, it's easy to see how important the overall gradient in the stream is to the power of the painting, how it creates the illusion of light, space, and drama.

In these paintings, how much was Twachtman inventing and how much was simply there, in the landscape, waiting to be seen and recorded? We'll never know. But making a painting requires making decisions and Twachtman knew exactly what to include, what to omit, and what to change.

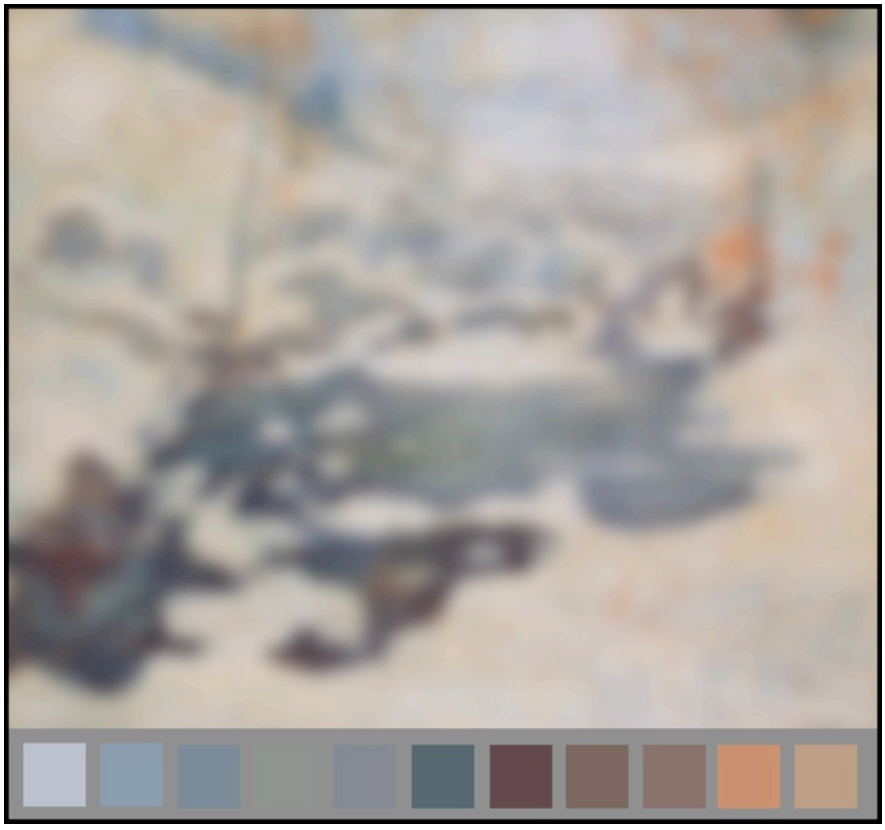


Color Key & Contrast:

The images of the paintings that I'm using for this newsletter were taken from the web, compared to reproductions in books, and adjusted accordingly. It's a certainty that the actual painting is richer, with a greater variety of subtle contrasts in temperature and saturation. But even taking that into account, it's obvious that Twachtman kept the color in this painting within a very narrow range of hues and saturations. Overall, it's in a warm key, ranging from muted purples through pinks and siennas to ochres. Look closely and you can see that the sky, background buildings and hills, and the foreground, each has a separate and overall hue. It's astonishing that a painting with such a narrow value range *and* a narrow range of hues can work so well. It was a quiet, moody scene and Twachtman captured it perfectly by keeping value and color contrasts to a minimum.

Comparing this image to the one above, and without looking at the color chips, you should be able to see immediately that "Icebound" contains a greater range of hues. The overall key is nearly neutral: the snow is in a warm key but the water and background forms are cool. Yet each area–snow and stream–contain temperature contrasts. The snow is mostly warm but there are certainly cool tones within it. And the stream is mostly cool but there are warm tones within it. In this regard, Twachtman was very much the Impressionist. In all his late paintings, he put a great amount of color contrast in areas containing little value contrast.

Notice that the most obvious color contrasts are in the stream. By limiting color and value contrasts in the snow, he keeps the eye moving in the center of the painting.



Edges & Details

In such a simple painting, consisting of a few large and small shapes, there aren't many edges! But what edges there are, vary greatly. From blended to broken to razor sharp, Twachtman uses them all. The soft edges keep the distant hills in the background. The hard edges of the tracks, together with strong value contrasts, fading to more broken and lighter tracks in the distance, push the tracks far back into space.

Notice the relationship between the edges and details. Twachtman uses the sharpest edges only on the most important details, those that establish scale, texture, and space. There are very few details in this painting. All of them are kept in the middle of the painting and all reinforce the movement of the eye and the focal point. Few paintings create such a sense of space and reality with so few details.

In the painting above, the calligraphic strokes of the tracks, the softness of the hills, and the variety in paint application betray a Tonalist sensibility. There is a uniformity in value but a great contrast in edges.

In "Icebound", Twachtman uses the opposite approach: there is little edge contrast but strong value contrasts. Here, the surface and edges of the painting, with its uniform handling of broken edges covering the entire surface, are much more reminiscent of the Impressionists.

Notice how the lack of edge contrasts in the background of the painting reinforces the illusion of atmosphere. Mist, seen in the middleground or background, will aways soften edges and weaken edge contrast. It works beautifully in this painting.

Two more. . .

The painting on right, "Snow," combines the limited value and color contrasts of "Along the River, Winter," with the Impressionistic paint handling of "Icebound." The handling of details in this painting is particularly well done: the feathery strokes of the trees contrasting with the simple expanse of snow.

The painting below, "Round Hill Road," is one of my favorites and an absolutely masterful lesson in minimalism. To make a high-key painting, with so little value contrast and so little description of form, work so well is extremely difficult. Twachtman makes it look easy. What makes it work? I think it's the subtle textures indicated in the trees and hedge and the use of contrasting warm and cool notes, all of the same value, that cover the entire painting.

You can see the original of "Round Hill Road" in the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C. It's on my list of "must sees."

Feedback. . .

As always, I welcome your thoughts, suggestions, and feedback.

Happy painting!