

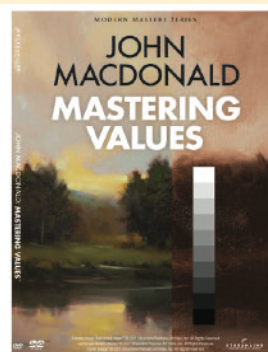
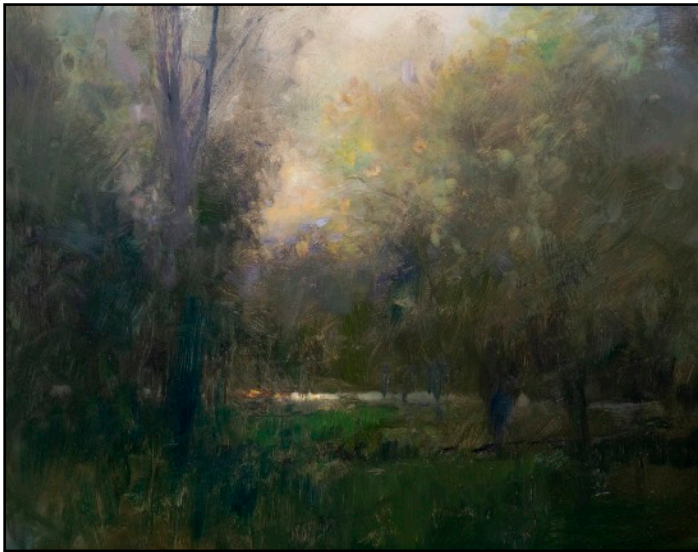
John MacDonald

January–February, 2022



The Illusion of Atmosphere

This coming year, there will be a theme running through the newsletters—each will feature a specific topic in landscape painting. This newsletter is about **atmosphere**, which can also include the painting of fog and/or mist. Future issues will address sunsets and sunrises, reflections in water, mixing greens, skies and clouds, and finally, trees. I hope you find them all helpful.



New Streamline Video Available

The newest Streamline video, “*Mastering Values*” is now available. Unlike the previous two videos, this is not about me, my technique, or the materials I use. Instead, this is about a single component of painting—arguably the most important component: **Values**. It was a labor of love and, thanks to the skill and professionalism of the Streamline staff, the result couldn't be better. Interested? Click [HERE](#).

Atmosphere, Fog and Mist

It may seem picky to distinguish between the painting of atmosphere from painting fog or mist but fog and mist can have solidly defined forms whereas atmosphere tends to be a part of the overall appearance of the entire painting. In Isaak Levitan's painting below, "*Fog Over Water*," the fog is clear defined but there's little atmosphere—the values of the distant trees are nearly as dark as the foreground trees and the edges of the clouds and the moon are distinct. Despite the fog, the air appears clear and transparent. No doubt that was Levitan's intention.



In the edited image (left) I added a much denser, more humid atmosphere: the fog, sky, and background trees have lost their distinct forms and are nearly lost in a haze. They've also receded into the distance.

Painting mist and fog with defined forms and edges is no different than painting clouds, which will be the topic of a future newsletter. In this issue, let's focus solely on atmosphere.

The Atmospheric Continuum

The appearance of the atmosphere depends on its density. There's a continuum from perfectly clear air through a translucence created by increasing amounts of humidity and dust to a nearly opaque fog. Fortunately, a single set of rules applies to the entire spectrum. Let's start with a few examples and then look at the rules of painting atmospheric perspective. In the four paintings below, beginning at the top left and moving clockwise, notice how the atmosphere becomes increasingly dense. There are differences between them but all four work beautifully. None is better nor worse than another based on how the artist portrayed the atmosphere.



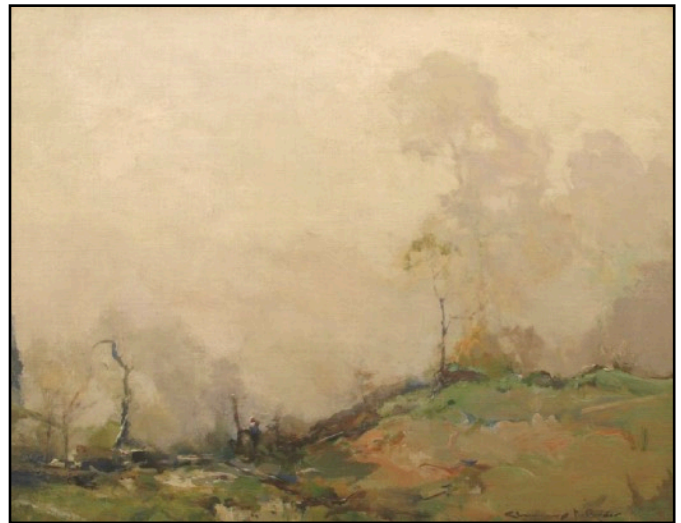
Birge Harrison, *Frosty Morning near New Hope, Penn.*



J. Francis Murphy, *Landscape with Brush Fire*



James McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne in Blue and Silver*



Chauncey Ryder, *Day in the Fog*

Atmosphere: Think Water and Dust

Air isn't a vacuum—it contains moisture and dust. When looking at an object close to us, we may be looking through only a few feet of air. But when looking at a distant mountain, sometimes we're seeing it through miles of moisture and dust. Unless the air is perfectly dry and clear, the more air we look through, the more it affects how distant forms appear.

Creating Atmospheric Perspective

Following up on the examples above—and to drive home the crucial point that you can determine and control the extent to which atmosphere plays a part in your paintings—let’s take a single painting, John Singer Sargent’s “*Simplong Pass*,” and add atmosphere to it, step by step. At high elevations, the air is often arid and clear—there’s little atmospheric perspective. Sargent captured that quality beautifully in this painting—the distant mountain and clouds are as distinct as the rocks in the foreground. He gives us visual clues to indicate that the background mountain and sky are in the distance but it’s not through atmosphere. So let’s add it, step by step.



While painting in the Rocky Mountains in the U.S., Sargent wrote a letter to a fellow painter in which he complained about the clarity of the air and the challenges it posed in creating the illusion of distance. The mountains in the far distance, he wrote, were as clear as those in the foreground. Well, if Sargent found it difficult to create the illusion of space in clear, transparent air, I think we can be forgiven for struggling with it, too.

In the three images below, there is a gradual increase in the amount of atmosphere, moving from an increasing mistiness in the distance to a nearly opaque fog. Each image works.

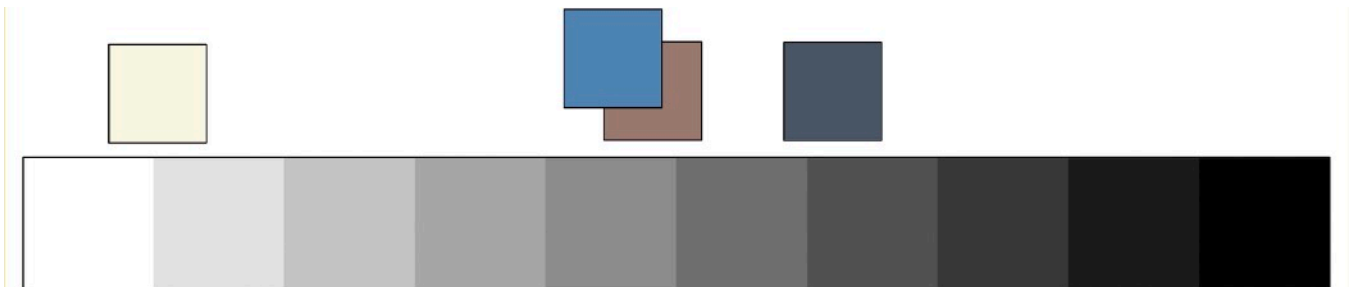
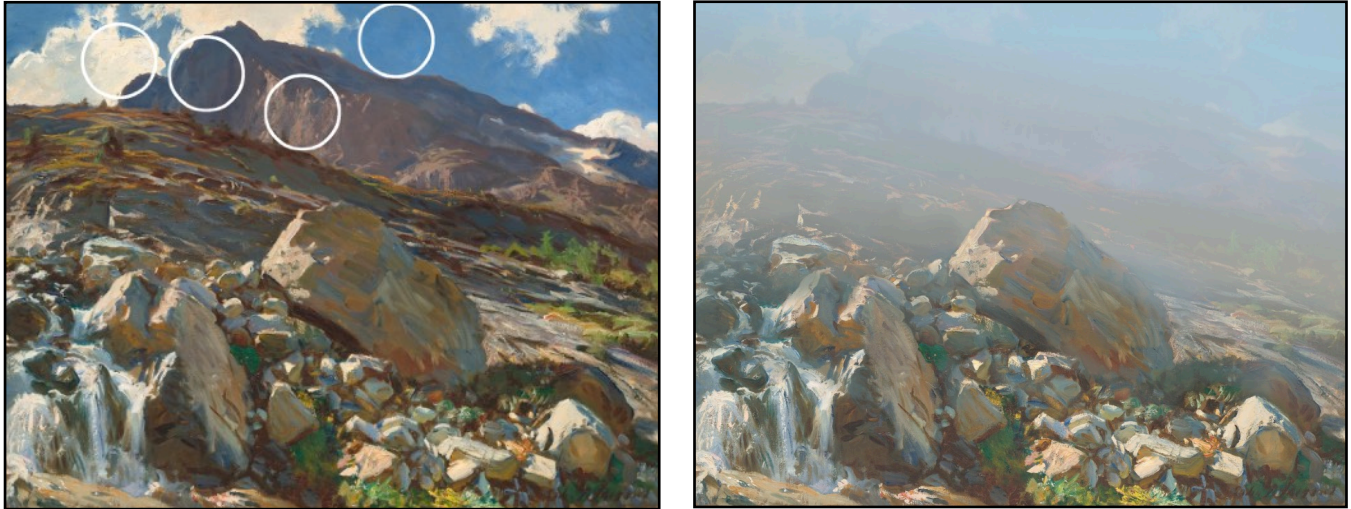


Let's move on to some rules of atmospheric perspective. Naturally, there will be exceptions to each of these rules but they're still useful in helping us to understand atmospheric perspective and to improve our ability to portray it in a painting. Let's begin with values. . .

Atmospheric Perspective: Values

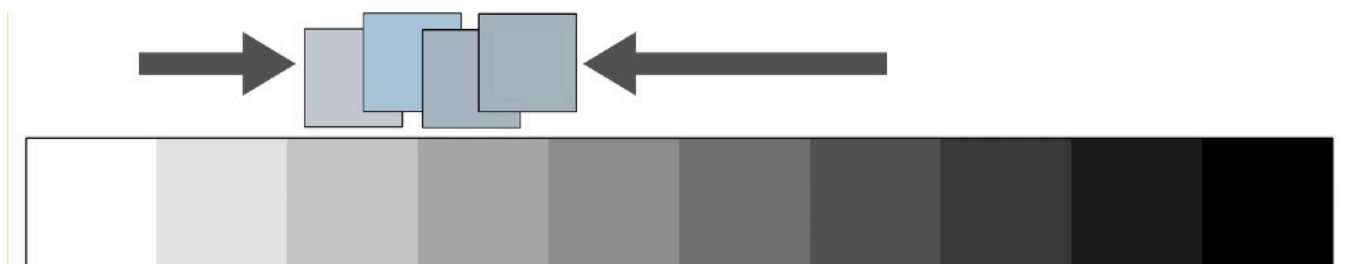
As forms recede, the range of values will diminish, becoming more compressed, and move towards the value of the most distant space or form. This benchmark value can be the sky, mountains, or, in dense fog, in the mid-ground, in the edge of a field, a group of trees, etc.,.

If the painting is in a dark value key (a foggy evening), the lightest values will change more than the darks as they move into the distance. And vice versa if the painting is in a light key: the darkest values will change more than light values. Either way, the values become compressed.

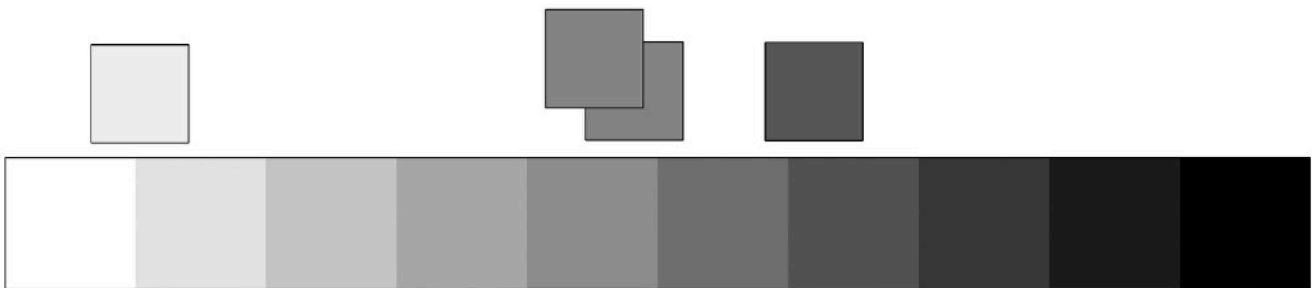


(Above) Distant forms in the original painting were sampled and placed on a value scale: the light in the clouds, the sky, and the shadows and highlights in the distant mountain. Despite being in the far distance, there's a stark difference in value between them. The values of the forms span more than half of the value scale, a direct result of the lack of atmosphere.

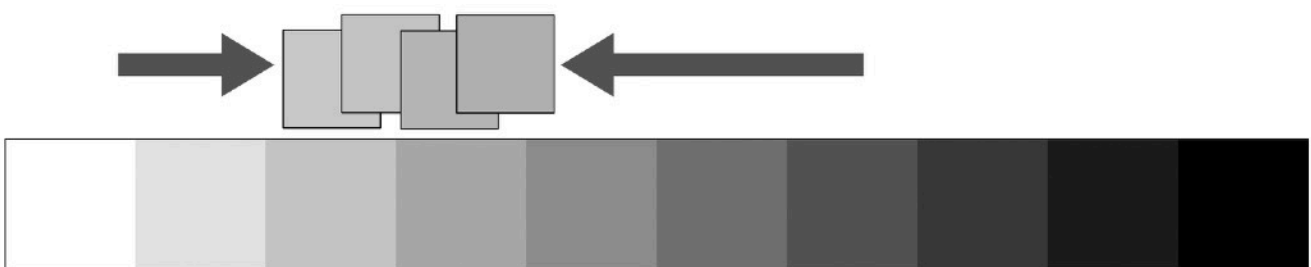
In the foggy version (below), the values are more compressed. There's little value contrast.



For those who struggle to see the value of a color—a very common problem—it’s easier to see how atmosphere effects the values when the images are monochromatic. Below are the same images and samples from the previous page but converted to black and white.



Above, the same sampled values but in black and white. Again, notice that in clear air, the difference in values of forms at a similar distance can be dramatic, whereas in the foggy version (below), the values move towards a single value, that of the most distant form. In this case, it’s the sky. The denser the atmosphere, the closer those values come together.

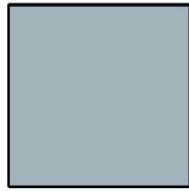
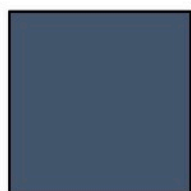
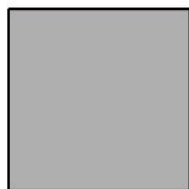
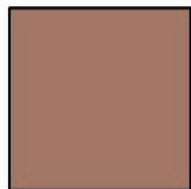
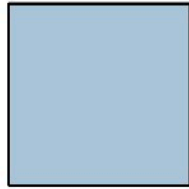
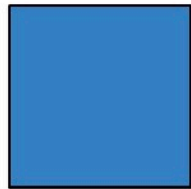
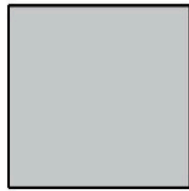
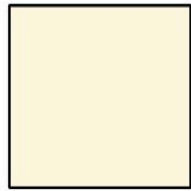


In terms of value contrast, the rule can be stated simply: **As the density of the atmosphere increases, value contrasts diminish with distance.** Or putting it another way: if you wish to create the illusion of atmosphere and deep space, avoid using strong value contrasts in the distance. Squint at your painting—do all the distant values blur together?

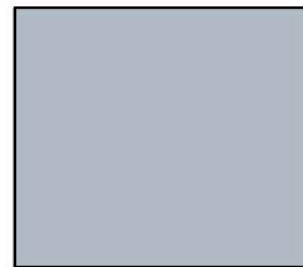
Atmospheric Perspective: Color

As the atmosphere becomes more dense and as forms recede in the distance, their hue and saturation (chroma) will take on the hue and saturation of the most distant area or form.

If the painting is in a cool color key, the warm hues will change more than the cool hues as they move into the distance. And vice versa if the painting is in a warm color key, cool hues will change more than the warm hues. Study the colors you see in nature and trust your eyes.



In this example, the blues, siennas, and yellows in the clouds have taken on the blue gray color of the sky. The blue of the sky changes little in hue but dramatically drops in saturation. The warm siennas change in both saturation and hue.



The shifts in hue and saturation can be quite subtle, requiring a good eye for color and a solid understanding of the principles of color temperature.

Atmospheric Perspective: Edges

Edges soften with distance, either physically through blending or broken brushwork, or visually by bringing values of forms together. The harder the edges between distant forms, the less the illusion of atmosphere *unless their values are close*. A razor sharp edge between two distant forms will not destroy the illusion of atmosphere if their values are nearly identical.



Because the appearance of edges depends so much on values, it's only logical that as you bring the values of distant forms together to create the illusion of atmosphere, the edges will automatically appear softer. The less value contrast at an edge, the softer the edge will appear regardless of whether the physically painted edge is sharp or not. It's obvious in the samples below.

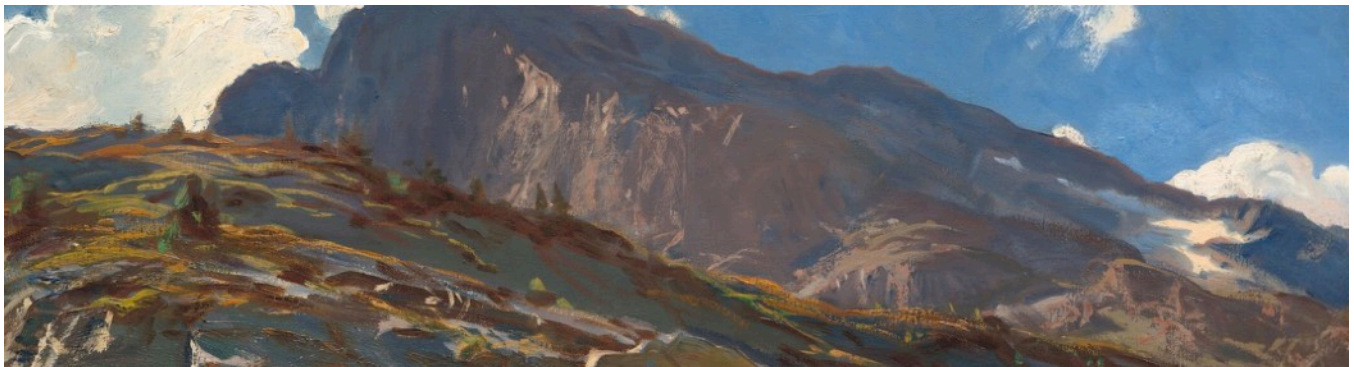


The blocks used to create woodcuts have only sharp edges—it's an unavoidable characteristic of the medium. To create the illusion of soft edges, woodcut artists had to rely solely on manipulating the values and colors of the distant forms in the scenes. Japanese artists became absolute masters at creating nuanced and sophisticated value and color relationships in their work. (right: Hiroshi Yoshida)

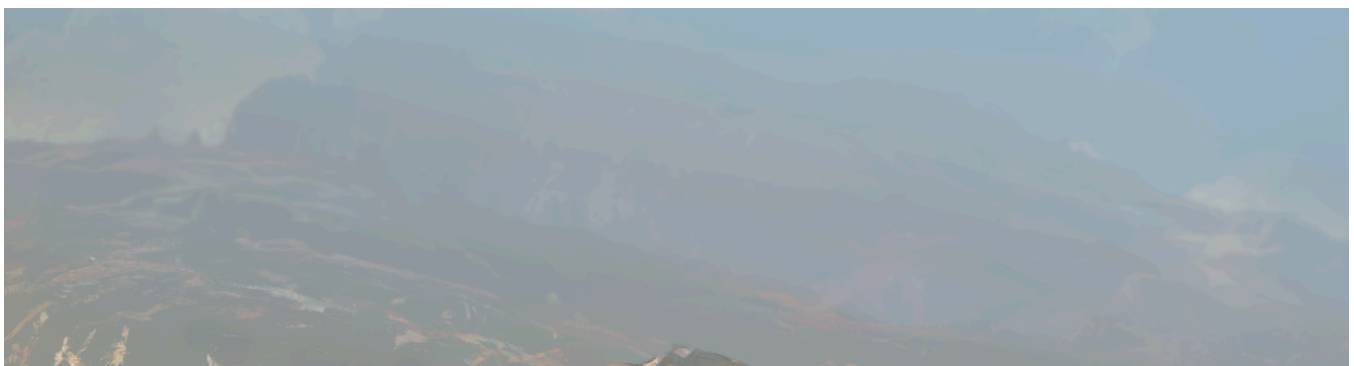


Atmospheric Perspective: Details

In a dense atmosphere, details disappear as they recede in the distance. What makes for a detail? Small, clearly defined notes consisting of secondary value contrasts and often hard edges. In heavy air, the secondary values sink into their foundation value and the edges soften.



In crystal clear air (above), there can be as many details in distant forms as there are in the foreground of the scene. But as the density of the air increases, the details will begin to fade as they recede. In a misty or foggy scene, they can be lost entirely, disappearing completely into the background color and value. Squint at the image below. It's nearly a single, flat color.



Atmospheric Perspective: Gradients

As forms move back in space, all changes in value, color, edges, and details usually occur in *smooth* gradients. It's important that the gradient is gradual and smooth: any abrupt jump in the gradient can break the illusion not only of the atmosphere but of its recession in space.



In the image below, there is little change between the foreground and the edge of the hillside in the mid-ground. There's then a dramatic change—a leap in space—to the distant mountain. The sense of dense atmosphere in the distance doesn't work with the noticeably greater clarity in the mid and foreground. Something is wrong. (A caveat: yes, it's possible that nature could give us a scene such as this—fog lying only in the distance with clearer air in the foreground. In that case, you'll need to decide whether to follow what you see or follow your initial intention.)



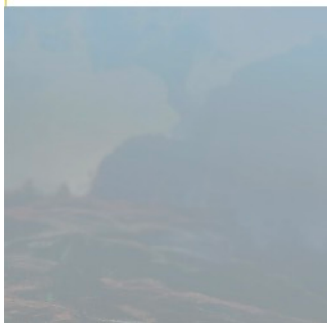
Atmospheric Perspective: Forms

The denser the atmosphere, the more all realistic 3-dimensional forms will slowly change into abstract 2-dimensional shapes as they recede in space.

As the most distant forms (hills, trees, mountains, etc.) lose their value contrasts and details, and as they merge into a single color, they become featureless and flat.



In Homer's painting (below) the hints of three-dimensional form in the rocks in the mid and foreground are lost entirely as they transition to a flat silhouette in the background. The only changes within that flat shape are extremely subtle shifts of color temperature and value.



Winslow Homer, *The Artist's Studio in an Afternoon Fog*

Atmosphere and Focal Point

A focal point in a painting is invariably found at the area of the greatest contrasts in value, edges, color, shapes, and details. When we introduce atmosphere into a painting, we do so by limiting all contrasts in distant forms. Consequently, a focal point can shift as the atmosphere becomes more dense. In a painting of a foggy landscape or cityscape, the only contrasts may be in the extreme foreground, exactly where we usually *don't* want the focal point! To make the painting work, we may need to introduce subtle contrasts in value, shape, or edges to push the focal point back to the middle or background, sacrificing some of the illusion of a dense atmosphere to ensure the eye moves in the painting in the way we intend.

In Sargent's painting, my eye moves from the bottom left to the background and then circles back to the foreground. In the foggy version, the eye becomes trapped in the foreground.

(Notice, at the beginning of this newsletter, how the focal point changed in Levitan's painting when I added a dense atmosphere. The focal point dropped into the foreground. Does it work?)



Atmosphere and Mood

How the atmosphere is rendered in a painting can dramatically affect its mood. In the three examples below by Emile Gruppè, as the air becomes more dense and values become closer and colors more muted, a sense of quiet and stillness increases in the painting. If a painting seems quiet to the point of being boring, just sharpen some edges and/or increase contrasts!



What is the painting about?

Is the atmosphere the point of your painting or does it play only a supporting role? If it's only a minor part of your painting and you're not intending it to be a quiet painting, it may be better to keep forms sharp and clear. But if the atmosphere, fog, or mist, is the subject matter of the painting, then it becomes more challenging. An accurate portrayal of fog, mist, and dense atmosphere requires a finely tuned sensitivity to subtle value relationships.

Because it's value, not color, that creates the illusion of light, space, and atmosphere, why not focus first on the values of the painting? Sketching a few tonal thumbnails or creating an underpainting, especially when working in a large format, will dramatically increase the chances that the painting will succeed. And don't we all love successful paintings?



This small (9"x12") painting, "*Monterey Sunset*," was created for the Salmagundi Club's annual Black and White Show. When creating monochromatic underpaintings, I rarely take them to a finished state; however, this was intended to be a finished painting from the beginning.

Color is wonderful, sexy, and a joy to work with. But it's equally satisfying and challenging to work solely monochromatically. There's instant gratification when working in values—you can see immediately if the illusion of space, light and form—and therefore the painting—will work.

And finally, a few examples. . .

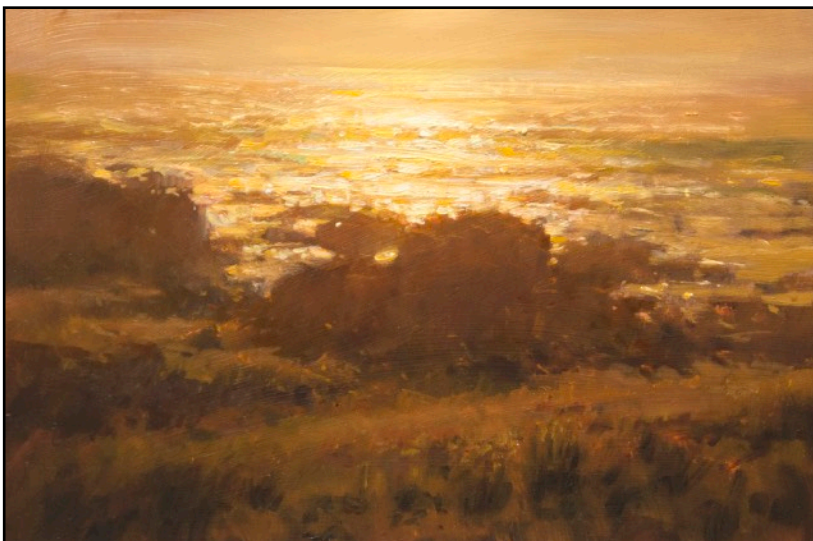
Creating a convincing illusion of atmosphere in your paintings isn't magic. It's based on a few principles and skills that can be learned. Go on location and study nature. Notice how the atmosphere affects the landscape. Study how artists create a sense of atmosphere in their paintings, how they use values, edges, and colors to create a convincing illusion. Then put what you learn into your own paintings.



Above – Birge Harrison:
St. Lawrence River Sunset

Top right – Vladimir Kirillov:
In the Village in Summer

Right and bottom – two of mine.



In choosing the two examples of my work, I deliberately picked two paintings with different subject matters and different overall color temperatures. Color can enhance the mood of the painting and will certainly affect the quality of the light, but the illusion of atmosphere is created almost entirely by values. Get the values right and you can play with color, knowing the illusion will work.

Brushes: Protecting Soft Bristles

In the Non-Toxic Studio (the mini-newsletter from September 2021), I explained how to use linseed oil to clean brushes and so avoid using solvents and/or soap. After cleaning the brushes with oil, they're stored upright in a jar filled with 1/2"-1" of clean safflower oil (left).



This method works well for the relatively large, stiff bristle brushes that I most often use when painting. But over time, storing vertically any small bristle brushes or soft, delicate synthetic brushes distorts and bends the bristles. (below)



I needed to find a way to store brushes horizontally without allowing the oil in the brush to dry nor to end up soaking the entire handles in oil. I had heard that clove oil nearly stops completely the drying process of linseed oil. It seemed the perfect solution to the problem. I purchased a small bottle of clove oil and an ArtBin brush box that can be sealed.

All my soft brushes are now stored in an ArtBin box with a dozen drops of clove oil placed beneath the bristle end of the brushes on the bottom of the box. The oil in the brushes has remain unchanged for up to two months. No drying of the oil and no damaged bristles. If you use soft brushes and wish to avoid solvents and soaps (always a good idea), I encourage you to try it.



Words of Wisdom

Use only that which works and
take it from any place you can find it.

– Bruce Lee, martial artist

Dreams are lovely. But they are just
dreams. . . dreams do not come true just
because you dream them. It's hard work
that makes things happen.

– Shonda Rhimes, author

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

I wish you all a happy, healthy,
and prosperous 2022!

*There are still spaces available in the June 6–10 PAFA workshop.
The other three are filled with waiting lists only.*

2022 Workshops



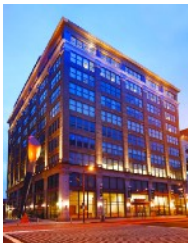
February 26 – March 5 Casa de los Artista, Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico
artworkshopvacations.com **WORKSHOP FULL**

This will be my sixth trip to this venue. The studio is perfect, the food delicious, and the scenery exquisite. It's a week of serious plein air and studio painting paired with a varied and fun-filled exposure to the delicious food, kind people, and deep culture of Mexico.



**May 4–10 Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art;
North Adams, Mass. MASSMoCA **WORKSHOP FULL****

A studio workshop for advanced painters. This workshop will be limited to eight participants. We will focus on creating a large studio painting based on plein air studies and sketches. Each participant will have a large, private studio. More details to follow.



**June 6–10 Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts;
Philadelphia, PA www.pafa.org *A few spaces are still open.***

We will be painting in the studio using photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies. We will explore the limitations of the camera and ways to compensate for them.



October 14–16 Falmouth Art Center

www.falmouthart.org **WORKSHOP FULL**

This three-day workshop will focus on painting in the studio while using photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. Open to painters of all levels of experience.