John MacDonald

September–October, 2020

Painting on the Edge(s). *Part 2*

The topic of the previous newsletter was edges in isolation–what they are and how to paint them. This month, we'll look at edges collectively. I'l begin with a review of a few rules about using edges in a painting and will then look at a three examples from masters to see how they used edges in their paintings. I hope you find the topic interesting and helpful.

Painting as a Refuge

What a year it has been. Remaining centered and sane has been challenging. And yet through it all, there have been so many reasons to feel gratitude rather than anxiety. My family is healthy; we live in an area in which Covid-19 remains low; and then there's art. Painting, and particularly landscape painting, has proven to be a balm for the heart, mind, and soul.

With gallery sales light since March, I've had less need to work in the studio on large paintings, which has freed me to paint outside nearly every day. Reconnecting deeply with plein air painting, and through it, the joy, wonder, and miracle of nature, has been a godsend. Being able to spend a few hours each day surrounded by incredible beauty has served as a constant reminder that my so-called problems are all transient and insignificant. Throw in the fact that the hours spent painting outdoors will, hopefully, also help me become a better painter, and it's clear I've little reason to complain.

I hope you and your loved ones are also doing well and that you're finding ways to stay centered and connected. Be well!

Covid workshop update

Sadly, the 4-day workshop scheduled for mid November at the Landgrove Inn has been cancelled. It being an indoor workshop, and considering the quarantine requirements of the state of Vermont, it was a difficult but wise decision. It will be rescheduled for next year.

Edge Contrasts in a Painting

How we use edge contrasts will affect the illusions of space and light, control the movement of the eye, and strengthen or weaken the visual appearance of different areas of the painting. When deciding how to treat an edge in a painting, two considerations should be kept in mind:

   1. **Varying an edge creates contrasts, which attract and direct the eye.** Where you choose to sharpen or soften an edge will affect how the eye moves to that area in the painting and where it will finally settle. A very dark area meeting a very light area with a razor sharp edge will immediately grab and hold the eye. Generally, it's best to keep the sharpest edges with the greatest value contrasts at the focal area of the painting. If you place the greatest edge contrasts in the painting along the edge of the canvas, you'll draw the eye out of the painting.

The edge of this tree line is varied by a combination of blended, unblended, and broken brushstrokes. The variety provides not only interest but creates the illusion of some trees being forward and others back in space. The eye ultimately goes to the strongest contrast and sharpest edges.

   2. **A shape whose entire edge is uniform will appear flat.** If a large shape on the canvas is painted with a uniform edge, it will appear as if it's lying on the surface of the canvas rather than existing in space. It doesn't matter whether the edge is uniformly hard or soft, it's the unvarying quality of the edge which makes it appear flat. Uniformity will also create an ambivalent focal area and confuse the eye. If the edge is all the same, the eye doesn't know where to go.

If Working in Value Keys, Keep the Edges Sharp(er)!

As described in last month's newsletter, edges always appear softer when values are brought together. Consequently, a painting with a limited range of values (a high key paint, for example) will need sharper edges to avoid appearing merely out of focus or unfinished.

In this middle-key painting by the Australian painter, Auther Streeton, notice how relatively sharp are the edges of his shapes in the background yet the forms still read convincingly in the distance. The edges need to be somewhat sharp *physically* because the close values soften them *optically*. **The less value contrast in a painting, the sharper the edges need to be.**

Arthur Streeton, *The Purple Noon's Transparent Might.*

In this detail, notice that even in the background he keeps the edges relatively sharp.
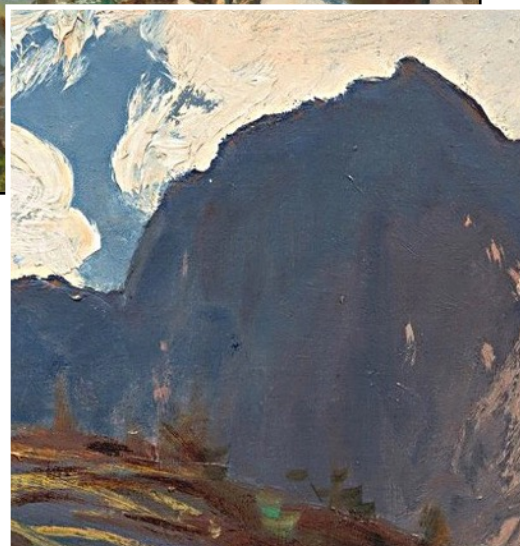
Edges and the Illusion of Space.

You may be familiar with an old adage regarding edges: *soft edges recede in space and hard edges come forward*. As with most rules of painting, it's not necessarily true. Atmospheric and linear perspective (line, scale, overlapping form, etc.) are more effectively in creating the illusion of space than edge contrasts. A mountain can have a sharp edge yet appear miles distant so long as all the other visual clues in the painting signal that it's far away in space. Values, especially, are much better than edges at indicating the location of forms in space. Focus on correct values first, then decide how you want the edge contrasts to affect the illusion of space.

John Singer Sargent. *Simplon Pass*, 1911

The distant cliff and clouds have hard edges, yet they remain firmly in the distance. The other clues to the structuring of space is this painting are so strong and unambiguous, the distant hard edges don't weaken the illusion of the mountain being in the background.

Eliminating Edge Contrasts Entirely:
Using all hard edges? – YES.

With the discovery of Japanese woodcuts in the late 1800s and the advent of modernism, using soft edges to create or enhance the illusion of space was often rejected in favor of creating images that were graphic, flat, and tied to the surface of the canvas. This emphasis on graphic design over illusionistic, 3-D space in which edges are uniformly hard, is neither good nor bad; it's just a different way of painting. Below are two traditional examples in which successful paintings were created using consistently hard edges throughout the image. But be aware that using

Vincent Van Gogh. *Irises*

Tom Thomson, *The Jack Pine*

uniformly hard edges flattens the space and calls attention to the surface of the painting. When coupled with clear, emphatic brushstrokes, the illusion of deep space is lost entirely as the forms are reduced to flat, surface pattern. If you want the illusion of space, use edges contrasts.

Using all soft edges? *NO!*

Oddly enough, while using uniformly hard edges can create strong, successful paintings, using uniformly soft edges will almost always create paintings that appear weak, unfinished, or out of focus. If you're going to use only one variety of edge in a painting, make them all relatively hard.

In this early painting of mine, I attempted to create a hazy atmosphere by making all of the edges soft. I instead created a painting that looks simply unfinished and out of focus.

The entire painting appears flat? Soften *ALL* the edges, then sharpen some.

As a painting progresses, it's not unusual to reach a stage at which the entire painting appears flat, as if the space in the painting is very shallow. This is often caused by edges that are uniformly too sharp, as if each shape in the painting is a cut-out piece of color resting on the surface. There are two techniques that can eliminate this flat graphic quality and restore deep space.

If the painting is wet. Lightly brush the entire surface from top to bottom with a large, clean, soft brush. Soften all the edges, then go back into the painting to sharpen those that need to attract the eye. This technique works best when the layers of paint are thin. If you've heaped the pigment on the canvas, it's best to scrape off paint and then soften with a brush. This technique can also be used when only a part of the painting needs to be softened. For instance, the edges of clouds are often too sharp with too much value contrast. Brushing over the entire sky will soften both edge and value contrasts and restore the illusion of the depth of space in the sky.

If the painting is dry. Scumble or glaze a thin layer of paint of a value that is between the lights and darks in the painting, leaving slightly more pigment visible on the edges of forms.

On the left is detail of a recent painting. The combination of value contrasts and sharp edges gave the painting more of a flat, graphic quality than I wanted. I was looking for softer forms dissolved in the light. By applying a thin layer of paint, all of the edges were softened, the value contrasts were subdued, and the illusion of atmosphere was enhanced. The result is below.

Orchestrating Edges to Direct the Eye ~ A Few Rules

As stated in the previous newsletter, edge contrasts draw the eye. Below are a few rules that can guide us as we make decisions about how we want the eye to move around in our painting.

Given two identical edges, the greater the value contrast between the adjacent shapes, the more strongly the edge will attract the eye.

In this example from Inness, both edges are relatively sharp, but the eye is more strongly drawn to the edge on the right because of the greater value contrast between the adjacent shapes.

Given a variety of edges, a hard edge will attract the eye more strongly than a soft edge.

The edges between the various shapes of color are uniformly soft. The only exception are the edges of the tree trunk. This is where the eye will settle.

Place hard edges on the edge of the canvas only if there are edges of equal or greater hardness in the focal area of the painting.

In Irisis, Van Gogh treats all the edges with equal hardness; consequently, those on the edge of the canvas (far right) will not unduly attract the eye.
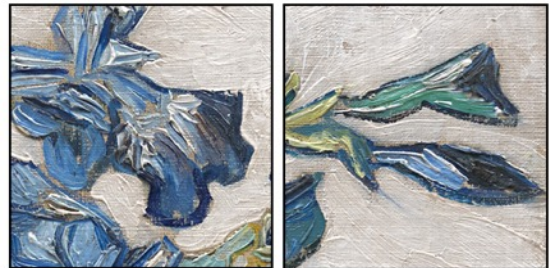
Paintings with predominantly hard edges have a flatter, more graphic appearance; the light appears sharper; and the atmosphere appears clearer and less humid.

The uniformly hard edges of Thomson's painting create a woodcut-like appearance. The mountains are in the background but the space seems shallow or flat.
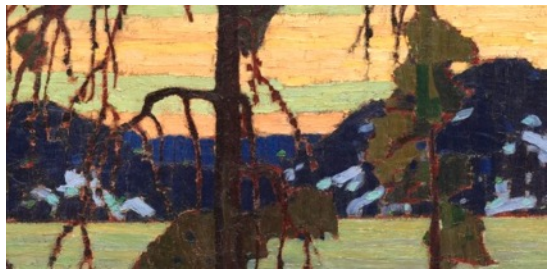
Paintings with predominantly soft edges have a more realistic, spacial appearance. The light in the painting will appear softer, the atmosphere more dense, and distant forms will become flattened as they dissolve.

In this example of my painting, the background hills appear much more realistically distant that Thomson's mountains, a result of values working with soft edges.
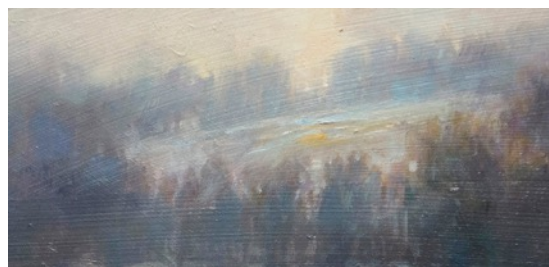
Lastly, THE most important rule about edges:

The edges we see in nature are rarely the edges the painting needs.

Nature isn't concerned about giving us a focal point, a logical path for the eye, or a perfect painting. Don't simply copy what you see. First, decide what you want the painting to say. Then take what you can and invent what you must, but in the end, the point is the painting and the edges you choose must serve to make the painting work.

At left is a photo taken on location and the plein air study (below). While painting, I changed the edges in the scene to match my intentions for the painting. For instance, in the actual scene, the edge of the hilltop was sharp against the clouds while the edges in the distant field were relatively soft. I wanted the eye to linger in the mid ground and not be drawn too strongly to the hill/sky edge. I softened the hill edge and sharpened the mid ground edges. Notice how I also changed the values to affect the appearance of the edges.

Orchestrating Edges ~ Three Examples

When analyzing edge contrasts in a painting, four items should be kept in mind.

1. Edge contrasts help determine where the eye moves in the painting.

2. A variety of edge contrasts makes a painting more visually interesting.

3. Edge contrasts can provide spacial clues, indicating where forms exists in space.

4. Edge contrasts work in tandem with value contrasts. When analyzing how an artist has used edges in a painting, consider how the value contrast affects the appearance of the edge.

In each example below, I'll point out three instances in which the edge treatments play an important role in determining the focal area and in describing space and form.

Curt Hanson ~ *Up Stream*

1. The strongest edge and value contrasts are where the water meets the grasses in the center of the painting. This draws the eye into the painting and creates the focal area. Notice how the sharp edges of the lights in the water also suggest its smooth, reflective surface.

2. The relatively sharp edges of the sky holes create interesting patterns that contrast with the softer edges of the surrounding grass and sky. Their small size, however, ensures they draw the eye less strongly than the light, hard-edged, shapes of the water.

3. In the highlights of the foreground blades of grass, the edges are nearly as sharp as the edges of the forms of the water but they don't draw the eye because there's less value contrast.

Curt uses edge contrasts to create a beautiful play of texture in this painting, contrasting the textures of the surface of the water, the blades of grass, the pattern of sky holes, and the sky.

George Inness ~ *Spring Blossoms, Montclair, New Jersey*

1. The darkest values in this painting are in the mid ground tree trunk and in the shadows under the trees and on the grass at the sides of the painting. The area of the tree trunk and flowering mass above attracts and holds the eye because of the hard edge of the trunk against the misty background, coupled with the lightest light in the painting–the flowers of the tree. In any painting, the area with the sharpest edge and greatest value contrast will become the focal point. Compare the area of the focal point to the softer edges and closer values in the darks at the sides of the painting. The quieter edges and diminished value contrasts ensure those areas remain subordinate to the focal area. There is a hierarchy of areas that attract the eye.

2. The roofline of the background house is a fairly sharp edge. This helps distinguish it from the soft edges of the nearby trees and allows it to subtly draw the eye into the background. The edge contrasts (hard roof-soft trees) provide visual interest *and* spacial clues in the painting. But notice that both value and edge contrasts are subdued compared to the center tree.

3. The edges of the foreground path leading into the scene are sharper at the bottom of the painting but soften as we move to the mid-ground. This transition to soft edges not only enhances the illusion of a flat plane moving back into space, it also keeps the edges of the path from competing with those of the tree in drawing the eye. Were the edges of the path in the background sharp, they would conflict with the edge of the trunk and flatten the space.

Cecilia Beaux ~ *Man with the Cat* (detail)

    Regardless of the subject matter of a painting, edges perform the same function: moving the eye around, creating a focal area, describing space, and suggesting texture. Cecilia Beaux's handling of edges in this portrait is masterful in all four areas. Let's look at three instances.

1. The background. She uses soft edges and close values (and hues) to ensure the background remains behind the figure. Notice, too, how simple she keeps the background–it's little more than abstract, rectangular shapes which contrast beautifully with the complexity of the figure.

2. The sinuous line of the edge of the lapel has variety in its edge, a transition in its value contrast, and provides a path that leads the eye up to the face. Notice how it becomes sharper with greater value contrast as it approaches the face. It's simple yet beautifully painted!

3. Also drawing the eye to the face is the sharp edge of the white collar against the nearly black tie. But the simplicity and small size of both shapes ensure the focal point remains the face.

Edges ~ The Last Word. . .

A skillful handling of edges alone won't make a masterpiece but it can make your paintings more interesting and successful. It's well worth the time and effort to study the edge handling in great paintings, explore different techniques for creating them, and paint paint paint!

A substitute for Vasari Raw Umber

Those who have expressed an interest in my limited palette know that I use Vasari Raw Umber. Being less yellow than other brands it mixes to a neutral, silvery grey when used with white. I love it but it's only available through their website with a $100 minimum charge. The painter, Ann Bodkhe, recently sent me the color chart below in which she compares Vasari Raw Umber to Williamsburg Italian Raw Umber. I've yet to try the Williamsburg paint but in the chart the two pigments appear identical. If you're interested in using a more neutral, Vasari-like Raw Umber, you'll find Williamsburg less expensive and more easily available.

Peter McLeod, a painter in England, has also suggested Michael Harding's and Old Holland's **Green Umber.** I've tried neither but both share the same pigment number as Vasari's Raw Umber. If you're already familiar with the Vasari brand and have tried either of these, please let me know what you discover.

Lastly, a simple approximation can be created by mixing any brand of a yellowish Raw Umber with approximately 10%-20% Lamp Black. This combination will do in a pinch.

Words of Wisdom

We are social creatures to the inmost center of our being. The notion that one can begin anything at all from scratch, free from the past, or unindebted to others, could not conceivably be more wrong.
– Karl Popper

The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common.
– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Coming up next in the Nov-Dec Newsletter:

In the last of this year's newsletter I"ll look at details–what they are, how to paint them, and how to use them skillfully. Until then,

–Happy Painting!

Depending on the state of the pandemic, the workshops below may change at short notice. Please refer to my website for the most current information. Stay well!

2020 Workshops

Dec. 7–11 Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts - ONLINE

www.pafa.org   ~   *Waiting List only*

An online workshop for intermediate to advanced painters. We'll work with a single photo, using it to create paintings with different compositions, value keys, and color temperatures.

2021 Workshops

Feb 27–Mar. 6 Casa de los Artistas artworkshopvacations.com

In a small village on the beautiful Pacific coast of Mexico, a week of focused plein air painting paired with a varied, fun-filled, and fascinating exposure to the delicious food, friendly people, and spectacular scenery of Mexico.

May 23–29 Hudson River Valley Art Workshops; Greenville, NY
www.artworkshops.com

A studio workshop for intermediate to advanced painters. We'll work with a single photo as reference, using it to create paintings with different value keys, color keys, times of day, and seasons. This workshop is for intermediate to advanced painters.

August 20–22 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. We will explore the limitations of the camera and ways to compensate for them. Open to painters of all levels of experience.