

# John MacDonald

September–October 2018



## WORKSHOPS

### 2018

I'm taking off 2018 from all teaching in order to re-write workshop materials and to concentrate on plein air painting.

Workshops are being scheduled for 2019/2020. See the [Workshop page](#) on my website for information.

### 2019

FEB 16–23, 2019

**CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS**  
Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico  
[Casa de los Artistas](#)

MAY 20–24, 2019

**WETHERSFIELD ACADEMY**  
Wethersfield, Conn.  
[www.wethersfieldarts.org](http://www.wethersfieldarts.org)

SEPT 22–28, 2019

**HUDSON RIVER VALLEY  
ART WORKSHOPS**  
Greenville, New York  
[www.artworkshops.com](http://www.artworkshops.com)

OCT. 9–15, 2019

**MASTER CLASS AT THE  
MASSACHUSETTS MUSEUM  
OF CONTEMPORARY ART**  
North Adams, Mass.  
(limited to 8 participants)

## News from the Studio. . .

### Painting from the Dark Side. . .

The days are getting noticeable shorter. It's a time of falling leaves, deepening silence, and Halloween. With the dropping temperatures and growing darkness, it seems only fitting that I spend less time painting sunny scenes *en plein air* and move into the studio to work in a manner more suitable to the season.

During the last two weeks, I've used classic Tonalist paintings as inspiration, photos as reference, and have transposed the landscapes in the photos into an autumn key: somber, dark, and moody.

In the January–February 2016 newsletter, I wrote about borrowing the palettes from classic paintings to create new ones. This month's newsletter is a reprise of that topic, this time in a Tonalist mood.

### Workshop in Sunny Mexico!

If these Tonalist-inspired paintings are too dark and gloomy for you, there is still time to receive the discount for signing up and paying for February's [workshop in bright, sunny Mexico](#). A sincere *thank you* to those who've already taken advantage of the offer and have signed up. I look forward to painting with you.

### *Pod cast with Eric Rhoads on Outdoor Painter.*

Among several topics discussed is using Photoshop to edit photos for painting reference. If that subject interests you, click [HERE](#) to listen. It runs slightly over 40 minutes.

A sincere *Thank You* to those of you who have already purchased the Liliedahl video. I hope you're finding it informative. Feel free to contact me if you have any questions or comments.



## Liliedahl Video

### A workshop in a box.

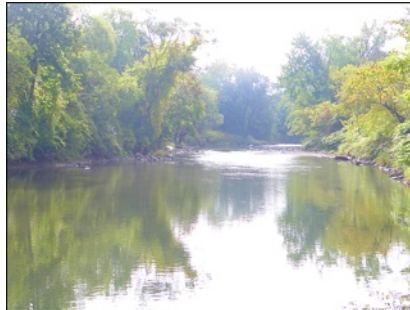
The Liliedahl instructional video is available [here](#). It's a mini-workshop in a box: five hours of exposition, and demonstration. Streaming is also available.

## The Exercise:

In the [January–February 2016 newsletter](#), I described how I created a new painting by taking the forms of the landscape and value structure from one of my photos and combining it with the color palette from a painting by Monet. Below are the photos from the earlier newsletter showing Monet's work, my photo, and the resulting painting.



Monet's painting.



My photo.



The new painting.

In the example above, I used only Monet's color palette. In the Tonalist-inspired paintings featured in this newsletter, I've taken not only the color palettes from the old paintings but also their value structures. My photos supply only the forms—the content—of the new paintings. This is a wonderful exercise that can lead to a deeper understanding of values, color, and composition. (See to the 2016 newsletter for more information.)

## The Ingredients:

1. A reproduction of a painting, preferably one that inspires you. The color need not be perfectly accurate but the better quality the image (in print or online), the better the result.
2. A photo that you'd like to use as reference for your painting. For best results, choose a photo in which the subject matter and elements in your photo are similar to those of the source painting. For example, it's difficult to use a painting of a meadow as inspiration for creating a seascape. In the examples given below, notice the similarity of the major shapes in my photos compared to the major shapes in the Tonalist paintings. They're not identical but they're similar enough to provide a starting point for the painting.

## The Process:

Using the elements of the landscape in your photo, sketch the composition on the canvas. Then, as you block in the shapes with paint, refer to the colors and value structure of the source painting. Only concern yourself with the color and value in the old painting, not its forms or details. This is crucial! If you find yourself following every nuance and detail of the source painting, then it's likely you're simply copying the old painting rather than using it as information and inspiration to create a new painting. (More on that at the end of the newsletter.) As the painting progresses, you should spend less time studying the source painting and more time looking at the new painting. Deviate from the source painting if your painting needs it. Again, the point of this is to **create**, not to simply **copy**.

## Painting #1: inspired by Charles Harold Davis

**Davis's painting.** Davis did several paintings portraying immense open spaces with a few trees breaking a far horizon. All of them evoke deep silence. I love this painting for its sophisticated simplicity. Squint at the image and you can see how tightly he limited the value range within the sky and the ground. This painting consists of only two foundation values.



Charles Harold Davis, *Deepening Shadows*, 1884, 29 x 45 in.

**Reference photo.** In the Berkshires of western Massachusetts, there are no deep vistas with a distant flat horizon, so I chose this photo, taken on a recent trip to Madison, Wisconsin. It offers a high horizon and a deep foreground, several trees from which to choose, and an interesting pattern of distant fields. There's plenty of information in this photo from which to choose.



**The painting.** In Davis's painting, only a single cloud breaks the uniform value of the sky. As my painting developed, the sky became slightly more complex, with a slightly greater range of values and details. There's also more detail in the distance in my painting. His painting has an Andrew Wyeth-like simplicity that I missed in mine. Is that a deficit or are the two paintings just different? I haven't decided.



## Painting #2: inspired by J. Frances Murphy

**Murphy's painting.** If Davis's painting was in a slightly warm key, Murphy's is even warmer. This, too, has a simple value structure. The sky is essentially one value, monochromatic in color, and nearly void of detail. The ground has a much greater variety of values, colors, and detail. The simple composition works beautifully.



J. Francis Murphy, *Autumn Fields*, 1900, 16 x 22 in.

**Reference photo.** Needing a far horizon, I again turned to the batch of photos taken last May in Wisconsin and found exactly what I was looking for: a long horizon, mid-ground trees, and a small patch of water. Given the simplicity of the sky, I knew it would be easy to invent the top half of the painting.



**The painting.** From the beginning, I wanted my painting to be slightly darker. (The image of Murphy's painting, taken from the internet, is probably lighter than the original.) Darkening my painting enhances the mood and allows for richer color. As the painting progressed, I added more information to the sky. This is the result after the first session. I'll decide later whether the more complex sky helps or hurts the painting. It may also need a few lighter values in the ground.



## Painting #3: inspired by Hugh Bolton Jones



Hugh Bolton Jones, *Twilight*, 1885, 11 x 15 in.



**Reference photo.** This photo of a nearby beaver pond provided all that I needed: water, trees, and a distant hill. The photo was taken on a bright, overcast September day. The sky and highlights on the water were completely washed out but it needed only a little adjusting of the values to turn it into an evening scene.



**My painting.** The result wasn't quite what I wanted. It's now a post-sunset scene, with a clear atmosphere and a more dramatic sky. The greater color and value contrasts in my painting destroy the silver light and sense of silence that permeates Jones's painting. It doesn't necessarily make mine a poorer painting, it's just different. Still, I didn't capture the mood that I wanted—the mood that is so evident in Jones's painting.

## Painting #4: inspired by Alexander Wyant

**Wyant's painting.** Tonalism wasn't a monolithic style of painting. Some artists worked in thin layers with soft edges. Some work with a thickly laden brush and palette knife. Wyant was in the latter group. I aspire to paint with the energy and directness evident in his images. In this work, the tree is tightly painted in a Hudson River School style; the ground is more loosely handled; and the sky is painted in a textured and suggestive manner. His handling of warm/cool color contrasts is simple yet masterful.



Alexander Wyant, *Sketch, Clearing Up*, c1890, 14 x 17 in.

**Reference photo.** Although it lacks the distant horizon of the painting of Wyant's, the sky and ground are similar. I only needed to raise the tree in the left side of the photo to break the horizon and keep the eye from sliding off to the left. A touch of autumn color in the photo gave me the warm hues I needed to contrast with the cooler grays and greens.



**My painting.** In Wyant's painting, both the horizon and foreground are lighter than the dark green band running across the mid-ground. Not having a distant horizon, I chose to put the darkest darks along the top of the hill and in the mid-ground trees. Looking at it now with fresh eyes, I may lighten the foreground slightly and, as in Wyant's painting, add more warm hues there, limiting the cool greens to the horizontal band across the mid-ground.



## Painting #5: inspired by George Inness

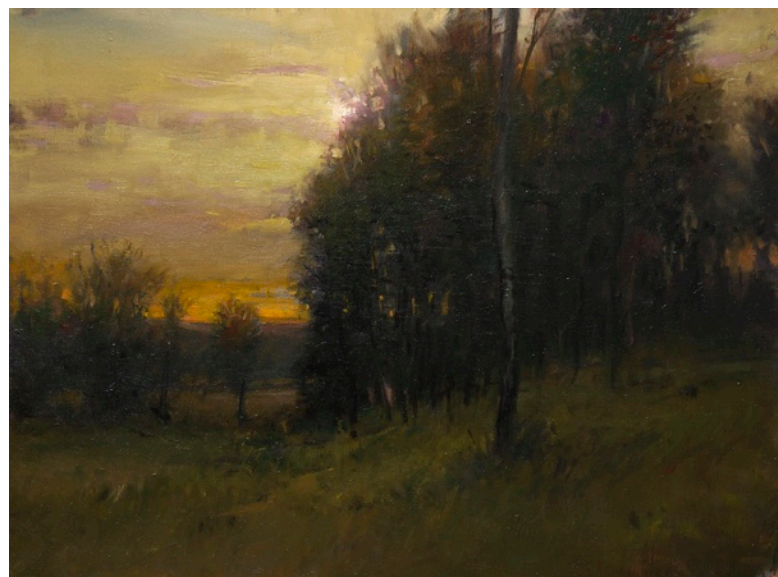


George Inness, *Sunset Glow*, c1888, 15x20 in.



**Inness's painting.** As with most of Inness's late paintings, his abstract shapes of simple values make his compositions sing. The values, shapes, and contrasts of color temperatures that he used seem so simple, yet this simplicity is so difficult to achieve. With so few details and such a simple structure, every element of the painting must work nearly perfectly.

**Reference photo.** In searching for a photo, I looked for strong shapes of trees against a sky, a simple foreground, and lighting that resulted in three values. It's much easier to begin with a photo of a landscape that offers a simple arrangement of elements than a complex landscape that requires extensive omission and editing.



**My painting.** This painting also went in a different direction than intended. After blocking in the trees and ground, with values darker than those in Inness's painting, I began working the sky. Using slightly cooler colors in my painting, it began to resemble a nocturne rather than a sunset so I decided to continue in that direction, toning back the warmth of the sky and adding a hint of a moon.

A few other new tonalist paintings and the photos used for reference. It's worth noting that these photos, and those used in the previous examples, could serve as good reference for paintings that follow more closely the color temperatures and lighting in the photos. That is, they could have been used to create paintings of light-filled, summer landscapes.





# 2019 Workshops

## February 16–23

**Casa de los Artista, Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico**

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

This will be my fifth 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 and studio painting paired with a varied and fun-filled exposure to the food, people, and culture of Mexico.



## May 20–24

**Wethersfield Academy, Wethersfield, CT**

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

A studio 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. This will take you from simply copying a photograph to creating a painting.



## September 22–28

**Hudson River Valley Art Workshops; Greenville, NY**

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

A studio workshop for intermediate to advanced painters. As in the Wethersfield workshop, we'll work with a single photo, using it to create paintings with different compositions, value keys, etc.



## October 9–15

**Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art; North Adams, Mass.**

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

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.



## Copying versus Creating

Since the invention of photography, there's been conflict between artists who work from life and those who work from photos. The argument hasn't ended. Some painters believe landscapes should only be painted en plein air. Others believe working from photos is a perfectly legitimate alternative. I believe it's the wrong argument. We should be discussing the difference between **copying** and **creating**. If my intention is to simply copy what I see—color for color, value for value, form for form—does it really matter whether I'm looking at a photo of a landscape or the actual landscape? As one artist put it, "We're artists, not police reporters." Mindlessly copying visual information results in weak work.

Still, there's a place for copying in our ongoing and endless development as artists. Copying the work of other artists is a time honored and effective way to learn about composition, value, color, choice of details, etc. There's nothing wrong with it so long it remains a mean and not the end in our work. In this exercise, I began the paintings by adopting the color palette and value structure of other artists. I was copying. In the process of painting, I allowed my ideas, mistakes, and experiences to influence my choices. That's creating. The paintings went different directions from the originals and, when finished, they spoke as much or more in my voice as they did in the voice of the other artist.

### Giving credit where credit is due.

If this exercise results in a painting worthy of showing in a gallery, I will always note on the back the influence of the artist. For instance, I may write, "*Inspired by the work of J. Francis Murphy*" or "*Influenced by Autumn Fields by J. Francis Murphy.*" I'm happy to acknowledge those artists whom I most admire and from whom I've learned so much.

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## Words of Wisdom

Art makes life bearable. It isn't a luxury.

Like our capacity for understanding  
and our experience of love,  
it is a vitally important part of life.

~ Gillian Pederson Krag

Don't put in a single unnecessary feature. Everything which  
does not contribute to the grace, or the beauty, or the force,  
or the sentiment of your picture detracts from it.

~ Birge Harrison

### Next Issue's Topic?

If you've a topic you'd like to see  
addressed in a future newsletter,  
please let me know. I'm always  
looking for ideas.

—*Happy Painting!*

