# John MacDonald

Plein Air Challenge

January 1 marked the beginning of my sabbatical. One of my goals for the new year is to become a more proficient and prolific plein air painter. But as the adage says, be careful what you wish for.

I paint outside as often as I can but I don't consider myself a plein air painter. My natural painting style is to work slowly over a period of multiple painting sessions, in thin layers of paint, glazes, and scumbles. That style doesn't work well when painting on location and so I've struggled to create finished, successful plein air paintings. Plein air painting requires quick decision making and rapid, direct painting. Trying to discover a style that works for me will be exciting. I'm already moving out of my comfort zone. That's a good sign!

There have been several breaks from the typical winter cold of western Massachusetts to allow me to paint outside every week. The result has been more than three dozen plein air paintings, but 50% have been scraped clean in the studio. It's been a good reminder for me to let go of results and expectations and to just keep painting. Some recent plein air paintings are shown at the end of this newsletter. I'll include some of the better results as the year moves along. And maybe a failure or two. I've plenty of those.

A few weeks ago, a fellow painter asked about the challenges of painting bare trees. Given the season, it's a timely topic. So let's look closely at the various approaches to painting bare trees. . .
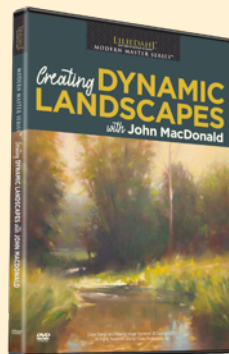
Painting Bare Trees ~ Different Styles

Bare trees may appear the same to everyone but the ways in which artists portray them can vary dramatically. Issues of talent aside, how the tree is painted depends an the artist's individual style. And there are a hundred ways to paint them. Let's look at three general ways that artists have painted bare trees:

1. Graphic / Decorative: In this style, the emphasis is on the graphic pattern created by the limbs against the background. It tends to be a little decorative, but that's not necessarily a problem. This group includes artists whose trees are stylized and carefully designed, such as John Carlson, as well as those whose trees are less consciously designed but still emphasize pattern and line. Many of the impressionists painted bare trees in this style.

Below are trees taken from a painting of Monet's (left) and John Carlson (right):
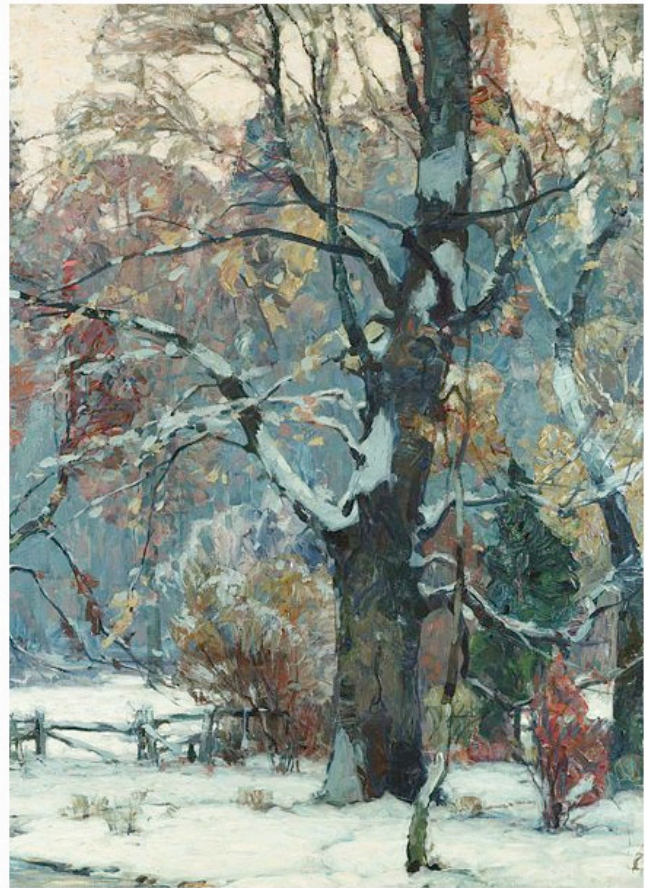
Notice the flat, graphic quality of the these trees. The finest twigs at the ends of the branches have been simplified into flat, large value masses. The trunk and major branches are sharply defined but the limbs, as they become thinner, disappear into the simple value shapes of the twigs. Not a single, thin twig is delineated, only shapes of value.

The value of the trunk and major limbs will almost always change as they transition to the value masses of the twigs. Except when sun is shining directly on the trunk or limbs, the upper parts of the tree will usually be lighter in value than the lower sections.

2. Realistic / Descriptive: Here, the emphasis is on realism. The images can be loosely painted, with brushstrokes suggesting texture, such as the work of Walter Laurent Palmer, or the brushwork can be eliminated entirely, approximating photographic realism. The Hudson River School painters as well as some of the late 19th century Russian painters come to mind. It's neither better nor worse than the graphic approach, just different.

Above are details of paintings from Isaak Leviton (left) and Walter Palmer (right).

In this approach, greater attention is given to the three-dimensional forms of the trees and less is given to the overall appearance of the flat pattern of sky holes and/or limbs and twigs. There is more detail in the masses of twig, even suggestions of individual twigs at the ends of the smallest branches.

Remember that contrasts attract the eye and details are a form of contrast. Small dark twigs against a light sky will especially grab the eye; consequently, it's almost always necessary to either soften the edges of those smallest twigs or to lighten their value or both. Notice that in both paintings, the details are only in the <u>foreground</u> trees!

Even in very tight, realistic paintings, as the trees recede in space the twigs at the ends of branches are massed into shapes of value, becoming simpler, more abstract, flatter, and usually lighter in value as they recede. This matches how the eye sees. Our minds know that distant trees are made up of limbs, branches, and twigs, but as the tree recedes only the largest limbs remain visible as individual limbs. Everything else becomes a value shape. As with anything in the landscape, paint what you see, not what you know is there.

3. Abstract / Suggestive: this approach lies between the graphic/ decorative and the photo realistic styles. There is an emphasis on capturing the individuality of the trees with less on an overt decorative stylization. In this style, there is more loose *suggestion* than tight, realistic *description*. This is the style that most attracts me.

The Tonalists painted in this style as do many contemporary plein air painters. It's a broad style, embracing many differences in individual approaches and techniques.

Two tonalist examples: William Tryon (left), and Charles Harold Davis (right).
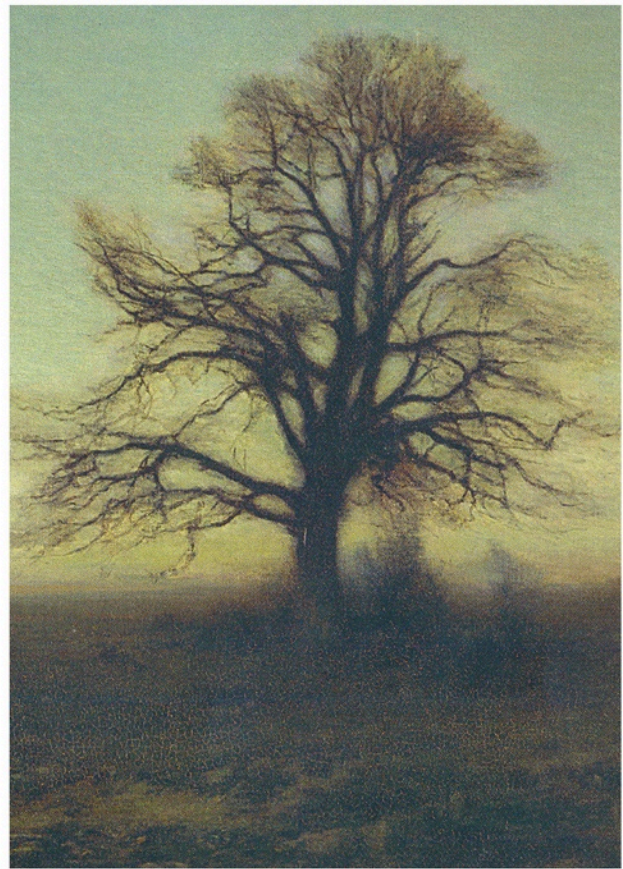
In Tryon's trees, the simplification of the value shapes is taken to an extreme. The tree almost disappears into the atmosphere. He creates this illusion by minimizing value contrast between the tree and the sky and keeping edges soft. It's all suggestion with little description. It's more realistic than the decorative approach of John Carlson.

In Davis's painting, the level of detail and value contrast is much greater than Tryon's. It also portrays a tree against an evening sky but here, the contrasts make the tree the focal point. Despite the strong contrast of the tree against the sky, Davis was still careful to keep the contrasts within limits. If the transition from tree to sky is too strong–in edges, details, and value–the tree will appear as if it's been pasted on top of the background sky rather than being immersed in the atmosphere that envelops both. Here, Davis avoids that by keeping the smallest masses of branches lighter, softer in edges, and more simplified as they merge into the sky. The silhouette of the tree is bold yet the transition on the canvas from branches and twigs to sky is still subtle and soft. While Tryon is attracted to the abstract shapes of the tree, Davis focuses on the specific forms of the tree: limbs and twigs.

The attention Davis gave to the softening of detail and form can be seen in the paintings by Curt Hanson (left) and Richard Schmid (right). Curt is a bit more abstract and less detailed but both simplify the forms, especially the trees in the background; yet despite this simplification, one never loses the impression that these are real, individual trees.

Study the work of painters that work in a similar style to yours. Look specifically at how they render the different parts of the trees, how they simplify forms, handle details and value contrasts, and then apply what you've learned to your paintings. You, too, may discover that you prefer painting trees one way in large studio paintings and a different way in small, quick, plein air studies. It's always beneficial to expand your stylistic preferences.

What to Paint First, the Trees or the Sky??

Frankly, it doesn't matter. Some artists prefer painting the sky first and then painting the value masses and details of individual limbs on top of the sky. Others prefer the reverse. I tend to prefer the latter, although I usually finish doing both. I like to block in the value masses first, then paint the sky up to the edge, then carve out the sky holes, and finally work on the darker and lighter limbs and the trunk. What I've found is that in order to convincingly paint the edge of a tree against a background (sky or distant land), I invariably need to keep the edges softer than I would normally tend to, and to do a lot of back and forth of getting the edges correct—painting sky into tree, softening the edge, and then going back to work the tree against the sky. A lot of time and effort usually goes into painting the edge where tree meets sky yet it can appear to be the work of a moment. At least, that's what I aim for.

Painting Bare Trees ~ A Demo

Below is how I tend to paint trees plein air, alla prima. I stress "tend" because different paintings can require different approaches and I'm always on the alert against the danger of relying on simple formulae that are based less on what we see than what we know.

In summary, here's how I typically paint a bare tree:
1. Compose the shape of the tree: the outline and major sky holes.
2. Mass in the shapes of the fine branches in soft value shapes only. No details!
3. Carve in the most prominent sky holes by adding or removing paint.
4. Paint the background into the edge of the tree, keeping the edge soft.
5. Draw in the prominent limbs using lights and darks.
6. Going back and forth, tweak the edge of the tree and add variety and details.

This is the photo used for reference in the demo. We'll never find a tree–in a photo or on location–that's already perfectly composed for a painting. We'll always need to edit the form to create an interesting composition. As I often say, we are artists making **paintings**, not reporters making **documentaries**. To simply copy, as exactly as possible, what we see is to be enslaved to the eyes and to waste the precious and critical contributions of the brain, heart, and soul. What our eyes present us is just visual information, the unconscious raw material that we need to shape into a painting. Copying, whether from a photograph or real life, may lead to a technically sound painting but it will always lack a soul.

The overall shape or silhouette.

Prior to composing a bare tree, I focus on three attributes: the silhouette of the whole, the shapes of the masses of twigs, and the lines of the trunk and major branches.

I'm looking for three qualities in these parts of the tree that, if not found in nature, will need to be invented: variety in size, contrast of shape, and rhythm in line.

Learning how to simplify, alter, and/or invent the components of a tree is a skill that is acquired through practice and careful looking. The challenge is to simplify the form of the tree without it becoming so stylized that it loses its sense of life–of its being a real tree. Stylization, pushed too far, can become cartoonish. When simplifying, retain some of the quirky qualities of the individual tree. In Monet's painting above, the tree is radically simplified–it's rendered in a few brushstrokes–yet it reads as a living, unique tree. That skill comes from years of observation and drawing.
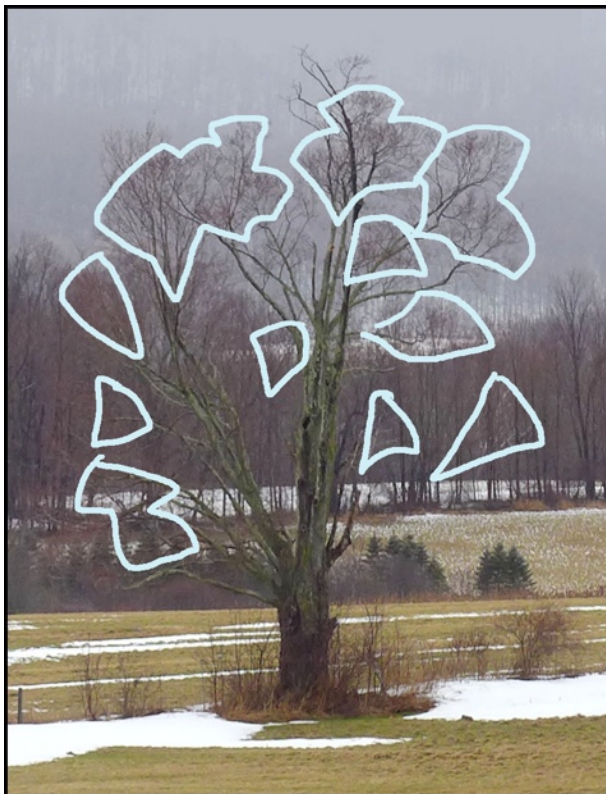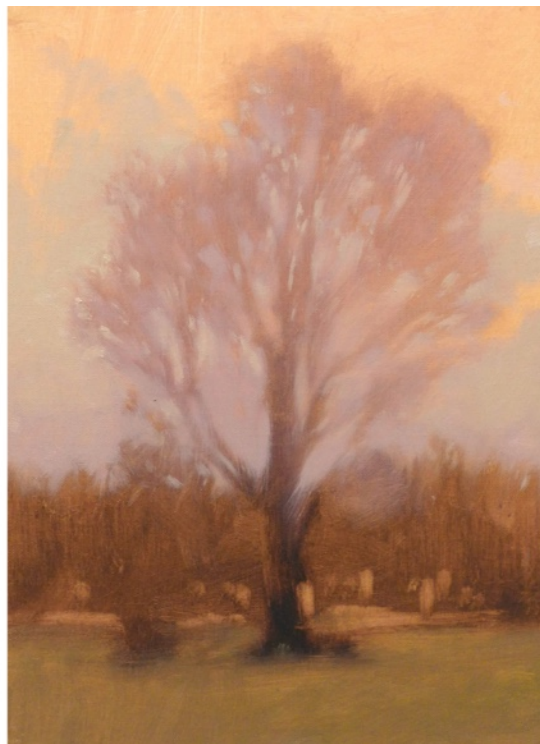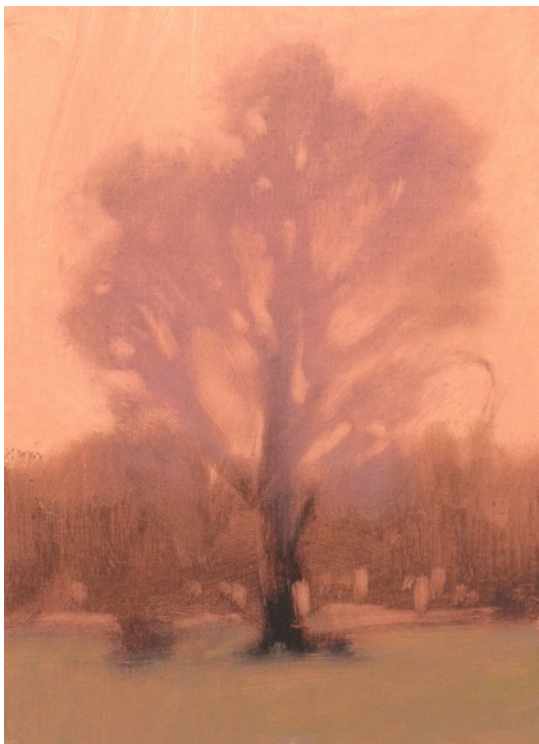

The shapes of the massed twigs.

The linear quality of the trunk and limbs.

1. In composing the tree, I look for the shapes of the massed twigs and the lines of the trunk, making any changes necessary to create a pleasing composition. **2.** The tree is blocked in with thin paint. My concern is primarily about values, less so about color.

3. Paint is wiped away to indicated the major sky holes. The ground is added. **4.** I begin working in the sky, bringing the paint of the sky to the edge of the trees and softly blending it. As I shape the edge of the tree and add the smaller sky holes, I'm beginning to work in a variety of edges–mostly soft but with some harder notes. The variety of edges is crucial to keep the tree from appearing flat and cut-out against the sky.
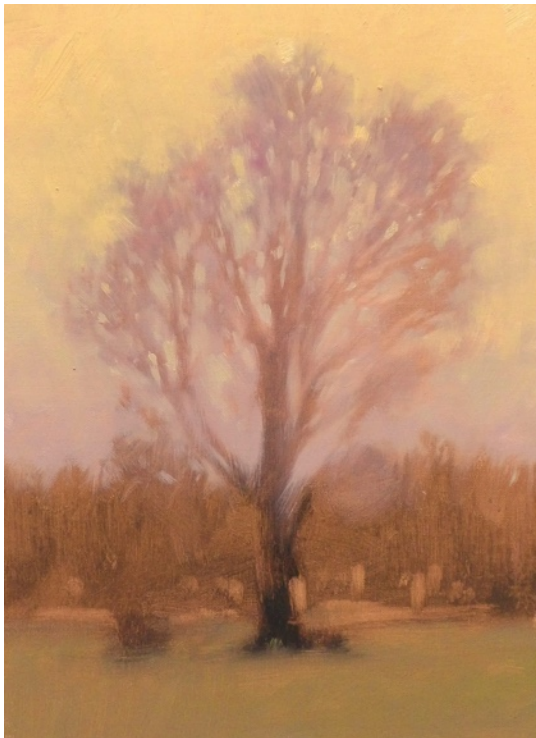
5. While blocking in the sky, I manipulate the edges of the tree–adding, blending, and wiping away. **6.** I then add darks in the trunk and major branches, trying to capture the illusion of branches reaching towards me. (Note the value gradient from the dark trunk to the light twig masses at the top. This is a crucial gradient to see and paint!)

7. I turn to the smaller sky holes and work the edge of the tree again, softening some areas of the edge and sharpening others. **8.** Final details: a few hints of lighter branches coming forward and adding details to the background and foreground complete the painting.

The finished sketch. This is a little looser and rougher than my studio paintings but is in keeping with my approach to plein air painting–it's much more suggestive than descriptive. The intention is to capture the feeling of the openness of the tree and the light and atmosphere enveloping it, adding enough structural detail to make the tree believable without it appearing photographic. It could be painted more tightly or loosely. The choice is yours.

A few examples of bare trees:

Below are several recent paintings, both plein air and studio, than feature bare trees.

A chance to connect in Santa Fe. . .

I am happy to announce my addition to the 2018 Plein Air Convention & Expo faculty in Santa Fe, NM on April 16-20. This is the world's largest plein air painting event. I encourage you to join us in Santa Fe and, if you register now, you'll receive the lowest possible price (spots fill quickly!). To find out more about #PACE18, head on over to www.pleinairconvention.com. See you in Santa Fe!
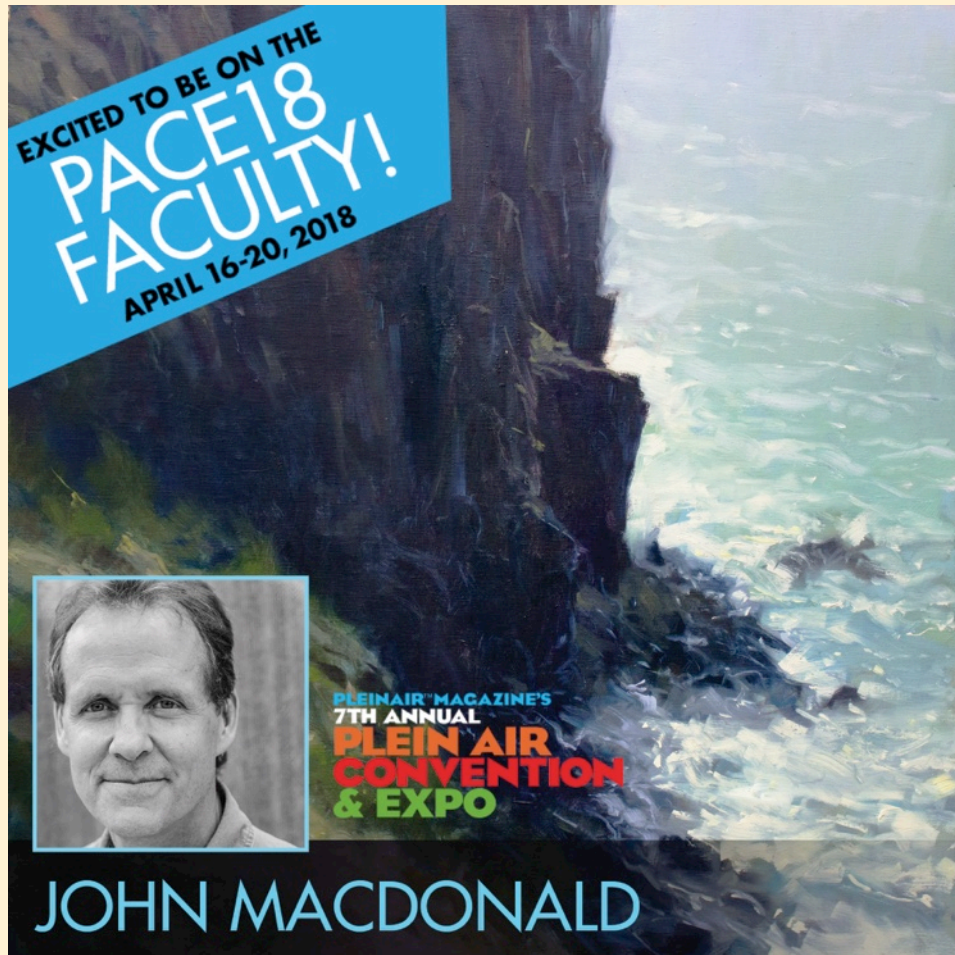
Words of Wisdom

"I'm learning all the time.
The tombstone will be my diploma."
-Neil Gaiman

"Every act of conscious learning requires the willingness to suffer an injury to one's self-esteem."
-Thomas Szasz

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!

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