

John MacDonald

May–June 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 2–8, 2019

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

MAY 20–24, 2019

WETHERSFIELD ACADEMY
Wethersfield, Conn.
www.wethersfieldarts.org

SEPT 22–28, 2019

**HUDSON RIVER VALLEY
ART WORKSHOPS**
Greenville, New York
www.artworkshops.com

OCT. 11–17, 2019

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

Summer Skies

Summer has finally arrived in the Berkshires and with it a rise in humidity. Winter's crystal clear skies are gone, replaced by a thick, moist air that gives us textbook examples of atmospheric perspective. In the [January–February 2017](#) newsletter I wrote about creating the illusion of deep space, of which atmospheric perspective is an important part. In this newsletter, we'll look at atmospheric perspective in greater much detail. I hope you find it informative.

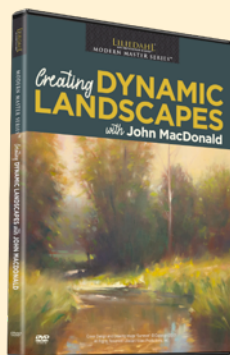
Plein Air Panels

In preparation for this year's focus on plein air painting, I gave much thought to the panels I would be using. They needed to be thin to fit the Strada easel, lightweight for ease of transportation, relatively inexpensive to allow me to paint without the distraction of cost considerations, and as archival as possible in the event that I produced a gem that would be of gallery quality. Both commercial and homemade panels were considered. The results of my research and experiments will wrap up this newsletter.

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.

Atmospheric Perspective

Atmospheric perspective in the landscape is caused by moisture, dust, or smoke in the air. In our paintings, the illusion of atmospheric perspective is created by the **reduction of contrasts**. The lessening of contrasts is what we see on location and it's what we need to paint. Each component of a painting experiences a reduction in contrast:

Values converge towards the value of the horizon.

Color hue shifts towards the color of the horizon.

Color saturation becomes more muted.

Edges, hard and soft, move toward a moderate softness.

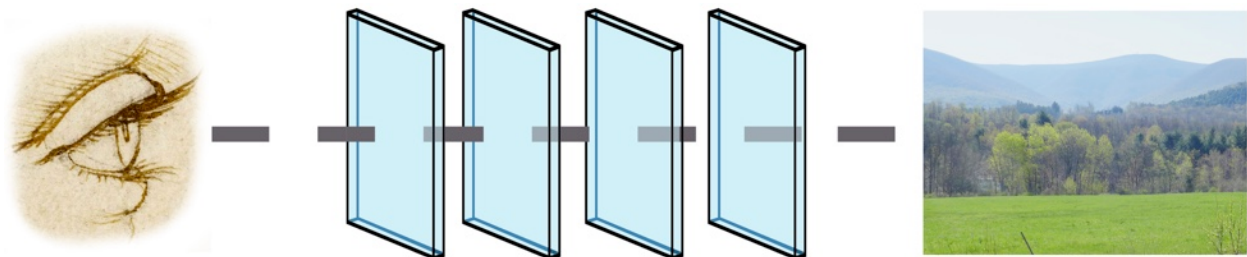
Details fade away, especially in distant shadows.

Before looking at each of these in detail, let's consider *why* these changes occur.

The amount of atmospheric perspective visible in a scene is determined by how much moisture, dust, or smoke the air contains and by how distant are the objects we see. The "stuff" in the air blocks our view and the more distant the objects, the more our view is blocked. In dense fog, the appearance of an object can change within a few feet. In a slightly hazy summer sky, it may not become apparent until an object is much further away. I like to think of it as looking through a pane of stained glass. The more heavily stained the glass (the dirtier the air) and the more panes of glass we're looking through (the more distant the object), the more the values and colors of the objects take on the value and color of the glass. **When we paint a distant mountain in humid conditions, the colors and values we paint have as much to do with the colors and values of the air as with the mountain!** I find it very helpful to continually remind myself of this as I paint a vista— that I'm painting atmosphere as much as I'm painting the objects that are seen through it.



If the air is largely free of moisture or particulates, the contrasts of value, colors, edges and details within distant objects will change little. This clarity is especially pronounced on clear winter days at high altitudes. The air is cleaner and therefore more transparent.



If the air is humid, dusty, or smokey, the appearance of distant objects will change dramatically. In fog or mist the air can be so opaque that distant objects become invisible.

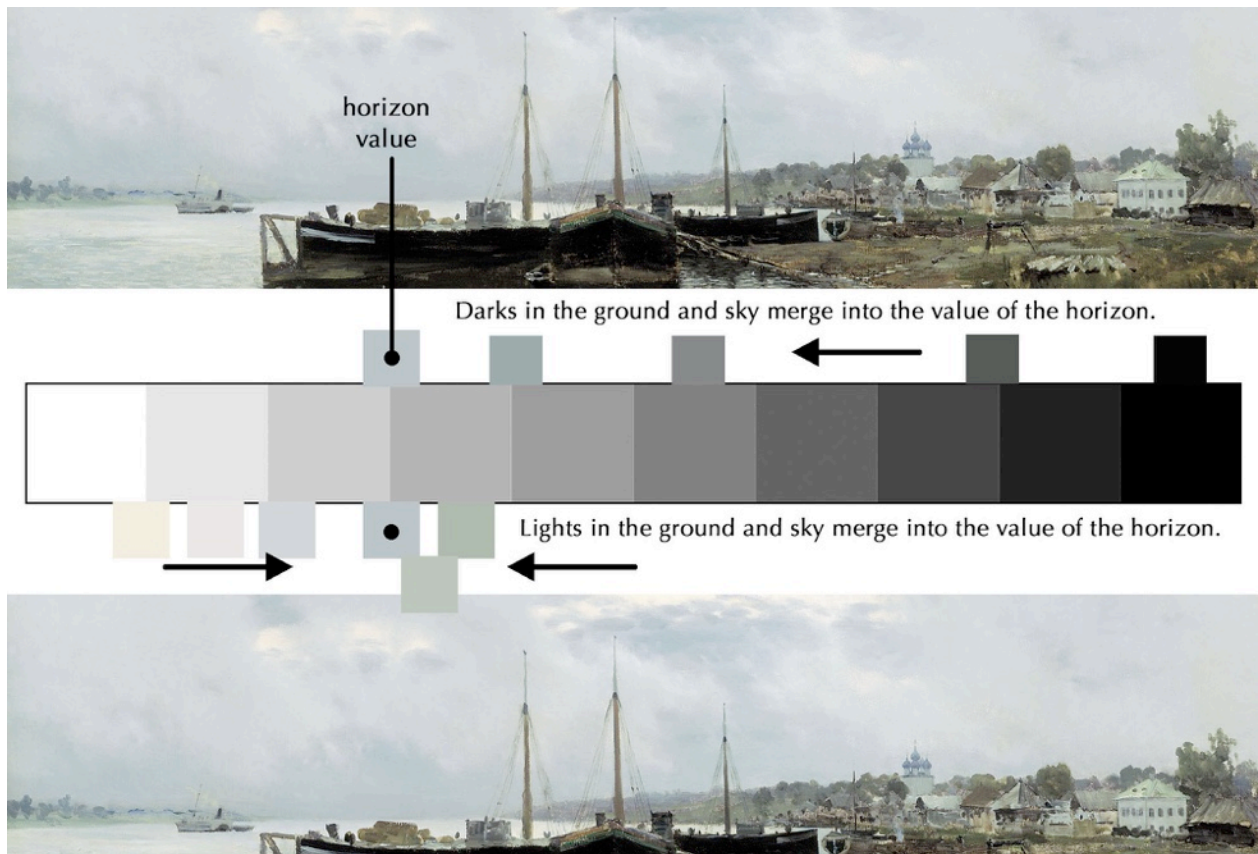
(drawing of eye courtesy of Leonardo D.V.)

VALUE changes in atmospheric perspective.

In most cases, the darks will lighten and the lights will darken from foreground to background, both converging towards the predominant value on the horizon.



Isaak Levitan, *After the Rain, Pylos*



But there are always exceptions to the rules. Notice the lightest light in the water is in the background. He's capturing the effect of light on water and also pushing the focal point to the background by placing one of the lightest lights against the darkest dark.

COLOR changes in atmospheric perspective.

Color Hue

The hues of all colors in the foreground and mid-ground will take on the color of the horizon. Hues that are already similar to the background hue will shift little, changing mostly in saturation. Complementary colors will shift significantly in hue.

Color Saturation

The saturation of all colors will change towards the level of saturation of the background color. Most colors will become more muted as they move towards the horizon.



Ivan Shishkin, *Rain in Tree Grove*

Greens in the grass, from foreground to background



Greens in the trees, from foreground to background



Warm hues in the ground, from foreground to background



Warm hues in the tree trunks, from foreground to background



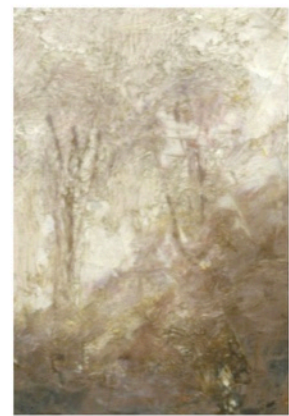
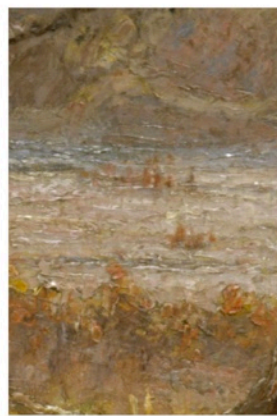
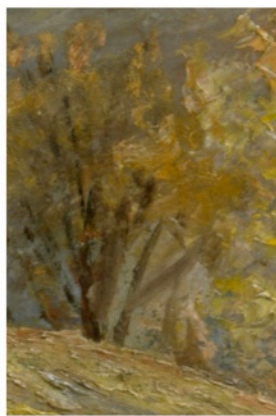
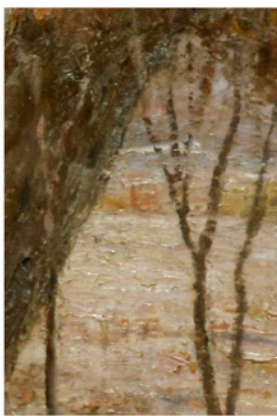
EDGE changes in atmospheric perspective.

Hard edges will always soften as they recede into the distance. An extremely soft edge in the foreground may sharpen slightly as it recedes but generally, all edges soften.



T. C. Steele, *The Bloom of the Grape*

Edge contrasts, from foreground to background



The edges change not only from the manipulation of the paint (using broken brushstrokes or blending pigments) but by bringing values close together. Notice how close in value are the distant trees near the left edge of the painting. This enhances the softness of their edges.

DETAIL changes in atmospheric perspective.

Details fade as objects recede in the distance. The thicker the atmosphere, the more quickly they fade. Even in sunlit scenes, details are usually lost in distant shadows. Notice that the changes in values and edges contribute to the fading of the details.



Childe Hassam, *Late Afternoon, New York, Winter*

Fading of details, from foreground to background



A few examples. . .

Study how the artists in these paintings used the reduction of contrasts to create the illusion of atmosphere. Some relied on changes in value, others also changed color, edges, and/or details. It's not necessary to change everything to create the illusion.



Walter Laurent Palmer, *First Snow*



Aureliano de Beruete y Moret, *Vista de Toledo desde los Cigarrales*



J. Francis Murphy, *The Clearing*



John Twatchman, *Round Hill Road*

A review of plein air panels

Below is a list of the panels that I've used, and continue to use, for plein air painting. Many more are available than those listed here. Try as many as you can until you find one that works best for you. The prices are the most current available and are given for a 9" x 12" format only. I've listed them from the most to the least expensive:



Raphael Oil Primed Linen Panels

www.jerrysartarama.com/raphael-premium-archival-oil-primed-linen-panels

The linen is similar to a portrait linen with a tight, small weave. It has a wonderful surface for painting but they're a bit heavy. They were my favorite panel until I began using a Strada easel, which can't accommodate the 1/4" thickness of the plywood. I use larger sizes for studio paintings.

9" x 12" price (at Jerry's): \$16.49



New Traditions Art Panels

www.newtraditionsartpanels.com.

High quality painting panels available in 18 combinations of cotton or linen on gatorfoam or birch wood panels. Prices for 9x12 panels run from \$10.02 (cotton on gatorfoam) to \$26.99 (finest linen on premium birch panel). I most often use the L280—oil-primed linen—on 3/16" gatorfoam.

9" x 12" price (L280 on 3/16" gatorboard): \$15.72



Pintura

www.jerrysartarama.com/pintura-painting-panels

Gesso primed cotton canvas on compressed wood. The cotton weave is small and close, similar to the Raphael linen. Being gesso primed, they're suitable for use with an acrylic underpainting. It's a nice, inexpensive, rigid panel, heavier but more sturdy than foamboard.

9" x 12" price (at Jerry's): \$8.75



Multimedia Artboard

<http://multimediaartboard.com>

These are available in a variety of surfaces and backings. The quality is high. Prices for 9x12 panels run from \$1.75 to \$11.25, depending on the surface and backing.

When traveling by air, I use the Claessens #15 Primed Linen on artboard. They're very thin and lightweight but, on the easel, a little too flexible. To compensate for the flexibility, I clip them to a rigid piece of gatorfoam.

9" x 12" price (Claessens #15 oil primed linen on artboard): \$8.35



Centurion OP DLX panels.

www.jerrysartarama.com/centurion-deluxe-oil-primed-linen-panels

Oil primed linen on hardboard. Inexpensive, of moderate quality, with a small weave in the linen. A few of the boards have warped but are easily straightened when placed in a frame. These are becoming very popular among plein air artists, beginners and experienced painters alike.

9" x 12" price (at Jerry's): \$6.32

Homemade Panels

Currently, I use two kinds of panels that I can quickly prepare in the studio.

Oil Primed Linen on Gatorfoam.

Using Centurion oil primed linen (from a 10 sheet pad) I attached a loose sheet to a gatorfoam panel by brushing on a thin layer of Golden acrylic gel medium. I make 20 or 30 panels at a time, stack them, weigh them down, and let them dry for two days.

Linen: <http://www.jerrysartarama.com/centurion-deluxe-oil-primed-linen-pads>

10 sheets, 9x12, = \$2.52 per sheet.

Boards: www.foamboardsource.com

acid-free, 3/16" gatorfoam, 12x18 cut to 9x12 = \$1.41 per 9x12 board

9" x 12" price (approximate): \$4.00

Plain Gatorfoam

The cheapest but also the least archival of the panels I use. I seal the surface of the panel with two coats of acrylic gel mat medium and when dry, lightly sand the panel with #0000 steel wool to ensure the adhesion of the oil to the acrylic. I paint directly on the surface of the gel medium. The brush marks from applying the gel provide some texture. The gel is transparent and the brown color of the panel provides a nice, mid-value tone.

Gatorfoam: www.foamboardsource.com

3/16" gatorfoam (12"x18" cut to 9" x 12") (25 sheet box = 50 panels) = \$2.38

9" x 12" price (approximate): \$2.50

Archival considerations

Several of the commercially available panels and both of my homemade panels use gatorfoam for the backing. Curious about the archival quality of gatorfoam, I contacted Montserrat Le Mense, the Conservator of Paintings at the Williamstown Art Conservation Center, and asked him if he had concerns regarding foamboard as a backing. He responded, "Gatorfoam is lightweight but susceptible to dings and dents. I also do not know how long the foam interior lasts before deterioration. It is not the most permanent of substrates and I would steer you to plywood or Dibond if possible. I have seen aged foam and it isn't pretty." (Dibond is a brand name, aluminum panel.)

I also asked him about my painting directly onto acrylic gel medium that has been applied to gatorfoam. His response:

"I would have some concerns about eventual longevity. Oil paintings are solvent resistant years down the road, but the acrylic would likely react badly to solvents. So perhaps no problem for you or for the near future so long as the oil grips well to the acrylic and the acrylic to the gatorboard. I would highly recommend that you make your materials clear on the reverse of the panel with an inscription 'oil painting on acrylic gel primed gatorboard' or some such to prevent damage in the future."

2019 Workshops



February 2–8

Casa de los Artista, Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

artworkshopvacations.com

This will be my fourth 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



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



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.

October 11–17

Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art; North Adams, Mass.

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.

A few plein air paintings created since the last newsletter . . .



Words of Wisdom

“The higher up you go, the more mistakes you are allowed.
Right at the top, if you make enough of them,
it's considered to be your style.”

–Fred Astaire

“Learn to get tight, and paint loose.”

–Thomas Hart Benton

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!*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "JOHN". The signature is stylized and written in a cursive-like font.