

# John MacDonald

June – July 2015



## UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

.. 2015 ..

JULY 28–30 (2 1/2 DAYS)

**THE GIBSON HOUSE**

---workshop sold-out---

SEPT 8–11

**THE BASCOM CENTER**

---workshop sold-out---

.. 2016 ..

FEBRUARY 6–13

**CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS**

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

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

APRIL 4–6

**COLONIE ART LEAGUE**

Colonie, New York

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

JUNE 9–11

**WETHERSFIELD ACADEMY**

Wethersfield, Connecticut

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

JULY 6–10

**HUDSON RIVER VALLEY  
ART WORKSHOPS**

Greenville, New York

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

## “Just Keep Painting. . .”

If there is one phrase that helps me remain focused and grounded during the disappointments and frustrations I so frequently experience as a painter, this is it. “Just keep painting.” As the years go by and the paintings pile up—successes and failures alike—this phrase sounds in my head with ever increasing frequency. “Just keep painting.”

Recent events brought this to mind. Two weeks ago, my 96-year-old mother-in-law entered Hospice. It occurred the day prior to the start of the Publisher’s Invitational in the Adirondacks and I immediately withdrew from the event. Naturally, my focus was on family but there was also a twinge of disappointment in missing a week of intense painting and relaxed congeniality in upstate New York. She passed away two days later and my wife and I spent the week in her hometown in Pennsylvania. I didn’t touch a brush for eight days. On our return, I felt rusty and distracted and turned out a large number of mediocre and lifeless paintings.

Whether its a deeply emotional event such as the loss of a loved one or the common and frequent failure of one painting after another, I find comfort and wisdom in the phrase, “just keep painting.” Whether today’s painting goes well or poorly doesn’t really matter. Get lost in the process and it becomes easier and easier to “just keep painting.”

## *Change of topic. . .*

### **—working from photos**

In last months newsletter, we looked at working from photos. This month, I was intending to continue the discussion by explaining how I use Photoshop to manipulate photos prior to painting from them. However, I’ve decided to put off that discussion. I’m aware that very few painters use Photoshop and I’d prefer to address topics in these newsletters that appeal to the largest number of my patient readers as possible. But let me know if it’s a topic that

you’d like me to address in a future newsletter.

## *Van Gogh show. . .*

### **At the Clark.**

If you live in the northeast, don’t miss the show of nearly 50 paintings and drawings by Van Gogh, drawn from thirty museums and private collections around the world. The Clark Art Institute is in my hometown of Williamstown, Mass. The show, “Van Gogh and Nature,” will run from June 14 to September 13. Click [here](#) for more information.



## *Deconstructing a Painting. . .*

While visiting the Clark this week to see the Van Gogh show, I stopped by one of my favorite paintings in the permanent collection. This little gem, which I suspect was at least begun plein air, is by **Charles Adams Platt** (1861–1933). Platt, a gifted Tonalist painter, spent the summer of 1884 on the coast of Brittany, painting the pearly gray skies and soft atmosphere of the area that was so prized by the American Tonalists.



*The Quay, Larmor*, 1884–85 Oil on Canvas, approximately 8" x 12"

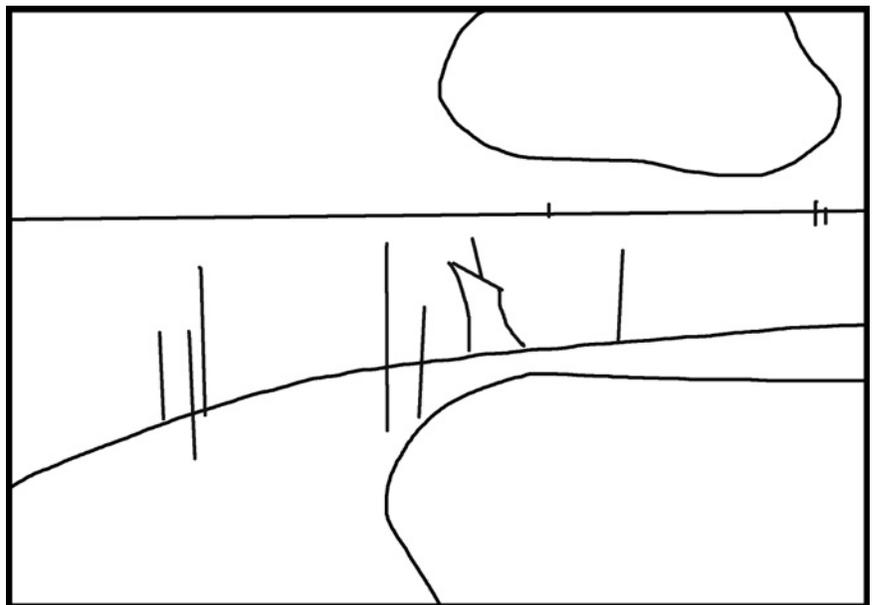
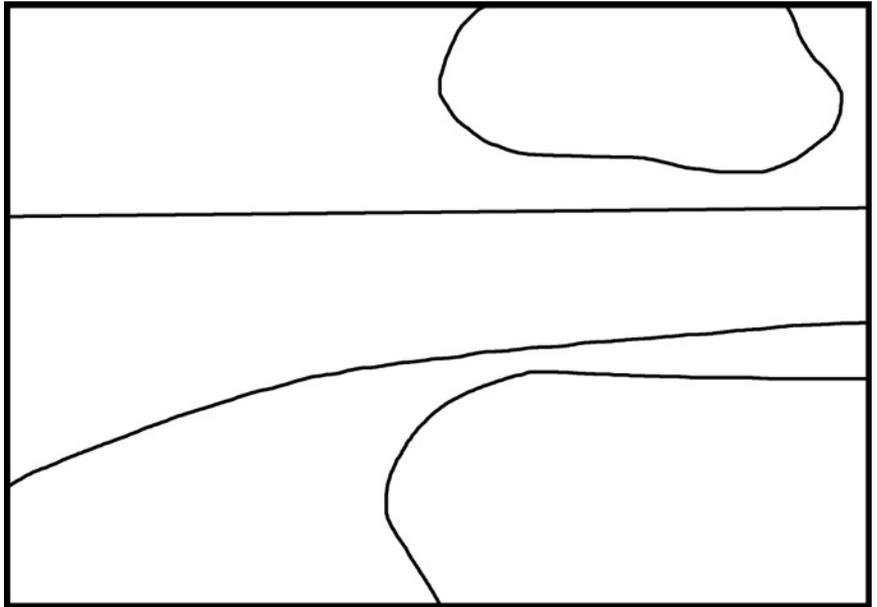


## Composition:

At its simplest, the composition can be reduced to two shapes superimposed on a division of the canvas into sky and ground. Notice how strongly the eye is led from bottom left to the top right of the painting. The foreground dock leads the eye into the painting and then to the boat placed nearly in the center of the painting, where the eye pauses, and then moves to the far horizon in the upper right. In this composition, there's a danger that the movement of the eye could be so rapid as to be led *off* the painting in the upper right. But the momentum of the eye is checked by the vertical masts and distant sails, which not only make the eye pause but also create a contrast to the horizontal lines of the horizon, the right pier, and the top edges of the boats.

As with all successful compositions, it's a balanced arrangement of interesting and varied shapes.

By the way, to see how effective and important those vertical lines are to the composition, notice how different the painting looks without them! Although the center boat still creates a spot of interest, it's not prominent enough to keep the eye from zipping to the lights in the sky and then out of the painting.



## Value Structure:

Also helping to keep the eye in the painting are the strong darks in the lower half, particularly the dark mass of the boats and stone pier in the bottom left. They provide balance to the light area in the upper right of the canvas.

The lightest values are in the sky but the greatest value contrast is found in the area of the center boat. Yes, the eye does move to the far horizon and the light sky but it always comes back to the focal point: the center boat. It's strong value contrasts that makes it work so well.

Notice what happens when the contrast in the upper right is increased and that in the center is diminished. (image to the right.) Those two simple changes destroy the focal point and trap the eye in the upper right corner of the painting.



Lastly, there is a gradient that is crucial to this painting's success: the gradient in the water. Even in the simplified, monochromatic schematic (above right), do you see how the transition from darks to light in the plane of the water creates the illusion not only of light on the water but also the illusion of deep space as the surface of the water recedes to the horizon. On the right, that gradient has been eliminated. It's a subtle difference but what a difference it makes! The water appears much flatter and the sense of light is lost.



## Color Key & Contrast:

The tonalists were known for using a restrained and muted color palette. They tended to rely on value contrasts and subtle temperature contrasts between neutrals to create color interest in a painting. Unlike the impressionists, they were not interested in using color to dissolve forms nor in pushing color saturation to extremes in order to mimic the intensity of light. However, like the impressionists, they understood perfectly the principle of creating the illusion of luminosity by contrasting warm and cool colors of similar or equal values. Their colors were more muted than the impressionists but they handled it with equal mastery.

Below is a detail of the sky from the upper right corner of the painting. Squint at the image and you'll see but two values. The clouds are of a more uniform color, slightly cool but with hints of warm grays. The lights in the sky and water are warmer and included slightly stronger contrasts of warm and cool colors: yellows, greens, blues, rose, etc.

Strong paintings like this are often the result of using a variety of subtle cools and warms assigned to the few, simple values of the overall value structure.



This is a perfect example of the Tonalists preference for a quiet landscape under an overcast sky. They created drama in a painting through value rather than color contrasts, using neutral and muted colors only to reinforce the mood. There are color contrasts in this painting but they're subtle. Notice in particular how the gray colors of the sky and water subtly shift from cool to warm as the eye moves around the painting and how the more intense, warm tones of the piers make the neutral colors in the sky and water appear cooler by contrast. Without those more saturated warm colors, the grays would appear lifeless.



Samples from the sky-upper left corner



Samples from the light reflected in the water

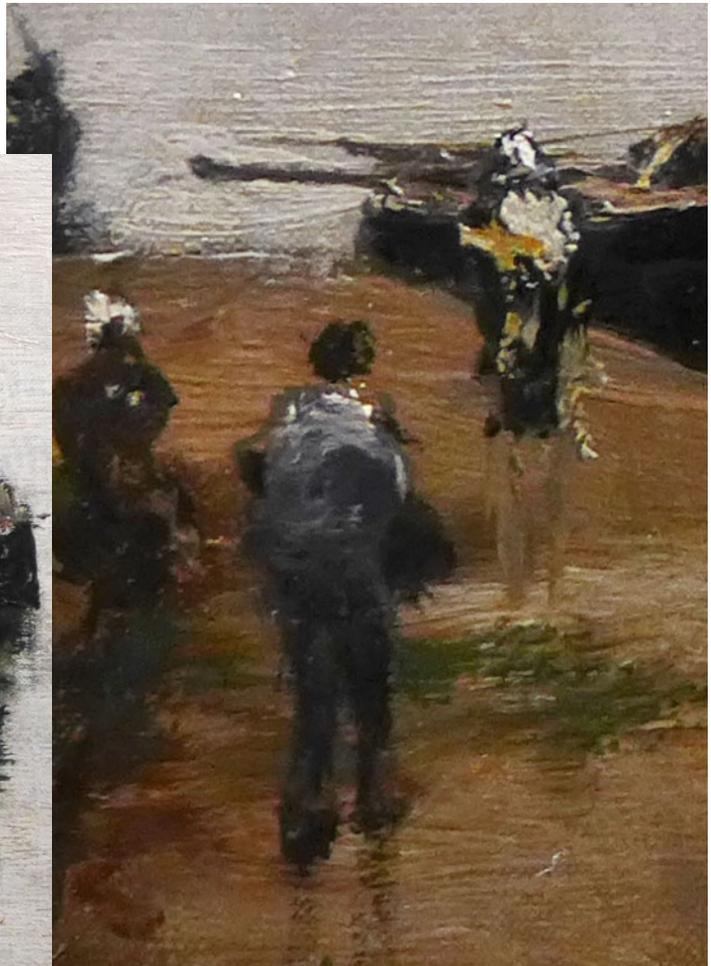


Samples from the foreground stone pier

**Details:**

There are several reasons that the details in this painting work so perfectly:

1. He uses only the details that are essential to create a sense of scale and to make the forms recognizable.
2. He confines those details to selected areas that support rather than break up the major shapes of the composition and value structure.
3. Other than the few reflections of the boats he eliminates all detail in the water. This empty area balances the details in the boats, piers, and distant horizon, and help them stand out.
4. He suggests rather than describes: the details are loosely painted with a variety of marks and values—they sparkle and are visually interesting.



As always, I welcome your thoughts, suggestions, and feedback.

Happy painting!

If you come to the Clark to see the Van Gogh exhibit, don't forget to view this wonderful little painting, too!

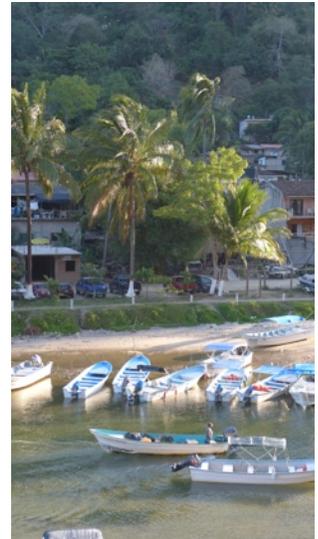
# Workshop in Mexico, Feb. 6–13, 2016

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

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

This will be my third trip to this venue. The studio is perfect, the food delicious, the village charming, and the scenery exquisite. It's the perfect workshop experience: a week of serious and focused painting paired with a varied, fun-filled and fascinating exposure to the Mexican culture. We paint plein air each morning and most afternoons but combine the work with a little play: snorkeling, shopping, a beach picnic, and an excursion through the hills to a remote town for sketching and painting. And in 2016, we'll spend a day painting at the Puerto Vallarta Botanical Gardens, rated by USA Today in a May 15th article as one of the ten best Botanical Gardens in North America.

Register before October 31 for the Early Bird Registration Discount. I look forward to painting with you in sunny, beautiful Mexico!



Photos from February 2015 workshop.

