

# John MacDonald

Newsletter: December 2013



## 2014 WORKSHOPS

FEBRUARY 1-8

### CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

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SEPTEMBER 21-27

### HUDSON RIVER VALLEY ART WORKSHOPS

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

*If people knew how hard I  
worked to get my mastery, it  
wouldn't seem so wonderful  
after all.*

—Michelangelo, (1475-1564)

*Patience is also a form of  
action.*

—Auguste Rodin, (1840-1917)

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## News from the studio. . .

It's been a busy autumn. . . signing on with a new gallery, beginning discussions with a second, and then being invited at the last minute to participate in a show in a third. Consequently, this newsletter is nearly a month late. My apologies!

The new gallery is in Doylestown, PA, the **Rich Timmons Studio and Gallery**. Their website address is <http://3795gallery.com>. Rich now has eight of my landscapes on display. Stop by if you can!

In December and January there will be a group show of small landscapes at the **Warm Springs Gallery** in Charlottesville, Va. Six of my paintings will be on display there.

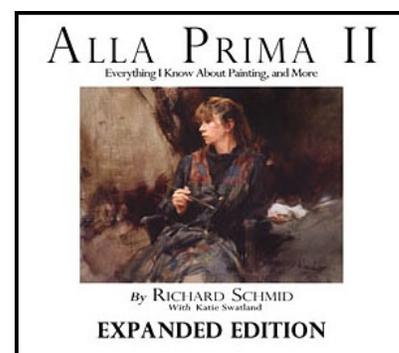
Over the last two months I've been painting seascapes and thoroughly enjoying working with a slightly different palette and the simplicity of rock, water, and air. Now, they only need a home! A gallery here in New England seems like a natural fit and I'm talking to one in Newburyport, a charming shore town just north of Boston. I'll keep you posted as to when and where they find a safe harbor. Meanwhile, I'll post some of them on my website and Facebook page.

## Resources . . .

### Recommended Reading.

No doubt many of you are already familiar with the work of Richard Schmid, one of the finest painters and most influential teachers working today. He has recently reissued one of his most popular books, *Alla Prima*, in an edition that features much new material and many more illustrations of his superb work. I

can't recommend this book enough. Regardless of the level of your talent there's much to learn from it! He covers everything of importance in the art and craft of painting.



His explanation of the elements of the visual language—value, composition, color, etc.—are superb. These are general truths about image making and he does a wonderful job explaining them. The only caveat I would add is to remember that when he recommends specific painting techniques he does so because they work for him. They may not work for you. For example, he strongly recommends keeping the palette and brushes meticulously clean while working. Such advice about working habits, unlike his wonderful discussions about the principals of image making, are just that—advice. You need not take them as law, even from such a great painter as Richard Schmid. But that aside, it's an extremely informative book and a must for your art library.

It's available on his website (<http://www.richardschmid.com/>) at the cost of \$125. Yes, it's a bit pricey but compared to a workshop or a quality plein air easel, it's a bargain.

## Tips & Techniques

### Working from two (or more) photos.

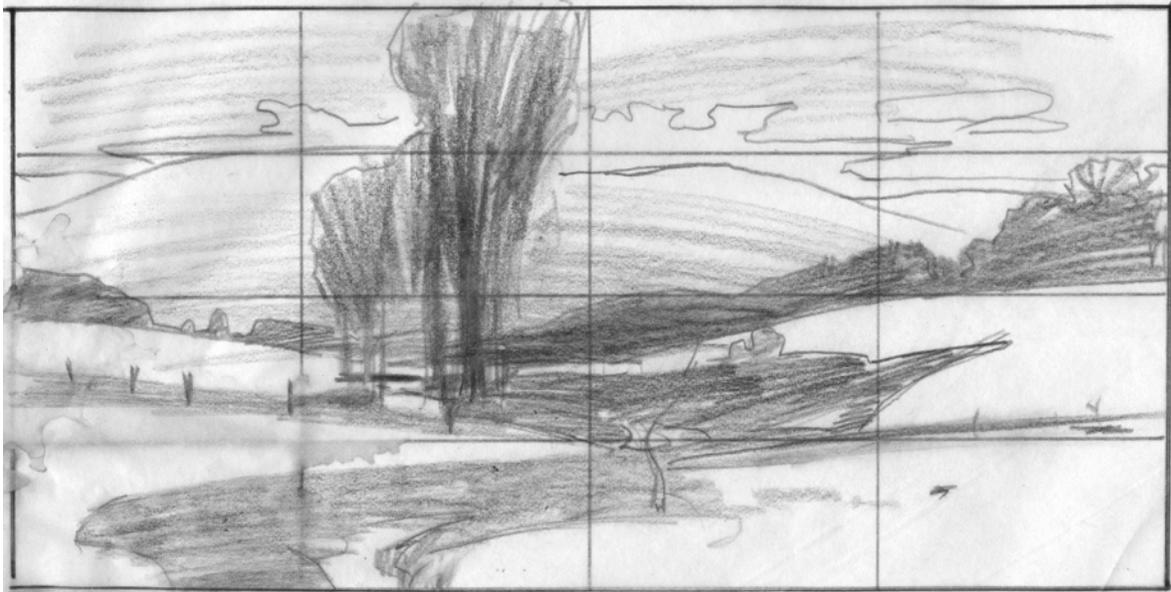
Whether painting plein air or from photos it's nearly impossible to find a scene that has it all: a flawless composition, perfect color and light, and just the right amount of details. Invariably, we need to edit the visual information: move a tree, eliminate a building, change the shape of a field, etc. And we must continue to make choices throughout the entire process of painting, from the beginning, when we create a strong composition, to the end, when we add the last, small touches of details.

When we're working outside on location, we have only one scene from which to work—it's impossible to be in two places simultaneously. But when working from photos, we need not limit ourselves to working from a single photo. We can combine elements from two or more photos to create a perfectly believable scene. We can also combine the elements of one scene with the lighting and/or palette from another. That's what I'm doing with the painting below, a painting that is still in progress. . .



I began with these two photos. The composition and elements of the landscape in the photo on the left are interesting but the lighting and palette are rather boring. In the photo on the right, the color and values are dramatic but the composition of the landscape isn't very inspiring. Perhaps the landscape of one with the lighting of the other will make a nice painting. . . ?

In terms of value and color, what attracted me to the photo on the right was the beautiful contrast between the warm tones in the background against the cool tones in the foreground. In order to have those warm tones I needed to add the mountains to the photo on the left. Otherwise, everything else in the photo on the left would work well.



I did several small (3" x 6") compositional sketches, working out the height of the mountains and then adding some distant trees on the far left. It's much easier to do this in a pencil sketch than on the canvas in oil! When I was satisfied with the composition in the small sketch I added a grid to help me draw accurately the shapes of the landscape on the canvas. I was then ready to work out the color and values in a small study.



There are several reasons for painting a study before beginning a large painting: it's easier to determine the composition and value structure while working on a small scale; it's easier to avoid getting lost in details; and like a plein air painting it's faster to execute and there's much less pressure than working large. It's also a lot of fun! I now rarely execute a large painting without first creating a small study.

Comparing the study (above) with the photos, you can see that the palette is warmer. I did that not only because snow *always* appears too blue in photos but because I knew I could make the snow a fairly neutral gray that, when contrasted with the warm hues in the mountains, it would still appear quite cool and bluish. And this is the point of doing studies!—working out the color and value issues on a small scale so you won't be struggling with them on a large canvas. The study above is 8" x 16." For the larger painting, I decided to work only slightly larger: at 12" x 24."



This is the larger painting after the initial blocking in. At this point I'm working, and thinking, only in terms of the largest shapes and their values, colors, and edges. Once these are all working together, then I can consider the small details that will give the painting scale and interest. This painting is far from finished and there are some changes to be made—at this stage, I prefer the study! But now I hope you'll see how interesting, challenging, and enjoyable it can be to combine two photographs to create a single landscape. Try it!

## Deconstructing a Painting.

*Richard Schmid, in his book Alla Prima, points out that a painting consists of only four elements: drawing (which includes the composition), value, color, and edges. I would add only three additional items: gradients, patterns or textures (which includes details), and the difference in contrast and variation between all areas which gives life to the entire painting.*

*In deconstructing a painting, I'll do so in terms of those four elements: composition, value, color, edges but will also mention gradients and patterns when they are important elements in the painting and will finish by pointing out how the variation and contrast between the large areas of the painting brings the entire work together.*

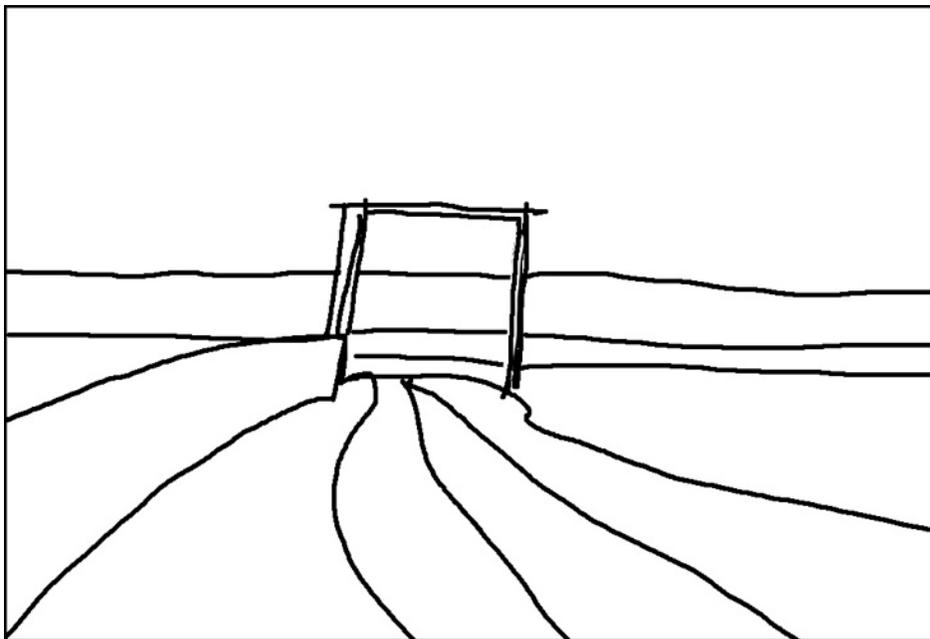
### The Painting.

This painting, "Summer Evening," is by Isaak Levitan, a Russian landscape painter who was born in 1860 and died in 1900. He's a terrific landscape painter. Examples of his work can be found on Wikipedia or by using Google Images. I found this painting online and so don't know the size. It's probably a small painting and almost certainly was painted plein air. I know of only one book about Levitan: *Isaak Levitan, Lyrical Landscape*, by Averil King, Philip Wilson Publishers, London, 2004.



## Composition:

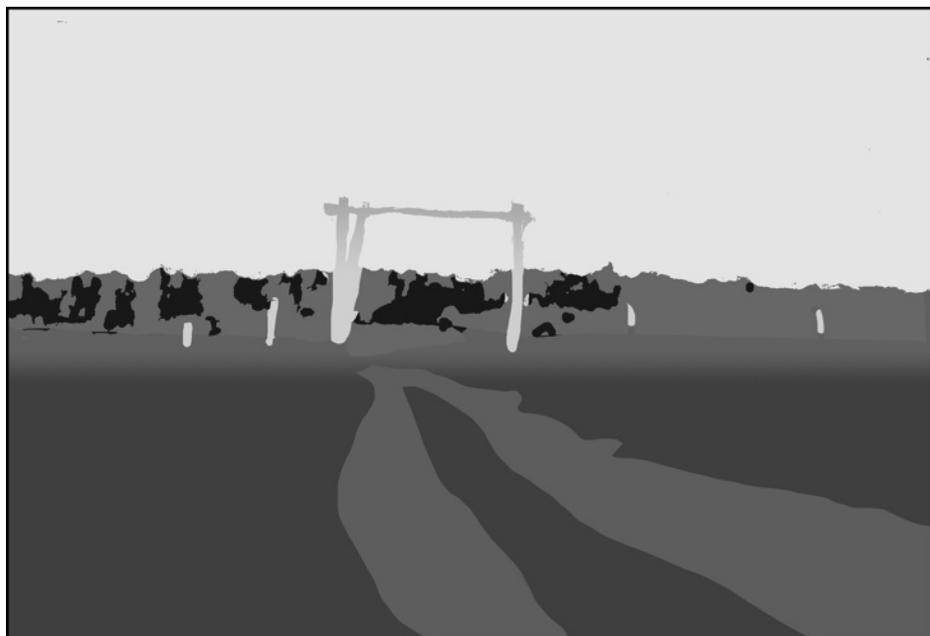
This is almost as simple as it gets: the sky filling the upper third of the canvas with a distant, horizontal band of trees and a foreground field. But what keeps this simplicity from being boring is the addition of a mid-ground rectangle (the gate) that becomes a strong focal point. It overlaps the distant hills. Six strong diagonal lines (fence and road) lead the eye directly to it. What a beautiful contrast between those two strong horizontal lines (nearly in the middle of the painting) and the foreground diagonals, which speed the eye through the foreground and into the middle ground and distance. (Levitan is far too good a painter to trap the eye in the foreground with unnecessary details.) Notice that the focal point is oh-so-close to dead center. Being just slightly off center makes it so interesting!



## Value Structure:

Although I've reduced the image to approximately four values, it could be reduced even further—to only two values: light sky and dark ground. A landscape can be built on a value structure of light sky and dark ground. The Tonalists were masters at it. (See the work of J. Francis Murphy, Hugh Bolton Jones, Alexander Wyant, and Charles Warren Eaton)

Even reduced to four simple values, can you see how well this already reads and works as a landscape? The sky is a single value and the entire foreground is approximately two values. By limiting the stronger value contrasts to the middle ground, Levitan guarantees that the eye will be drawn there and that any dramatic value contrasts will be all the stronger because of the simplicity of those two large areas—sky and foreground. Notice how the darkest darks—the shadows in the distant trees—are adjacent to the lightest lights of the sky and fence posts and gates. Placing the darkest darks near the lightest lights will always draw the eye. Levitan established his focal point in the middle and then paints everything else with the greatest restraint!



## Color

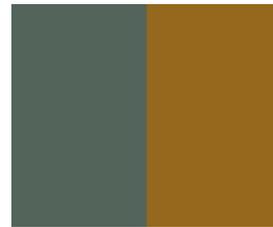
I blurred the image to allow the simple hues to show more easily.

The greatest color contrast (contrast in temperature) lies in the warm light on the gate and distant trees sandwiched between the cools of the sky and foreground.

The palette of the foreground consists of either cool or neutral colors with subtle hints of some warm colors. The sky is also largely cool with hints of warm colors. From the color samples I took from the painting below you can see that none is fully saturated. These are muted colors! They look more saturated than they are because he is placing some of the warmest colors directly against some of the coolest and then **keeping the values between them as close as possible!**



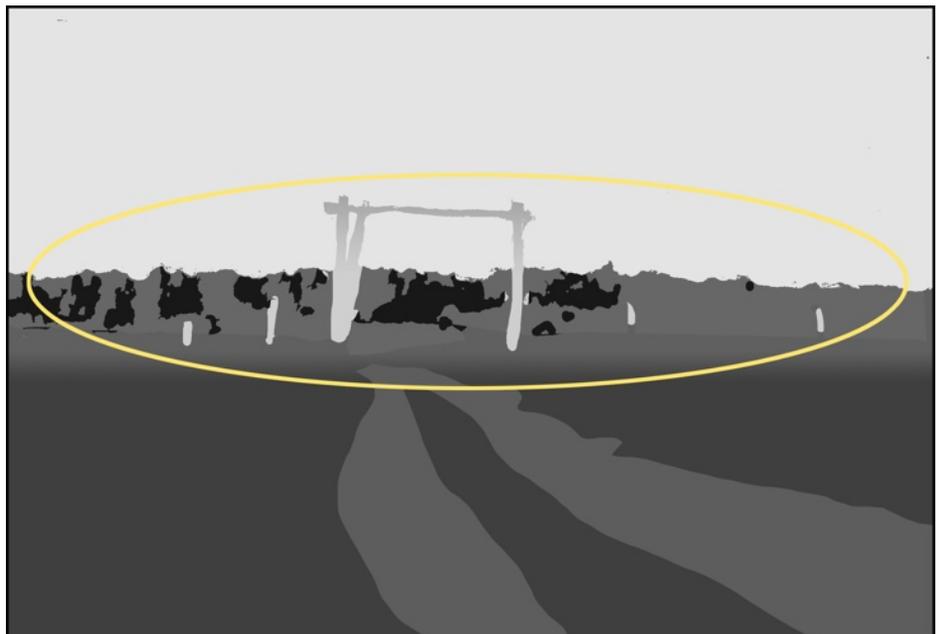
Notice the two colors on the right, taken from the trees in the light and the grass in shadow on the right side of the painting. They are nearly exactly the same value—so what jumps out isn't their value contrast but their contrast in color temperature.



There are subtle variations in color both in the foreground and sky but both are overall cool. There are subtle variations in color in the band of trees but they are overall warm. This is what makes the color in this painting work.

## Edges

Levitan uses the difference in edges simply and masterfully. ALL of the edge contrast is in the middle of the painting: the hard edge of the trees against the sky, the pattern of dark shadows in the trees, and in the lights of the fenceposts and gates. All other edges are made soft, either through blending or by keeping values extremely close. Simple but beautifully executed!



## Details

Study how he handles the details in this painting. Where are they? Almost all in the center!

In the sky, there is only one measly puff of a cloud floating in the lower right of the sky. (Initially I thought this was unnecessary but now I think he added it to balance the fence that moves off the lower left side of the painting.) Otherwise, the sky consists of nothing but very subtle shifts in color temperature, all of the same value. Squint at this and the sky blurs to nothing.

The foreground has slightly more value contrasts than the sky but all the colors are muted and generally cool. He's letting the texture of the paint **suggest** grass and ground rather than **describing** every single blade of grass and stone and pebble. He creates the fence on the left the very minimal amount of visual information, keeping both the color temperatures and values close. Why? Because he doesn't want the eye distracted and drawn to the far edge of the painting. Again, it's more suggestion than description.

All of the significant details he places in the center of the painting and they stand out the more because he sandwiches them between two large areas (sky and foreground) that contain little detail. The high-contrast (in both value and color) shadows shapes in the trees provide both visual interest but also scale. Notice the tiny marks in and around the gate—hints of green light on the distant field, little shadows, and of course the gate and lighted tops of the fence posts: simple marks creating the illusion of distance.

This painting is a lesson in how to use detail! It takes far less detail than we think to make a painting believable and interesting. As you paint, when working some of the details into the painting, there's a simple rule: if you're not sure whether or not this or that little detail is necessary, then leave it out! Too little detail is always better than too much. Few details make for intriguing paintings. Many details make for boring paintings.

