

John MacDonald

January–February 2017



WORKSHOPS 2017

FEB. 4–11, 2017

CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS
Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico
www.ArtWorkshopVacations.com

MAY. 8–12, 2017

Half Moon Bay, CA
(See my [website](#) or click [here](#).)
****Waiting list only****

JUNE 9–11, 2017

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA)
Philadelphia, PA
www.pafa.org

AUG. 7–9, 2017

WETHERSFIELD ACADEMY
Wethersfield, CT
www.wethersfieldarts.org
****Waiting list only****

OCT 8–14, 2017

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

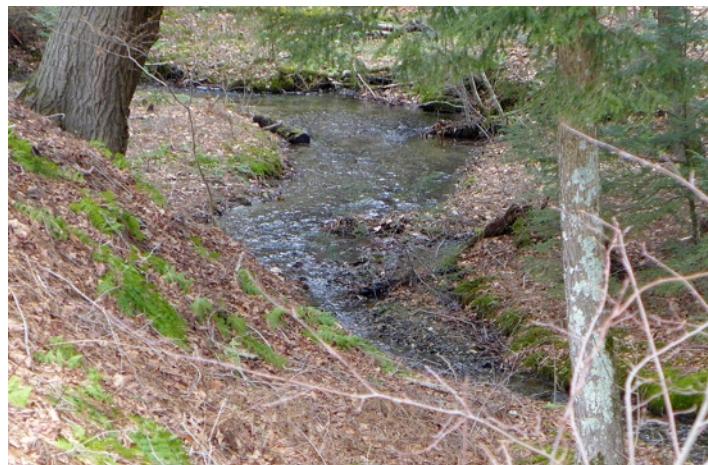
OCT 25–27, 2017

THE LANDGROVE INN
Landgrove, VT
www.landgroveinn.com

A change of plans. . .

In the last newsletter, I promised that I'd address "an exploration of painting trees; specifically, how to create the soft, textured edges of trees as seen against the sky." I've decided to put that off until the next newsletter. Blame the change of plans on this morning's breakfast.

Near our house runs a small stream. It's visible from our back porch where my wife, Debbie, and I have breakfast. Debbie is taking an online sketching course and, while eating breakfast this morning, she looked at the stream and asked me how I would draw it to create the illusion of depth. By the time I finished talking our coffee and eggs were cold, she was overloaded with information, and I had the topic for the newsletter.



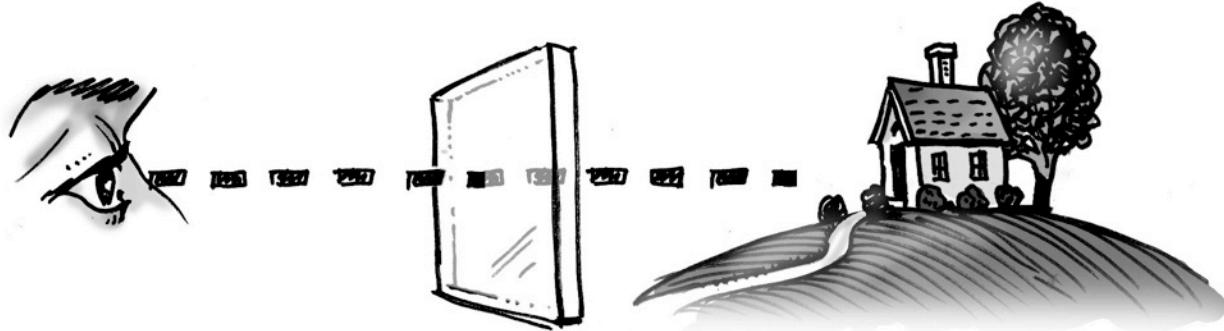
The stream from our window. How does one draw it with depth?

Creating the illusion of space: a basic skill.

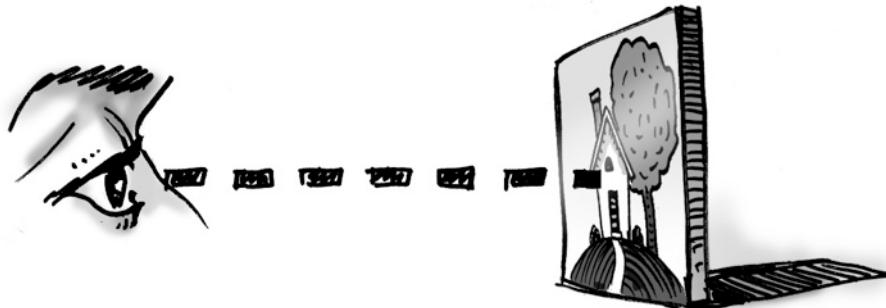
We representational painters want to make images that resemble the scene we observe. We want to create the illusion of light and a believable three-dimensional space. Our training as artists usually begins with that goal in mind. The ability to create a convincing illusion of space is considered one of the basic skills that every landscape painter should possess. But let's not interpret the word "basic" to mean "simple" or "rudimentary." After thirty-plus years of painting, I've noticed that the leaps in quality in my work have never come as a result of my adopting an esoteric technique, material, or teaching. Every advance I've made has come from my struggling with, and coming to a deeper understanding of, the basics: composition, value, color, edges, and, yes, the ability to create the illusion of deep space, which just happens to be dependent on the elements just named. Let's look at some of the ways we can create the illusion of space in our paintings. . .

The Picture Plane vs. The Illusion of Depth

Creating an illusion of depth is challenging because we're attempting the impossible: to create a three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface. Those two components are present in every painting: **the picture plane** (the flat surface on which we paint) and **the subject matter** (in this case, a landscape that exists in 3-D space). The former is physical—it's real; the latter exists only in our brains. The more convincing we wish the illusion of space to appear, the less attention we must call to the surface—to the picture plane—and the more clues we need to provide the brain to convince it that what we see on the picture plane actually exists beyond it in a three-dimensional world. In other words, if the picture plane is a window, we want that window to be so clear and transparent that we don't notice it, we see only the world through it.



The goal is to make the picture plane transparent so we see through it to a 3-D world beyond.



But if we call too much attention to the surface or lack the skills to create adequate visual clues which the brain can interpret as depth in space, the image will appear flat and stuck on an opaque picture plane.

Fooling the Brain: Creating the Illusion of Depth

Every painting consists of only four elements:

1. COMPOSITION. The drawing and placement of large shapes and small details.
2. VALUES. The overall value structure and the values of individual objects.
3. COLORS. The overall color temperature and the colors of individual objects.
4. EDGES. Where shapes meet, the boundary edges can be hard, soft, or lost entirely.

Within each of these components of a painting are visual clues we can use that will create the illusion of depth. The most commonly used clues are listed below. Not every painting needs to contain all of them but in most cases, the more clues present the more easily the brain will read 3-D space in the image.

It's worth noting that much of the history of visual art, at least in the West, was an attempt to make paintings that looked increasingly "real," that copied as exactly as possible the 3-D space that was seen in nature. The advent of the camera made that goal moot. Much of the focus then turned to emphasizing the surface of the painting, the picture plane. But more on that later . . .

A Flat Image on a Picture Plane.

Let's begin with a simple, flat image. Well, almost flat. Here, there is one clue that is impossible to avoid: the fact that we naturally read a landscape image from bottom to top, with the brain interpreting the bottom of the canvas to be foreground and the top to be background. Other than that subtle and unconscious clue, this image appears to reside on the surface of the picture plane. It may be interesting, attractive and decorative as an image but it completely lacks realistic, deep space.



Composition: Diagonal Lines

In composing a scene, we are designing the image using shapes. Remove value, color, and edge contrast from those shapes and we are left with the boundaries of the shapes expressed in LINE. Line is the basis of linear perspective. One component of it—diagonal lines—are powerful clues to creating the illusion of recessional space.

In this example, the parallel lines creating the sides of the fields have become diagonal lines and begin to imply some recession into space.

Let's add two more components of linear perspective to heighten the effect . . .



Composition: Overlap

When working with the forms of the landscape, having one object overlap another creates a strong visual clue that the two objects exist in different places in space. Breaking long lines in a composition with overlapping objects not only fosters the illusion of depth, it can also prevent a line from leading the eye out of the painting. Patterns can also be created through overlapping that add interest to an image.



Composition: Scale

One of the most effective clues used to suggest deep space is a change in scale: the reduction in size of similar-sized objects as they recede in space. If two objects in a scene are rendered the same size, the brain will interpret them to be in the same plane in space; that is, at the same distance from the viewer. But be careful! This also applies to the physical size of shapes on the canvas! If a small, foreground bush is the same size on the canvas as a distant tree, the brain will tend to interpret them as being equidistant from the viewer even if it recognizes they are different types of object. It's always wise to avoid equal division of the canvas.



Value: Atmospheric Perspective

Generally, the values of objects in a landscape will move towards the value of the sky as they go back in space, and the more dense the atmosphere the more pronounced will be the effect. If the sky is slightly lighter than a middle value (which is usually the case), then the lights in the foreground will darken and the darks in the foreground will lighten as the objects recede in space.

Using gradients—the change in value within a single value of a large form as it recedes in space—is also a powerful way to create the illusion of space. Gradients are clearly evident in the sky and fields in this illustration.



Color: Atmospheric Perspective

Generally, the colors of all objects in a landscape will move towards the color (hue and saturation) of the sky as they recede into the background. As with values, the more dense the atmosphere, the more evident the effect. In dense fog or mist, objects in a landscape will quickly take on the values and colors of the mist and fade entirely away.



Edges: Atmospheric Perspective

Generally, the edges of all objects soften as they recede in space, and the denser the atmosphere, the softer the edges. In fog, all edges become soft and are eventually lost. On the opposite end of the extreme is the crystal clear air of mountain environments. John Singer Sargent often complained when painting high in the Alps because the lack of atmosphere would give even distant mountains hard edges and clear colors. The clearer the air, the more difficult it can be to create the illusion of space. But in most cases, edges noticeably soften as they recede.

And that's it. Easy, right? Not so fast . . .



WARNING:

Strictly following these rules would be a **VERY BAD IDEA**.

Why? Because focal points are created by **contrasts** and we've just placed ALL the contrasts—in values, colors, and edges—smack in the foreground. If we mindlessly follow these steps as a formula, in every painting we create the focal point will sit in the immediate foreground, hugging the bottom of the canvas, exactly where we don't want it. How do we avoid that? We take these rules and manipulate them. We tweak them to move the focal point where you want it. After all, we're artists, and it's bending and breaking rules that makes painting so much fun. Establish the deep space, then determine where you want the focal point.

In the image below, I put a shadow in the foreground, which dramatically reduces the value and color contrasts, and then I slightly increased the value contrast in the middle ground, creating a patch of light. By making those two, simple changes the focal point shifts to the middle ground. Much better!



Among the Sierra Nevada, California by Albert Bierstadt

In this cropped section of the painting, notice how Bierstadt uses every clue mentioned above: diagonals, overlap, scale, edge contrasts and atmospheric perspective in value and color. He gives us a picture plane that is perfectly transparent. We see through it into a world of deep space, receding forms, and light.



There is a breathtakingly masterful handling of values in this painting. Here are two examples: below is a sampling of the darks in the rocks, moving from the left edge of the image to the center. Notice as the rocks recede into the distance, the values sequentially lighten and the colors take on the hue of the sky.



And here, notice how the value contrasts between the lights and darks in the rocks change as they recede in space. The darks lighten (significantly) and the lights darken (slightly) as both move towards a single value.



The Picture Plane: Friend or Foe?

So the goal of painting is to eliminate all indications of the picture plane and to create a photographic illusion of deep space? Well, not exactly. There's a second caveat:

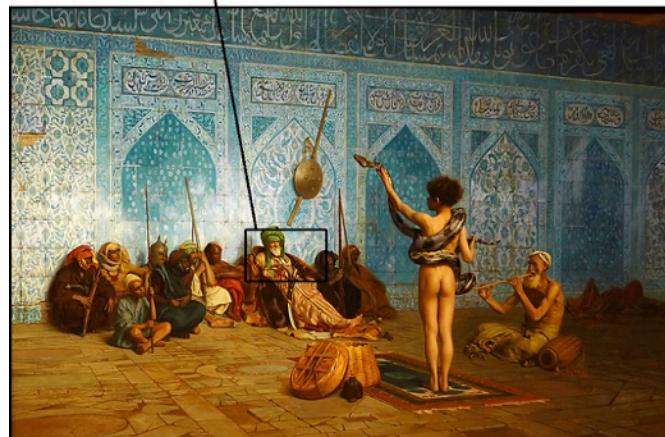
WARNING: Strictly following these rules can lead to **BORING PAINTINGS**.

There's a history of artists painting photorealistic work and some are true masterpieces. But personally, after the initial amazement at the technique, I tend to find photorealistic work soulless, even a bit boring. (Bierstadt's and many of the Hudson River School paintings are exceptions.) We are, after all, **painters**; we're not photographers who use paint to make photos. Photorealistic paintings lack the traces of the hand—the personality—of the artist. It's through the various ways we put paint on canvas—the brush and knife work, the smudging and smearing—that we uniquely express ourselves. ALL of that takes place on the surface of the canvas, on the picture plane. Eliminating entirely all indications of the picture plane eliminates the stylistic differences among artists. The result would be paintings that differ only in the subject matter.

Our painting technique does more than just convey our personal voice and style. It also creates a visual tension between the flat surface of the painting and the illusion of deep space within it—a tension that can make a painting energetic, lively, and interesting. I prefer paintings that, when viewed very closely, appear completely abstract, a chaotic mess of paint. But then, stepping back, suddenly—magic!—a convincing illusion of realistic objects in 3-D space appears. As the years pass, I'm becoming increasingly interested in playing with the surface technique and the tension that results from calling attention to the surface of the painting while also creating a believable 3-D world. Flat vs. Depth—it's endlessly fascinating!

Loosely Painted vs. Tightly Painted

Below are two paintings from the Clark Museum. Both details (top) were photographed about six inches from the surface, yet how they differ! The full-sized paintings are approximately the same dimensions.



Winslow Homer, "Eastern Point" 1900 30" x 48"

Jean-Léon Gérôme, "Snake Charmer" 1879 32" x 47"

Technique or Subject Matter? Or Both?

What is the message of a painting? What is it really about? The more transparent the picture plane, the more the message is about the subject matter of the painting, be it a landscape, still life, or figure. Conversely, the more attention called to the picture plane through the application of paint, the more the message is about technique—**how** it was painted rather than **what** was painted. And therein lies a danger: a splashy painting technique can call so much attention to itself (and the surface) that it destroys the illusion of space and overwhelms the significance of the subject matter, even making the subject matter irrelevant. In my opinion—and it's just an opinion—paintings that are solely about a dazzling technique are as shallow and boring as photorealistic paintings, which are only about subject matter. Technique is important but it should always be a servant of the message, not the message itself; a means, not an ends, to expressing something, be it a mood, emotion, idea, etc. This doesn't mean the technique should always be meek and mild, only that I prefer, and try to create in my work, a balance between calling attention to the surface through technique and creating a realistic world of space and light. When each do their job, there is tension but also life.

What is the message of **your** paintings? What are they about? Is the message carried mostly by the subject matter or by your technique. Does your technique **reinforce** the subject matter (a vigorous application of paint for a dynamic subject matter) or **contrast** with it (vigorous painting and a quiet subject matter)? It can do either. The Tonalist painter J. Francis Murphy created beautiful paintings that convey a deep mood of peace and silence but with a technique that was exactly the opposite—some of his surfaces are as energetic as any abstract expressionist of the 1960s. And at the opposite extreme, Whistler's nocturnes were painted with a technique that completely reinforced the mood: the paint is the merest “breath on glass,” as misty and as soft as the scenes he portrayed. I tend to fall somewhere in the middle. How about you?

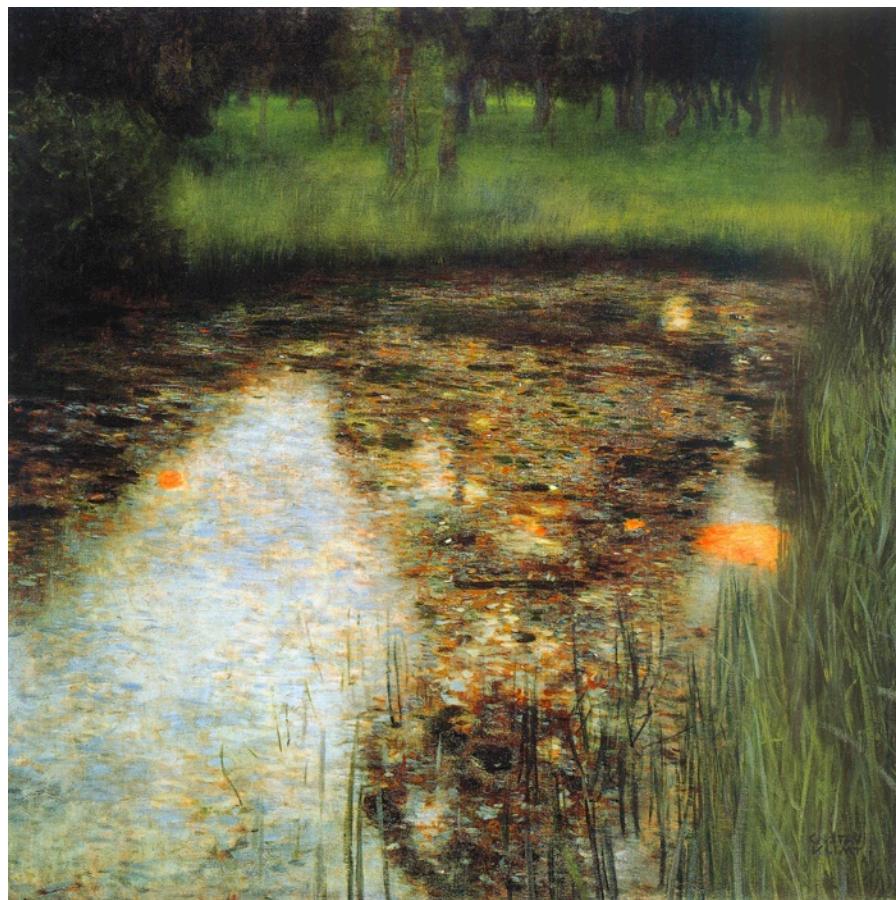
Below are two recent paintings. In both, the mood is quiet but the paint handling differs: thicker paint with more broken and looser strokes on the left; thin paint with blended and tighter strokes on the right. How do we decide which approach to use? Explore and play with it and let the painting decide.



Below are five works that move progressively from deeper to shallower space. Each beautifully balances the tension between an active picture plane and the illusion of space. The first, Tyron's, features the deepest and most realistic space; the last, Hokusai's, is the most flat and decorative. All five are masterpieces.



Dwight William Tryon "*Twilight November*"



Gustave Klimt "*The Swamp*"



Claude Monet from the water lily series



Vincent van Gogh "Starry Night"



Katsushika Hokusai “Great Wave off Kanagawa”

Words of Wisdom

Passages and quotes that stimulate, inspire, and challenge us to become better painters.

“One day work is hard and another day it is easy; but if I had waited for inspiration I am afraid I should have done nothing. The miner does not sit at the top of the shaft waiting for the coal to come bubbling up to the surface. One must go deep down and work out every vein carefully.”

— Arthur Sullivan, composer (1842-1900)

“Even in literature and art, no man who bothers about originality will ever be original: whereas if you simply try to tell the truth, without caring twopence how often it has been told before, you will, nine times out of ten, become original without ever having noticed it.”

— C.S. Lewis, writer (1898-1963)

What began as a brief discussion over breakfast ended with a brief exploration of the relationship between the surface of a painting (how it's painted) and the portrayal of space within it (what is painted). There's so much more to say about that interesting topic but I've run out of time and space.

Until the next newsletter,
Happy Painting!

(Have a favorite quote you'd like to share? Send it to me!)

2017 Workshops



February 4–11

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** painting paired with a varied, fun-filled, and fascinating exposure to Mexican food, people, landscapes, and culture.



May 5–13 ~ Waiting List Only

Half Moon Bay, California

Join me on this 5 day workshop, where we'll be painting plein air along the spectacular coast of northern California. Contact me directly for more information or click [here](#).



June 9–11

Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts; Philadelphia, PA

www.pafa.org

In this workshop, we will be painting in the studio while using photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. We will explore the limitations of the camera and ways to compensate for their limitations.



August 7–9 ~ Waiting List Only

Wethersfield Academy, Wethersfield, CT

www.wethersfieldarts.org

A studio workshop, we will be painting from photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. We will explore the limitations of the camera and look at different ways to compensate for their limitations.



October 8–14

Hudson River Valley Art Workshops; Greenville, NY

www.artworkshops.com

A studio workshop, we will be painting from photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. We will explore the limitations of the camera and look at different ways to compensate for their limitations.



October 25–27

The Landgrove Inn; Landgrove, VT

www.landgroveinn.com

A studio workshop, we will be painting from photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. We will examine the limitations of the camera and explore different ways to compensate for their limitations.