

# John MacDonald

March–April 2018



## WORKSHOPS

### 2018

I'm taking off 2018 from all teaching in order to re-write workshop handouts, concentrate on my own painting, and to take a workshop or two myself.

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

SEPT 22–28, 2019

**HUDSON RIVER VALLEY  
ART WORKSHOPS**  
Greenville, New York  
[www.artworkshops.com](http://www.artworkshops.com)

OCT. 11–17, 2019

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

## Working and Weather

It's been a whacky winter. First came December's bitter cold. Then a January and February so mild I could paint outside nearly every day. It felt as if it were going to last forever. And then came March. . .

As I write this on March 17, I'm looking out on two feet of snow in our yard with below normal temperatures and winds that keep the sky filled with flakes. I can paint in the cold or deep snow but it's impossible when it's actively snowing, even lightly. Like farmers, plein air painters quickly learn that we can't control the weather. It's always humbling and at times frustrating.

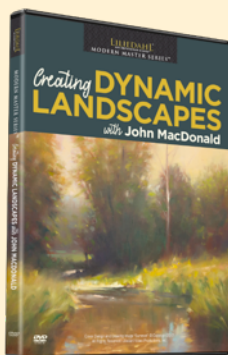
Still, the current cold weather has given me the opportunity to return to the studio to work on some neglected large paintings and to spend some time studying the forty-plus plein air paintings I've recently done (not counting many that I've scraped or wiped clean). It's a time to reflect on what I've learned, to identify where I'm still struggling, and to decide on the next steps to take.

This newsletter looks at a few important but sometimes neglected aspects of painting plein air that occur at the beginning: choosing a scene, locating our easel, and lighting the canvas.

### *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 now available.

The Liliedahl instructional video is now available [here](#). It's a mini-workshop in a box, five hours of exposition, and demonstration. Streaming is available.

## Choosing the Scene.

When considering a scene, remember that not all are created equally. Some scenes will lead to good paintings while others, although perhaps attractive at first glance, won't work. Separating the winners from the losers can be challenging. When making a choice, I rely first on intuition and inspiration but then often ask myself the following questions:

Can the entire scene be broken into 2-5 varied and interesting shapes?

Do those shapes form a varied but unified value structure?

Is there a single, strong area of interest, a potential focal point?

Is the scene neither too busy nor too quiet?

Are areas of details balanced by areas of void?

Does the scene offer adequate value contrasts, color contrasts, or both?

Can I imagine this scene as a finished painting? If so, is it interesting?

I'm asking these questions for two reasons. First, I don't want to waste my time struggling with a painting that will never succeed because of problems in the scene itself. Secondly, in answering these questions I'm warming up my eyes by immersing myself in the scene and seeing in greater detail its potential for translation into a good painting.

Below is a photo of a scene from a recent plein air excursion. It initially attracted me but after studying it, I decided not to paint it. Some of my reasons: there are two widely separated focal points—the river (bottom right) and mountains. The largest mass of the pines in the mid-ground is situated dead center. The lines of the mountains converge nearly dead center while the lines in the fore and mid ground river and fields lead the eye off the right side of the painting. I tried zooming in and cropping the scene with a viewfinder but without success. I finally decided I would need to make so many changes that it was wiser to simply find a new scene or move to an entirely different viewpoint of the same subject.



## Don't be Seduced by the Subject

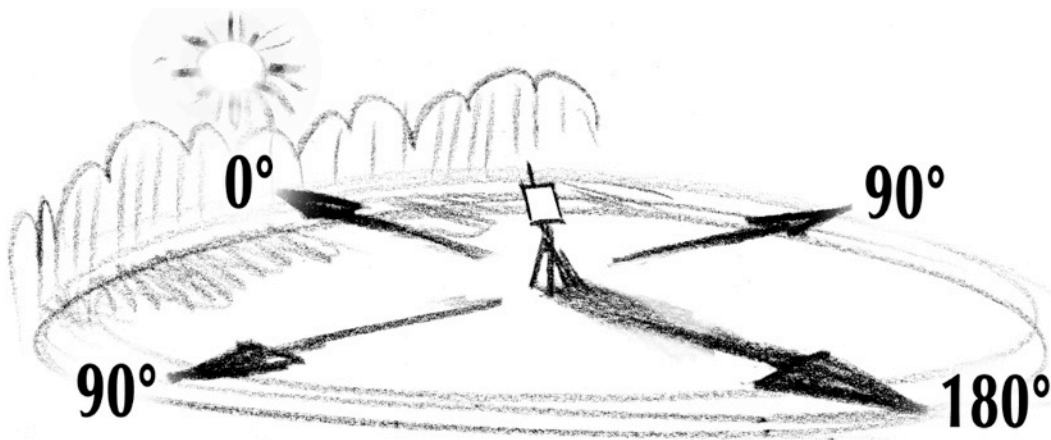
This may sound nuts but in terms of what makes a painting work, the subject is *irrelevant*. The subject matter— a barn, cows, crowded street, waterfall, mountains, etc —can appeal to our intellect or emotions, it can tell a story or evoke a mood, and it can make your painting *interesting*, but it won't make it *work as a painting*. A painting must work VISUALLY by having a good composition, solid value structure, interesting color contrasts, intelligent handling of details, etc., etc. Falling in love with the subject matter is fine—after all, it's the source of our inspiration—but don't forget that the goal is to make a good painting.

## Inventing—How Much is too Much?

No perfect composition exists in nature. We always need to add, delete, or change some elements in the landscape. Copying what you see is perfectly fine when it serves the interests of the painting. It's much easier than inventing. And elements in the landscape that are copied are almost always more convincing than those we invent. For these reasons, I'll copy as much as I can and invent the rest, but if I need to invent 50% or more of the elements in a painting to make it work, I'll look for another scene.

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## Choosing the Angle of the Sun.



When we choose a scene on a sunny day, we need to be aware of the position of the sun in relation to our viewpoint. It will have a dramatic affect on the values and colors in the scene and even determine whether value or color should dominate in the painting.

Let's look at three positions: looking directly into the sun, looking directly away from the sun, and facing our chosen scene with the sun directly to our left or right. . .



### Facing into the Sun (*contra jour*)

Looking into the sun creates strong value contrasts, with more light and dark values and fewer middle values. Details are lost in the dark shadows and the value contrasts will overwhelm the color contrasts. The scene will be about value patterns and contrasts.



The distribution of values is heavy on the light and dark ends of the value scale with only a moderate number of middle values. Color contrasts are lost to the strong value contrasts.



Painting by Dennis Miller Bunker

## Facing Away from the Sun

Other than a few highlights and spotted darks, all of the values in the landscape become compressed towards the middle of the value scale. Because there's so little value contrast, color contrasts will dominate. If you want to push color, choose this orientation.



The lights and darks are mere spots with the majority of values massed toward the middle. With so little value contrast, the color contrasts will need to carry the visual weight.



Painting by Brian Sweetland

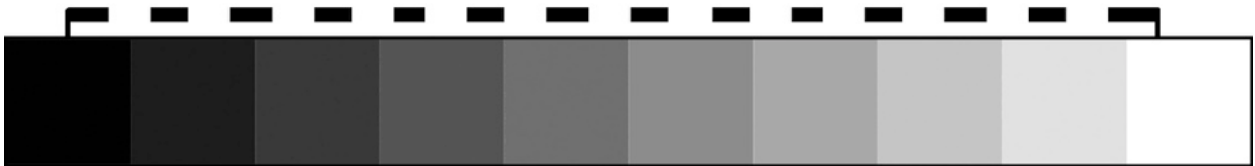


## The Sun at a 90° Angle.

Facing the scene with the sun on one's direct left or right is problematic. The values tend to be evenly distributed among the full range on the value scale. The middle values are broken by shadow and highlights and those lights and darks on forms such as trees or hills tend to be of equal amounts. It's more difficult to mass the values into a single value shape when determining the value structure of the scene. It's also common to find the middle values exactly in the middle of the value scale, evenly spaced between the lights and darks. This even distribution of values usually leads to a weaker painting.



The values are often evenly and equally distributed across the value scale, making it more difficult to mass the values in order to create a strong and clear value structure.



Painting by John Constable

## Value Comparisons.

To understand the importance of our orientation vis-a-vis the sun, look at these side-by-side comparisons of the photos and cropped paintings, all in black and white. When on location and choosing the scene, squinting will help you discover how the sun is affecting the values and how you can structure the values in the painting.

TOWARDS THE SUN



AWAY FROM THE SUN



90° TO THE SUN



I don't want to convey the impression that one orientation is better than another. It's your choice and it's often influenced by what you find when you arrive on location. But being aware of the differences will help you to choose a scene that plays to your strengths, or conversely, to choose a scene that will challenge you. Here's a simple summary:

### **Facing towards the sun.**

*Advantages:* Obvious value structure. Strong value contrasts. Shadows make strong shapes.

*Disadvantages:* Limited opportunities to create color contrasts.

### **Facing away from the sun.**

*Advantages:* Opportunity to create vivid color contrasts and create the temperature of light.

*Disadvantages:* A challenge for those (like me) who prefer to use value contrasts.

### **Facing the scene at 90° to the sun.**

*Advantages:* Lights and darks create strong patterns.

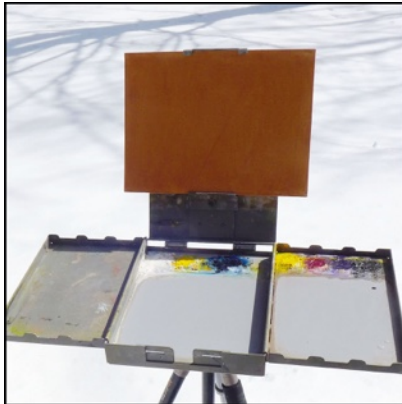
*Disadvantages:* Difficult to create clear value structure. A 50/50 distribution of values.



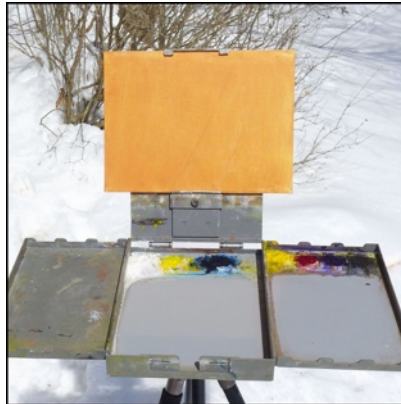
## Lighting the Canvas.

When on location, we have no control over the quality or consistency of the light. But we can control, to a certain extent, the light that shines on our canvas. Some painters are perfectly comfortable painting with full sunlight blazing on the canvas while others, myself included, prefer painting from a shady spot. I try to avoid having too little light, too much light, or shadows that fall across the canvas, represented by the three set-ups photographed below. In each of these, I've photographed the same canvas, which has been toned to approximately 50% on a value scale. Notice the change in its appearance.

**Backlit canvas**



**Canvas in full sun**



**Shadows on canvas**



In all three of the above set-ups, with the canvas either very dark, very light, or broken up by shadows, I find it difficult to judge correct values and mix accurate color.

Below are two optimal positions for the canvas. (Not shown is the use of an umbrella in full sun, which can work well if the background isn't too bright.) When setting up in the shade of a tree or building, position the canvas so it receives ambient light from the sky. If you position the easel so the canvas faces a dark shadow, there will be too little light on the canvas, making values difficult to judge. To create adequate ambient light, you may need to position the canvas facing one direction while looking and painting in another.

**Dark background with ambient light**



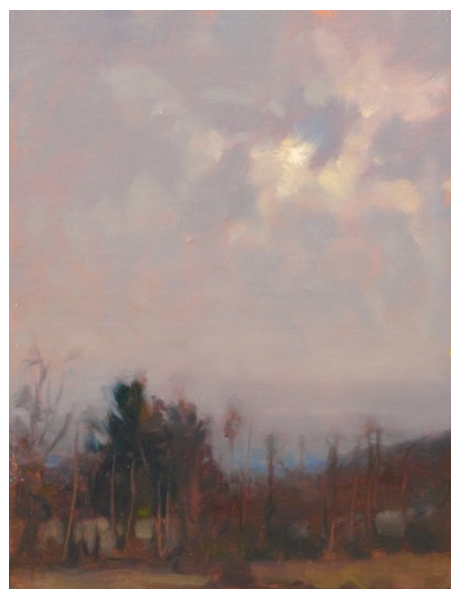
**Canvas angled to sun**





## Some Recent Plein Air Paintings

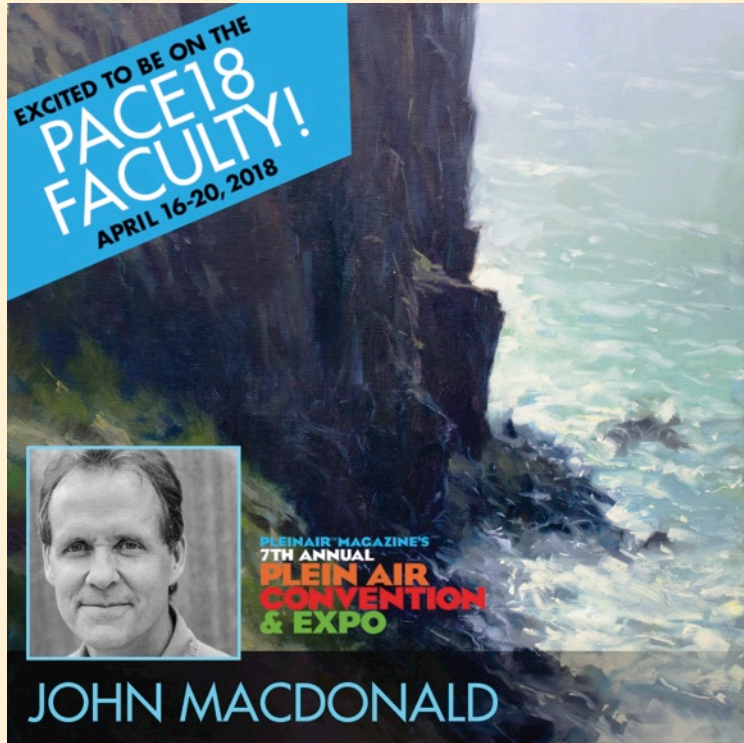
All but two of these paintings are 9" x 12," a size small enough to allow me to work quickly and loosely but large enough to allow the inclusion of some detail. Each was painted in a single plein air session. I've not (yet) touched them up in the studio.











## A chance to connect at PACE in Santa Fe.

*As mentioned in the last newsletter, I'll be among 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. Join us in Santa Fe and, if you register now, you'll receive the lowest possible price (spots fill quickly!). To find out more check out this: [www.pleinairconvention.com](http://www.pleinairconvention.com).*

*If you're on my mailing list and will be in Santa Fe, please introduce yourself to me. I always prefer having a face to connect to a name. Hope to see you!*

## Changing your email address? Please let me know!

Each time I send out a newsletter, I receive a couple of bounce backs from addresses that are no longer valid. If you value the newsletter and want to continue to receive it, please remember to send me your new email address when you change it. Having changed my email address several times over the last decade, I know it's a time-consuming hassle to update every site on which you're registered but I can't contact you, or send you a newsletter if I don't have your new address. And if you ever want to discontinue receiving it (and I'm happy to say I've received exactly one request in 6 years), just let me know. I'll immediately delete your email from the list.

## Words of Wisdom

“When love and skill work together, expect a masterpiece.”

—John Ruskin

“There is a fountain of youth: it is your mind, your talents, the creativity you bring to your life and the lives of the people you love. When you learn to tap this source, you will have truly defeated age.”

—Sophia Loren

### 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!