

John MacDonald

January–February, 2021



WORKSHOPS 2021

FEB. 27–MAR. 6, 2021
CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS
NOW ONLINE

MAY 23–29, 2021
**HUDSON RIVER VALLEY
ART WORKSHOPS**
Greenville, New York
www.artworkshops.com

AUGUST 20–22, 2021
FALMOUTH ART CENTER
Falmouth, Mass.
www.falmouthart.org

SEPTEMBER 3–6, 2021
THE LANDGROVE INN
Landgrove, VT.
www.landgroveinn.com

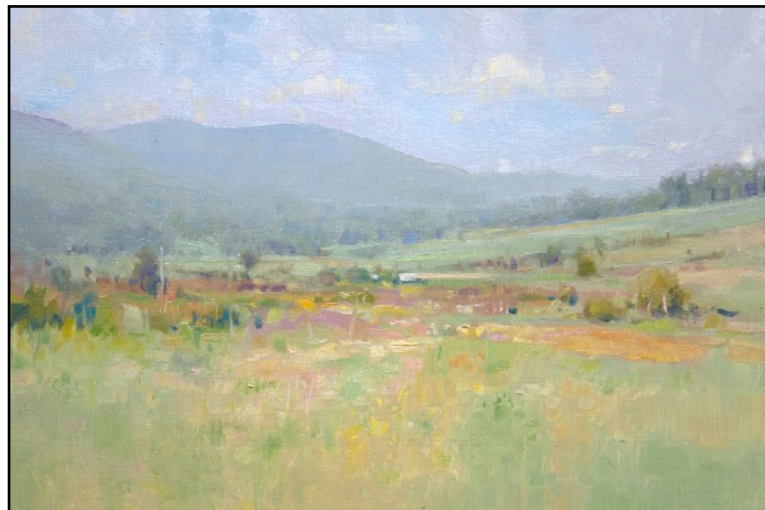
OCT. 9–15, 2021
MASSMOCA
**MASSACHUSETTS MUSEUM OF
CONTEMPORARY ART**
North Adams, Mass.

Reaching for the Skies

In troubled times, nothing is more restorative than immersing ourselves in the all-embracing sky. Sunny or stormy, its constant beauty and transient nature serves as a reminder that everything beneath it, no matter how unpleasant, will pass in time.

As is often the case when gathering material for a newsletter, the topic proved far more interesting and complex than I expected. I could easily fill several newsletters but will limit myself to touching on the essentials of painting the sky. I hope you find this newsletter informative and helpful.

(And thank you, Sue C., for suggesting the topic.)



All Good (Free) Things Come To An End, Sort of. . .

After years of resisting the advice of my business managers (my wife and business-savvy sons) to charge for the newsletters, I've decided to placate them by requesting donations instead. If you've been enjoying these newsletters and are able and willing to make a donation, any contribution would be appreciated. If you've just begun receiving them, feel free to first see how helpful you find them, then you can decide if they're worth a donation. ~ *Thank you!*



DONATE HERE:

[PAYPAL](#)

Pre-Flight Preparations.

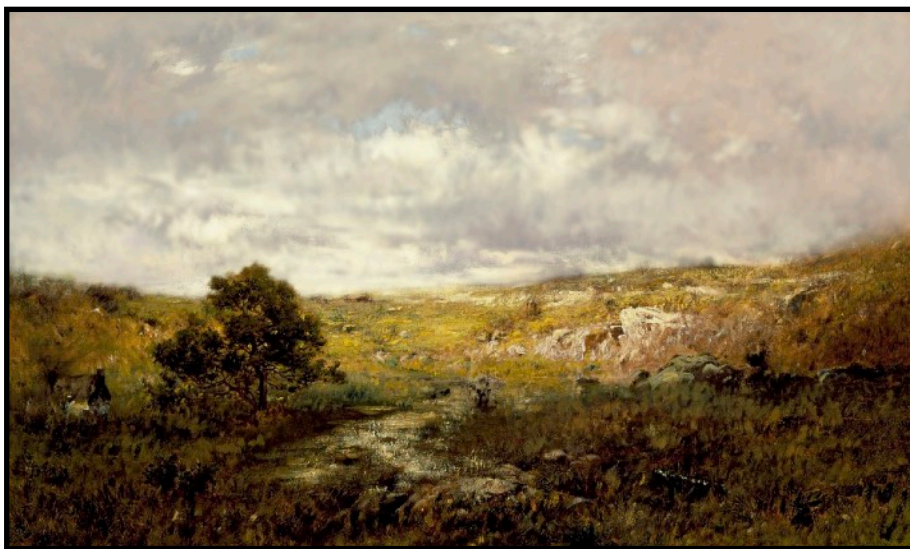
Before launching yourself into the skies, ask yourself two important questions:

How important is the sky to the message of the painting?

What is your intention—what do you want to say in the painting and where do you want the eye to go? Is the sky an essential part of the message or is it merely a backdrop for what's taking place on the ground? Don't begin the painting until you're clear about your intention. In Alexander Wyant's, *Any Man's Land* (below), the strong value contrasts and dynamic brushwork give the sky nearly equal billing with the ground. It's a vital part of the mood of the painting.



In the edited version below, I've dramatically reduced the contrasts and softened the sky, putting the emphasis on the ground below. It's neither better nor worse, just a different painting.



The more important the sky is in the painting, the more contrasts you'll need in the sky to attract and hold the eye. And if it's the entire message of the painting, you'll want to diminish or eliminate contrasts in the landscape below that could detract from those in the sky.

Where do you want the horizon line?

The more important the sky is to the painting, the larger it should be on the canvas, right? Not necessarily. Remember, it's *contrasts* that draw the eye and establish a focal area. Strong contrasts of value, color, edges, and details will attract the eye to the sky regardless of its size on the canvas. That said, the placement of the horizon line can affect the message of the painting. A high horizon line implies looking down, which emphasizes the fore and middle ground. A worm's eye view of a landscape—a low horizon line—implies looking upward into space. If the focal area is in the sky, consider placing the horizon line below the mid point of the canvas.

Low Horizon Line. The two paintings below feature low horizon lines. In the Klimt painting, (below left), the sky is simple, subtle, and relatively unimportant—a backdrop for the other elements. In Homer Dodge Martin's work, the sky is the center of interest. Both have low horizon lines but differ dramatically. In the sunset scene, notice the lack of details and contrasts in the ground. All the interest in the painting is in the sky and the shape of silhouetted trees.



Horizon line near the middle. In J. Francis Murphy's painting (below left), the sky is simple with few contrasts. Like Klimt's painting, the focus is on the ground. In Constable's painting (right), the horizon line is at a similar level but the contrasts in the sky make it a more important part of the painting. Both paintings feature a mostly cloudy sky but are handled very differently.

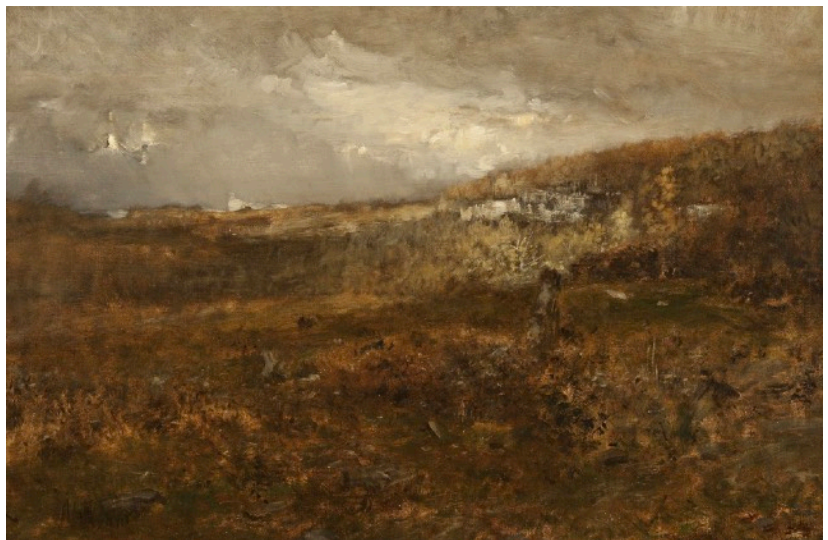


The High Horizon. A high horizon will always place more emphasis on the ground than the sky, but it doesn't necessarily mean the sky is unimportant. **It's not the size of the shapes of things on the canvas that attract the eye, it's the strength of the contrasts *within* the shapes.**

In *Vista de Toledo*, by Aureliano de Beruete (right), the sky is a mere backdrop, almost a single value with only subtle notes of warm and cool hues. Compared to the hillside and city, the sky appears nearly flat. The simplicity of the sky balances and enhances the visual activity on the ground and keeps the eye centered on that area of the painting.



On the right is another painting by Alexander Wyant, *Grey Hills*. In this painting, the sky, although limited to a small strip at the top of the canvas, plays a much larger role than in Beruete's. The larger value range, suggested details, and vigorous brushwork all serve to draw the eye to the sky. And yet the strongest contrasts remain in the ground near the horizon, ensuring that the eye eventually settles there.



SKY vs. GROUND

In Birge Harrison's book, *Landscape Painting*, (pub. 1910), he writes, "...of all the rules of composition. . . The first and by far the most important of these is, '**don't try to say two things on one canvas.**'" When considering a scene to paint, it's not unusual to find the sky and the ground equally interesting. If you try to capture both, the result will be two equal focal areas and the painting will fail. Choose one area—sky or ground—to emphasize with contrasts and then simplify or silence the contrasts in the other. Or do two paintings!

The closer you place the horizon line to the middle of a painting, the more likely you are to encounter this problem. It's not necessary to change the horizon line (unless you want to), simply put different amounts of contrasts in the two areas.

Sky Gradients

A sky isn't a flat backdrop on a stage. It has volume and depth. One of the easiest ways to create a sense of depth is through the use of gradients: a gradual change in value, hue, and/or saturation across the shape of the sky. Even if the sky is relatively unimportant to the painting, it's nearly always necessary to create one or more gradients to prevent it from appearing as a flat shape stuck on the surface of the canvas. The most common sky gradient is that of a darker top moving to a lighter horizon but it can also shift from a dark horizon to light top or a gradient that moves from side to side. Look for the gradients in nature. They're always there!

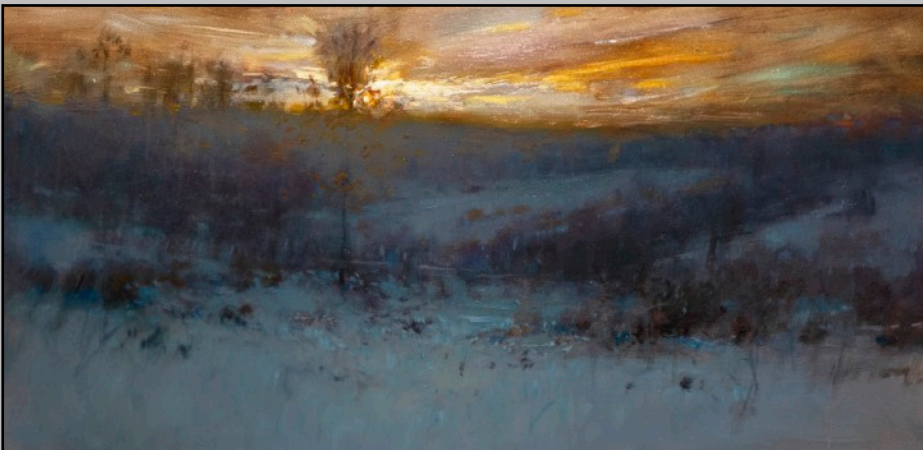
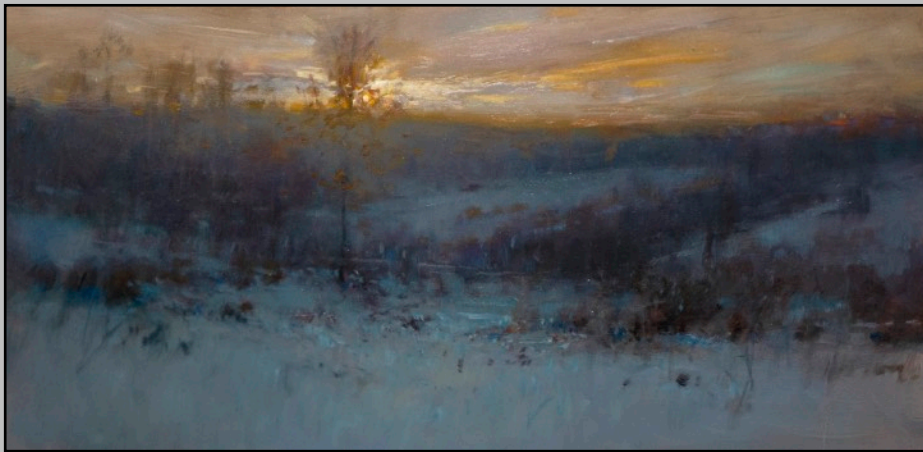


In this painting by Edgar Payne (above), the gradient moves from top to bottom, with shifts in value, hue, and saturation. In J. Francis Murphy's painting (below) there are gradients in both the clouds and the clear areas between them. Simple or complex, there are always gradients.

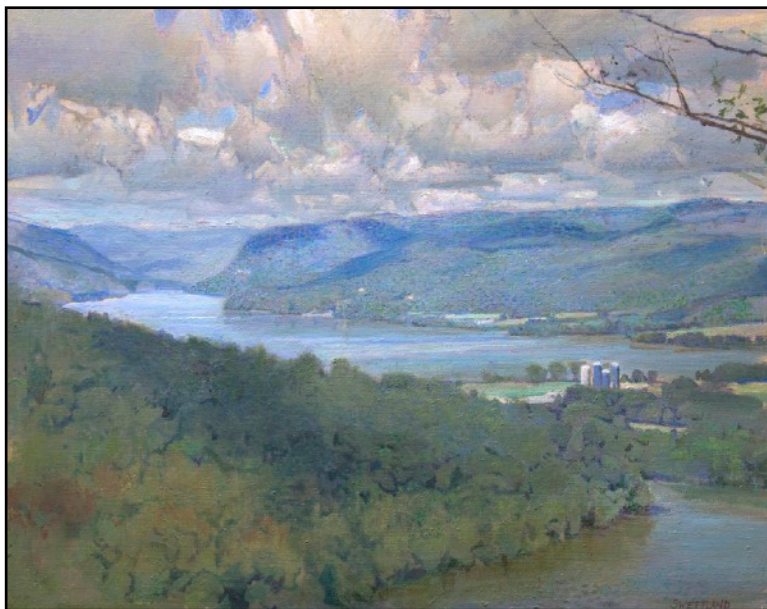
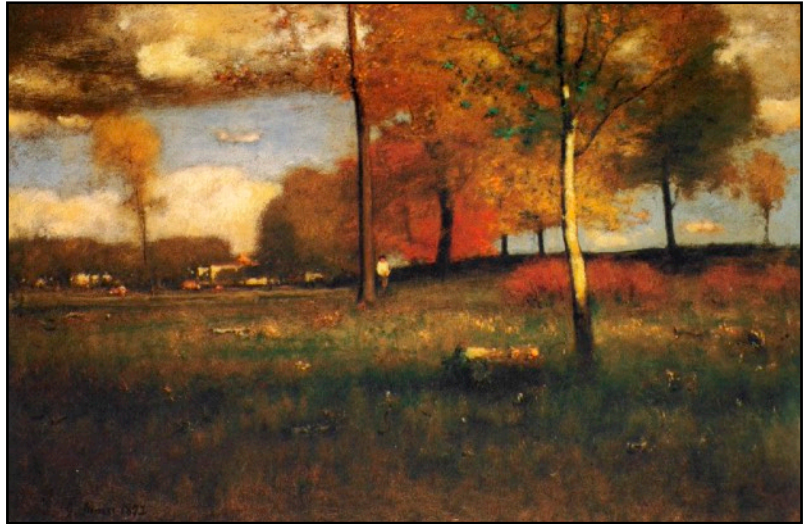


Value Contrasts in the Sky

Nothing grabs the eye with greater power than value contrast. It will overwhelm all other forms of contrast. In the images below, the middle photo is the original painting. In the top image, I've reduced the value contrasts in the sky. In the bottom image, I've exaggerated them. The range of the values you use will change the mood of the painting and affect the strength of the focal point. The difference between the top and bottom images is particularly striking.



George Inness (right) often painted strong value contrasts to create drama in his skies. Like Constable, he would use the full range of values in both the sky and ground, which is very difficult to do without destroying the overall value structure of the painting. Contrast the value range of the sky in this painting with the value range of the sky in Brian Sweetland's (below). Both paintings work, but they differ in mood.



In Sweetland's sky, the values range from middle to light values on the value scale. Compared to Inness's painting, the value contrasts are quieter, with a clear separation in foundation value between the sky and the ground.

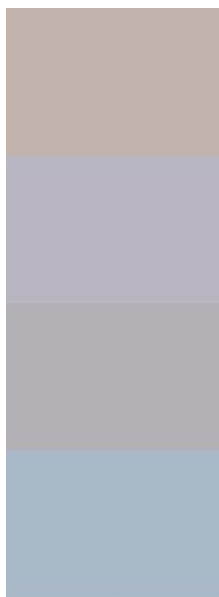
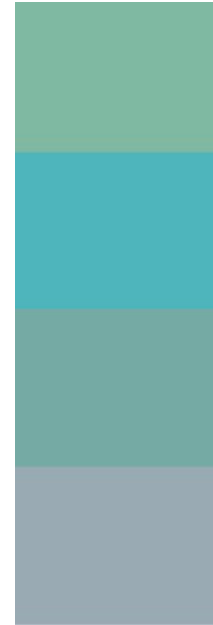
If painting a blue sky of nearly a single value, look for gradients with contrasts of hue and saturation. Nothing kills the life of a sky more than painting it in a flat, unvarying color. Notice the subtle changes in the sky in the painting below, by the Australian painter Arthur Streeton.

When analyzing the range of values in the sky, especially cloudy skies, it's crucial to continually compare the values of the sky with those in the entire scene. If we focus exclusively on the sky, the eye will exaggerate the value contrasts and we will tend to make the darks in the sky far too dark, unless of course, a stormy sky is the subject matter of the painting.



Color Contrast in the Sky

In a sky, color contrasts work in two ways: first, the overall color contrast *between* the sky and ground (e.g., a warm sky against a cool ground) and, secondly, the shifts of warm and cool colors *within* the sky, whether it's warm, cool, or neutral. Of the two, it is the color contrasts within a sky that create the illusion of the luminosity of light and depth. In Metcalf's cool sky (below) and Daubigny's warm sky (bottom), the subtle warm and cool shifts from the predominant hue create color contrasts, which give the needed depth and luminosity to their skies.



Color Contrast–Clouds

Color contrast isn't limited to blue skies. Clouds, too, require color contrast to give them luminosity and translucency. Notice the huge range of hues in Brian Sweetland's clouds below.



Because color contrasts are stronger when values are kept close together, deliberately limit the number of values in your clouds as much as possible, **making temperature color changes rather than value changes.**

Brian Sweetland always managed to convey a beautiful feeling of motion, light, and translucency in his clouds by using a variety of warm, cool, and neutral colors in both the lit and shadowed areas. He had a profound understanding of clouds, all based on years of plein air painting coupled with patient analysis.

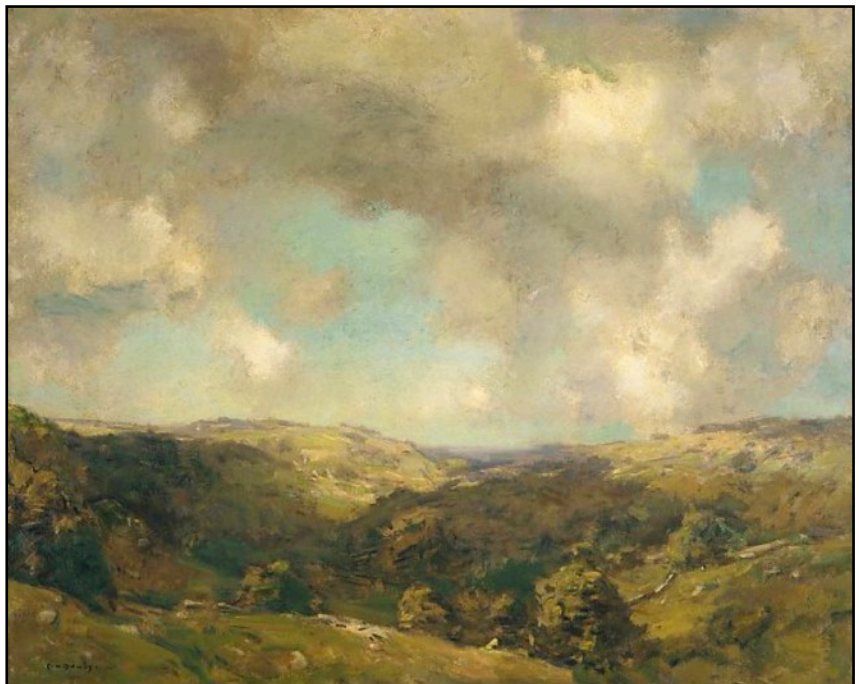
Cloud Edges

If your painting goal is to create believable illusions of light, space, and atmosphere, avoid using hard edges in your clouds. They will flatten the clouds and the sky, drawing attention to the surface of the canvas. However, if you wish to emphasize the graphic quality of your composition, then use uniformly hard edges on ALL the forms in the painting. But first, decide which result you want. Do you prefer a graphic, 2-D space or a realistic 3-D space? Both approaches can result in beautiful paintings. *But don't mix them!* Creating hard edged clouds in an otherwise realistic, soft-edged, landscape will flatten the sky and destroy any illusion of representational space.

In Edgar Payne's painting (left), he emphasized the design qualities of the painting by using hard edges on all the forms in the landscape. It creates paintings with bold, strong shapes and draws attention to the composition.



In the painting by Charles Harold Davis (right), the edges of the clouds have varying degrees of softness as their forms recede into the sky. The space is deeper and more atmospheric than that in Payne's painting. They differ in their portrayal of space but both paintings work beautifully.



Cloudy Skies ~ Looking *with* the Sun

If the light source is behind with the light shining fully on the scene ahead, the values in the sky tend to fall in the middle of the value scale. Scattered highlights and shadows emphasize the 3-D form of the clouds—giving them volume and spacial depth. With most values clustered in the middle of the value scale, it's the color contrasts, not value contrasts, that will bring life to the sky. In this case, take advantage of the limited value range and push the color.



Details of paintings by:

Camille Pissarro (above)

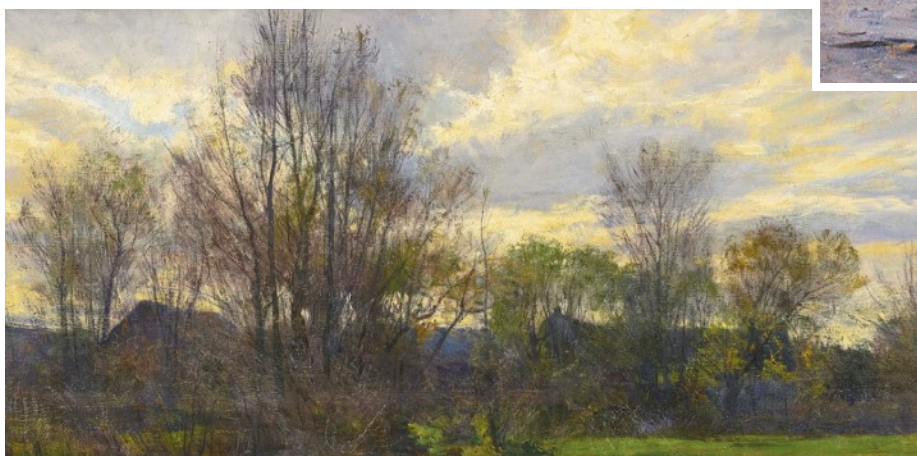
Charles Harold Davis (left)

Brian Sweetland (below)



Cloudy Skies ~ *Contre Jour* (Looking into the Sun)

When looking *into* the light source, the values in the sky can range from white to nearly black. Clouds are reduced to silhouetted flat shapes, emphasizing their graphic quality and the design of the composition. Here, value contrasts become more important than color contrasts, with a need to create darks that enhance the illusion of glaring light. All of the values in the painting follow a gradient from the lightest at the light source to a gradual darkening toward the edges of the painting. The greater the value range, the greater the illusion of dramatic light.

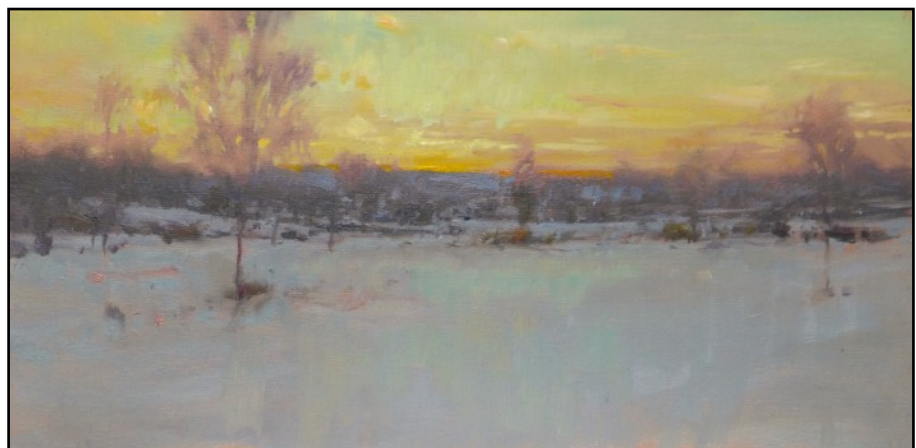
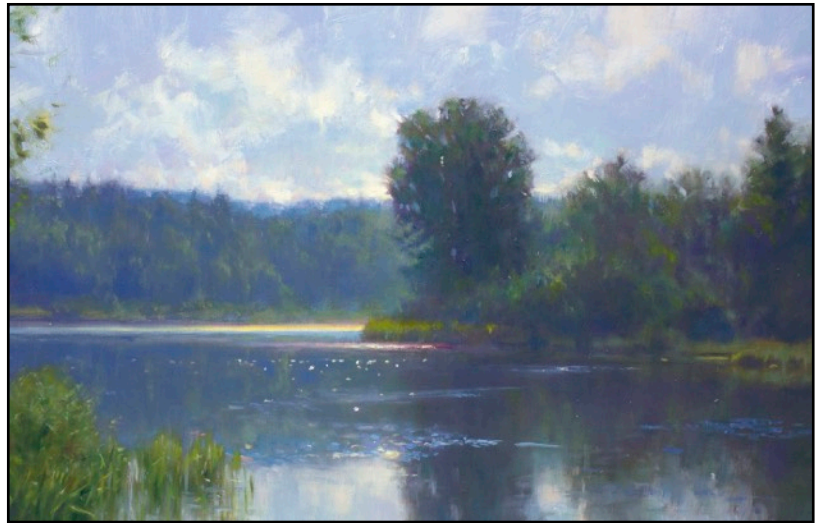


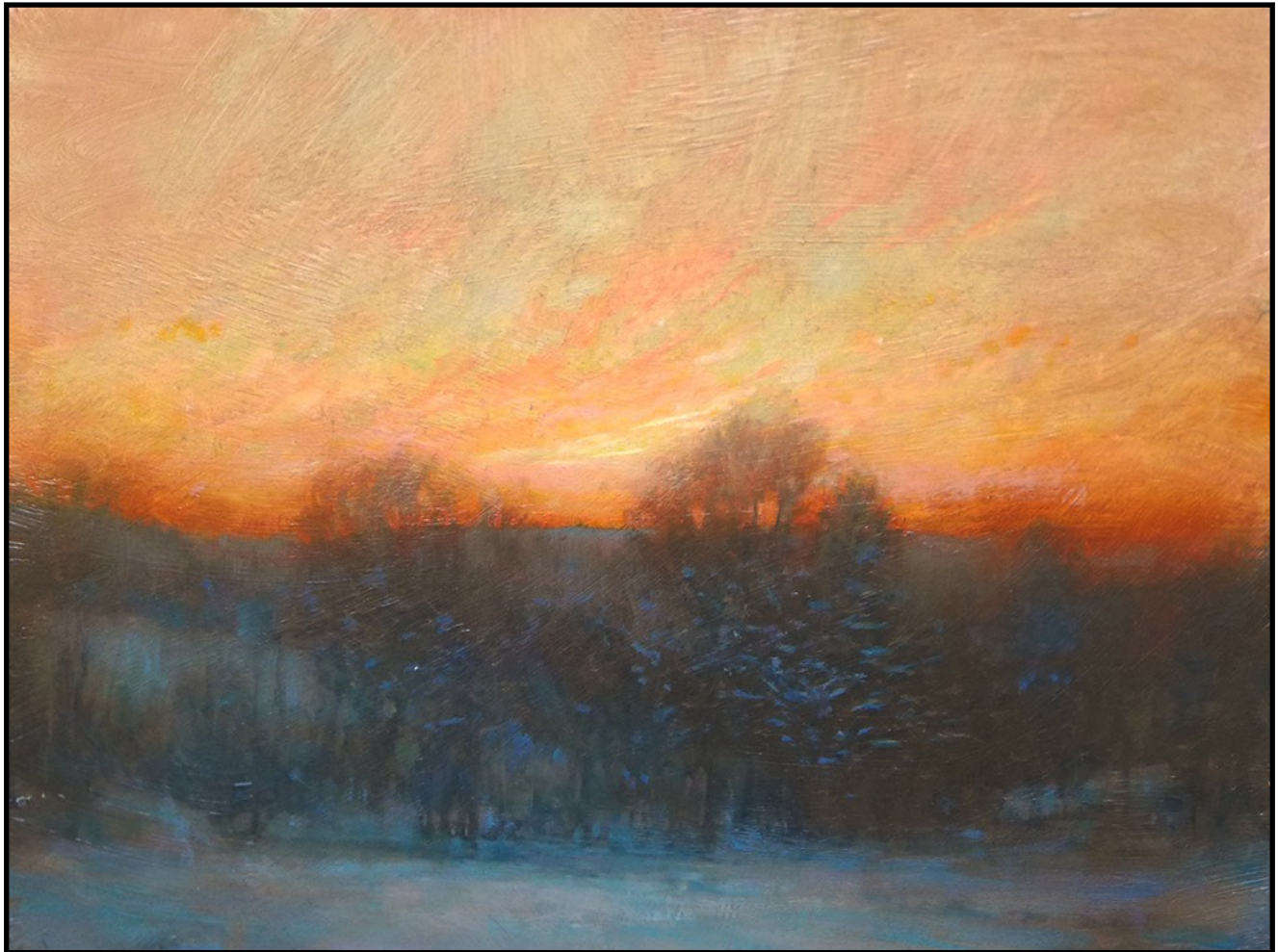
Clockwise from top left:
A.K. Savrasov - *Country Road*;
Birge Harrison, *Sunburst at Sea*;
Joseph DeCamp, *Becalmed*;
Hugh Bolton Jones, (*unknown*)

All are cropped details from
larger paintings.

Sky Examples

Below are some recent paintings in which the sky is an important feature, helping to establish the mood, the illusion of light, the time of day, and the conditions of the weather. Half of these examples are plain air paintings with the remainder being based on photos or tonal sketches.





Whether playing the lead or a supporting role in your paintings, understanding the nature of the sky and learning to paint it in all its manifestations is an important skill for any landscape painter. And what could be more fun than spending time soaring through an open sky?

Words of Wisdom

My process is thinking . . . thinking . . . and thinking.
If you have a better way, please let me know.

– Hayao Miyazaki

The sky is the source of light in nature
and governs everything

– John Constable

The sky is the ultimate art gallery just above us.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

Coming up in the next Newsletter:

As I finish this newsletter, I've not yet decided on the topic for the next. Let me know if you've any suggestions. . . Until then,

–*Happy Painting!*



Depending on the state of the pandemic, the workshops below may change at short notice. Please refer to my [website](#) for the most current information. Stay well!

2021 Workshops



Feb 27–Mar. 6 Casa de los Artistas artworkshopvacations.com

In a small village on the beautiful Pacific coast of Mexico, a week of focused plein air painting paired with a varied, fun-filled, and fascinating exposure to the delicious food, friendly people, and spectacular scenery of Mexico.



May 23–29 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 as reference, using it to create paintings with different value keys, color keys, times of day, and seasons. This workshop is for intermediate to advanced painters.



August 20–22 Falmouth Art Center www.falmouthart.org

This three-day workshop will focus on 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 them. Open to painters of all levels of experience.



October 6–12 Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art; North Adams, Mass. NEED WEB ADDRESS.

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.