

# John MacDonald

May–June, 2022



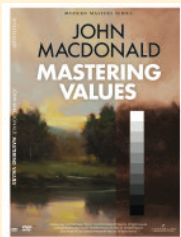
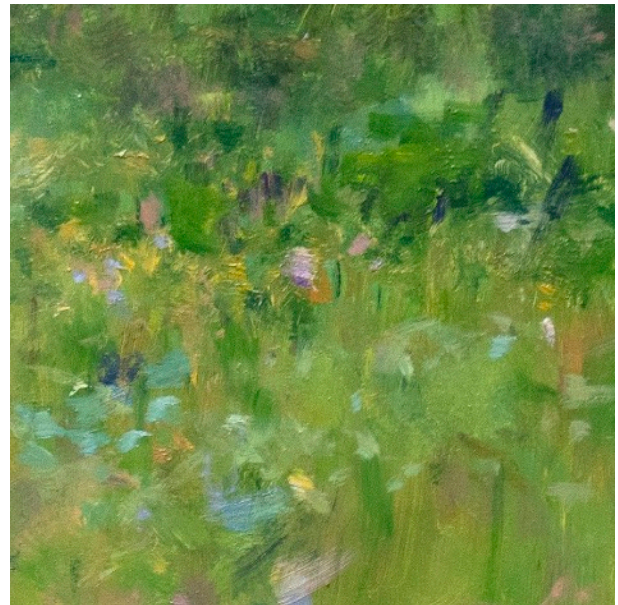
## Those Difficult Greens

Spring is unfolding in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts. The trees are budding and will soon flower, the ochres and browns of dried grass are giving way to new growth, and a faint green mist is slowly filling the woods. This is such a special and beautiful time of year and yet so transient. Far too soon, spring will give way to summer and those of us living and painting in the Northeast will be faced with four months of ever-present, unrelenting, beautiful but ubiquitous *greens*. . .

If you're a landscape painter living anywhere but a desert or at the earth's poles, you'll need to work with greens. It's often considered one of the most vexing of colors to use. The focus of this newsletter is on the hue we label *green*: how to see it, understand it, mix it, and use it in our paintings.

P.S.—anyone who remembers the list of topics published in the January-February news-

letter will expect a newsletter about reflections in water. But after reviewing the newsletter from July-August 2015, which featured that topic, I realized I had little to add. And so I'm moving on to the next topic. . . GREEN.



### *Streamline Video ~ All About Values*

Unlike the previous two videos, "*Mastering Values*" is not about me, my technique, or the materials I use. Instead, the subject is about a single component of painting—arguably the most important component: **Values**. It was a labor of love and, thanks to the skill and professionalism of the Streamline staff, the result couldn't be better. Interested? Click [HERE](#).

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 peruse them first.

To make a donation, click [HERE](#).

To the many of you who've already contributed~ *Thank you!*



# Seeing Green

Our brains think in terms of words, of labels. When we think of colors, we usually picture a hue labeled on crayons or color wheels. If we let the brain do the seeing, this is what we see:



But if you turn off the thinking of the brain and allow the eyes to lead—to look for differences and relationships among hues—*this* what we see. Forget the word “green.” Think “**greenish.**”





# Understanding Greens

The two most important concepts to grasp about greens (or any color) is that *color is relative* and *color temperature contrast brings color to life*. The two concepts are interrelated.

Because color is relative, a color can appear greenish or not depending on the colors surrounding it. Below is a detail of Frederic Church's, *Cotopaxi*, with a sample of the green that he used in the painting. In *this* context, the color below is unambiguously "greenish."



Yet the same color surrounded with a different hue can appear dramatically different.



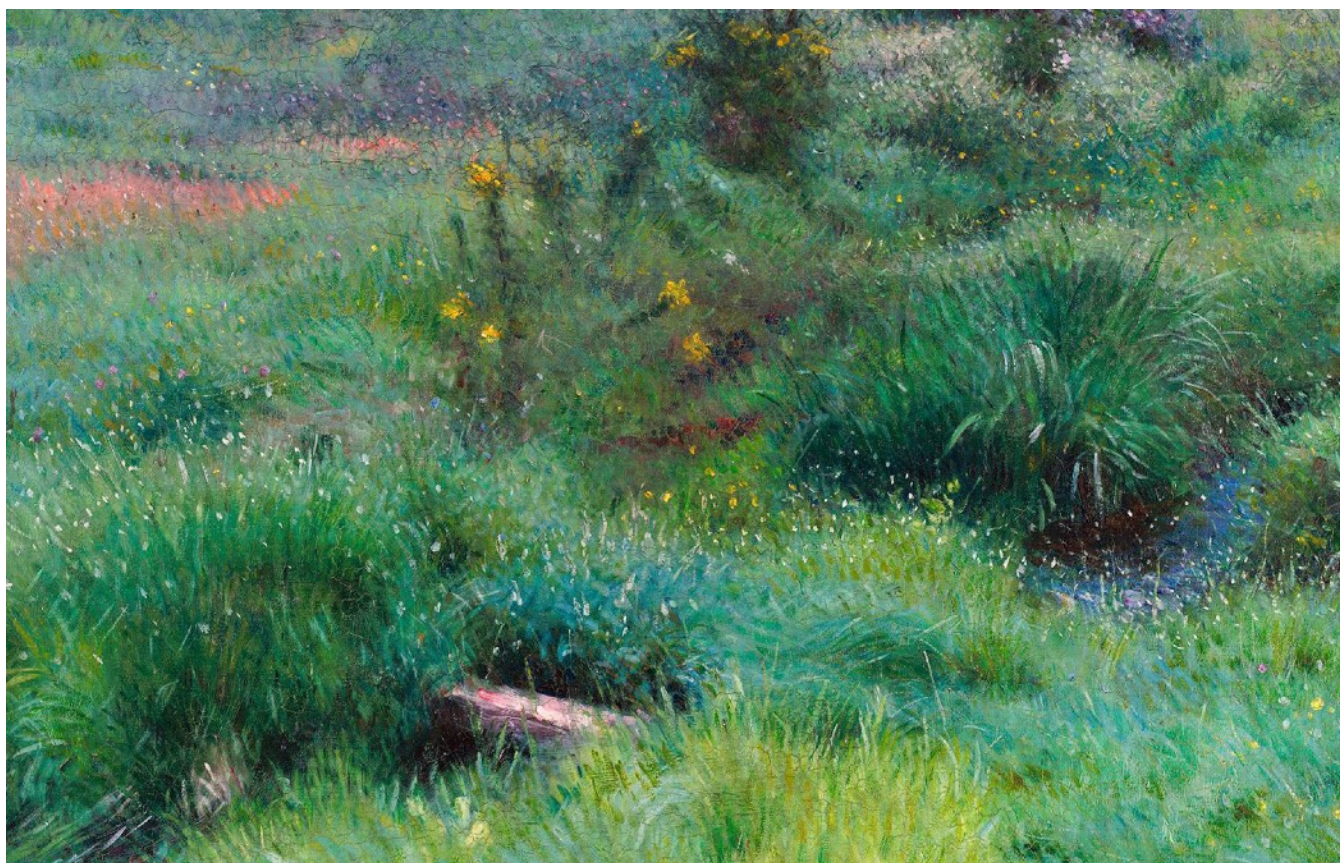
When trying to identify a color, it's crucial to take surrounding colors into consideration. A distant hillside can appear nearly royal blue, yet when placed next to an even more brilliant blue sky, it can be subtly greenish. And as shown above, under a red sunset a muted orange can appear greenish if surrounded by oranges and reds that are more saturated. Context is everything.

As mentioned in previous newsletters, color contrast is created by juxtaposing warm and cool colors—or warm and cool variations of a single color—while keeping their values as close as possible. There is no single, isolated color that is absolutely cool or warm. A color can appear warm or cool depending on adjacent colors.

Below, in the center, is a classic “green” which appears cooler than the olive green on the left but warmer than the bluish-green on the right. (Whether or not you see certain colors as cooler or warmer than others isn’t nearly as important as seeing the *difference* and understanding the concept and the importance of using color contrast in the greens in your landscapes.)



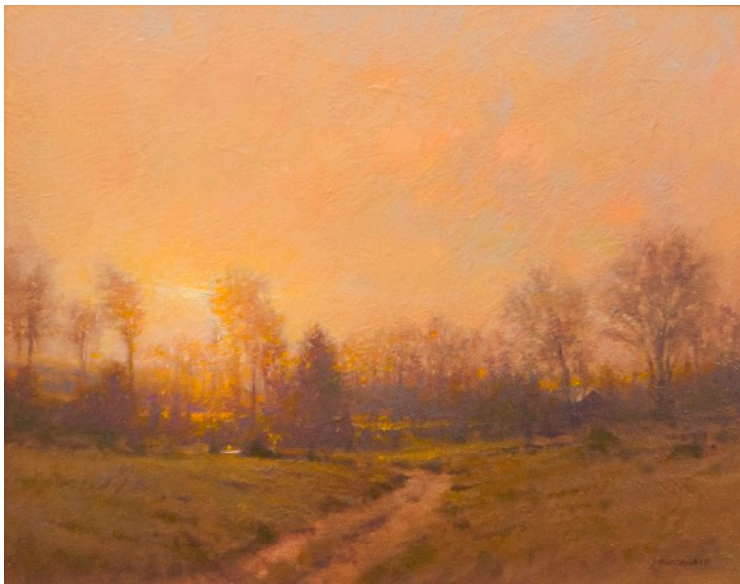
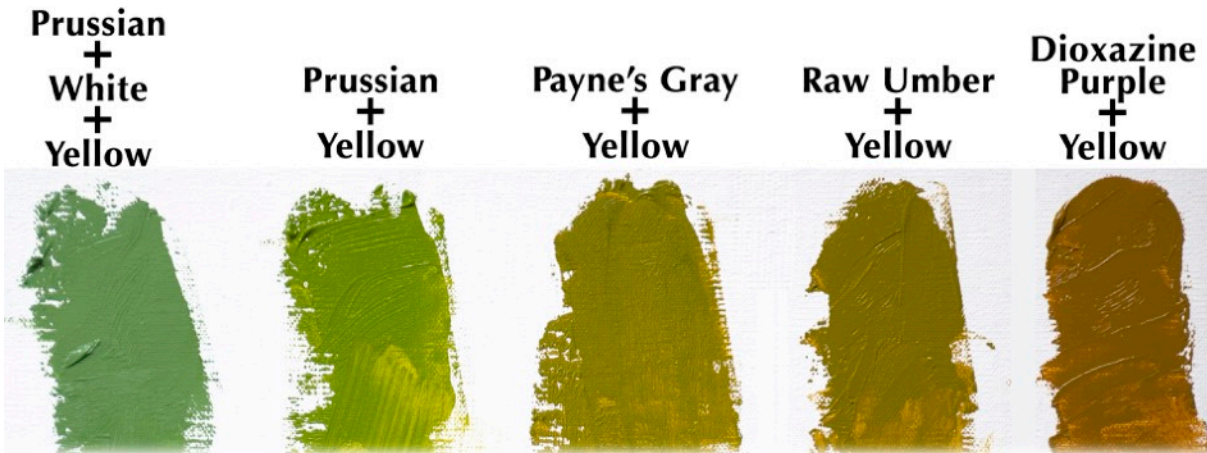
Below is a detail from Dennis Miller Bunker’s, “*The Brook at Medfield*” (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum). The range of greens from cool to warm, saturated to muted, is astonishing!





# Painting Greens ~ Color Mixing

Your ability to mix a variety of greens will depend on the quality of your seeing and the familiarity you have with your palette. If you struggle with greens, eliminate green pigments from your palette and mix your own, using any blueish and yellowish pigments. In my limited palette of White, Cad Yellow Light (hue), Prussian Blue, Alizarin Crimson (permanent), Payne's Gray, Raw Umber, and Dioxazine Purple, I will often use yellow with a single pigment (excluding the crimson) to create a green based on temperature, and then vary it using the other pigments. I've discovered there is rarely a green that I cannot mix using this simple palette.

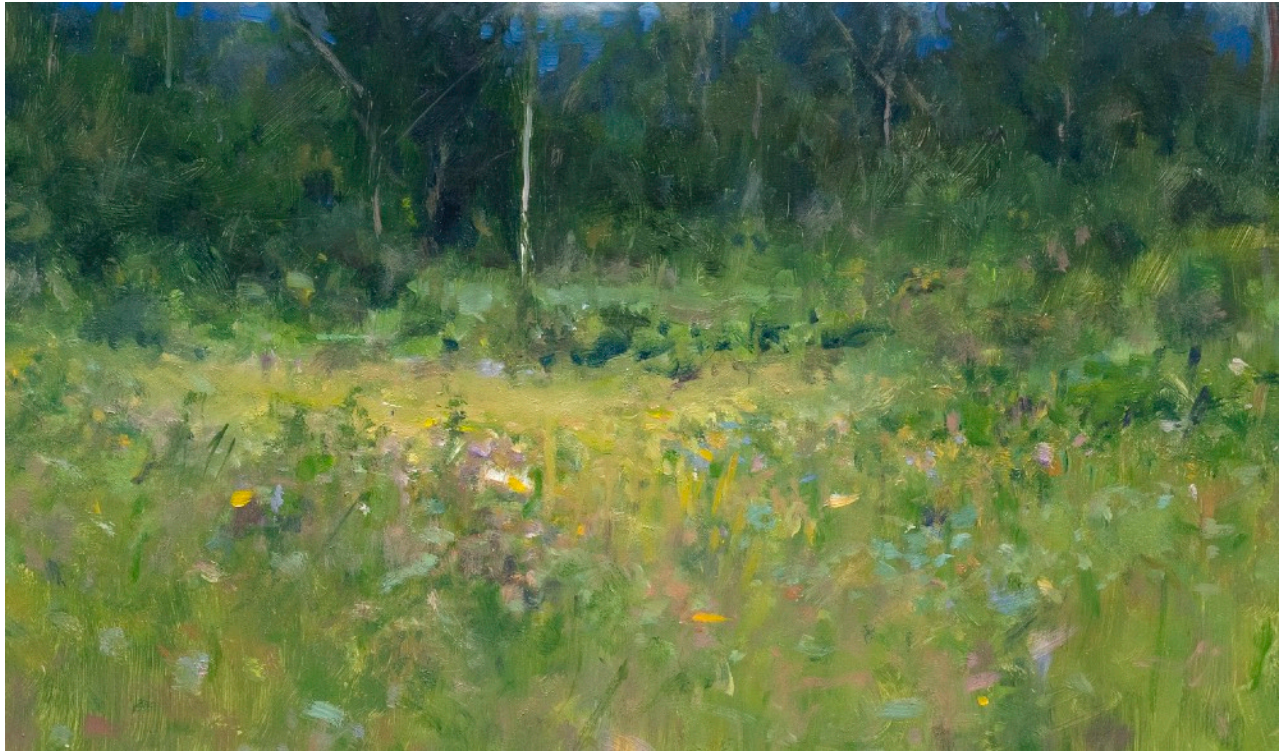


In this warm key painting, all greenish hues were created by mixing yellow with Raw Umber and /or Dioxazine (above).

Whether working from a photo or painting plein air, simply copying what you see rarely results in a successful painting. But it's great training in color mixing. Seeing a color and trying to match it as closely as possible with your pigments is one of the best exercises for developing not only your ability to see and understand color but to become intimately familiar with the paints you use—their limitations, capabilities, and qualities.



Below are details from two recent paintings that showcase a broad range of greens. Notice how values are kept close to emphasize color contrasts rather than value contrasts. That's crucial!





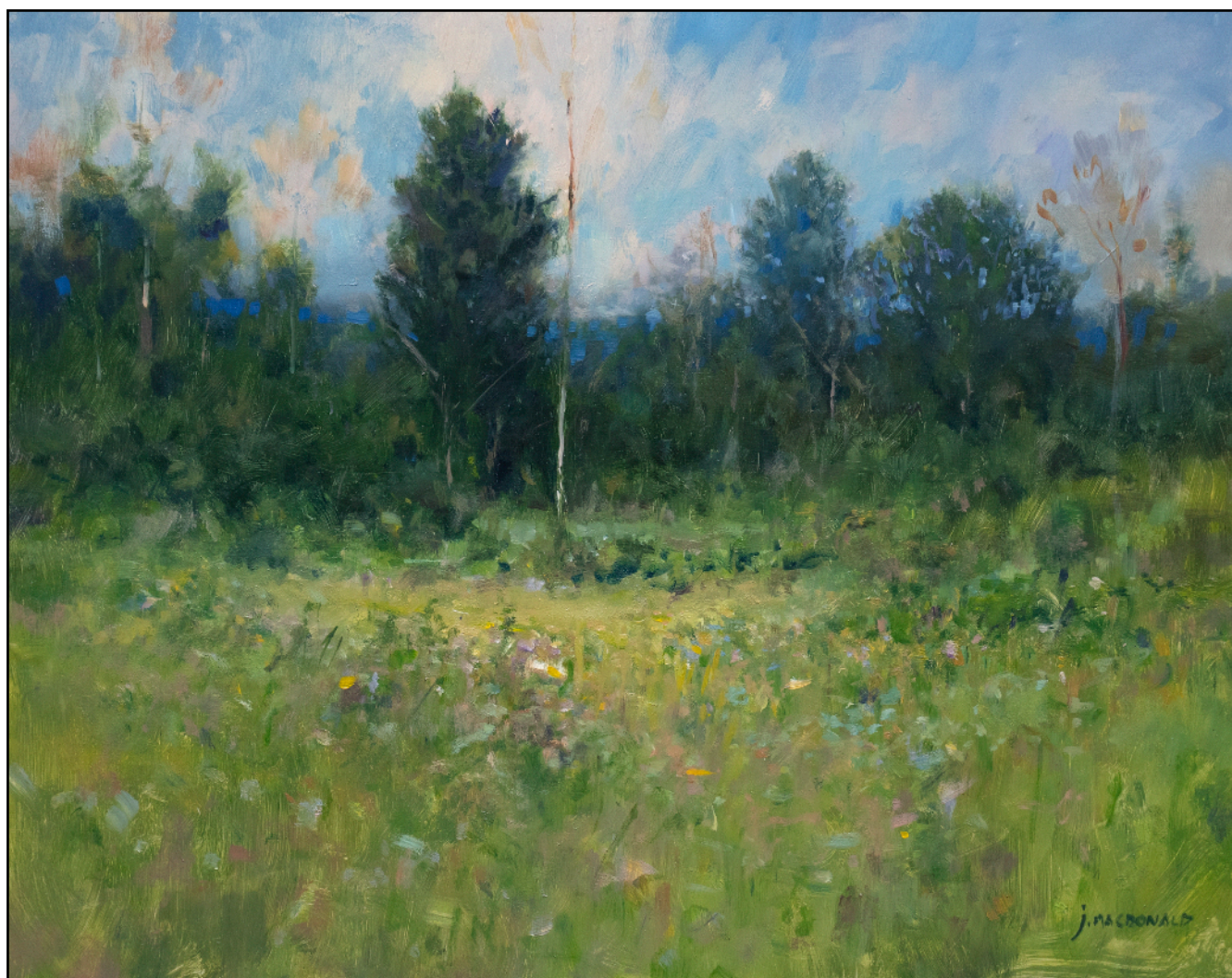
## Painting Greens ~ Working with Them

When you can see the variety of greens in nature, understand them, and mix them, there still remains the challenge of using them in a painting so they work. A painting that is predominantly green needs enough variety to keep it alive and interesting.

### **Vary the greens between the major shapes.**

Just as the major shapes of a composition must vary in value (foundation values), so too should different “green” shapes of the composition vary in hue. For example, in the painting below, both the background trees and the meadow were primarily green. Besides ensuring there was an overall value difference between them, it was necessary to vary the overall temperature of the greens. I chose to keep the trees a cooler (and more muted) green while making the meadow, overall, slightly warmer and more saturated. This helps distinguish the two areas in space and form.

For those familiar with my use of the term “foundation values”, you can think of these as being “foundation colors,” a hue and temperature of green to which all other greens will relate.

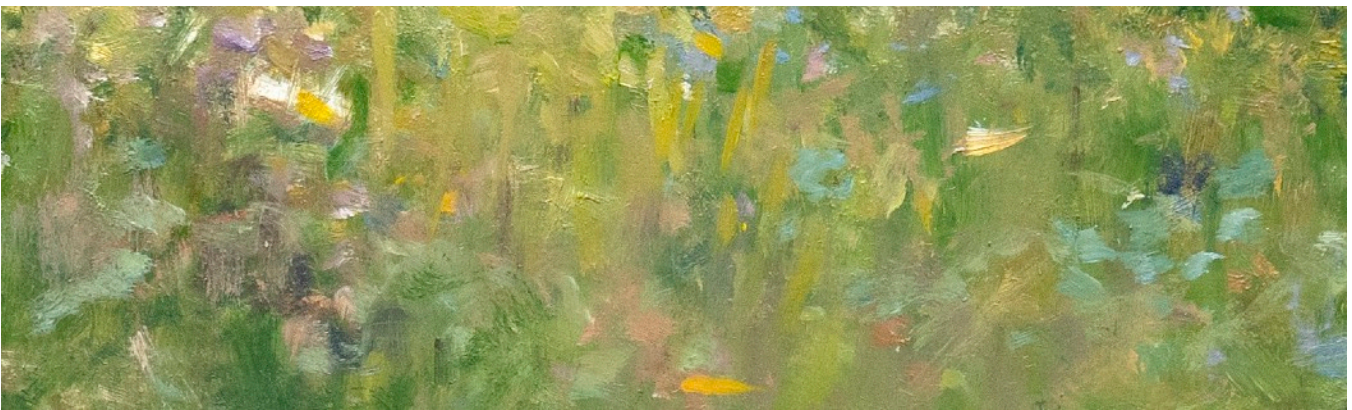




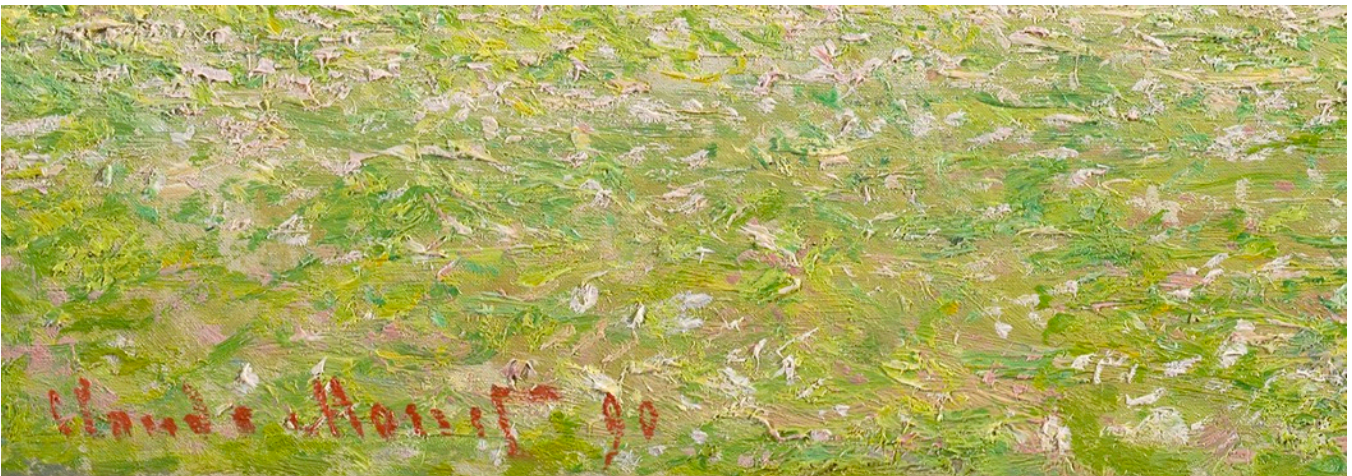
## Vary the greens *within* the major shapes.

Having separated the overall temperature of the greens of the trees and meadows, I then varied the temperature of the greens within each of those areas, being careful to maintain the underlying, overall color temperature structure of cool trees and a warm meadow.

Taking it a step further, it's better to have differences between the variety of greens in each shape. If there are a dozen different warm and cool greens in a foreground meadow, consider treating any background trees more simply, perhaps with just one or two variations of the dominant green. As with any form of contrast, *put the greatest color contrasts where you want to draw the eye*. In the painting on the previous page, the greatest variety of color—the strongest color contrasts—are in the back of the meadow, where I wanted to draw the eye. Where I didn't want to draw the eye—in the trees—there is less variety. There are still notes of warm and cool greens in the trees but fewer of them compared to the meadow. They are closer in hue and value. This simplification of color contrasts in the trees ensures that the trees recede in space and prevents the eye from being drawn to them, then up into the sky and off the top of the painting.



In the detail from my painting (above), I not only painted a broad variety of greens but created details of varying values. In the detail of a Monet painting (below), he kept the values and hues uniformly close, creating a quieter area that doesn't draw the eye as much as mine.



Claude Monet, *Spring in Giverny* [detail]



## Working with spring greens.

In his book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1914), Vassily Kandinsky assigned a meaning and emotion to each color. He saw yellow-green, the color seen in sunlit springtime foliage, as poisonous, calling it “sickly and unreal.” I disagree. On a beautiful spring morning, it’s a stunning color. But. . . its intensity and strength can make it difficult to work with in a painting. Mix some cad yellow with a little thalo blue and the result is a color that will leap out of your painting and set the wallpaper on fire. The best advice? Use it sparingly and keep an eye on the saturation. It’s often better to make it slightly muted while increasing the saturation of colors around it.

Just to prove me wrong, Curt Hanson often worked with fairly saturated yellow-greens, lots of them, and yet he made them work. Below are a few examples.





## How Master Painters Handle Greens

In all of these paintings, the greens are handled superbly. Notice the wide variety in the color and how different areas vary in the amount of different shifts in hue. Some of these colors are obviously green while others appear subtly green-*ish*. But all work beautifully.



Denys Gorodnychyi, title unknown

*(One of my favorite landscapes ever painted!)*



Chauncy Ryder, title unknown



Arthur Hoeber, *Connecticut Idyll*





T. C. Steele, *Pleasant Run*



Fritz Thaulow, title unknown



Vladimir Kirillov, *The Lilac Bush*



## ***Lastly, a few of mine.***

Summer is magical, yet it may be my least favorite season to paint. By the end of August the greens in the Berkshires can feel overwhelming, boring and monotonous. But I know that when I have that thought, it's telling me I'm not looking closely enough. There are always enough various greens to make a good painting—I just need to look more openly, through my eyes and not my brain. (The two bottom paintings on this and the next page were plein air. The others were created in the studio.)







## Words of Wisdom

“Color was not given to us in order that we should imitate Nature. It was given to us so that we can express our emotions.”

– Matisse

*Topic in the next Newsletter:  
Skies and Clouds.*

Until then,

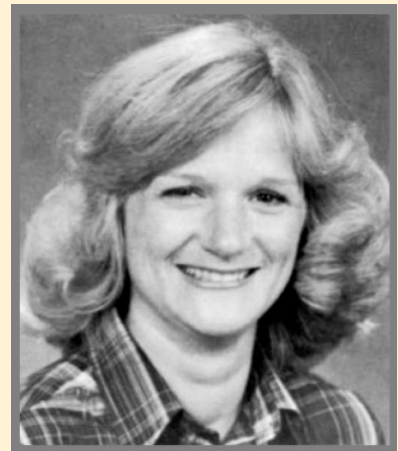
–*Happy Painting!*



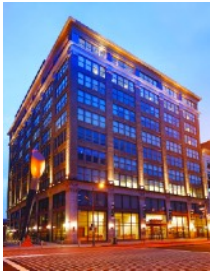
## Mary Nicewander Yingling

1944 – 2020

I was informed recently of the death of Mary Yingling, my high school art instructor. (At right is her photo from my senior yearbook, 1975.) A talented artist herself, she was the finest teacher I had in high school—demanding, supportive, knowledgeable, and great fun. She recognized the talent I had at that time in my life and pushed me to be better than I thought I could be. She was a true teacher.



## 2022 Workshops



**June 6–10 Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts;  
Philadelphia, PA [www.pafa.org](http://www.pafa.org)**

We will be painting in the studio using photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies, concentrating on the painting process from start to finish.

***This workshop is sold out. Waiting list only.***



**October 14–16 Falmouth Art Center [www.falmouthart.org](http://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.

Following the October 2022 workshop, I’m retiring from teaching, at least from teaching in-person workshops. For the foreseeable future, I may continue to offer the occasional Zoom workshop or private sessions. At 65 years, I’m more aware than ever of my mortality. I’m running out of time. I’m going to consider writing a book. After that, I hope to have another 20-plus years of learning how to paint.