

John MacDonald

January–February, 2020



WORKSHOPS

2020

FEB. 29 –MAR. 6 , 2020

CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS

Boca de Tomatlan, Mexico

Plen air and Studio.

APRIL 15–18, 2020

LANDGROVE INN

Landgrove, VT

Studio: working from photos.

JUNE 1–5, 2020

PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS (PAFA)

Philadelphia, PA

(registration begins 12/2019)

SEPT. 11–13, 2020

VILLAGE ARTS CENTER

Putney, VT



New Year's Resolution: *Ask Questions.*

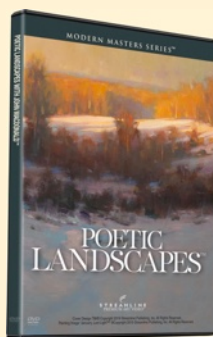
Being the third week of January, it's not too late to make a New Year's resolution that will boost the quality of your work:

"I will ask four questions before I begin every painting."

So many factors push us directly into a painting. We may be feeling the itchy and irresistible pull of inspiration, the light may be changing minute by minute, or perhaps we simply want to get to some beautiful colors and juicy details without any delay. While there's nothing wrong with occasionally diving into a painting without any preliminary thought or investigation, doing so will nearly always increase the likelihood of failure. In painting, as in any activity that is a blending of skill and magic, time spent in thoughtful preparation is time spent well.

In this newsletter, we'll look at five questions you can ask yourself before touching a brush, questions which, by simply taking the time and making the effort to answer them, can lead to better paintings.

(An abbreviated version of this newsletter will appear in the online Art Notes Newsletter by Liliedahl Art Videos. Look for it next month.)



NEW Liliedahl Video now available!

Like the first video (click [here](#)), I concentrate on the basic elements of the painting process but then move on to a demo of a winter sunset.

You may purchase it [here](#). Online streaming is also available.

From Scene to Paint ~ Some Crucial Questions.

When we're painting, we're always asking ourselves questions: *Is this green too dark? Is this edge too hard? Does this tree look right?*, etc. Usually, these questions are answered best not by thinking but by painting: we mix paint, brush it on, and see if it works. But there are other questions we should ask ourselves every time we paint, *before* we paint, questions that require thinking and analysis and that invariably lead to better work. Let's look at four crucial questions that should be answered every time we approach a painting.

1. *Why do I want to paint?*
2. *Why do I want to paint this scene?*
3. *Will this scene translate into a good painting?*
4. *Do I want to copy, translate, or invent?*



Question #1

1. *Why do I want to paint?*

The point of asking this question isn't to test our philosophy of life, our love of art or our work ethic. It's about clarifying our painting goals and expectations. We ask ourselves, "Given the time I have, the nature of the scene from which I'll be working, my skill level, and the materials I'll be using, what am I hoping to achieve? What's my **intention**?"

Are we painting to produce a quick color study or a fully developed, finished painting? Are we experimenting with new colors and brushes? Trying a new subject matter that will push us out of our comfort zone? Or are we just playing around and having fun?

Each of these reasons to paint is valid but each will result in different approaches and different paintings. If we set out with the clear intention of creating a simple color study that will exercise our skills of observation and color mixing, then we won't be disappointed if the session ends with a rough study. But if we begin the painting with no idea of what we intend, we may finish with a beautiful study but be frustrated and disappointed because it doesn't look like a finished painting. Without goals or expectations, we won't be able to evaluate the result and will miss the opportunity to learn from the painting.

Before you paint, ask yourself what you hope to achieve and then let go of any expectations that lie outside that goal. You'll be a more focused, efficient, and happier painter.

Question #2.

Why do I want to paint this scene?

If the previous question concerns goals, this question is about inspiration. The answer to this question reveals the message of the painting, its content, what it's about. It gives us not only the physical focal point of the painting but serves to keep us focused during the painting process, constantly reminding us of what is essential to the painting and, by extension, what isn't. A message-less painting is a weak, confusing painting.

In his 1910 book, *Landscape Painting*, Birge Harrison cautioned painters, “Don't try to say two things on one canvas. Any motive that is worth painting must have a central point of interest. Concentrate on that and sacrifice everything else. . . Don't put in a single unnecessary feature.” Having a clear idea of the message of our painting will help us know what to keep, to simplify, to change, to omit, or to add, to make the painting sing.



Being a Tonalist at heart, I'm most attracted by mood, and most often a mood that conveys a sense of tranquility and stillness. Here, I was attracted to the quiet simplicity of the landscape, the sense of deep space, and the lack of visual or physical busyness. I love the contrast between the patterns and details of the hills against the simple snow and sky, the undulating curves of the hills, and the distant blue hills. That area of inspiration gives me the focal point.

A word of warning to storytellers.

If your message is based solely on something visual—a pattern of trees, brilliant light on water, dramatic value contrasts, etc, then the message is already inseparably tied to the elements of the visual language: composition, values, colors, edges, etc. But when the message of the painting is a story, a narrative—the history of an old barn, the celebratory atmosphere of a street cafe, the antiquity of a town, romance of a ship, etc., then often our enthusiasm for the *story* blinds us to the possibility that there may not be enough in the rest of the scene visually to make a good *painting*. It's not enough to create a painting that appeals to the intellect as a narrative. It must also appeal to our eyes. The painting has to work wordlessly—**visually**—as a whole, as a painting. Which leads us to question #3. . .

Question #3

Is there enough in this scene to make a good painting?

None of us begins with the intention of creating a mediocre painting, so why would we settle on a mediocre scene, one that doesn't offer us interesting and varied material? Often, it's because we're so excited and inspired by a small part of the scene or a fleeting effect of light or color that we fail to stop to look at the whole. We're seduced by a single tree and fail to see that the forest around it is dull, uninspired, and untranslatable into paint.

This question is addressing the form of the painting rather than the content—not what you say but the context in which you say it. This isn't about technique—how you apply your brushstrokes, for example—but for something more basic and important—how you structure the painting. A well-realized focal point with all the beautiful details in the world won't work if there isn't an abstract structure that holds the painting together—primarily the composition and the value structure. We need to look at every visual component of the scene and determine if they can be successfully shaped into a whole. Is there an adequate variety of shapes, values, color temperatures, edges, etc. and can they be orchestrated into a painting that will work? We discover what the scene offers us and what it doesn't, what we may need to change, delete, or invent. We must develop the ability to judge if a scene will make a good painting regardless of the intended message. Look at the scene. Can we visualize a finished, successful painting? If not, what do we need to do to make it succeed?



Is there enough here to make a good painting? Given the message I want to convey, yes, I think so. The simplicity of the foreground snow and sky contrast with and frame the complexity of the patterns of the trees and hills. The many horizontals are balanced by the vertical tree trunks. The negative shapes of the fields are varied. There are opportunities to play hard forms against soft and large masses against small details.

Question #4

Do I want to copy, translate, or invent?

Assuming we've determined the message (why) and have decided the scene will make a good painting (what), it's time to ask *how* we wish to paint it. Should we closely follow what we see? Do we take liberties with color and/or values (keys) or the shapes of the composition? Or would we like to use the scene—or only part of the scene—as loose reference and let the painting become something entirely different? All three are equally valid approaches. The decision will depend on your goal and the message you wish to convey.

Having finally answered all four questions, we're focused and now ready to paint!



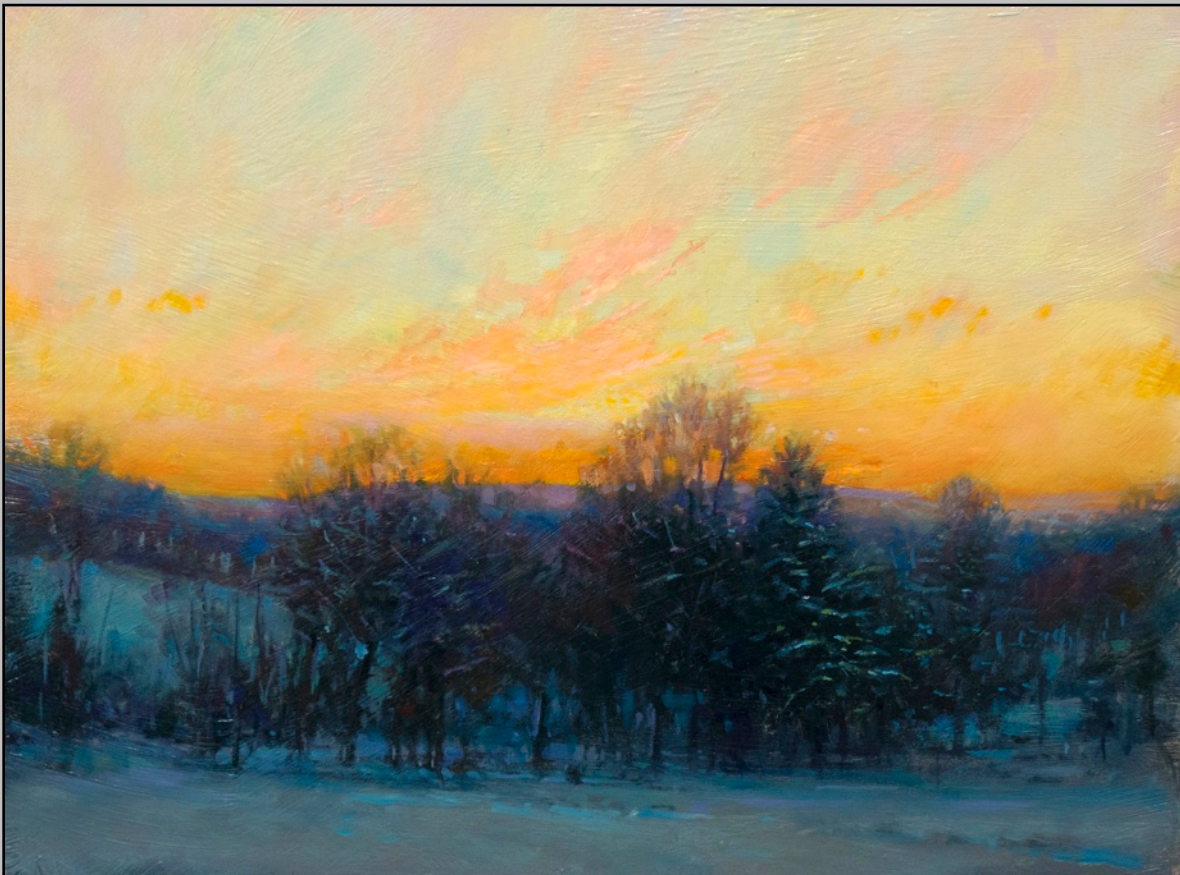
Two paintings from several years ago, based on the photo. That at the left is 8" x 16," that below is 24" x 30." In both cases, I was content to closely follow the forms and values in the photo. I zoomed in a little then changed the amount of detail and color contrast in the sky, finishing with a foreground diagonal.





Below are two recent paintings based on a cropped section (left) of the same image. In both, I wanted to move away from the photo and be more inventive, to explore an extreme value contrast between a light sky and dark ground while trying to keep the middle snow value as dark as possible so to exaggerate the value contrast with the sky. I also wanted to minimize secondary value contrasts, allowing only some of the lighter values in the dark trees to provide the notes of greater value contrast.

Wherever possible, I made color changes rather than value changes, which preserves the simple value structure of the painting and gives it maximum color contrast. In the first painting (below), I added details in the sky and snow not found in the photograph. I now feel the amount of detail in the sky, snow, and trees is too similar. Each draws the eye nearly equally, making for a slightly ambiguous focal point. Is it the horizon? The snow in the trees? The spotted fields seen through the trees? It's not clear.





In the second attempt, I tried to see how little detail I could add to make the painting work, keeping it as simple as possible while putting all the emphasis on the contrasts at the horizon. The message of this painting is simpler and clearer than the previous one. Whether or not it resulted in a better painting is perhaps a matter of taste.

(Question #5: Can't we just *paint*?!)

Working through the questions may seem too time-consuming, too analytical, and too chilling to the fires of inspiration. But without this initial work, the painting is more likely to fail. It may seem artificial, awkward, and perhaps even counterproductive when first trying this, but with practice, the asking and answering becomes more intuitive and automatic. We are soon able to look at a scene and quickly decide what we want to say and how we can most effectively and beautifully say it.

Don't forget Plein Air. . .

When out on location, often the quickly changing light pressures us into diving immediately into the painting. Resist that temptation and ask the questions. It's not necessary to linger over them in great detail. Taking a few minutes to ask them helps us see the scene with sharper eyes and come away with a clearer idea of what we want to do. Simply make a mental note of the answers and then get to work.

Words of Wisdom

"Success is stumbling from failure to failure
with no loss of enthusiasm."

~ Winston Churchill

An artist should never be a prisoner of himself [herself],
prisoner of style, prisoner of reputation, prisoner of success.

~ Henri Matisse

Inspiration does not come like a bolt, nor is it kinetic,
energetic striving, but it comes into us slowly and quietly
and all the time, though we must regularly and every day
give it a little chance to start flowing, prime it with a little
solitude and idleness.

~ Brenda Ueland

COMING UP . . .

I've nothing planned for the next newsletter so will consider the suggestions that have been sent in. If there's a topic you'd like me to address in a future newsletter, please let me know.

~*Happy Painting!*



2020 Workshops



Mar. 1–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.



April 15–18 Landgrove Inn; Landgrove, Vermont

www.landgroveinn.com

A studio workshop, we will be painting from photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference while staying at a cozy Vermont Inn—wonderful food, atmosphere and a large, well-lit studio building.



June 1–5 PAFA: Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts;

Philadelphia, PA www.pafa.org

A studio workshop for intermediate to advanced painters. We'll work with a single photo, using it to create paintings with different compositions, value keys, and color temperatures. This workshop will take you from simply copying a photograph to creating a painting.



September 11–13 Village Arts of Putney; Putney, VT

villageartsofputney.fineaw.com

A three-day, plein air workshop amidst the beauty of rural Vermont.