

John MacDonald

March–April, 2021



WORKSHOPS

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

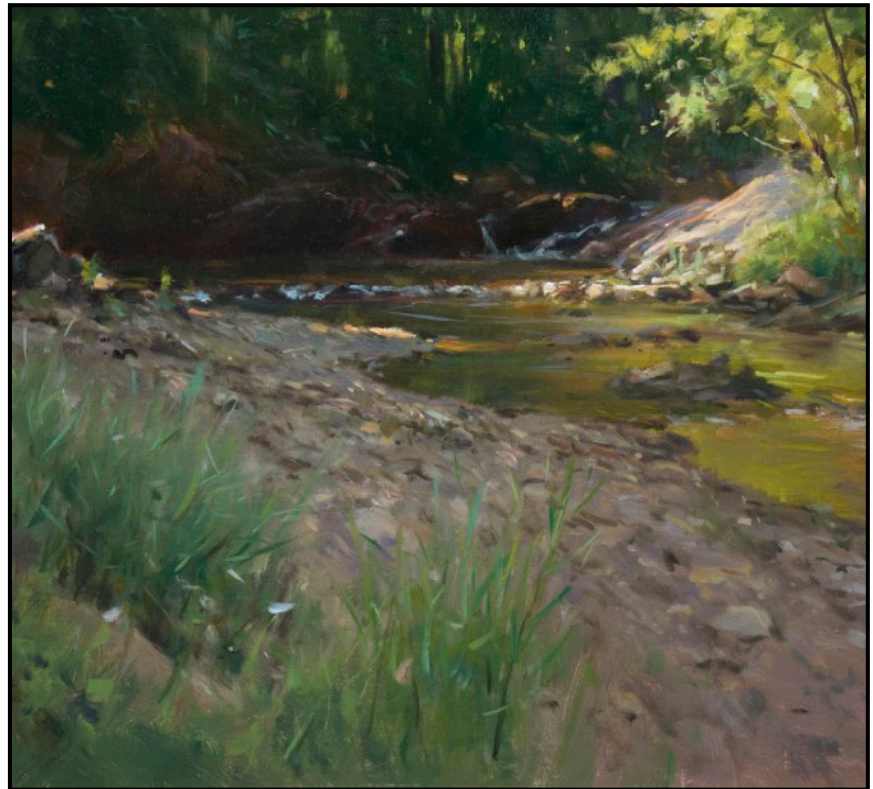
OCT. 9–15, 2021
**MASSMOCA
MASSACHUSETTS MUSEUM OF
CONTEMPORARY ART**
North Adams, Mass.

FEB. 26–MAR. 5, 2022
CASA DE LOS ARTISTAS
Boca de Tomatlin, Mexico.
artworkshopvacations.com

Those Frustrating Foregrounds

In the previous newsletter, I addressed the challenges of painting the sky. Now, let's come back to earth and examine one of the most problematic elements in a landscape—the foreground. Despite its playing only a supporting role in most paintings, it can ruin the entire show if not handled thoughtfully and skillfully.

In this newsletter, we'll look at foregrounds: what they are, what they do, and how they should be painted.



Thank you for your donation!

I'm extremely grateful to those of you who made a contribution through Paypal or by check. If I didn't thank you personally, please be assured I appreciated each and every donation. If you care to contribute, (and in these tough times, it's completely optional) you can go to my webpage [HERE](#).

~Thank you!

The function of the foreground.

A foreground is a doorway. It attracts the eye and then releases it, allowing it to move into the illusion of the space in the painting where it will eventually settle on the focal area. Just as the door of a house is a failure if it attracts you to the entrance but then prevents you from moving inside, the foreground in a landscape should attract the eye but not trap or hold it. This attraction and release can be a difficult balance to achieve. If there's too little of interest in the foreground, the eye will struggle to find an entrance into the painting; too much interest and the eye will never move beyond the foreground to the focal area, to the message of the painting.



Arthur Streeton, *Cremorne Pastoral* (detail below)



In this painting, Arthur Streeton manages to find the perfect balance between attracting the eye and then releasing it into the rest of the painting. How can we find that balance?

The Rule of Foregrounds

The complexity of the focal area determines the complexity of the foreground.

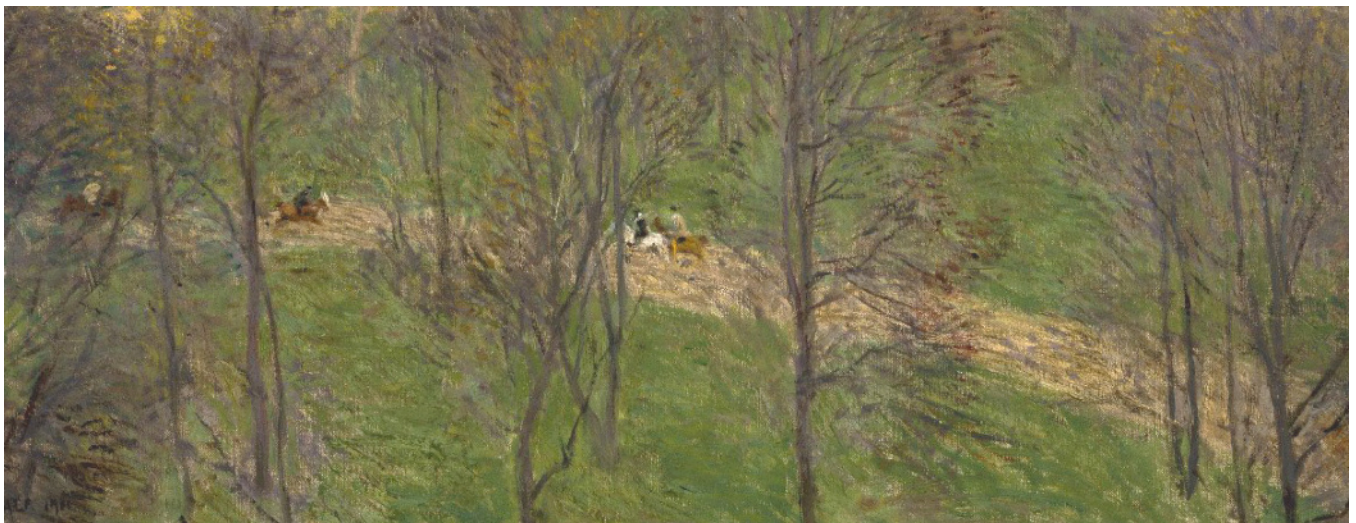
The foreground must be less visually attractive than the focal area—it must contain fewer contrasts in value, color, edges, details, etc. A painting with a complex, dramatic focal area can accommodate a busy and detailed foreground whereas a painting with a subtle, and subdued focal area will require an even quieter foreground. *The focal area determines the foreground.*

In the following three examples, as the focal areas become more complex and emphatic, the foregrounds likewise become more complex, yet the paintings still work because in each case the foregrounds are visually quieter than the focal areas. When deciding how to treat a foreground, always first consider the strength and complexity of the focal area of the painting.

The simple foreground. ~ painting by George Inness



A moderately complex foreground. ~ painting by Willard Metcalf



The complex foreground. ~ painting by Thomas Moran



Attract the eye to the foreground. . .

First, attract the eye to the foreground with contrasts of values (light/dark), color (warm/cool), edges (hard/soft), and/or details (complex/simple). The foreground should have enough visual interest to attract the eye but remain weaker than the focal point so it doesn't hold it.



Contrasts Attract the Eye. In this painting, Arthur Streeton uses a variety of contrasts to make his foreground interesting, yet keeps all of the contrasts simpler and weaker than those he uses in the focal area.

Value Contrasts

Contrasted dark and light areas.

Color Contrasts

Warm hues against cool hues.

Edge Contrasts

Sharp edges versus soft edges.

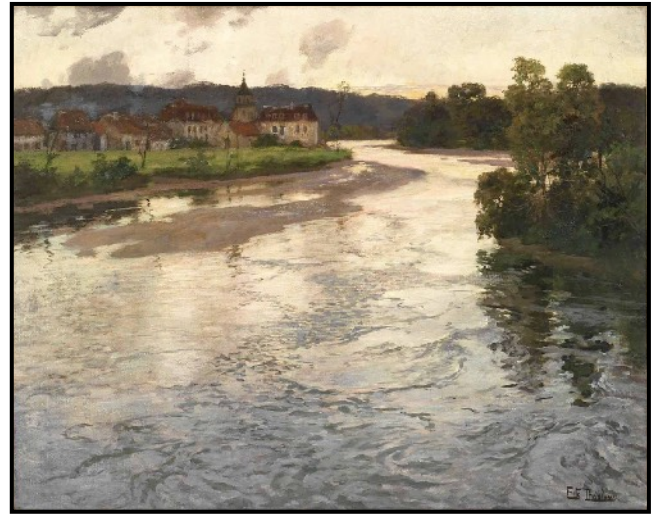
Detail Contrasts

Areas of simplicity and complexity. The details are loosely suggested.



. . . then lead the eye into the painting.

By using **diagonal lines**, **overlapping forms**, and/or **scale**, we can lead the eye beyond the foreground into the mid and background, to the focal area. In these two paintings below (Isaak Leviton left and Fritz Thaulow right), both painters used diagonal lines to lead the eye back into the painting. Here, the diagonal lines are part of the forms in the landscape—the road as it winds through the field and the ripples in the water as the river proceeds downstream.



Diagonal lines can also be formed from the edges of shadows or by aligning the edges of objects. The eye perceives diagonal lines even though there is no physical corollary to the line in the landscape. In the detail below, Streeton aligns the rocks in the composition and shadows in the grass so that their edges create diagonals leading back to the focal area of the painting.



The diagonal lines in a foreground, whether formed by physical objects or their optical alignment, can be bold (with strong value contrasts and sharp edges) or subtle (with suggestive details). Their strength depends entirely on the strength and complexity of the focal area.

In the examples below, Levitan (top) moves the eye to the background by overlapping the trees and shadows and reducing their size (scale) as they recede. In Gustav Klimt's painting (bottom) he relies almost entirely on the gradual reduction in scale in the ripples of the water to move the eye back. Notice how the groups of ripples form vague shapes with diagonal edges..



Foregrounds in shallow space

Not all landscapes feature vistas of deep space. In these two paintings by John Carson, the space is shallow and enclosed, which creates a sense of intimacy. The focus in both is on the pattern of trees, which lie nearly in the foreground of the painting and fill the canvases. In these images, the true foregrounds are limited to thin strips stretching across the bottom of the canvases. They show just enough of a horizontal plane to provide ground for the trees. Diagonals then move the eye back and above in the painting, to the pattern of trees.



When the foreground is the focus.

What if the foreground is the most interesting part of the painting?

Not to split hairs but it is important to distinguish between the literal foreground in the landscape—the part of the ground nearest to where the viewer stands—and the foreground of the *painting*—the bottom of the canvas that usually, but not always, represents a literal foreground.

In this painting by Dennis Miller Bunker, it could be argued that the subject matter is the literal foreground of the landscape. The far background in this painting, the top of the canvas, represents a part of the landscape that is still relatively close, perhaps no more than 50 yards in the distance. But even with the literal foreground filling the painting, the bottom of the canvas is still simpler and less attractive to the eye than the middle and upper middle areas of the canvas. The function of the bottom third is to lead the eye into the more interesting areas above.

Even when making the foreground the subject matter, the bottom of the canvas represents the foreground of the *painting*. To ensure the painting works, keep it simpler than the focal area.





In these two examples, the focal area is found close to the literal foreground of the landscape and below the mid-point on the canvas. But in neither case does it rest on the very bottom of the canvas.

Bring the focal point forward in the landscape if you wish, but don't rest it on the bottom edge of the canvas.

T.C. Steele, *Country Autumn, Brookville*



Maurice Cullen, *Ice Cutters, Longueuil*

Breaking the Rules?

Rules are made to be broken, especially in art. In these two paintings, the strongest contrasts, details, and interest are found in the very bottom of the paintings and yet both still work.

As you become more skilled in building your foregrounds, let go of the rules and learn to trust your eye, to be sensitive to how it moves through your painting and to take notice of where it finally comes to rest. In these two examples, where does your eye go?



Charles Platt, *The Quay, Larmor*



John Singer Sargent, *Simplon Pass*

Four tips for better foregrounds.

When painting the foreground, CONSTANTLY refer to the focal area.

When painting, if you focus only on the foreground you'll invariably add too much detail with too many value and edge contrasts. Judging how much to put in and what to leave out are decisions that must always be made in the context of the entire painting.

Simplify, simplify, simplify!

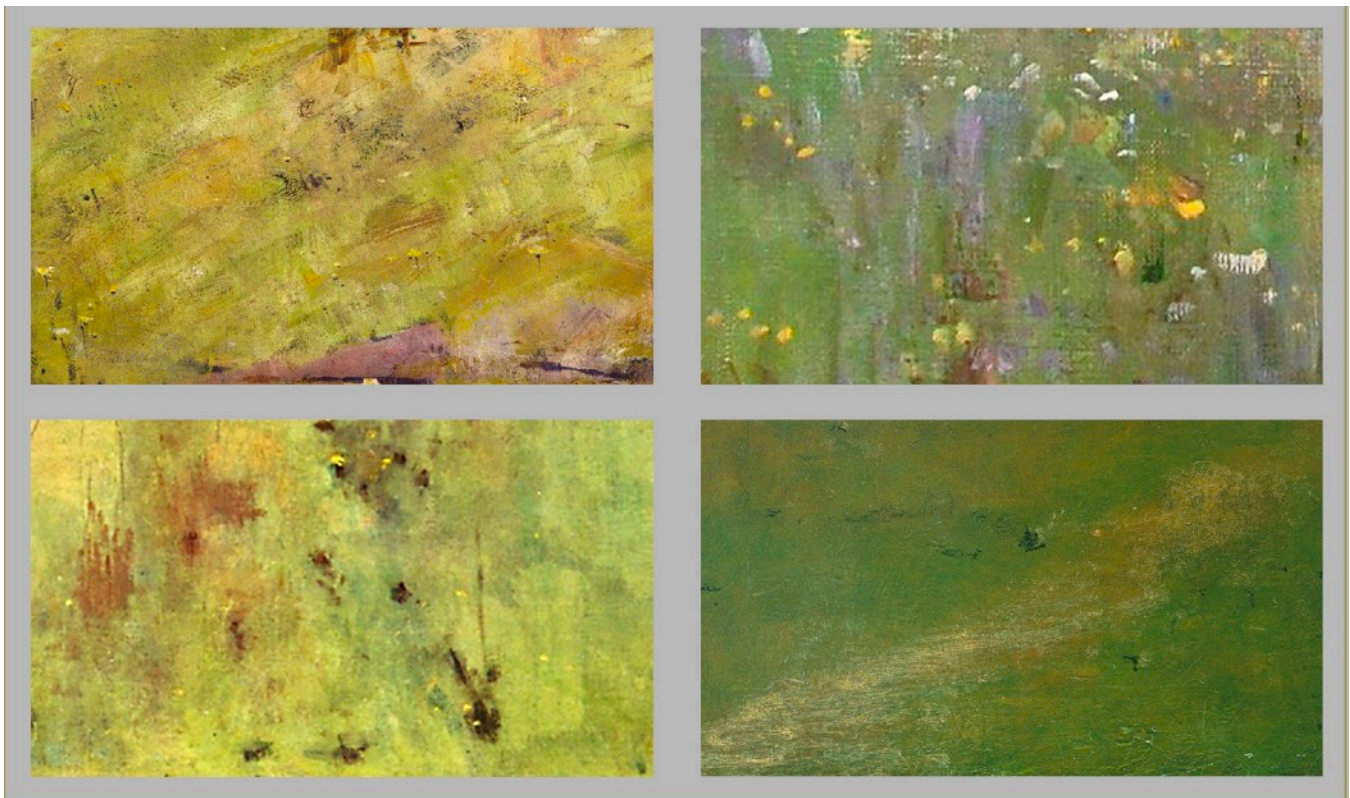
Nature always gives us more than we can or should use. Identify what's needed in the foreground to attract and release the eye and then be willing to sacrifice all the rest.

Suggest, don't describe.

It isn't just the quantity of details in a painting that is important to consider. Equally important is how the details are rendered. Tightly rendered, descriptive details will always attract the eye more than loosely painted, suggestive details. When adding details, consider keeping the suggestive, details in the foreground and the tighter, more descriptive details in the focal area. Above all, don't flood the foreground with highly descriptive details. They will trap the eye.

Use color contrast rather than value or edge contrasts.

Color contrasts rarely grab the eye with the same intensity as value or edge contrasts. In the details of paintings below, the painters breathed life into their foregrounds by making color changes rather than value changes, keeping them interesting but subdued.

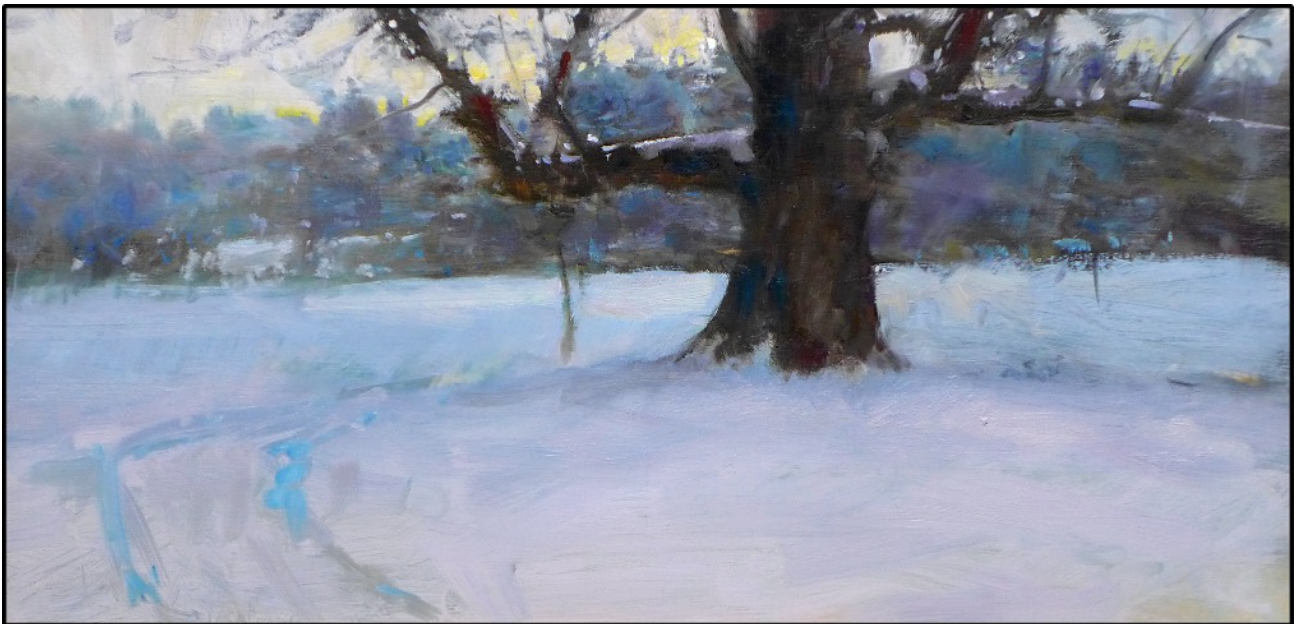


Clockwise from top left: Arthur Streeton, Denis Gorodnichy, George Inness, Dennis Miller Bunker.

Lastly, two recent snowscapes of mine. Even a foreground of little else but snow requires some interesting variety, whether in detail, value, edge or color contrasts.



Evening Flurries, 12" x 16"



Williams Tree, 12" x 24"

Words of Wisdom

Creativity—like human life itself—begins in darkness. We need to acknowledge this. All too often, we think only in terms of light: "And then the lightbulb went on and I got it!"

It is true that insights may come to us as flashes. It is true that some of these flashes may be blinding. It is, however, also true that such bright ideas are preceded by a gestation period that is interior, murky, and completely necessary.

— Julia Cameron

The essence of all beautiful art, all great art, is gratitude.

— Nietzsche

*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



May 23–29 Hudson River Valley Art Workshops; Greenville, NY

www.artworkshops.com ~ **Workshop FULL, waiting list only**

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

~ **Workshop FULL, waiting list only**

This three-day workshop will focus on painting in the studio while using photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies as reference. Open to painters of all levels of experience.



September 3–6 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.



October 6–12 Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art; North Adams, MassMOCA

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 with private room and shared kitchen and bath. Please submit samples directly to me.