

# John MacDonald

March–April, 2022



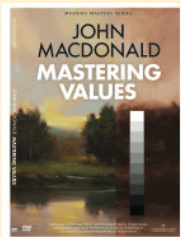
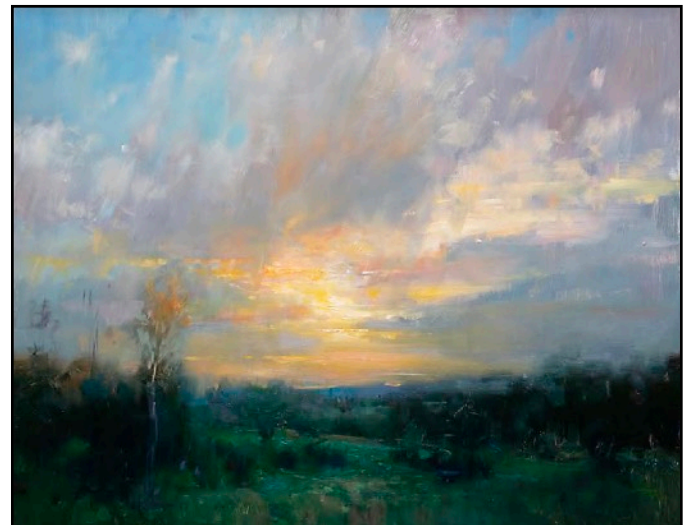
## Sunrise . . . Sunset

Sooner or later, every landscape painter wants to capture a sunrise or sunset. The drama, the beauty, and the quiet mood that often permeates this fleeting transition of time can prove irresistible. Sunrises and sunsets are one of the most exciting subject matters to paint. They're also one of the most challenging.

The rapidity with which a sun rises or sets, with its changing light and shadows, value relationships, and shifting color palette, makes painting a sunset plein air nearly impossible. At best, we're limited to frantically sketching in the major shapes, values, and colors, then relying on memory, notes, or photos to develop the painting. In most cases, it's simply easier to work in the studio from photographs. But painting a sunset or sunrise in the studio presents its own problems. The weaknesses in a camera's ability to capture the dynamic value range and subtle value and color relationships creates as much of a handicap as the severe time limitations of painting plein air.

The best approach is to do it all: paint plein air sketches, take photographs, study sunrises and sunsets when they occur, and diligently study the paintings of artists who've successfully captured the illusion. Let's look closely at how to paint sunrises and sunsets that work.

(In this newsletter, for the sake of simplicity and to avoid repetition, I'll use the term "sunsets" to refer to both sunsets *and* sunrises.)



### *New Streamline Video Available*

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!*



# General Considerations . . .

## Suggestions for taking photos.

Cameras can't accurately capture the dramatic value contrasts nor the subtleties of color relationships found in sunsets. And no single photograph will ever capture enough information to allow it to be simply copied. (And what's the point of copying a photo?) You'll want to refer to several photos when building your painting. To give yourself as much information as possible, shoot at least three exposures: one for the lights, one for mid-values, and one for the darks.

## Suggestions for painting sunsets.

- Avoid black silhouettes like the plague. That's how the camera sees, not the human eye. Nothing screams "amateur" more than flat, black shapes in a foreground backlit by a brilliant sky. Lighten the foreground values enough to allow the darkest darks to reveal some color.
- Colors in sunsets can be eye-popping brilliant. But if every color in a painting screams, no color will stand out. Limit the most saturated colors to the focal area. If you find yourself using paint straight from the tube, consider making all the other colors slightly more muted instead.
- If you wish to emphasize the brilliance of the light source (invariably the lightest light in value), it may be better to push all other values towards the dark end of the value scale. The darker the painting overall, the greater the illusion of that intense light at the light source.
- Watch the focal point! It's so easy to be seduced by the multitude of interesting areas in the scene that we want of emphasize them all. Multiple and equal focal points kill a painting.

## The Differences between Sunrise and Sunset.

Is there visual difference between a sunrise and a sunset? Not really. Sunsets can have a warmer palette as a result of the dust and moisture stirred into the atmosphere during the day by the winds created through solar heating. But the dawn sky can also be very warm depending on clouds and weather conditions. The greatest difference isn't visual but *emotional*: we tend to regard dawns as having a light, positive mood—a full day lies before us with all its promise and potential. Sunsets, on the other hand, often are tinged with melancholy—it's the dying of the day. If you wish to capture a mood, then adjust the value structure and palette of the painting to reflect that intent. A dark, muted sky and ground would be more appropriate for a quiet sunset than a sparkling dawn.

## Point of View and Weather

When painting sunsets, there are choices and conditions that determine the options we have and the challenges we'll face. Our choice is to paint facing towards the light source (*contra jour*) or to paint with our backs to it. The condition is whether the sky is clear or cloudy. These two choices and two conditions give us a minimum of four ways of painting sunsets. Let's first look at an example of each of the four possible combinations.

**Refer to these newsletters for more information:**

**March-April 2018** (point of view), **January-February 2022** (atmosphere), **May-June 2021** (luminosity through value), and **July-August 2021** (luminosity through color)

# The Points of View and The Sky

## Looking Into the Light - Clear Skies



Walter Launt Palmer, *Sundown*

Using the phrase, “looking into the light” is more helpful than “looking into the sun” because often the sun isn’t visible during a sunset—it may be hidden behind clouds or below the horizon. When painting a sunset, it’s not necessary to portray the sun’s disk. What must be captured is the illusion of the glowing luminosity at the light source.

## Looking Into to the Light - Cloudy Skies



J. Francis Murphy, *Indian Summer* 1895

## Looking Away from the Light - Clear Skies



Isaak Levitan, *Summer Evening*

Each of these four possible combinations has unique challenges and therefore will demand slightly different structures in your painting. It’s important to understand the differences and keep them in mind while painting.

Let’s look at each of these four options individually and see what they require in order for the painting to succeed.

## Looking Away from the Light - Cloudy Skies



George Inness, *Clearing Up* (detail)

## Looking Towards the Light Source ~ Clear Skies

A clear sky at sunset will contain a variety of hues, gradients, and subtle shifts in value and color. But because the values are close and the colors aren't tied to the forms of clouds, there is little to attract the eye other than the light source itself and a small sun in a clear, simple sky can rarely be the sole focal point. In this type of painting, it's nearly always the *area* that encompasses the light sun and darker, more complex, and often silhouetted ground, that provides the necessary interest to establish a focal point. Foreground objects often frame the setting sun.

### Successful paintings of this type share these qualities:

- The sky is simple with very close values but with contrasts of warm and cool colors. The color contrasts provide luminosity and depth to the sky. There are always gradients in color temperature and value, centered on the light source and radiating in all directions from it.
- A complex silhouette, with a variety of hard and soft edges, of dark trees or hills against a simple sky. The value, edge, and shape contrasts at the horizon create the focal area.
- The sun is usually near the horizon. Putting the sun too high in the sky (too high on the canvas) will split the focal point, confuse the eye, and weaken the painting.
- Values, hues, and edges bleed out from the light source, creating a multi-layered gradient.
- The horizon is complex with a relatively simple sky and foreground.



Curt Hanson, *Setting Winter*



Dwight William Tryon, *Evening September*



Childe Hassam, *Boston Evening at Twilight*.

## Looking Towards the Light Source ~ Cloudy Skies

No sunset is more dramatic than a cloud-filled, fiery sky lit by a blazing sun which sits on the horizon and picks out points of sparkling light on the ground. All three areas—sky, horizon, and ground—often contain contrasts in value, color, edges, and details which pull the eye equally. Each wants to be the focal point. Because we can't have three (or even two) equal focal points in a painting, we must choose an area to emphasize. Our choice will determine the horizon line. If you wish the sky to be the area of greatest interest, drop the horizon line below the middle of the canvas. If you want the focal point to be a light area on the ground, raise the horizon towards the top of the canvas. If the focal point is the horizon itself—where a dramatic sky meets a dark ground, keep the horizon line slightly above or below the mid-point of the canvas.

### Successful paintings of this type share these qualities:

- **An unambiguous focal point.** In a visually busy painting full of contrasts, there is a hierarchy of focal points with one area clearly standing out. The eye is led to it by minor focal points.
  - Regardless of how dramatic the upper sky or foreground, the strongest color, value, and edge contrasts usually lie near the horizon, where the light sky meets the dark silhouettes of the ground. This keeps the eye away from the edges of the canvas.
  - The greater the variety and detail in the sky, especially near the horizon, the more often the land forms at the horizon will be little more than flat, silhouetted shapes. (But never pure black.) The graphic simplicity of the land contrasts with and highlights the complexity of the sky.



Frederich Edwin Church, *Twilight in the Wilderness*

Compare Davis's painting (below) with Church's (above). Davis's sky is simpler, with muted color and close values. The area of greatest interest, rather than being solely in the sky, includes the silhouetted shapes of the trees. This is a much quieter painting. Notice that the foregrounds in both are similar: dark values, a limited variety of color, and only spotted areas of detail.



Charles Harold Davis,  
*A Quiet Corner*

In the painting (below) George Inness strikes a balance between the two. He creates an equally quiet ground but a sky that is more dramatic than the Davis painting but quieter than Church's.



George Inness  
*Impression, Sunrise*

## Looking Away from the Light Source ~ Clear Skies

When looking into a light source, it is the broad range of **values** that provide the primary contrasts in the painting. When looking away from the light, regardless of whether a sky is cloudy or clear, values tend to become compressed towards the middle of the value scale and **color** contrasts dominate. In fact, there must be color contrast. A painting needs value or color contrast (or both) to succeed. Whenever value contrasts are lacking, the color contrasts must keep the painting alive and interesting. Fortunately, the dramatic colors of a setting sun on the ground and sky provide plenty of beautiful contrasts of warm and cool hues. Look for them.

### Successful paintings of this type share these qualities:

- A sky with subtle variations in hue, value, and/or saturation. It's never a single, flat color.
- The sky is simple with all complexity—contrasts in values, edges, and details—in the ground.

The focal point is often the mid-ground or horizon with a limited amount of sky in the canvas.

In Curt's painting (right) the gradient in the sky is primarily in hue: the sky becomes subtly warmer from right to left. There's little change in values or saturation but many notes of warm and cool hues. It's quiet but alive.

Likewise in Sanford's painting (below), the sky also is little more than a gradient in hue. Both painters contrast the warm sunlight against the cooler sky and ground, keeping most of the detail in the middle ground.

Curt Hanson, (*unknown title*)



Sanford Robinson Gifford  
*No Man's Land*





Walter Launt Palmer, *Autumn Moonrise*

Here, Palmer adds the moon to create a focal point in the sky with a secondary focal point in the light on the treetops. (Or perhaps it's vice versa?) The subtle road and the hint of light on the water also provide points of interest. The painting is a beautifully arranged hierarchy of soft focal points. Notice how color contrasts run throughout the entire painting, adding luminosity— a result of close values. The lightest value is the moon and the only darks are the spotted patterns among the trees and the adjacent structure. Squint at this image and you'll see that the brilliant spot of red in the tree leaps out, not because of its contrast in value but because of its contrast in hue and saturation. This is a painting with a few simple values but a variety of complex colors.

## Looking Away from the Light Source ~ CLOUDY SKIES

Within the genre of sunsets, this is often the most challenging point of view to paint. The light shines equally on everything: sky, horizon, and ground. The values can vary wildly, with as much contrast in the sky as in the landscape beneath it. Each area in the scene—and our painting—can be overwhelmed by the complexity and confusion of broken values and fussy details. Paraphrasing Thoreau: *Our painting is frittered away by detail. Simplify, simplify, simplify!*

### Successful paintings of this type share these qualities:

- **An unambiguous focal point.** If the sky and ground are equally inspiring, attractive, and dramatic, we must choose one over the other. Calling attention equally to both will destroy the painting. Which is most important, the sky or the ground? When you decided, use contrasts of value, color edges, etc., to create complexity in the chosen area and simplify all others.

Below is an early work of George Inness, painted when he was still in his “the more details the better” stage. My eye eventually settles on the figure with its note of red (a common trick in the 19th century) but only after being pulled and tugged by the multitude of details and value contrasts scattered throughout the painting. I cringe to criticize such a master from whom I’ve learned so much, so I’ll just say that this is a nice painting—but not his best work.



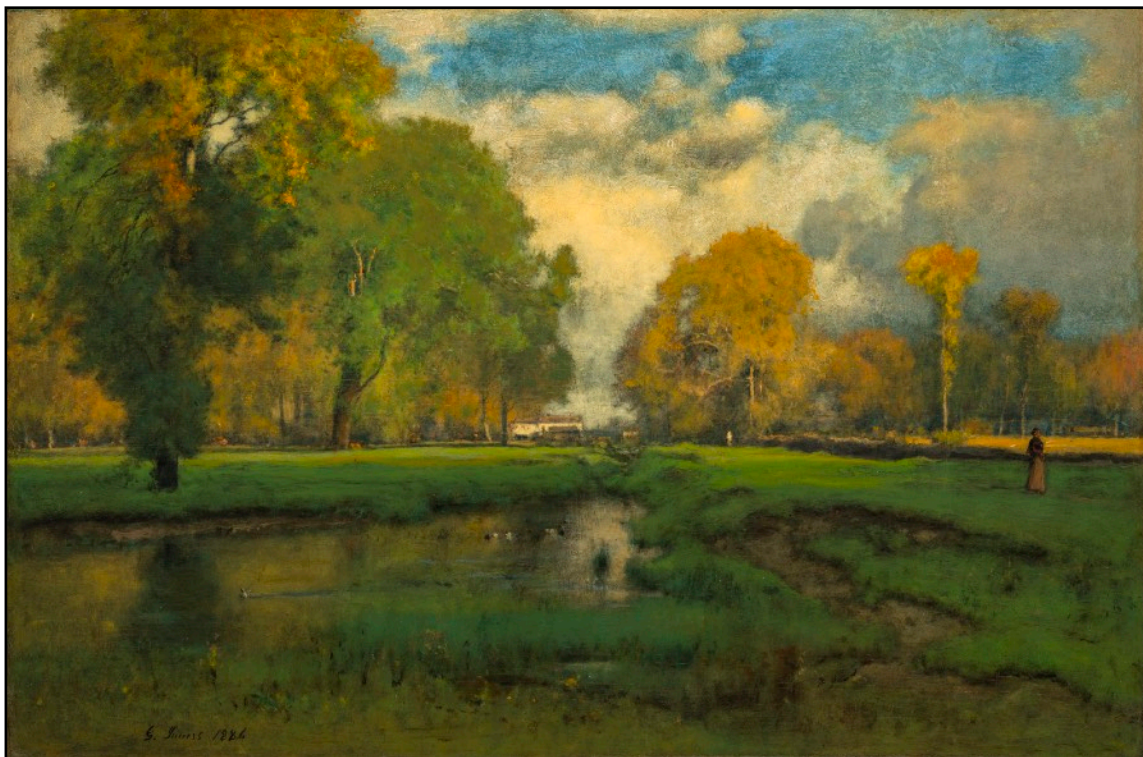
George Inness, *Clearing Up*

Below are two later Inness paintings. Wow. In these later paintings there is a clarity of intent and a crystalline distillation of focus that is nothing short of astonishing. In *Georgia Pines, Afternoon*, the focal point lies where the light cloud meets the dark trees with the slash of light on the horizon. There's a balance and variety of simple and complex areas. The upper sky is kept quiet while the entire bottom third of the painting is radically simplified—it's little more than two values, one color, and a few muted details. The balance between light versus dark, simple versus complex, and abstraction versus description, is perfect.

In his painting *October*, (below) the color is more vibrant but without the warm color key of what we typically think of as sunset colors. Still, the value structure, with the foreground in shadow and primary value contrasts at the horizon, provides the illusion of a sunset. There is a range of both simple and complex areas in the painting. It's all beautifully orchestrated.



George Inness, *Georgia Pines, Afternoon* c1890



George Inness, *October* 1886

## The Sun Below the Horizon

A dusk landscape can be so simple—a dark foreground against a lighter sky. But to create a good painting, this simplicity puts a premium on the ability to design and compose shapes.

### Successful paintings of this type share these qualities:

- The focal point/area is always near horizon.
- The sky contains vibrant notes of color with strong color (and sometimes value) contrasts.
- The ground has little value contrast (perhaps hints of secondary values and details with soft edges), with the greatest value contrasts at the horizon, where lies the focal point.
- The sky is often in a warm key with the ground in a (relatively) cooler key.
- The silhouetted shapes of the ground against the sky are interesting and well designed.



Sanford Robinson Gifford, *A Venetian Twilight*

Notice how the edge contrasts work in these paintings. Gifford placed the lightest band of light above the actual horizon, veiling the horizon in a misty band of atmosphere, or perhaps it's the [Belt of Venus](#). Only the tops of the sails provide sharp edges that contrast with the soft sky. Inness placed his sharpest edge contrasts where the lightest light lies adjacent to the dark line of the horizon. It isn't important if the sharpest edge is above or at the horizon. It's only important that the sharpest edges are at the focal point.



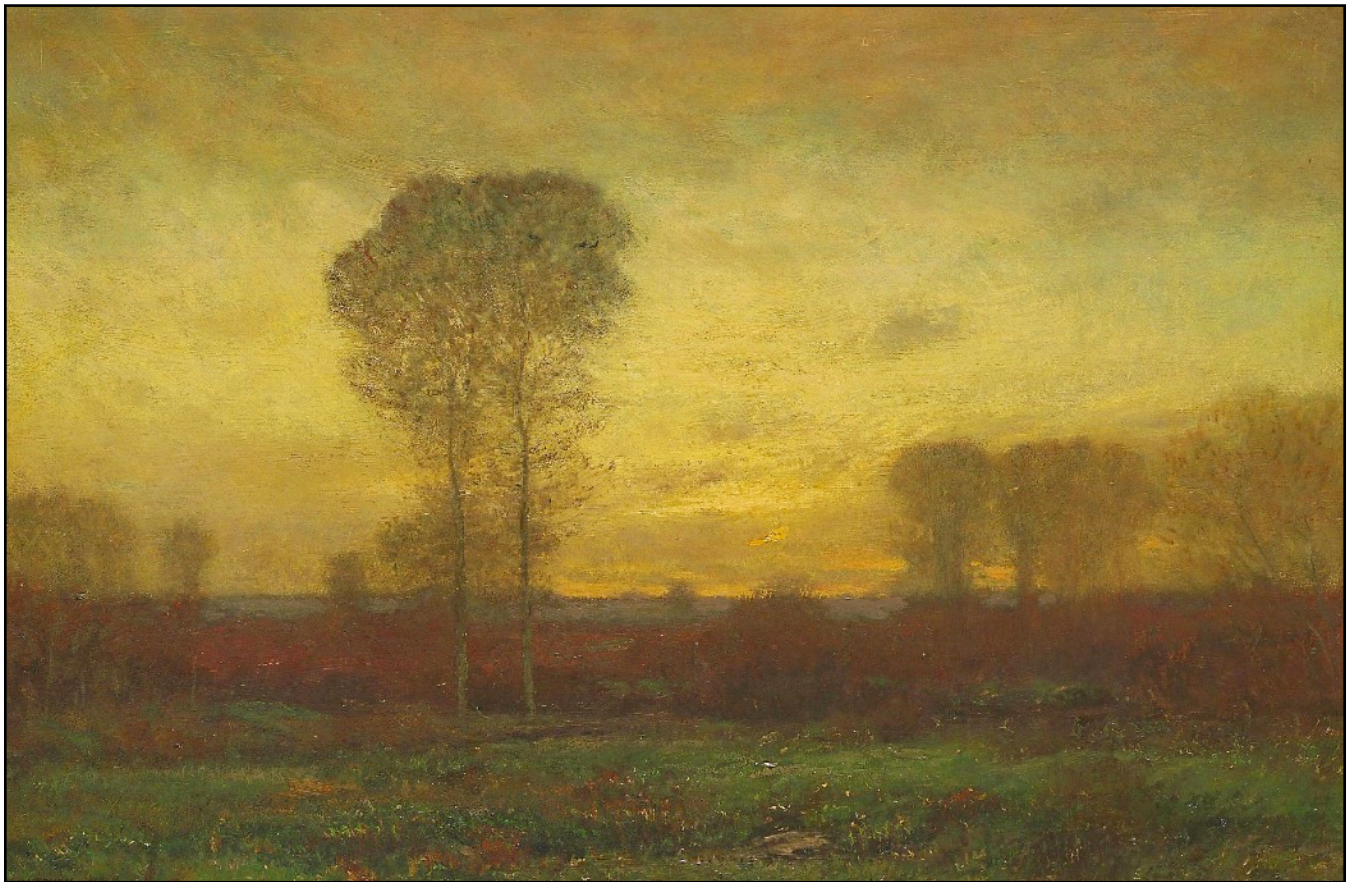
George Inness, *Sunset Glow*

Most painters are attracted to sunsets for their drama. The power in the two paintings above comes from the combination and contrast of the dark, flat, and beautifully designed shapes of the silhouettes of the ground against the brilliantly luminous warm hues of the sky. The simplicity and solidity of the subject matter (mostly horizontal and vertical lines) conveys a mood of silence and tranquility while the background colors are ablaze. But the sky in a dusk scene need not be always dramatic and of warm hues. In these two examples, the quiet of the subject matter is reinforced by the handling of the sky. Soft, subtle, and subdued, the skies appear as a backdrop against the ground, with noticeably less vibrancy than in the paintings above.

In dusk scenes, a clear contrast in value between sky and ground is vital. How much you choose to push the color contrast, which will add drama, depends on your intention.



J. Francis Murphy, *Autumn Fields*

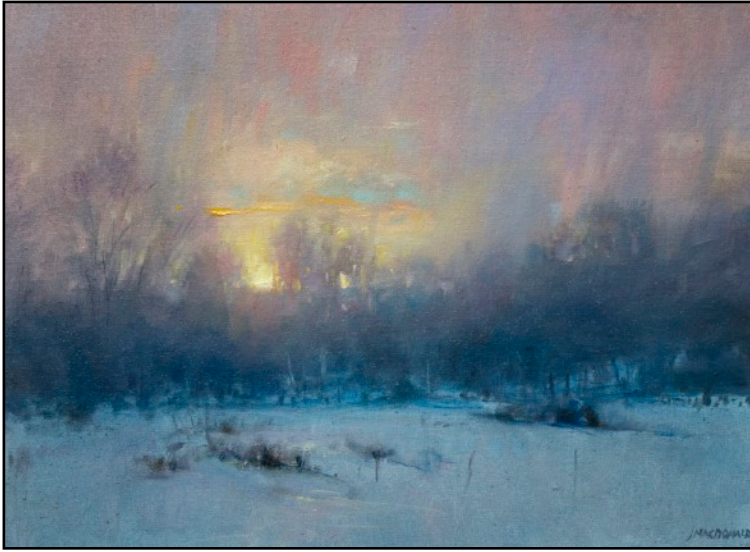


Dwight Tryon, *Twilight Autumn*

## *Lastly, some of my recent sunsets . . .*

Over the last several months, I've been feeling the urge to paint sunsets, which explains why I chose it for the topic of this newsletter. I've been exploring different value keys; warm, cool, and neutral color palettes; and various techniques for convincingly rendering the illusion of light and atmosphere. I never imagined there were so many ways to paint sunrises and sunsets, each with a different mood. Thankfully, the learning never ends! Below are a few examples.





## Words of Wisdom

“To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work.”

– Mary Oliver (1935-2019)

*(THE key to painting: we can't paint something we don't understand; we won't understand something if we don't know to look for it; and we won't be able to look for it unless we know how to see with a rapt attention. Technique is easy to learn but we'll spend a lifetime learning how to see with complete attention.)*

*Coming up in  
the next Newsletter:*

In the next newsletter, the topic will be reflections in water. Until then,

–*Happy Painting!*



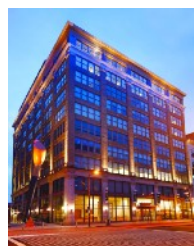
*As of now, all of the below workshops are scheduled to be conducted in person at the venue, depending on the state of the pandemic. Please see my website for updates.*

## 2022 Workshops



**May 4–10 Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art;  
North Adams, Mass. [MASSMoCA](https://www.massmo.org)**

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



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

We will be painting in the studio using photographs, sketches, and/or plein air studies. We will explore the limitations of the camera and ways to compensate for them. ***This workshop is sold out. Waiting list only.***



**October 14–16 Falmouth Art Center [www.falmouthart.org](https://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. Open to painters of all levels of experience. ***Several spots remain in this workshop.***

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.