



Members Workshop with Carol Spurgeon, June 27-28, 2015

The main element named, examined and worked with Instructor Carol Spurgeon was the NOTAN (pronounced no – tan). It is a passage in your painting and translated from Japanese to mean “light and dark harmony.” When a composition is in its most basic form, it is in the “Notan.”

This is not a chiaroscuro (the Renaissance Italian word “chiaro” meaning clear, light and “oscuro” meaning obscure, dark) which is more about values. Notan is the skeleton, the underlying structure of a painting. It is the balance between the light and dark patterns—to make a stronger composition through an effective design, no matter what the subject is.

When looking at your Notan—your black and white “sketch,” this is the time to change your shapes, values, etc. The process with the Notan would look like this:

1. Identify the dark and light and find the balance between them.  
Your next decision will be whether the mid-values group will go with the dark or with the light.
2. Isolate a few main shapes.
3. Squint to reduce detail.
4. Think big shapes, combining small ones.
5. Limit the number of shapes used in the Notan to 3-5, no more than 7.

There is a computer program for an iPad that might help with different light/dark patterns called “Value-viewer” for \$7.

Carol used sponge brushes for washes—great for skies. For her darks, when she started painting, she used the Tsunami, a big brush from Cheap Joe’s and mixed either violet with burnt sienna for a dark-dark or thalo blue with burnt sienna. She let this first layer dry.

For the second layer, when she went back into her Notan first layer, Carol advised to stay away from water. This time, instead of the biggest brush, she used a one-inch (stiff) flat brush. She did some lifting within the Notan and suggested to do this if your dark mass (such as a forest) is too much. She used cobalt blue and alizarin crimson and a drop or less of yellow to get a purple blue for the shadows and kept painting.

Carol started Sunday morning with us writing down on a small slip of paper what our biggest painting problem was right now. She gathered all the responses and read them reflectively aloud one by one, making comments, asking the group for their comments for a solution and gave us food for thought.

She then talked about the under layer to down tone with sepia if working towards a warmer undertone or using Payne’s gray for a cool under layer. She warned about not painting with both. Several items she finished with were how passages were important in the whole of our paintings. She pointed out the importance as well of texture, remembering to “tuck behind.” Carol also explained to not paint many little brush strokes to represent grasses. We need to remember also to use a dry brush technique where the brush needs to touch our paper towel before touching our painting.

At the end, we need to pull the whole painting together (no afterthought) and recommended we use the Notan in all our landscapes.

Carol’s demo of an iris included her starting with a Notan. First she did her placement of the flower, then an overlap for chances to get shadows. Then came the decision of a focal point or center of interest. Carol suggested to start with a bigger sheet of paper and noted it can always become smaller later.

Next Carol thought of direction. She picked her brush up and held it in the Chinese way, resting in the palm of her hand, between the middle finger and ring finger. As she held her brush, she felt where she needed to place

her brush and felt when she needed to paint in another area. This is the same with shapes. She made those decisions as she painted. The class then had the opportunity to try this technique.

In the afternoon, the class practiced Chinese brush strokes by painting bamboo, then leaves on bamboo. Carol asked us these questions as we painted, “Can we place the bamboo and leaves harmoniously on the paper? How do we feel about it? How do the results feel?” We then practiced with similar brush strokes for butterflies and roosters from black and white samples Carol gave us. Her brush recommendation included Pro Arte Proline synthetic brushes used by Jessica Zemsky, famous Big Timber children’s portrait artist who uses gouache. This entire workshop weekend with Carol was an amazing experience and provided inspiration!

Carol’s personality and her way of being cannot be experienced any other way than actually being in the workshop. On Sunday morning, she opened up with “I love being here, this is my tribe.” Reconnecting with friends, now “old friends” after many years with MTWS and making new friends, is always a sweet experience. By exchanging tips about different ways of doing things, a different product tried, a different technique provided, a new adventure recounted—as when Carol Barbian went on her trip to Italy—the sharing and laughs at the Members banquet, these are the weavings that go into the shared web of what connects us all. The MTWS members workshops and shows are those marvelous yearly weekends in the year that give us all the opportunity to reconnect with each other, inspire and send us on another year of discoveries and creativity.”

*Respectfully submitted, Jacqueline Mercenier*

