

PLEIN TALK

USING NOTANS FOR BETTER PAINTINGS

by
Lynn Mehta

This June, MAPAPA Board Member Lynn Mehta began teaching a series of online Zoom courses at Chesapeake Fine Art Studios (CFAS) in which she focuses on the use of the notan. Below are highlights from her lessons discussed in the Zoom lectures/demos associated with her classes and how notan can be useful for a plein air artist.

(Below is a page from a Lynn Mehta Notan sketchbook)



Notan is basically a Japanese dark/light concept of design. It is the pattern of two values which make up a pleasing, harmonious, and balanced

arrangement. Lighter values are grouped into a single value into a light pattern - darker values are grouped into a single value into a
(continued on next page)

PLEIN TALK cont.

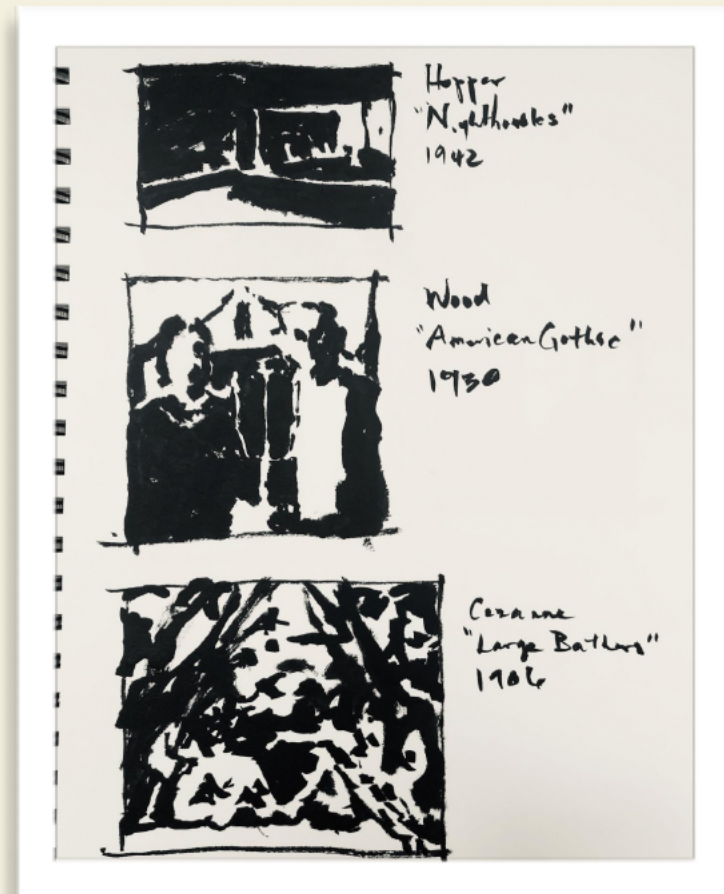
dark pattern. Think of the yin-yang. By squinting our eyes, we can see values better. From there we can separate out values and determine whether they belong in the lights or darks in the pattern. A notan is not a line drawing. The notan applies to any visual 2-d art. However, applied to landscape painting, the notan is a wonderful tool.

So, how did notans end up in plein air painting?

Basically, Arthur Wesley Dow is credited for bringing the notan concept of design into art schools in the US in the early 20th century. His book, "Composition, Understanding Line, Notan and Color" was helpful in spreading the idea into art schools. Dow's contemporaries and his students (such as Georgia O'Keefe) incorporated his ideas and the notan design concept into their understanding and practice of art. Some artists took the concept of notans to the abstract. Today, many landscape or plein air artists, myself included, find the use of notans very helpful in breaking down and understanding a scene.

Why bother with notans?

We want to create paintings that are well-designed. To achieve a successful painting that isn't just copying what we are looking at, we need to put our design first. We are creating a visual reality defined by the four edges of our canvas. We should be in control of that visual reality. Dow believed that design is a



Notans of the Master's paintings
courtesy Lynn Mehta

preparation for the drawing, not vice versa. By reducing a painting to its most abstract form of darks and lights without the distraction of brushwork or texture, or even color, we can analyze and ascertain the strength of the design. When you walk into a museum or gallery, a successful painting reads from across the room. Your painting should have a good design.

How do you use notans when painting plein air?

I recommend that when you are in the field, to take a few minutes to do fast and quick notans before you begin a painting. You can use a Sharpie or even your brush.

(continued on page 12)

PLEIN TALK

(continued from p. 7)

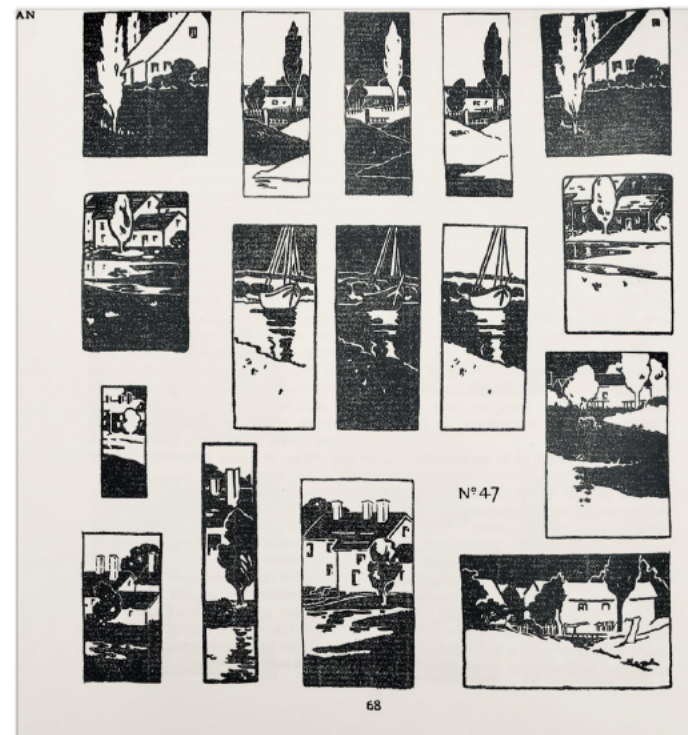
Don't use a thin pen or sharp pencil. Don't spend too much time on each of them. Create notans to simplify a scene down to its most important elements. This is particularly helpful when the scene is a jumble of information. Mass together disconnected dark and light elements. Use your notans to make sure there is an interesting dark/light balance. Division of thirds is considered a harmonious balance. Identify interesting shapes. Ultimately, remember that the light is changing and you are on its deadline. So, be sure to set up your easel and everything else before you do your notans. After establishing a notan, I begin painting and focus on color notes. If you have done a notan you can refer back to it later, or if you get lost in your painting, in order to recall your original concepts and inspiration.

Other thoughts about notans:

Remember to draw out the rectangle for your notan before you create it. Your design is defined by the four edges and elements shouldn't be freely floating on the sea of notebook paper. A notan should have the same proportion as your canvas. Use a Sharpie, a brush pen, a thick marker, or a thick sketching pencil that is closer to the gesture of a paint brush and allows you to make larger dark shapes. Build up a notan sketch book. It could be separate from the one in which you do notans in preparation for a painting. Do

scores and scores of notans from life. Get in the habit. Look at the world around you. Create compositions of the scene in front of you. Do one, then move on. If you do this, you build your capability for creating compositions.

Sketch notans of the Master's paintings. The Masters knew what they were doing. There is a reason to go back and look at them again and again. Choose ones that you love. You can download paintings in museums which are in the public domain. Or, you can open up your art books and do them from there. **(continued on next page)**



A page of notans from Arthur Wesley Dow book *Composition: Understanding Line, Notan and Color*. Dover Publications reprint 2007. Originally published 1907.

PLEIN TALK

(from the previous page)

With practice and time you can see a good Notan in your mind. Even without a wealth of formal composition and design training, if we sort through many notan designs we can intuitively spot which ones are more interesting than others. Pay attention to the notans that fascinate you.

Resources for Notans:

Dow, Arthur Wesley. Composition: Understanding Line, Notan and Color. Dover Publications, Inc., reprint 2007, copyright 192

**Downloadable Apps in AppStore and GooglePlay:**

Notanizer \$1.99

GridPainter \$2.99

To register for Lynn Mehta's "Notan to Studio" upcoming Zoom classes go to chesapeakefineartstudio.com under Weekly Online Classes.

Plein Talk is a recurring column for "The Palette," MAPAPA's newsletter. Look forward to hearing from those in the field who have much to share. If you have topics for future columns email them to newsletter@mapapa.org.



Above: *On Stands* by Lynn Mehta
Left: Notan for *On Stands*