

# Jason A. Saunders: Capturing the Subtleties of Light and Shadow in the Landscape

During a three-day workshop last October, Jason A. Saunders taught Tennessee artists how to recreate the subtleties of light and shadow found in the landscape by using a limited palette, constantly considering the conditions under which they were painting, and working to achieve accurate value relationships.

—  
by **Allison Malafronte**

Saunders conducted a late-day demonstration for the students participating in his plein air workshop last fall.



**ABOVE AND BELOW**  
Two views of the Preston Farm, in Leiper's Fork, Tennessee, where participants painted on the first day of the workshop.

## Jason A. Saunders is a no-nonsense, no-frills kind of painter.

Spend any amount of time with the Nashville-area artist and it quickly becomes clear that he paints for the pure love of it and refuses to become distracted by anything that might take his focus off what matters. Mention a recent article written about him, for instance, and he says, "I never saw it." Press him for the specific brands and types of art materials he uses and he bluntly answers, "It doesn't matter. Give me a stick and some mud and I'll find a way to make it work—just let me paint." But put Saunders in front of a workshop of landscape painters questioning how to achieve accurate value relationships and understand their outdoor environment, and suddenly this 34-year-old artist becomes the man with the answers.

Despite his young age, Saunders is already a highly regarded and sought-after instructor, having studied with such renowned representational painters as Dawn Whitelaw, Everett Raymond Kinstler, Matt Smith, and Scott Christensen. With the maturity of an artist well beyond his years, he has taken the best of his mentors' instruction and adapted it into an approach all his own: Like Dawn Whitelaw and other members of the Cumberland Society of Painters,

of which he is a member, Saunders is adamant about using a limited palette to obtain the highest degree of harmony and balance in his work; his ability to achieve the subtlest shifts in temperature by fully understanding his light source is something Matt Smith has instilled in him; and the true-to-nature

colors he portrays in his paintings result from intensive study with Scott Christensen, an artist known for his pure landscapes filled with naturalistic light and atmosphere.

A colorful fall weekend this past October provided the perfect outdoor studio for Saunders to expound on these topics. And, thanks to Saunders sharing his privileged acquaintances, the class had the opportunity to learn these lessons on some of the most spectacular private farmlands and properties in Tennessee. The workshop commenced at Leiper's Creek Gallery, in historic Leiper's Fork, with Saunders giving students a brief overview of what they should expect in the days of plein air painting ahead. "Ninety percent of problems in landscape painting are value-related," the instructor said, cutting right to the chase. "And, although I will be conducting demonstrations, the main way I will teach you how to overcome these problems is on your canvas. We are all visual people, and I think it is often better to show you a technique rather than just talk about it."

Once on-site on a sunny private farm that morning, Saunders continued easing the artists into the workshop experience by giving a short lecture on setup before begin-



## Demonstration: Tennessee Hills



### Step 1

Saunders began this late-afternoon demonstration by sketching in his composition using cadmium red light thinned with mineral spirits.



### Step 2

The artist next worked on the areas he knew were going to change under the quickly moving light—including the darkest shadows as well as some of the distant trees—using French ultramarine mixed with cadmium red light.



### Step 3

Once he had established his dark values, Saunders moved into his middle values, concentrating on just painting the essence of the scene and not laboring over details.



### Step 4

Saunders next looked out over the hills to find his lightest values and quickly painted those sunlit areas in the foliage and foreground.



### Step 5

The artist completed the demonstration by turning his painting upside down and painting the sky using cadmium yellow light and cadmium red light. By leaving the sky until last and turning it upside down, Saunders was able to objectively judge its color against the other values that were already established in the painting.



#### ABOVE

The painting and the view it depicted.

#### THE COMPLETED PAINTING, RIGHT:

**Tennessee Hills**  
2006, oil, 14 x 18.  
All artwork this article private collection.





ning a demonstration. He stressed the importance of choosing equipment that allows for quick, easy assembly and that is durable enough for long wear. After lauding Open Box M as “the most superior easel on the market,” Saunders took out three books on landscape painting that he said had been instrumental in helping him advance as a plein air painter: John F. Carlson’s *Carlson’s Guide to Landscape Painting*, which he called “the Bible of landscape painting”; Edgar Payne’s *Composition of Outdoor Painting*; and Scott Christensen’s *The Nature of Light*. Saunders carried these books with him throughout the workshop, showing students various paintings when he needed to give visual answers to their value-related questions.

Knowing that most artists struggle with not only seeing and mixing values accurately but also with understanding how environmental conditions—including time of year and the direction and temperature of the light—affect how one sees and paints those values, Saunders conducted two

demonstrations at different times of day: one during the late morning of a crisp day with strong overhead light and the other on a warmer day at 4 p.m., when the quickly moving light was casting dramatic shadows. Saunders’ aim in these demonstrations was to show students that, when you begin to understand your light source, consider the conditions under which you’re painting, and work on achieving accurate value relationships, you can more convincingly record the subtle nuances of light and shadow found in nature.

**Demonstration No. 1: Subtleties of Light**

Saunders began the first demonstration by setting up his easel adjacent to a sprawling field and choosing a distant red barn as his subject. “Never let the sun hit your canvas or your palette while you’re painting,” the artist advised as he turned his easel away from the sun, which forced him to paint over his shoulder. “The reflection will bounce into your eyes and you’ll end up painting values darker than



**ABOVE**  
Douglas Jones used a viewfinder to help zero in on an interesting composition within the landscape.

**LEFT**  
As Saunders conducted a demonstration, two students looked on.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
Saunders chose to paint this hillside scene to demonstrate how to capture dramatic light and shadow.

## Individual Instruction

The two demonstrations Saunders conducted during the three-day workshop were the only times the artist was at his easel. He spent the rest of the class walking from student to student offering straightforward advice and hands-on instruction.



**Above:** As Saunders made the rounds to the students spread among the sunlit hills of the private farm, he noticed that the value of almost all of their ground planes was off—no one seemed to realize how light it actually was. Here, he mixed a lighter green and added it to the foreground of this artist's painting, which allowed him to reestablish the correct value relationships.



**Above:** After applauding this artist's accurate reading of values, Saunders suggested she find ways to break up some of the forms. "Each subject has a slight variation," he said. "Find out what's different about those trees—look at the difference in the stems and the shape of the leaves, even the way the light is hitting each differently, and paint those in."



**Above:** As Saunders arrived at this student's easel, she was questioning how to accurately paint sunlit foliage. "You have to mass in your dark values and then create a light side and a shadow side," the instructor advised. "Because you're dealing with a backlit subject, you have to first establish the form and then deal with the light. Remember that too many and too bright lights in your dark masses will break up your form."



**Below:** Walking up to this artist's canvas, Saunders stopped and observed from afar. "You have a great balance among your lights and darks," he said. Coming closer to her painting, he pointed to the background area and suggested simplifying the variations in the trees that were breaking up the forms.

## Student-Critique Session

The workshop concluded with an outdoor critique session of the paintings produced during the three-day class. Here is a selection of student work and Saunders' feedback on each.



**Gary Young (above):** "You did a great job of using your blues to create the feeling of distance in this painting," Saunders said of this artist's work. "As busy as this painting is, it still holds together because the values are reading correctly. I would only suggest moving the point of interest from dead-center to the side slightly to lead the viewer's eye in from the right."



**Lori Putnam (above):** Saunders gave this painting the verbal "painting-of-the-week" award, applauding the artist's handling of colors, composition, and overall mood. "Look how fresh this little vignette is," the artist said holding up the painting. "Look at how the looseness in the lower-right-hand corner is just leading your eye in. And look at the colors: the cools are added in just the right areas to balance the warms, and the scratched-in phone lines are just subtle enough—it's these kinds of things that make a good painting a great painting."



**Andrea Jones (above):** "Great design in this piece," Saunders said of this artist's work. "It's very well balanced. I would lighten your ground plane slightly—your tendency is to paint your values too dark. There's some really good brushwork in this painting as well."



**Douglas Jones (left):** "Nice painting," Saunders commented. "Look at how the fence is helping to hold the composition together. Also, this tree near the fence is doing a great job of balancing the busyness in the left." Now addressing the entire class, Saunders said, "If you have something busy happening on one side, go to the opposite side and put something interesting there, such as a sharp edge or an area of contrast. It will balance the work."



**ABOVE**  
After watching Saunders conduct a demonstration that morning, Mary Catherine Glassford chose as her subject the same distant barn and worked on her interpretation of it.

**RIGHT**  
Gary Nielson used his left hand to steady his brush as he added the finishing touches to his painting.



they are.” Saunders next squeezed out his limited palette of alizarin crimson, cadmium red light, cadmium yellow light, lemon yellow, French ultramarine, phthalo green, and titanium white. “I have a cool and a warm of each primary as well as white, and I set my palette up by temperature,” he told the class, explaining that he keeps his warm colors on the right and his cool colors on the left. When the students asked if this limited palette hinders his process, he replied, “Not at all. Look at Anders Zorn. He did some of the most impressive paintings in history, and he is said to have only worked with three or four colors.”

As Saunders moved into some compositional sketches using a combination of cadmium red light and mineral spirits, he told the class that he was simplifying the scene into just those elements that would work best for his painting. At this point some of the students started asking materials-related questions, including what size brushes Saunders was using and what type and brand of medium. “I use one brush throughout the whole painting until I get to the sky,” Saunders replied. “Either a size four or six bristle. For mediums, I use walnut oil during the colder months and mineral spirits during the spring and summer. As far as what brand, I’m not picky. I’ll get my paint thinner from Home Depot if I have to.”

As Saunders started to mass in his dark values, he quickly directed the conversation back to the heart of the matter. “Nailing your values is the single most important aspect of accurate landscape painting,” he declared. “The tighter your values, the better your painting. Right now I’m working from one pool of color and just bending it either warm or cool. If you keep your values as close as you can and just bend the temperature, you will achieve greater color harmony.” The artist also advised squinting to decipher values, always asking what one value is *compared* to other values, both within the painting and in the surrounding environment. He illustrated this point by comparing the red of the barn that he was painting to a student’s red sweatshirt. “You think that barn out there is a pretty intense red until you compare it to the red of Mary Catherine’s sweatshirt,” the artist said. “Now do you see how the color of the barn is actually quite grayed down?”

Saunders went on to explain that, because of the neutral temperature of the light during early fall, most colors the artists would be painting would have to be grayed down slightly by adding a color’s complement. This observation segued into a discussion of the three primary sources of light in the landscape and how those different types of light

**BELOW**  
Morgan Christine Ogilve shaded her eyes from the sun as she chose the best position for her easel.



## Saunders’ Materials

### EASEL

- Open Box M

### PALETTE

- a midtoned palette (or place a midvalue paper under the glass)
- alizarin crimson
- cadmium red light
- cadmium yellow light
- lemon yellow
- French ultramarine
- phthalo green (use sparingly)
- titanium white

### BRUSHES

- bristle brush in size 4 or 6
- palette knife

### MEDIUMS

- Liquin or other odorless thinner

### Saunders' Work



TOP  
**Southern Fields**  
2006, oil, 48 x 72.

ABOVE  
**Sunset Study**  
2004, oil, 6 x 12.

RIGHT  
**Rolling Hills of Tennessee**  
2005, oil, 40 x 48.



ABOVE LEFT  
**Autumn Hills Study**  
2005, oil, 14 x 18.



ABOVE RIGHT  
**Rainy Day on the Harpeth River**  
2005, oil, 11 x 14.



LEFT  
**Tennessee Farm**  
2002, oil, 14 x 12.



## ABOVE

Saunders worked intently on finishing his demonstration while students observed his technique.



determine the relative value and temperature of surrounding colors. “There is direct light, reflected light, and cool sky light,” Saunders told the students, mentioning that the direct overhead light cast on sunny days will cause the tops of most surfaces to receive the strongest, warmest light—which will reflect onto other surfaces, causing form and cast shadows—while some of the ground planes will be picking up the cool blue of the sky.

The strong, cool, reflected light—or “zenith light,” as Saunders often referred to it—of that morning was saturating the landscape and reflecting color onto almost every surface. As the artist worked quickly to finish his painting, he explained to the students that there are four main planes found in the landscape and that they should consider how the various types of light affect the value of each plane. “Typically, your lightest light will be your sky, your second lightest will be your ground plane or foreground, your mid-

dle values will be your slanted planes, such as your sunlit roofs or mountains, and your darkest darks will usually be your uprights, such as tree trunks,” Saunders told the class, warning them that missing one of the four main value planes would throw off the harmony of the whole painting.

### Demonstration No. 2: Subtleties of Shadow

The second day of the workshop brought the artists to another private property in Leiper’s Fork, this one full of rolling hills, hidden creeks, and brightly colored trees. Saunders waited until 4 p.m.—his favorite time to paint—to conduct the second demonstration and set up on a grassy knoll overlooking a dramatic play of light and shadow. “During this time of day, light is moving very quickly, and you only have a short time to capture it,” the artist said as he squeezed generous amounts of paint onto his palette.

“Make sure you have enough paint to get you through the next 30 minutes, because the last thing you want is to have to go back and squeeze out more.”

As he surveyed the quickly moving light and shadows on the hills in front of him, Saunders explained to the students that he would start by painting the areas that he knew would change. “When you’re in a situation where the sun is going in and out or when you’re dealing with strong shadows, paint those shadows and your other darks first,” the artist suggested. “Then go back and do the areas that remain constant.” He also indicated that he would be painting the “mood” of the subject and not every detail—he wanted to capture the essence of the scene, which he felt was about the shape and structure of the hillsides as well as the distinctiveness of the shadows.

Continuing the previous day’s instruction on the different types of light in the landscape, Saunders touched on how the direction of the light source also affects the types of shadows being cast. He explained that there are form shadows and cast shadows, the former being the shadow that direct light casts on an object, and the latter being the shadow that is cast onto another surface as a result of that overhead-light reflection. Saunders also described how the temperature of a shadow is determined by the temperature of the light source, and that the temperature of a shadow is usually the opposite of the temperature of the light casting it. For instance, on a bright, sunny day, the light is warm and shadows are cool; on an overcast day, the light is cool and shadows are warm.

Saunders became silent as he worked intently on completing his demonstration. If any students had any questions at this time, they weren’t asking them. Instead, several of them walked up to the canvas to watch their instructor work, seemingly transfixed by how expertly and accurately he was capturing the light and shadow pattern of the hillside scene. “This is exactly why I took a workshop with Jason,” artist Andrea Jones later commented. “He has this amazing ability to pick up on the subtleties of light and shadow that many of us don’t even see.”

“Do you see those shadows under the barn?” Saunders had excitedly asked his students during the previous day’s demonstration. “Look at that gradual variation in the temperature, how it’s warm under the shingle and then once it gets under the direct light in the corner, it cools off. That’s the beauty of painting from life: you come out here, mark your territory, and capture those pure observations that are only available in the natural world.” ■

Allison Malafronte is the associate editor of *Workshop*.

## BELOW

Sitting in a chair set up in the back of a pickup truck gave Linda Nielson a better vantage point.



## About the Artist

**Jason A. Saunders**, of Leiper’s Creek, Tennessee, studied art at Lipscomb University, in Nashville, where he was introduced to the teachings of nationally known painter Dawn Whitelaw and accepted to study with acclaimed portraitist Everett Raymond Kinstler. He continued his art education by briefly studying with Arizona artist Matt Smith and embarking on intense study with Wyoming landscape painter Scott Christensen, whose workshop was life-altering for Saunders. “After studying with Scott, I knew what I was going to do with the rest of my life,” the artist says. Saunders is a member of the Cumberland Society of Painters ([www.cumberlandsofartists.org](http://www.cumberlandsofartists.org)), a group of Tennessee artists dedicated to continuing the painting traditions set forth by such masters as Sargent, Sorolla, Zorn, Carlson, and Payne. The artist is represented by Leiper’s Creek Gallery, in Leiper’s Fork, Tennessee ([www.leiperscreekgallery.com](http://www.leiperscreekgallery.com)). For more information on Saunders, including his biannual plein air workshops, visit his website at [www.saundersfineart.com](http://www.saundersfineart.com).