

TAKING THE FEAR OUT OF WATERCOLOUR



PAINT WITH COURAGE
AND CONFIDENCE

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Afraid
of the
Dark?

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Watercolours love contrast, whether blatant or subtle, it is contrast that excites the eye and adds dynamism to the composition. Rich vibrant dark colours and shades can make watercolours look really strong and vibrant, however, dark tones can be scary to apply and are often a cause for consternation. The resulting hesitation often results in an attempt to deepen the dark colour incrementally, making a dull lifeless dark tone that lacks transparency from too many layers being applied, and lacks verve because it is laboured.

Instead be brazen! Be bold! Mix and lay strong darks with more immediacy, straight off the mark. Let them dry before judging their depth of tone and then, if you do decide they look too dark, you can always lift off some of

the pigment to gently lighten the tone. Strong concentrated colour on the paper behaves like paint in dry pans: the top level of pigment particles can be lifted off to a greater or lesser extent by dilution with water. Even staining colours give up their darkest hue when neat on paper, since the rich concentrated paint sits atop the underlying paint that has seeped into the fabric and stained the paper. All you need do is apply gentle pressure with a damp brush, sponge, or cloth and lift off a small amount of pigment. Adding the water breaks down the dried gum arabic, exactly as it does in/on the dried pans in the palette.

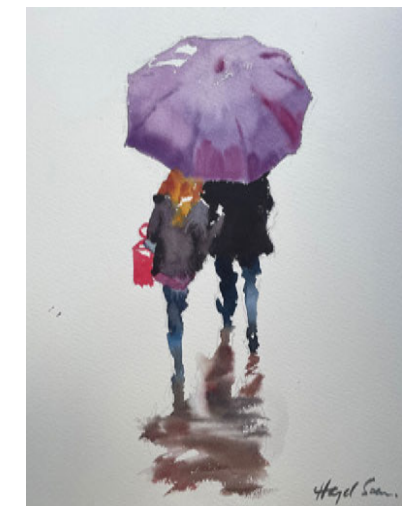


◀ Ultramarine Blue and Transparent Sienna are combined to make the rich deep brown for the horses' chests. Added into the local hue of lighter brown (pure Transparent Sienna) painted over the horse's hide, the colour blends in a single layer, thereby maximising transparency.



▲ This elephant is painted with two dominant colours, Cadmium Red and Schmincke Violet. The Violet is a highly staining pigment and I used it as concentrated as possible for the dark tones, knowing that if it looked too dark when it dried, I could quieten it down by lifting off a little pigment with a damp brush.

▼ The man's shape beneath the umbrella is painted in the paler tone of Indigo as seen on the right calf, then the deep black of the coat and left leg added immediately with neat Indigo, wet into wet.



Troubleshooting:

Figures to the rescue

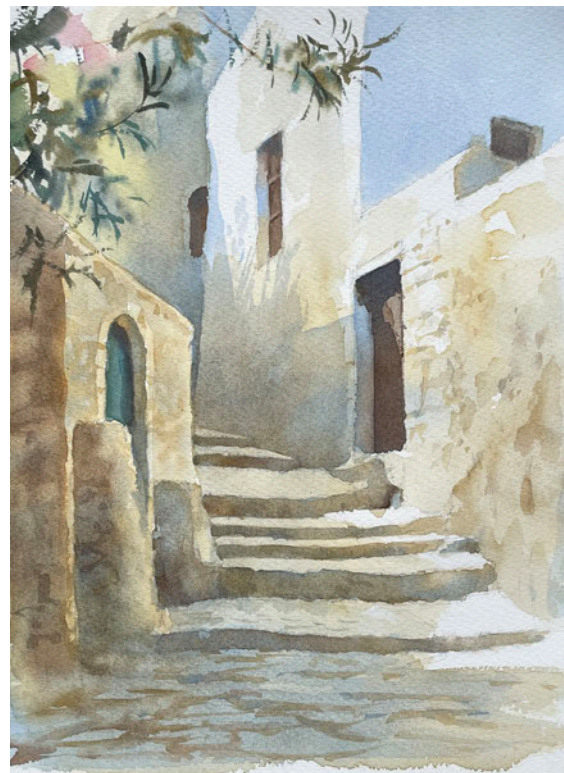
One of the quickest ways to enliven a lacklustre landscape is to add a figure/figures into the scene. Admittedly painting people shapes comes with its own angst but a figure that is even only mildly convincing will enliven a dull painting immediately.

1 Work out the best position in the composition, and therefore **the size** of the figure in proportion to the scene. Following the rule of thirds, a figure is likely to have more impact positioned a third from the left or right rather than close to the edge or bang in the middle. Since it is easier to add a darker figure against a lighter background, if possible place your figure in an area where it can stand out without the need for the introduction of lighter tone.

2 Choose an appropriate pose. Depending on the subject and narrative it may be that an impression of movement will add more interest than a static pose. Practise the figure on a separate piece of paper, then try to make it appear in the painting with the minimum of brushstrokes.

3 Consider the direction of light. It is easier to add a figure dark against light, such as a silhouette, but, for example, if the lighting comes from the side, adding a slither of light down the lit side may be needed. Neat white paint or scratching off are ways to make this fix.

4 Take a pause... before you add the figure, check if there are better/simpler options, eg would one or more figures be best? Could some other landscape feature do the same job? Should you rather enhance the tonal contrast and not have to add anything more?



▲ I liked this landscape watercolour and especially the granulating textures, but I felt it looked a little empty and lacked a storyline.

► I decided to add a woman walking down the steps and debated where best to place her. I did not want her too large, so I chose the wide middle step, this put her almost in the middle of the painting so I added the cat as a balance offset. The shadow on the wall, against which her head and torso are positioned, meant she needed to be painted in strong tones to stand out, plus light falls on her left side. I chose an opaque colour, Light Red, for her skin tones and added white into her left cheek and neck. The black of her dress is a mix of Cobalt Blue and Transparent Sienna already used in the painting. The woman and the cat add the missing narrative giving the painting a story!



Practice Practice Practice:

Familiarity breeds confidence

Being an agile and spontaneous medium, watercolour is used by painters to respond with immediacy to new subjects and circumstances. Each time we paint, a product (the painting) is created. This is one of the beneficial aspects of the medium but it can sometimes make watercolour painters unknowingly presumptuous when it comes to results. Instead of thinking of each painting as research, practice or exploration, we expect a finished result. It becomes common to start a new painting full of hope and excitement and to end up disappointed when it does not work out as well as originally hoped.

So let's pause here, why indeed should it? If the subject is unfamiliar, why should we be think we can make a satisfying representation/watercolour at first try? All other disciplines require practice: an actor rehearses before a play; a musician plays a piece multiple times before performing; writers edit their manuscripts through countless iterations; a golfer practices their swing before hitting their ball; so why should a watercolorist expect to make a successful

rendering at first attempt? Inspiration is not the same as execution. Being excited by a subject does not necessarily translate directly into a successful painting straight off the bat (although sometimes fortuitously it does!). I work on the assumption I will be painting a subject several times. My first painting is made trying to find out about the light and shade and main shapes, the next to distil the visual information and discover the essentials. Sometimes I like all the versions, sometimes none, sometimes the first effort even ends up the best, but I never assume I will paint the 'perfect' painting at first attempt, I see every painting as an experiment and as research towards all future paintings.

Because the effects of light change quickly and the pattern created is often the reason for the painting, there is by default a sense of urgency and importance to the first painting, but painting the same subject several times is the way to learn to paint, getting it wrong at first try is not failure, it is normal!



▲ My first attempt at painting the blue dome of this church was from a lower angle. It was painted in my khadi paper sketchbook.

► My second version was painted in late afternoon light and from a much better angle, giving me a view of the dome on top of the tower and the contrast of foliage against the white angles. I enjoyed the composition very much and went back next morning to the same spot.



▲ In the morning, the light comes from the other side, I used the same colours, Ultramarine Blue, Transparent Sienna and Sap green.

► In this third watercolour version, also in the morning light I introduced some Schmincke Violet to the original three colours.

