

# Grahame Booth

## watercolour basics

Congratulations! You have decided to paint in a medium that most artists agree is the most difficult. The reason is simply because watercolour, being a transparent medium, cannot be corrected by covering up mistakes and so it requires careful planning, confident application and an acceptance that a watercolour painting will never be perfect. Many “mistakes” in watercolour are easier on the eye than attempts at correction. The beauty of watercolour depends on its unique transparency and much of the skill in watercolour painting is in preserving that transparency.

There are a few guidelines that I try to follow when painting. These are not rules, never to be broken, but I follow them for more than 90% of the time. They are:

Don't even think of putting brush to paper until you have planned your stroke in your mind. - Dabbing at the paper in a vain hope of something happening will not work. Plan what you want to do, go for it, then get out.

Pretend that the paper is extremely delicate - Once you have applied paint to paper, leave it alone. The only effect of continuing to brush over an area of paper is to begin to destroy the surface of the paper and this affects the transparency.

Do not overpaint until the first coat is completely dry - When the paint film is starting to dry, it is at its most delicate. Any overpainting at this stage will result in MUD instead of two transparent layers. Try to plan your painting so that only two or three layers are needed. If you use more than this you lose the transparency.

Use plenty of paint and water - If you have to scrub at the paper with a dry brush you will lose the freshness of the paint. When painting a wash, the paint and water mix should flow from your brush. Once the brush is “empty”, re-fill it. Never scrub your brush on the paper unless you are looking for a “drybrush” effect.

If you can follow the above you will avoid 90% of the mistakes that beginners make but there are many other factors that will affect the success or failure of a painting. The more important things to think about are:

Use good quality paint, paper and brushes. Watercolour is hard enough without handicapping yourself with poor materials. Use only artists quality paint - it is more concentrated, more finely ground and has a creamier consistency. Squeeze a decent amount on to your palette - at least a blob the size of your thumbnail. Any less and you

are wasting your time. You don't need dozens of tubes of paint. Three colours will cover 70% of your needs, six colours will cover 99%.

Your choice of paper is just as important. There are three surfaces available - hot pressed (HP), cold pressed (also called NOT - because it is NOT hot-pressed) and ROUGH. Various weights are available as well, they are 90lb, 140lb, 200lb and 300lb. Hot pressed paper is very smooth and difficult for beginners so NOT is a good compromise. 140lb is a good weight for small paintings. Once you find a paper you like, then stick to it. NEVER go into an art shop and ask vaguely for watercolour paper, you should know your manufacturer, surface and weight.

Brushes come in all shapes and sizes. I use a size 12 round sable and size 4 rigger for virtually all of my painting. As with paper, find a brush you like. If you use round brushes, it is important that they have a good point. Sable are best but expensive. Squirrel hold lots of water but are a little floppy for my taste. I have sourced an economical squirrel/synthetic mix that is almost as good as sable.

A correct tonal range is vital. For most subjects, the tone basically varies from white to black so ensure that your painting has this full range. It is a good compositional device to place your lightest light and darkest dark at the focal point.

Don't worry too much about duplicating colour. The colour of an object depends on many things including the time of day and the climatic conditions. Too many beginners spend hours trying to mix the “correct” colour. Actually if you do manage to mix the “correct” colour it generally looks too bright and stark on the paper. If you use what are known as the earth colours - siennas, umbers, you will achieve a more subdued colour that looks better on paper.

Some final thoughts: Everything above is my advice based on what works for me. It may not work for you so expose yourself to lots of books and videos. These will show you other and often contradictory ways of achieving results. Trying all of these methods, keeping what you like and discarding those you don't will help to develop what will become *your* style, as personal as your handwriting. It is a funny thing, the more you practice, the better you become. If you paint for only an hour or two every couple of months then you will not advance because you will forget anything you learn. Paint often and try not to become despondent with slow progress. Learning to paint is a lifelong occupation.