

INTRODUCTION

Welcome!

This course is a comprehensive introduction to watercolour painting. It starts with the basics and gradually introduces more complex elements to students in a logical way. We hope it will prove to be useful, exciting and inspirational to a large variety of people, however practised they are and whatever their interests and approaches.

We've extensively illustrated the course with examples of work by a range of the most highly regarded past masters of the medium, and these are complemented by demonstrations to clearly illustrate points made in the Study Units.

A full list of the illustrations can be found at the back of the course. You'll also find at the end suggestions for 'further looking' as well as the more common 'further reading', as we hope this course represents only the beginning of your journey into watercolour. The suggestions for 'further looking' include many inspirational contemporary artists, whose work cannot be featured directly in the course.

As you work through the course we guide you step by step through techniques and suggest various exercises, which we hope you enjoy and find useful in developing your skills, though it is not imperative that you complete all of these. The assignments, which you submit to your tutor, are also interspersed throughout the course at regular intervals. These are designed to consolidate and build on the skills learned at each stage; they are varied and open, with lots of opportunity for your own unique interpretation.

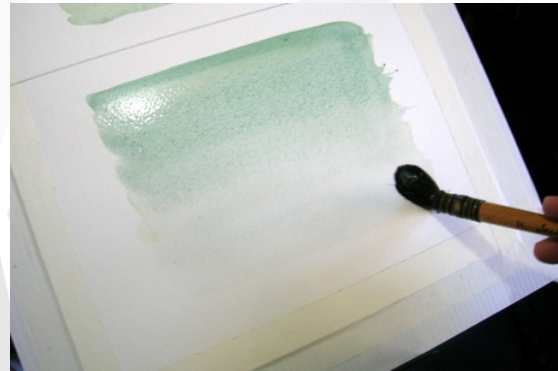
There are suggestions, approaches and techniques that the more advanced or experimental person might want to investigate, whilst other will not. You can be involved at the level of your choice.

Having received the course we recommend taking some time to look right through it so that you can see the variety and richness that is to come.

Watercolour can be extremely diverse in its application, with enormous scope for vastly differing work to be produced from artist to artist. It is an exciting and challenging medium.

The more we look the more we see. The more we experiment and practise the more we develop our own path as artists, and the better we can paint whatever we want.

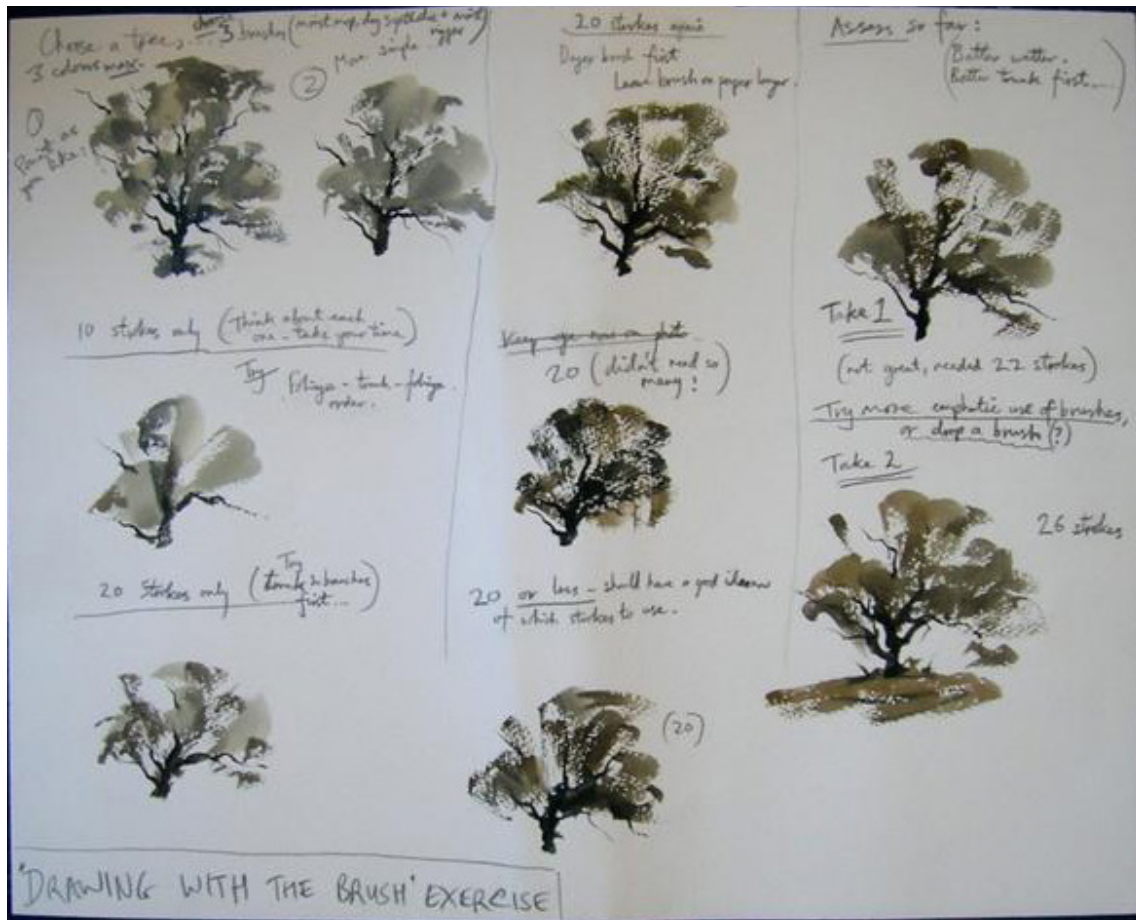
- * Create a wash on the bottom half of your paper. Begin as before, but after the first stroke is done, instead of picking up more paint from the palette this time dip the brush quickly into your water so that it is equally loaded as before, but this time there will be more water in the mix.
- * Then make your second stroke underneath the first line and overlapping with it slightly - as with the flat wash procedure - to create a smooth join.
- * Again, dip the brush into the water pot to load it with an even more diluted mix of paint. You might need to give it a swish in the water if the second stroke wasn't much weaker than the first. Then paint your third 'row' of wash under and overlapping slightly with the second.
- * Continue for a 4th or 5th row until you have filled the bottom half of your page. What you should end up with is a block of wash which is darker in tone at the top and gets consistently weaker as it progresses down. As with the flat wash, what you are aiming for is an equally loaded brush on each application so that the resulting wash has a smooth transition from the darker to the lighter area. Again, the more quickly you can produce the whole thing the better. As soon as the first bit of paint is on the paper it will begin to dry. As a rule of thumb you need to aim to have completed a wash before any of it has dried.



Important tip: While mastering even a simple wash takes practise, one key thing is that you should not return to an area once you have moved on. 'Never go back!' As a beginner you will see 'imperfections' initially, and even a professional will. However, to go back into a wash often makes matters worse, and once it has dried out most of these imperfections will not appear as bad as you thought, and certainly not when seen within the context of a finished picture.

The reason that going back into an area of wash already laid down creates problems is mainly because you will be adding more water into a partially drying area of paint. This inconsistency in 'wetness' will lead to a worse imperfection than what you were trying to correct, often resulting in the classic watercolourist's nightmare, known as the 'runback' or 'cauliflower'.

An example sheet of this exercise by a student:



There are many other ways of making marks in a painting using implements other than brushes, and we will come to those alternative methods later. For now though, let's have a look at some exemplary watercolour paintings whilst considering some of the other key attributes of the medium.



Stages 2 & 3 (above)

We start at the left and work to the right. Firstly, Drag a brushful of brown quickly across the first roof, allowing some judicious break up of your marks on the grain of the paper; we want some of these to remain at the end of the exercise. Next, pick up some of the greyer mix onto your brush and quickly continue the wash across the second roof, including the chimneys as you go. We allow the two colours to bleed together slightly on the paper so that there is no hard edge between them.



Stages 4 & 5

Continue again across to the right, adding more wash, 'wet against wet'. Go back to a more brownly mix (wash out your brush and dry off quickly before picking it up) for the next rooftop, before again picking up the more grey mix to add in the next chimney and beginning of the tree. Small sections of different colour and tone are merging together in a subtle way.

At this point pick up some very thick, dry paint and add the dark touches to the base of the tree and front of the building. This needs doing while those areas are still damp, so that the pigment bleeds slightly and the edges remain soft. You will have dry brush effect at the very bottom edge, where the paper is still dry.



Stage 4: Final wash, adding the darkest ‘details’ of the painting.

Here we are adding finishing touches. Try not to be too fussy, as although there is plenty of mud in this scene fussing will lead to ‘mud’ of a type we don’t want!

In the original painting any ‘detail’ is simplified and quite vague, so aim to keep it the same here.

Try to keep your shapes as simple as possible and your brushstrokes decisive. You could try a little bit of dry brush technique or ‘bleeding away’ for the marks on the bank or the boat. Remember you don’t need much water in your brush just to soften an edge slightly. You also need to touch the surface of the paper only lightly, or the earlier wash below will be disturbed and ‘lifted’ slightly.

Don’t worry if things don’t come off as you would like, it is all a matter of trying things out and aiming to learn from the results. Watercolour is fickle!

Consider everything from composition to techniques, colours to marks, tone to edges, and so on. A lot can be learned in a first attempt at a painting. You might arrive at the correct tone for something through layering three or more washes. In a second attempt you can then mix that tone and put it down correctly in one wash using thicker paint.

Edward Seago is known to have re-worked his watercolours several times before he arrived at the ones he let people see. He used to let guests to his home watch him paint in oils, but never in watercolour. It is a difficult medium and he was a master, so let's take heart from that.

Bold attitude of approach, and experimentation

This is important in order that you don't get stuck in a rut, or become too 'precious' with your painting. Some of the best styles of watercolour have an evident degree of 'verve' in the way they were painted. You can see the energy, freedom and risk-taking in the brushstrokes. With watercolour this can lead to beautiful transparency and a lively 'still wet' look.

A contemporary artist whose work meets this description is Steve Hall. Here is one of his watercolours (copyright owned by Steve Hall):



There is nothing to lose and everything to gain from taking risks in your paintings. The opposite is to become overly careful in your approach to using the medium, sticking to what you know, and work that looks stale. You may prefer to work in a fairly traditional way, but this does not mean your paintings need to be boring on the eye. Much will be down to your attitude of approach. Here's a phrase to remember:

'A painting that is boring to paint will be boring to look at'.