

Look how light-filled this watercolour by John Singer Sargent is:



The water has a little colour and tone, but it is almost just white paper, reflecting as it is the light from the sky.

The shadows on the animals' bellies are a strong dark. Without the combination of the two the artist would not convey the effect of bright light so well.



Notice how in this watercolour sketch the muscular form of this pure white ox is defined entirely by the shade, which wouldn't exist without the light! The strength and direction of shadows also tell us that the light is coming somewhat from the right; a high sun, perhaps mid day.

Here he manages to create a terrific effect of the light reflecting in the central area of the water. This was carefully planned in advance, and he has achieved the effect by retaining the pure white of the paper only in this central area. Note that all the surrounding rocks, grass and distant water are all covered with at least a pale tone of wash. Then he has used slightly darker tones (and some small individual brush marks) to depict the ripples. The painting again utilises a very full tonal range because of the powerful solid darks for the shadowed areas of rock. These are quite small areas - in some cases just single skillfully applied brush marks - but they are vital to the painting because of the strength and emphasis they provide in relation to the white paper and all the lighter tones. The very fact that there are only small areas of white, and small areas of very dark bestows both of these with great impact.

This painting by Wilson Steer has a different use of tone. What do you notice?



The painting has a narrower tonal range; ie less extremes of light and dark. Although he retains the pure white of the paper in the 'cloud window' in the sky (closest to the source of light - the sun) he does not employ any really powerful darks anywhere in the picture. The light in the sky is given its powerful effect once again by entirely covering the white of the paper in *all other areas but this*. He has been very subtle, though, with just a very pale wash over the water, which of course reflects the light from the sky. The sky has been approached in the manner of a 'gradated wash' becoming paler as it gets lower, but at the bottom it is still covered by a slight tone. The painting is no less effective owing to its narrower tonal range, because it just conveys a different, less strident light effect. With most of the sun being hidden behind cloud the shadows are less intense.

Study Unit 4: Observation, interpretation and artistic licence

If you want to be able to paint anything from reality convincingly then it will need to be well observed. This means looking at things very carefully before plotting them onto your paper, so that they sit in the correct proportions and relation to their surroundings.

Exceptions to this might be if your work is entirely 'invented', based on imagination, fantasy or an alternative version of reality where things don't need to look in any sense real or as we see them in life. But even in those cases there is often a need to at least have the skills which are required to observe and interpret well.

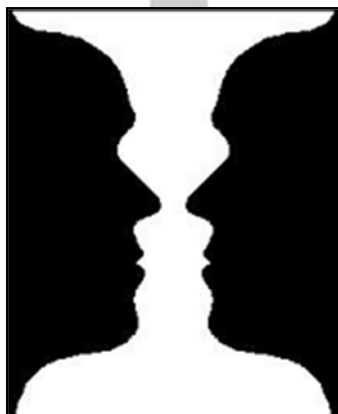
Unless you are already very good at drawing you probably discovered some difficulties during your first assignment which were not entirely specific to watercolour. As previously mentioned, watercolour painting can be described as 'drawing with the brush', and in most cases some aspect of drawing cannot be avoided even if you wish it could.

Drawing skills come with practice, but good drawing is mainly about accurate observation, and there are things which you can learn to help with that.

Lines and shapes

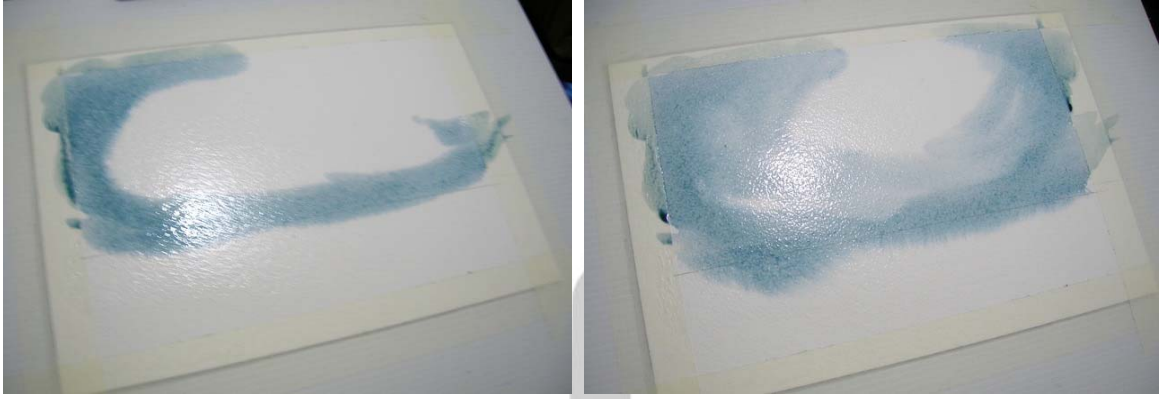
We should mainly think of lines in terms of helping us to mark out 'shapes.' Objects in reality do not have black lines around their edges, but they do have a shape.

A silhouette is good for making the point:



There are no lines in this image, except for a border around the outside. What we are looking at is shapes. On a sheet of paper everything is contained in relation to its outside edge.

If you were to draw out this image yourself with pencil lines, filling a sheet of paper, how would you approach it?



Stage 2

With a mid tone wash paint a gradated wash that imitates a 'glow' effect around the sun in the sky. It is gradated from dark to lighter, all the way to pure water. Sweep your brush quickly around and inwards towards the sun, using a weaker mix by adding water to your brush as you go.

It doesn't need to be entirely 'smooth', but if you need to 'lift' any colour towards the centre then wash out your brush and dry most of the liquid out of it, then sweep it around to pick up and blend a little as needed.

The paint and paper *must remain wet* through to the next stage, so move quickly on.



Stage 3.

Pick up your stronger wash. Ensure your brush is not already very wet before going into your stronger mix or it will in effect dilute it again. Look at the photo and note where the main shapes of cloud are. Paint these in, trying to use a little 'verve' in your strokes. Try to combine some large marks with some very small marks. For the latter your brush must just touch the paper briefly.

You need to do this whole stage quickly, while the paper is still wet. The paint you add now must not be as 'wet' as the paper is or you will get runbacks forming. Don't loiter trying to get a literal interpretation of the original photograph; it is just the general effect we are aiming for.



Wet in wet technique takes practice. Timing is important, as is having the correct dilution of paint for your washes.

With a sky painting, you need to add the land element before you can tell how successful you've been. Here the land was copied in from the photo in a simple way, done in one wash from top to bottom, after the sky had totally dried. Note that the first sky wash was continued down over the lake area so that it reflects the same general tone. Having white paper *only* in the area of the sun is what gives that area its glow.

It is hard to see what is actually in the photo, but the most important thing is that it is tonally quite accurate. Observe the photo and you'll see that the land needs to be *at least* as dark as the darkest clouds in the distance, and then even darker as it comes forwards. You'll need quite thick paint to go dark enough in the foreground.

Painting reflections in water

Again there are different ways of approaching this subject, but this is a common one.

Prepare your paper as normal, except this time position your board in a vertical, or 'portrait' orientation.

If you found the previous exercise quite challenging you could try cutting your paper smaller for this one to make it more manageable. Again, read through the whole exercise so you are well prepared before you begin painting.

An additional colour was used in this exercise, Raw Umber, as well as Light Red and Winsor Blue again. Make sure you have a good pea-sized blob at least of each paint squeezed out ready.