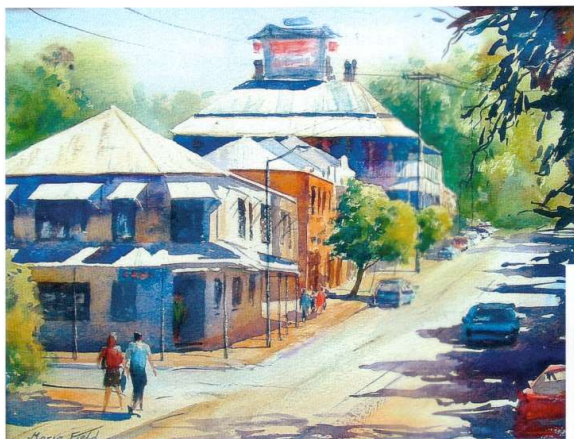


Getting back to basics can help you regain control of your watercolour painting

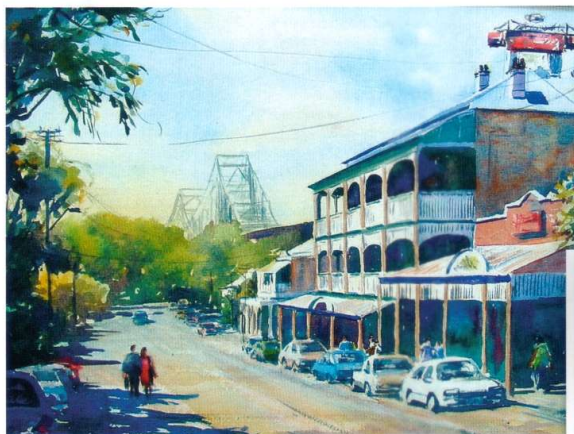
# UNDERSTANDING WATER

by Maria Field



*Story Bridge Hotel, 37 x 27cm*

I cropped in on the view and added some people for life. Shadows were painted hard edged, wet on dry, with reflected light dropped in while the wash was still damp.



*Story Bridge, 37 x 27cm*

Here is the view looking down the same street. Hard edges enhance the feeling of bright sunlight, but the background trees are looser and simplified by using wet in wet.



Watercolour is one of the most beautiful mediums to work with, but it also has a bad reputation for being uncontrollable. Anyone who has ever had a water pipe burst, spilt a glass of water on the table or seen how a river has carved its way through a landscape, can see that water has a mind of its own. Therefore it's no wonder that watercolour can be difficult! We will wonder why the pigment is not moving when we want it to, and why it is travelling when we don't! It comes down to the amount of water involved, both on our brushes and on the paper. Through this tutorial and demonstration, I hope to impart some ideas and techniques which may help you gain some control. □



*Lemons and Lace, 37 x 27cm*

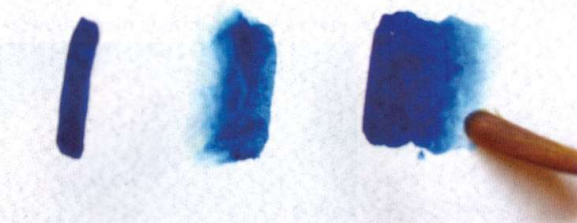
The background was loosely painted wet in wet. The lemons had a little masking fluid on them to retain the main lights, while the reflected light and shadows were added dry on damp for control. The lace was painted mainly wet on dry. Note the use of complementary colours.



## POINTS TO CONSIDER

- Do I want a hard edge or soft edge?
- Therefore, does my paper need to be wet or dry?
- Do I want control of the mark or do I just want the watercolour to blend on its own?
- Therefore, does my paper need to be just damp or very wet?
- Do I have too much/not enough pigment/water on my brush for the effect I want?

## HOW WATER WORKS



### WATER DISPERSES

Observing how water behaves can increase our chances of better controlling what the water and pigment does in our paintings. This applies especially where we want control over our edges. It is simple:

- Hard edges are done on dry paper.
- Soft edges need water, either before we put the stroke down or by softening the stroke with a damp brush later.
- By placing a little water beside a stroke, the pigment is dispersed into the water and a much lighter version is created giving a soft edge.
- If we wet the paper first prior to flat, graded or variegated washes, the water will help the pigment disperse more evenly.

### WATER DILUTES

The amount of water you use in mixing your paint will affect the tone. The more water, the more dilute the wash, and it will be much lighter. Less water means the pigment is not diluted and therefore will be stronger in tone. Water will dilute your colour, so if you already have water on your paper, bear this in mind. The colour you mix might look perfect on your palette, but will be lighter in value when you add it to the water already on your paper. Watercolour dries lighter anyway, so you may need to make a much darker mix than you think. There is nothing worse than having to go over and over an area to attain the right tone. This is a perfect recipe for mud!

## my art in the making Venice Afternoon

### What the artist used

#### Support

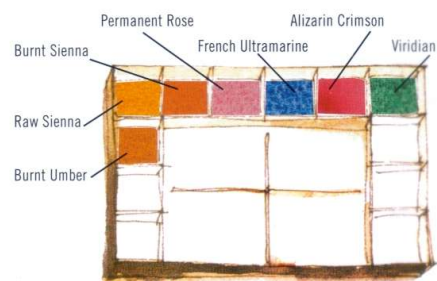
300gm Rough Arches watercolour paper

#### Brushes

No.2 Mop, No. 8 Round, 3/4" Flat

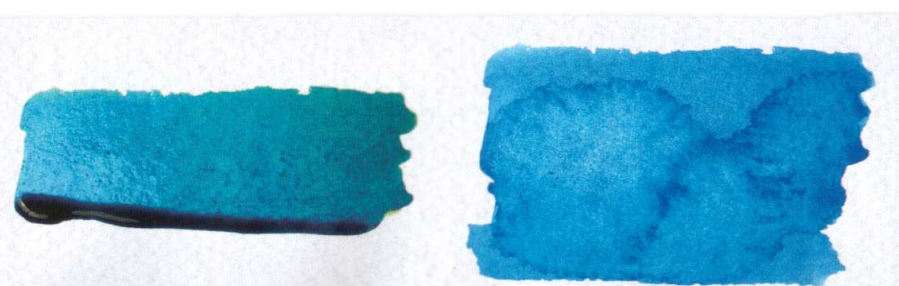
Rigger, bristle brush

#### Artists' quality watercolour



### Stage 1 Photo and Planning

I am usually inspired by light and shadows, and being in Venice in the late afternoon sun was simply magical! I cropped off some of the bottom and right hand side to improve the composition and included more figures. It was, after all, Venice and even though I was lucky enough to see it non-tourist season, I felt it needed more people. And of course, I wanted to be able to show the gondolas even though they are hidden in the photo.



### WATER RUNS

Water will run downwards with gravity, so if you want to retain a bead on your work, say if you are working large or to enable you to have some time to go back into your wash with details, then work with your board at an angle. The bead will prevent a hard, dry edge from occurring. The fact that water runs downwards is also handy if you want to do a graded wash. You can tip the board to make the paint settle stronger at one end.

### CAULIFLOWERS/BLOOMS/BACKRUNS

Water loves to run into damp areas, so if you don't want your paint to run into an adjoining area that is still damp, you must have a little patience and wait for it to dry. Alternatively, leave a small strip of dry paper separating the areas. Cauliflowers are caused by putting water or a watery mix of paint onto a damp wash. They can also be caused by a puddle left on your masking tape, flowing back onto your paper.

### WATER AND OIL DON'T MIX

Be careful of grubby, oily fingers on your clean paper. We can utilise the way that oil repels water by using masking fluid, oil pastels and candle wax for resist techniques.



### Stage 2 The Underwash - Wet in Wet

This is the fun part for me. I love to drop colours roughly where I want them to give me a 'ghost' image, and let them blend on the paper wet in wet. I plan where I want to retain light though. It is a useful way to loosen up at the beginning of a painting session too.



### Stage 3 Simplifying the Background

Background buildings and trees were put on dry, but while the wash was just damp, hints of warm and cool colours and darker tones were added to suggest details and form.



## GETTING BACK TO BASICS

Understanding how much water/pigment is on your brush and how wet, dry or damp your paper is, will enable you to better create the look you are after. So let's look at the 4 basic brush strokes:



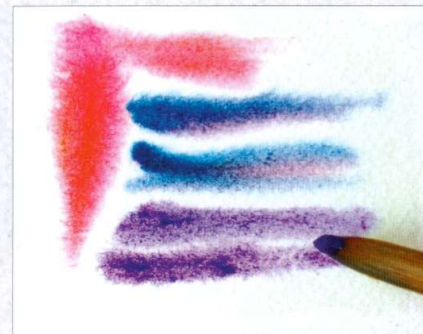
**WET ON DRY**  
BRUSH LOADED WITH WATER AND PIGMENT APPLIED TO DRY PAPER.  
This stroke will be hard-edged and has good control, because there is no water on the paper. It will give good strong colour because there is no dilution.



**DRY ON DRY**  
BRUSH LOADED WITH PIGMENT BUT LITTLE OR NO WATER, APPLIED TO DRY PAPER.  
This stroke is very controllable, because there is little water involved, and you should have little trouble creating those dry, broken edges perfect for sparkle on water or texture in a foreground or building. It also helps if you use the brush on its side, make the mark quickly and use rough paper (although it is still achievable on Medium/Cold pressed paper).

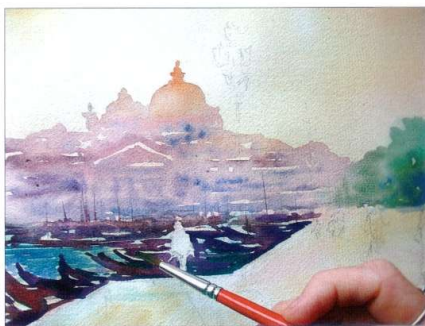


**WET IN WET**  
BRUSH LOADED WITH WATER AND PIGMENT ONTO WET PAPER.  
The more water that is involved, the less control we have. When a wet brush is applied to wet paper, we hand over the reins and let the colours mix and blend on their own. This is a joy to watch and the wonderful blends are spontaneous and exciting! We can choose which colours to use and can tip and tilt the board, but that is about it. The wash will retain beautiful clarity and transparency because we have not pushed and pulled, rubbed and scrubbed it to death. This is my personal favourite effect and is great for skies, loose background washes and under-washes. Remember though that because there is already water on the paper that it will dilute the colour.



**DRY ON DAMP**  
BRUSH LOADED WITH PIGMENT BUT LITTLE OR NO WATER, APPLIED TO A DAMP PAPER.  
Suppose you want some blurry edges, but still want it recognisable as a tree/mountain/building etc in the distance, then working with less water than wet in wet will enable you to have some control on the mark you make. If it spreads too much, then there is too much water, either on your brush or on your paper. Wait a little until your paper dries a bit more, or pick up thicker pigment. Do not go into your water jar or puddle of watery pigment unless you want a cauliflower.  
In conclusion, watercolour may not be fully controllable and actually is at its best when we just let it have its own way, but we can certainly have fun trying! If it doesn't work out, just remember...it's only a piece of paper!

## my art in the making Venice Afternoon continued



**Stage 4 Connecting Shapes**  
I implied the boats, simply connecting all the shapes with a wet on dry dark mix of Ultramarine and Burnt Sienna, intensifying the tone closer to the foreground and dropping in Viridian and Alizarin Crimson at random to blend by themselves on the paper. Areas of untouched under-wash gave sparkle.



**Stage 5 Softening Edges**  
Any edges that are too hard can be softened afterwards with a slightly damp bristle brush.



**Stage 6 Introducing People**  
People were painted in on dry paper for hard edges. Forget that you are painting people. Like everything else, they are simply shapes of tone and colour. The gesture is more important than the details. Let clothes bleed together and unite groups of people.



**Stage 7 Adding Details**  
Isn't it fun adding those last few details? A rigger was used for the birds and poles. Put these in quickly and confidently. In and out...no going over and over them, or they will turn into albatrosses!





**The Waves Beckon, 37 x 27cm**

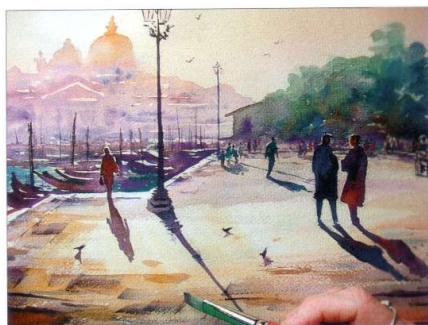
The majority of this painting was done wet in wet and dry on damp. Control of waves, reflections and clouds were created with thicker pigment while the wash was drying. The hardest edges were refined to the main figure, which also had the greatest tonal contrast. A few dry brush marks in the foreground help to add texture.



**Umbrella Dance, 37 x 27cm**

I love granulation! You can enhance granulation by working very wet, on an angle and with granulating colours like Cerulean, French Ultramarine, Yellow Ochre and Raw Sienna. This is a predominantly cool painting with a hint of warmth. An unusual viewpoint makes for an intriguing design. Note the hard and soft edges.

“Forget that you are painting people. Like everything else, they are simply shapes of tone and colour.”



**Stage 8 Foreground Texture**

A flat brush is used to indicate cobbled block work and dry brush helps to give texture to the foreground.



**Stage 9 The Finished Painting**

I added a few more people, a little spatter in the foreground, a strip of masking on a few heads and shoulders and then I put it away for a week. This painting has the whole kit and caboodle of brush strokes! It also has variations of light/dark, warm/cool colours and soft/hard edges.



**Naturally Nastursiums, 37 x 27cm**

Lots of wet in wet and dry on damp washes established the overall picture. Negative painting was done wet on dry for hard edges to bring focus to the main flowers.

## about the artist

Maria Field is a self-taught artist, chocoholic and mother of two, born in Brisbane in 1963. Her love of art began at the age of 5 when she received a 36 colour paint box, which became her most treasured possession.

Maria is constantly inspired by light, shadows, colour and the sheer beauty of nature and the world around her, which she strives to portray in all her work. She delights in creating colourful, clean watercolours, loving the challenge of the spontaneous, fresh and exciting medium, with her work encompassing many subjects.

Maria also loves to create vibrant floral oils and acrylics, impressionistic pastels and has gained a reputation for her detailed pastel pet portraits. She enjoys sharing her love of art by teaching several weekly art classes.

Since commencing competing in shows in 2003, Maria has sold over 200 paintings and won over 45 awards, including 15 Firsts, "Champion of Show" Samford Show 2007 and "Reserve Champion" Samford 2009. She was commissioned by the Lord Mayor's Office to do a watercolour painting of Brisbane as an international gift and two of her paintings were bought by the Ipswich Art Gallery for their permanent collection.

Her work can be viewed at:

**Gallery Newtown**, 176 Brisbane St, Ipswich, Queensland

**Queensland Watercolour Society**, (various venues) Queensland

**Scattered Arts**, 6 Newman Road, Camp Hill, Queensland or visit her website at [www.paradox.com.au/mariafieldart](http://www.paradox.com.au/mariafieldart)

Her works are held in private and corporate collections throughout Australia and in England, Canada, South Africa, Italy, Germany and Japan. If you have any queries or are interested in class or workshop information please do not hesitate to contact Maria Field by email: [mfield@cheerful.com](mailto:mfield@cheerful.com)

