Using interesting values in your paintings can give them the WOW factor!

Tone Up Your Watercolours

by Maria Field

What is Tone?

Tone, also referred to as value, is simply how light or dark a shape or area is compared to the shape/area next to it. This is not to be confused with the colour of the shape, as different colours have different tones. A very dark yellow could be the same tone as a light blue. The best way to see tone easily is to squint your eyes at your picture, which will help to lose all detail and break it down into tones. Another excellent way is to photocopy your picture into black and white.

High key paintings have very little contrast in tone and in the hands of an expert are a marvel to behold. However, for most of us, if our paintings look flat, insipid, wishy-washy, lack focal point, form, impact or direction, then it is probably that our tones are not correct or interesting. Every painting should have at least a light, a mid-tone and a dark tone. You can have more in between, but at the very least have those three.

Bromeliad, 37 x 27cm

TONE USED TO SHOW

FORM The shadows help to indicate the forms on which they fall.

LIGHT AND TEXTURE Lightest areas help to convey not only the sunshine, but also the shiny texture of the leaves.

FOCAL POINT The highest concentration of light and dark is around the focal point. Colour and placement also help with the focal point here.


Tone or Colour?

Apart from planning and composing your painting, I believe tone to be the next most important aspect in our paintings. For me, it is more important than colour, although I also love colour and it is certainly important to understand your choice of colours and know how they mix together. It really won't matter if that tree has yellow, green, blue, brown, red or purple in it, as long as it has the right tones - say a light tone where the sun is hitting it, a dark tone on the shadowed side, and a mid-tone in between.

How do I adjust tones?

In watercolour, the easiest (but not only) way to adjust our tones, is by the amount of water we mix with our pigment. The more water, the weaker the wash and lighter the tone. The more pigment, the thicker and darker the **wash.**

So why is tone so important?

Do you know those advertisements for Bi-Carbonate of Soda or Tea Tree Oil, which seem to have a 101 uses for everything, from cleaning off mould to soothing insect bites…well, tone is like that. It can be used for so many aspects of your painting. If it came in a tube it would definitely be on your shopping list! Let's look at a few of the ways it can work magic through my demonstration, notes and gallery of paintings. □
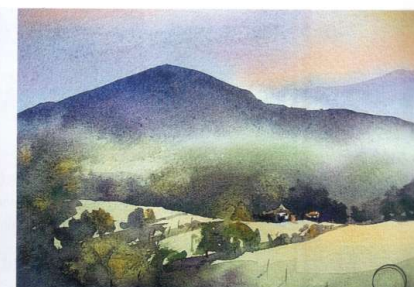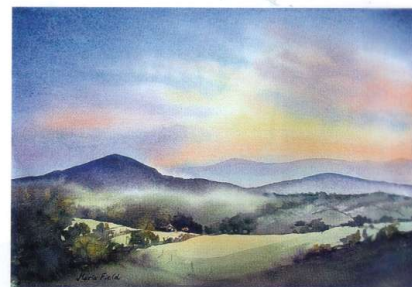
Misty, 37 x 27cm

TONE USED TO SHOW

**MOOD** A feeling of late afternoon light and mist rolling in, has been achieved.

DEPTH Distant mountains are lighter, foreground is darker.

FOCAL POINT The main mountain and farm have been enhanced with hardest edges and greatest contrast.

Squinting gives me wrinkles!

Okay, so we don't want any more 'laughter lines'. If you are having trouble seeing whether you have the correct tone, say for that shadow on the flower petal, there is another easy way to check those tones. A simple two-holed punch card in a scrap of watercolour paper does the trick. Hold one hole over the area on your photo and the other hole over the area on your painting. You will easily be able to see the difference in tone. So be brave - go darker.
Have fun and value your values!
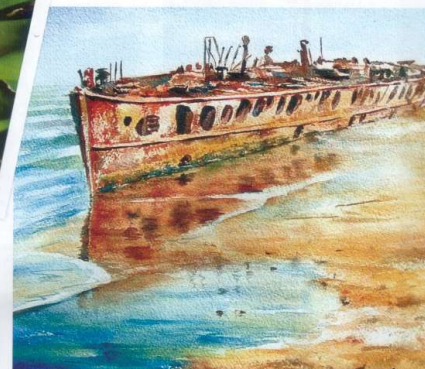
Fraser Wreck, 37 x 27cm

TONE USED TO SHOW

DEPTH The tone lightens as the wreck recedes and the water is darker in the foreground.

TEXTURE With thicker dry brush for the rust, and spatter for foreground sand.

DIRECTION Darker water at front keeps the eye in the picture.

the practical uses of tone

Form
Without tone, any object in our paintings will look flat. To give them dimension and volume, you must use tone. Imagine a circle with only one value - it would look like a flat disc. With a light, mid-tone and dark, we can make it look solid enough to be picked up off the paper.

Focal Point
The greatest contrast of tone - light against dark or vice versa - should be around the focal point. This will direct the viewer's eye there in an instant.

Light and Contrast
We can punch up light by having dark tones in contrast. Diffused light has very little change in tonal values. Strong light will be enhanced by contrasting strong darks.

Mood/Mystery
Tone can help set the time of day and the mood, and there can be mystery in objects in shadow.

Depth
Aerial perspective is heightened by the use of light tones in the distance and darker tones in the foreground.

Edges
By contrasting a light tone next to a dark tone, you are able to see the edge of the object. If you find you cannot see the edge of an element in your painting, then simply adjust the tone, either of the element or of the area beside/around it. Alternatively, if you want to "lose" an edge, say in a still life where two objects overlap, or a portrait where the model's hair is lost in the background, then simply have the same value. Remember this is not necessarily the same colour.

Variation
A painting with at least 3 tones will be infinitely more interesting, because of the variation it offers, than a painting with only one tone.

Texture
A clump of grass in the foreground, a rough textured wall, a furry animal, a smooth form etc can all be heightened with tone.

Direction
Shadows and dark shapes help to lead our eye around a painting and can help with the rhythm of your painting.

Unity
Tones and the use of shadows can help unify a painting, especially if we link our shadow shapes.

Light Source
What if your sketch or photo has no strong lighting to show any shadows? Well then, let's have some fun making it up! Do little thumbnail sketches showing where shadows would be if the sun was to the left, right, overhead, behind etc. This is a great mental workout. Who needs to go to the gym? I'm exhausted already! I didn't say it would be easy, but what fun! Depending on your light source, the relative shadows will lead your eye around the picture plane in different ways. Which is the most interesting? It's your decision, but be careful to make sure that your shadows are consistent throughout your painting.

Impact
Don't take your photos at face value. For paintings with impact, try altering the tones. How about making the sky really dark and stormy, and the foreground light? Or a dark background to bring out a still life/flowers. Or have a light background and silhouette the vase of flowers, or group of people against it. Do a few little thumbnail sketches to play around with ideas.

Order of Painting
Generally, in watercolours we work from light to dark. Sometimes, we like to get our darks in early so that we can evaluate the contrasts. However, to reduce the chance of making darks bleed if we accidentally paint over them, it is better to start with the lightest washes first, ending in the darkest washes last. So by knowing the tonal values of the elements we are going to paint, we will also have worked out in what order we are to paint them.
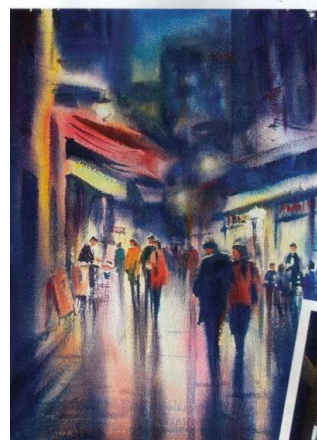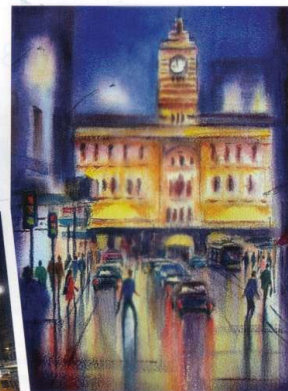

Melbourne Station at Night, 37 x 27cm
TONE USED TO SHOW
LIGHT Glowing off the station, street lights and the road reflections.
SOFT EDGES Around lights give the illusion of radiating light.
MOOD AND UNITY
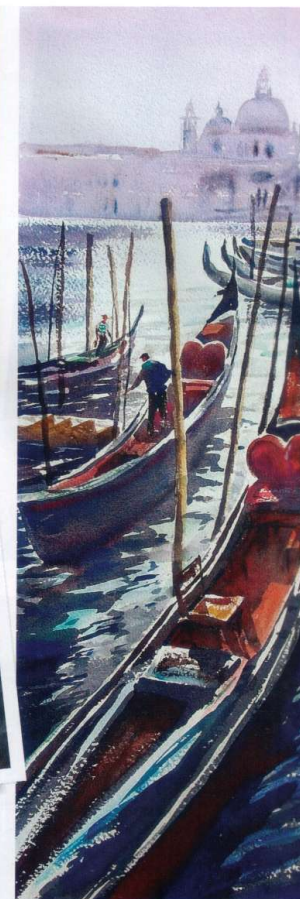
Hardware Lane, Melbourne, 37 x 27cm
TONE USED TO SHOW
FOCAL POINT Emphasised with hard edges and greatest contrast.
TEXTURE On the road.
MOOD AND MYSTERY
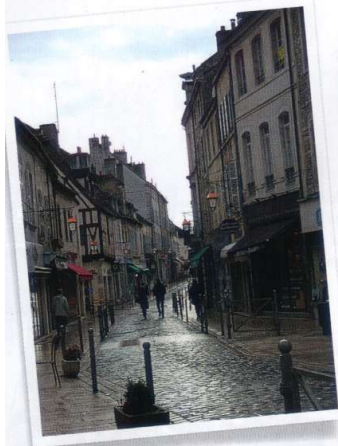**LIGHT AND DEPTH**

Venice 2, 50 x 22cm
LIGHT Bight light accentuated by dark contrasts.
DEPTH Buildings are lighter in the distance.
TEXTURE Ripples on the water are enhanced with tone.
FORM, EDGES AND MYSTERY

my art in the making Beaune, France

STAGE 1 Inspiration and drawing

Here is the original photo, taken in a beautiful little French town called Beaune, on a rather gloomy day. The rain did nothing to dampen my spirits for being there, but I decided to inject my painting with some light and shade, and long afternoon shadows. A few little thumbnail sketches helped me to work this out and also how far I wanted to crop. The people would be my main focal points, especially my invented French lady with her ubiquitous baguette! The wonderful chimneys, awnings, some lamps and that little half-timbered house would be my supporting elements, with everything else simplified. By taking a little time to plan, I then knew the order in which to paint and what brushstrokes I would need.

STAGE 2 Underwash

After wetting the paper, I drop in colours, wet in wet, for a very loose underwash. Some of these colours will glow through glazes, while others may not even be painted over and will therefore retain freshness. I've kept the foreground warmer for depth.

What the Artist Used

Support
300gsm Arches Rough watercolour paper ¼ sheet

Brushes
Large Hake
No. 6 filbert
No. 8 round
No. 2 mop
rigger

Other Materials
A very messy palette
Spray bottle
Kitchen sponge
Tissues

Artists' quality watercolor
Raw Sienna
Burnt Sienna
Permanent Rose
Viridian
Cobalt Blue
French Ultramarine
Alizarin Crimson

STAGE 3 Buildings, texture and shadows

I worked over the painting, putting in some details on the buildings. You really have choices about how you want to do those shadows. Here, I have painted the local colour and details of the building, followed by a shadow glaze of Ultramarine and Alizarin Crimson over the area, after it had totally dried. Glazes must always be done on a dried wash, otherwise you risk lifting your previous wash.

STAGE 4 Alternative method

Alternatively, you can do as I have done here. Paint the shadow colour straight on and while it is still damp, drop in some thicker paint to indicate details on the wall. It is really up to you - which look you like and which way you are comfortable working.

STAGE 5 People in shade

When painting people in shade, I try to connect the person to the building by painting them at the same time. This stops them looking too "cut out and pasted." Remember, wherever possible, try to link your shadow shapes.

STAGE 6 Painting the people

I carefully cut around the figures to leave any white highlights, though you could always add this later with gouache. Aim for gesture over detail and let clothes bleed in together. Try to paint your figures and their shadows at the same time. Keep the shadow darker at the base of the object you are painting.

STAGE 7 The finished painting

By boosting up the tones and creating a light source, I have achieved a late afternoon mood with long cast shadows. The buildings have hard edges to show the sharp change in plane, whereas the soft edges and lighter tones create depth in the distant buildings. There is plenty of variation of warm/cool, light/dark, wet in wet/dry brush and hard/soft edges.
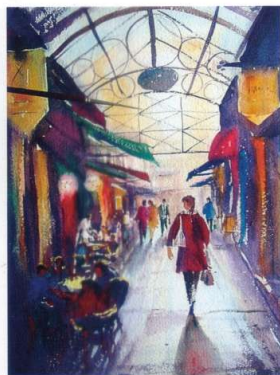
Melbourne Arcade, 37 x 27cm
TONE USED TO SHOW

DEPTH The figures and shops become lighter in the distance.
LIGHT
FOCAL POINT The Focal Point is maximized with greatest tonal contrast.
TEXTURE In the foreground with some darker dry brush.

Forgot the Biscuits, 37 x 27cm
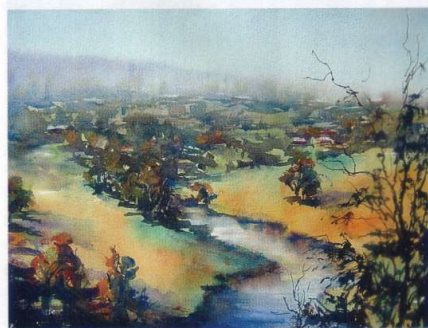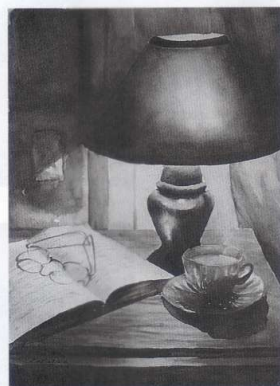**TONE USED TO SHOW**

FORM On the lamp and cup.
TEXTURE Of the smooth lamp base, rippled cup, metal glasses and the wood grain.
LOST EDGES Of the lamp shade and the red card - different colours, same tone - see the black and white image.
HARD EDGES Mostly between the lamp, book and cup – these help to capture the eye.
LIGHT Light is enhanced by the contrasting dark. Note also the strong triangular composition.

Big Country, 52 x 40cm
TONE USED TO SHOW

DEPTH AND AERIAL PERSPECTIVE Achieved with lighter tones and softer edges.
TEXTURE Texture in the foreground tree, which also helps the feeling of depth.
LIGHT Light on the paddocks and water, is enhanced by the shadows from the trees.
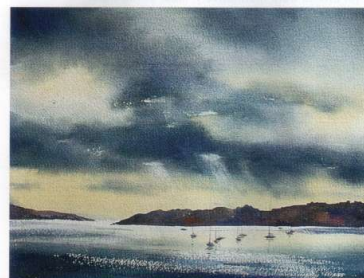**EDGES** A mix of sharp edges with tonal contrast and lost edges in the distance.

Old and New, 36 x 20cm
TONE USED TO SHOW

FORM Look at the folds in the cloth with both hard and soft edges.
DEPTH The background has been downplayed with a lighter tone.

Into the Light, 37 x 27cm
TONE USED TO SHOW

TEXTURE Dry brush gives sparkle to the water.
LIGHT Light is enhanced by the darks.
DEPTH, MOOD AND IMPACT

Echeveria, 37 x 27cm
TONE IS USED TO SHOW

FORM The form of the rippled leaves. Also the direction of the shadows helps to convey the form of the leaves.
DEPTH, LIGHT AND TEXTURE

about the artist

Maria Field, self-taught artist, chocoholic and mother of two, was born in Brisbane in 1963. Maria is constantly inspired by light, shadows, colour and the sheer beauty of the world around her, which she strives to portray in all her work. She delights in creating colourful, clean watercolours, loving the challenge of this spontaneous, fresh and exciting medium, with her work encompassing many subjects.

Maria enjoys sharing her love of art by teaching several weekly art classes and giving workshops and demonstrations. She will be tutoring a workshop at the USQ McGregor Summer School in January, 2012.

Since commencing competing in shows in 2003, Maria has won over 46 awards, including 15 Firsts and her works are held in private and corporate collections throughout Australia, England, Canada, South Africa, Italy, Germany and Japan.

MARIA'S WORK CAN BE VIEWED AT:
Gallery Newtown:
176 Brisbane St, Ipswich QLD

Queensland Watercolour Society:
(various venues) QLD

Scattered Arts: 6 Newman Road, Camp Hill QLD

If you have any queries or are interested in class, workshop or demonstration information, please do not hesitate to contact Maria Field at PO Box 2043, Toowong 4066 or email: mfield@cheerful.com Website: www.paradox.com.au/ mariafieldart

If you are interested in participating in Maria's Beginners/ Intermediate workshop at the McGregor Summer School, Toowoomba from 4th to 14th January, 2012 visit www.usq.edu. au/mcgregor/summer or email: mcgregor@usq.edu.au Phone: 07 4631 2755.