

THE #1 WAY To Improve Your Artwork

Oils

Edition

TRANSFORM YOUR OILS
by discovering the single, most common
mistake made by struggling artists.



ArtTutor.com

*Bob Davies and
James Willis*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Bob Davies

Bob has been teaching drawing and painting for more than 20 years. He passionately believes that anyone can create pleasing artwork when they're shown certain fundamental techniques – something that the schooling system sadly fails to do.



Bob is the creator of what is now the number one selling watercolour instruction DVD series in the world, *Watercolour Secrets*, and the accompanying e-book has been downloaded by more than a quarter of a million people worldwide. He's also the co-founder of ArtTutor.com.

You can see an outline of Bob's Watercolour Video course here:
www.arttutor.com/watercolour-painting-foundation-course

James Willis

James works principally in watercolour and oils, taking his inspiration from everyday scenes within an architectural setting. He tries to capture the play of colour and light in people and buildings, and his pictures are instantly recognisable with the bold, dynamic brushstrokes, all conveying a sense of activity to his artwork.



James is the resident artist at Sir John Soane's Museum where he supports the museum's learning programme. He tutors adult learners and young people, inspiring and encouraging with his lively and informative approach.

[You can see James' Impressionistic Oils demonstrations here](#)

You can find out more about Jane at www.jameswillisart.co.uk

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INTRODUCTION

Over many years, I've seen students looking ruefully at their latest painting, wondering why it hasn't turned out as they expected. They've mixed nice colours (not muddy), the perspective has been pretty good and there may have been very little wrong with the composition.

Yet invariably there follows a comment along the lines of:

"...Well, it's OK, but something's missing and I don't know what is or even if I did, how I go about fixing it..."

Now lots of skills and techniques go into making a good painting but there is one that stands out. Most of our art tutors and experienced artists agree it's the number one reason why a piece of art looks poor.

This e-book outlines what that is. More importantly, it shows you how to overcome the problem so you'll never be trapped by it again.

You've probably heard of it already but I'd be willing to suggest that you don't have a real **practical** understanding of how it can affect your paintings and drawings.

Don't under-estimate or dismiss the simplicity of what it is. Without it, your pictures will always remain a tantalizing step away from being the minor masterpieces you strive to achieve.

Read and apply the techniques and exercises in this e-book and you will get to understand:

- Why your pictures lack depth
- Why they look flat, dull and lifeless
- Why an otherwise good composition doesn't seem to work
- Why just using brighter colours seems to have no great effect

And you'll discover:

- How to give your picture punch, vibrancy and impact
- How to create depth and that 3D look that jumps off the page
- Simple ways to plan your picture to avoid problems in the future

This e-book will teach you not just techniques but a state of mind.
So what is this number one mistake?

It's something called tonal or value contrast.

And if your artwork doesn't make proper use of it, it will have no life, no real form or shape, no punch, and certainly no oomph that's going to make you want to eagerly show it off to family and friends.

You can read this e-book from cover-to-cover in under an hour. A lot of people will do just that... and then never actually work through the exercises. Please don't be one of those people! Follow along. Get your pencils and brushes out and work with these techniques. You'll be delighted with the results!



Image 1

This painting has punch! You might think it's the vibrant use of colour and that helps. But more important are the contrasting values and where they've been placed – something you're about to learn all about!

SECTION 1 – IT’S ABOUT CREATING VALUE

1.1 What is value?

You’ll often hear professional artists and art tutors use various terms when they talk about producing a painting, terms like: hues, tone, value, shades, tints, chroma. All of these relate to the wider subject of colour theory.

Don’t worry, the purpose of this e-book *isn’t* to convert you into an expert in colour theory! The goal is to have you producing much more pleasing and impactful artwork by fully understanding a few key principles on a practical level.

Yep, we need to cover a little bit of theory but it won’t be heavy going and we’ll use plenty of real-world examples and exercises so that it really sinks in.

So let’s begin with one of the terms above – ‘**value**’...

Value refers to the lightness or darkness of a colour. So a dark blue has greater value than a light blue. If you imagine a scale of value, black would be at one end of the extreme and white at the other.

1.2 And what is value contrast?

As you know, artists work on a flat 2-dimensional piece of paper or canvas. They have to use *illusion* in order to make objects in their pictures look 3-dimensional and jump off the surface.

They achieve this, to a large extent, through **value contrast**.

We already know that value refers to how light or dark a colour is, so let’s get clear on what ‘contrast’ means...

Contrast, in the wider sense, simply refers to the difference or similarity between two or more things we compare. High contrast means there’s a lot of difference. Low contrast means there’s very little difference.

If you’ve ever played around with the contrast button on your TV set, you’ll know the sort of effect it can have...

Image 2 – the effect of changing the contrast control on your TV from low, to normal, to high contrast



In your artwork, all that value contrast refers to is the difference in lightness and darkness between various parts of the picture. Look at the two boxes I've drawn below:



Image 3

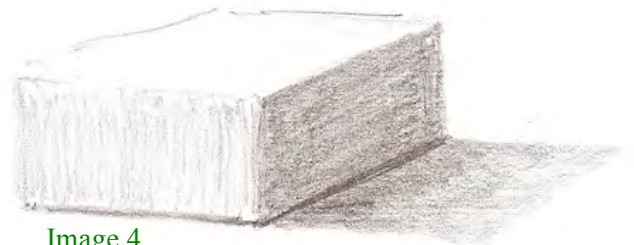


Image 4

The top and sides of the box in Image 3 are similar in value (they're about the same darkness or lightness as each other). So we can say that Image 3 has low value contrast overall.

In Image 4, the sides of the box are obviously very different in their value. We can say that this box has high value contrast.

It probably doesn't need me to point it out, but can you see how Image 4 looks much more 3-dimensional and solid? It jumps off the page.

The number one reason why poor-looking artwork looks, well, less than inspiring is because it makes poor use of value contrast. Poor use of value contrast will make an image look flat and 2-dimensional instead of punchy and solid.

1.3 Value contrast applies to colour too

Most newcomers can grasp this concept of value contrast when producing a black and white picture - such as a pencil or charcoal drawing for example. It's obvious that using lighter and darker values is the only way to separate different shapes in a picture that has no colour.

However, in my experience, struggling artists aren't nearly bold enough in the *range* of values they use – their darkest darks aren't dark enough and their lightest lights aren't light enough. The result is often a flat-looking pencil sketch.

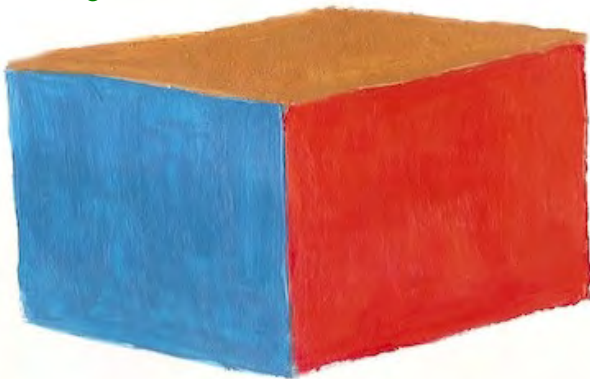
We'll address this problem with practical examples and exercises in Section 3 so that it's never an issue in your artwork again.

But to finish this section, I want to briefly address what happens when you add colour into the mix – because that's when I think problems really start to occur.

By now you know that a dark blue has greater value than, say, a light yellow. But (and this is crucial) did you know that two completely different colours that you might *think* will clearly stand out from each other could actually have the same value?

Let's look at an example...

Image 5

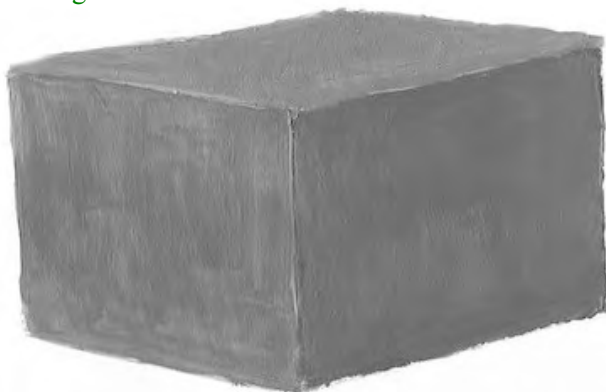


In terms of value, you would say blue is usually darker than red, and red is certainly darker than yellow. The sides of this box in Image 5 are obviously easily distinguishable from one another.

But there seems to be something not quite right here. The colours are bold but despite that, it seems a bit dull and lifeless.

In Image 6, let's strip away the colour to reveal the value in greyscale...

Image 6



Straight away, you can see the value of the three colours – Cadmium Red, Cerulean Blue and Yellow Ochre in this case – are identical.

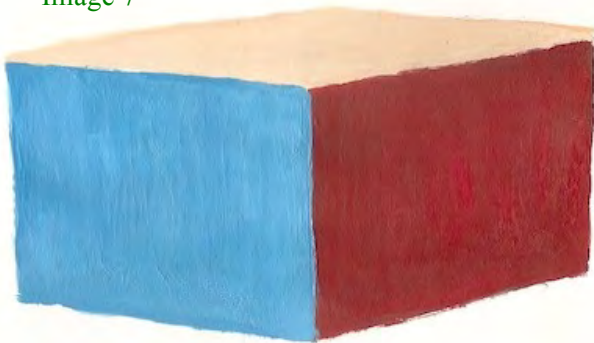
The eye can be fooled by a variety of colours being the same, or a very similar, value. Sure, a Pthalo or Ultramarine

Blue is going to be stronger and darker than a Lemon Yellow, no matter how strong you paint the latter...

But when you start mixing your colours on the palette to create new ones or to make them lighter or darker, this is when you need to take into account how their value will fit into the overall picture, rather than merely concentrating on what sort of colour you create.

Let's have another go at our coloured box and the same three colours in Image 7...

Image 7

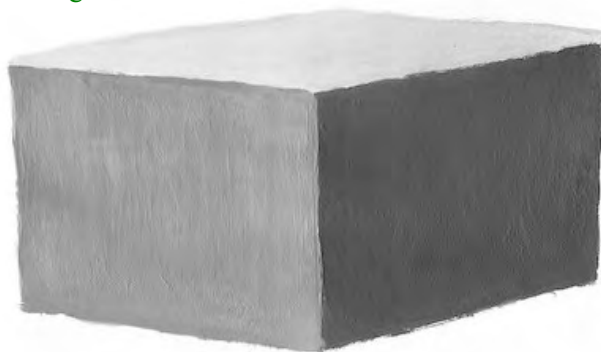


This time I've darkened the red, slightly lightened the blue and significantly lightened the yellow.

Now the shapes look like a box, with form and light and shade, even without any shadow being cast.

You get the impression that strong light is falling on the top, with a bit less light on the blue side and the red side being in deep shadow. This happens irrespective of the colours I've used because I've adjusted their value to 'create' the shape of the box. To confirm this, look at the new box in greyscale in Image 8...

Image 8



Notice how this box looks much more 3-dimensional?

If you don't understand or check the value of the colours you place on your painting (and where you're placing them), the result is likely to be a flat, lifeless image that you won't be inspired to show off to friends

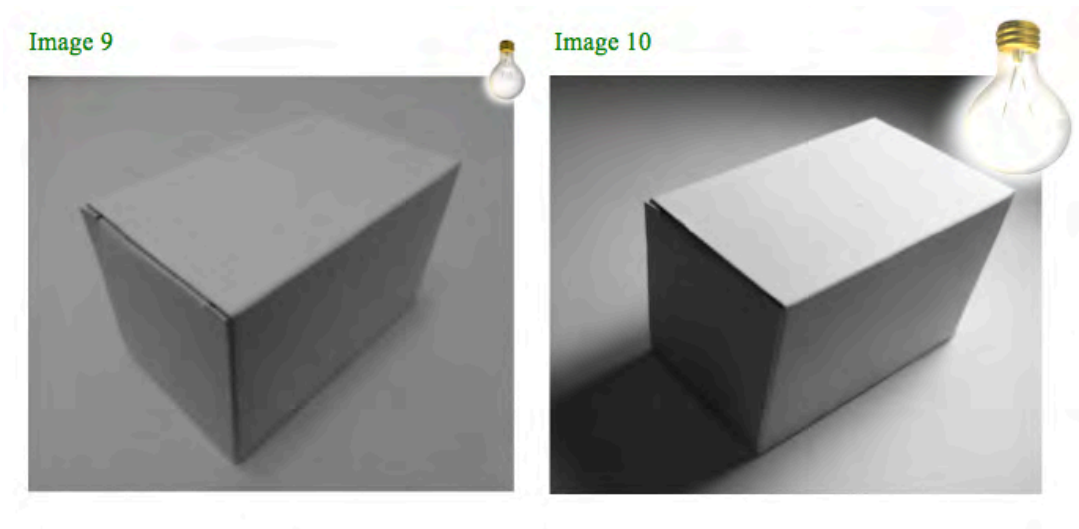
or family.

1.4 Form and viewing distance

In our example of a box with high value contrast above, the different values we used for the three sides of the box reflect the light source -

the way light strikes one side of the box and puts the others in relative shadow.

The stronger the light source, the starker the contrast will be between the lights and darks. Compare these two photos (Images 9 & 10) of a simple white box...



In this sense, we are using value contrast to create form and give an object on a flat piece of paper a 3-dimensional look. Incidentally, a really wide range between the lightest lights and darkest darks, gives the impression of a stronger light source – something we'll look at later on.

Aside from creating form, we also use contrasting values to give an image a sense of **depth and distance**. Landscapes illustrate this point really well...

As an object moves farther into the distance it will have increasingly less value, in other words it becomes lighter. Even a very dark element (like a slate roof on a cottage) will appear relatively light when it's far enough away.

You can show this in a representational form by looking at the following two photos (Images 11 & 12)...



Image 11



Image 12

If you painted a landscape, you'd probably have these three elements of sky, middle distance and foreground. In this case they're represented by streaks of blue, green and brown.

However, they're all a pretty similar value (look at the greyscale version next to it).

Now let's adjust them, in Images 13 and 14, to better represent distant sky, middle distance trees and a foreground field...



Image 13



Image 14

See how the adjustment of the sky and the tree colours has given, even in this abstract example, a much greater degree of depth and distance. It's even more apparent when you compare the two black and white versions.

Moving on to something more realistic, take a look at the two sketch paintings below in Images 15 and 16...



Image 15



Image 16

Image 15 - The values of the near hills are actually lighter compared to the distant hills. It's hard to distinguish between the middle distance hills because they are the same value.

Image 16 - The values become progressively lighter into the distance. The edges of the middle distance hills are darker than the hills behind them to create contrast and separation.

With that bit of theory under our hat, let's look at 3 simple tools you can use to help you see values within a painting much more easily...

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SECTION 2 – TOOLS TO CHECK VALUE

2.1 Squint and defocus your eyes

People often squint slightly when they struggle to read something because it's slightly out of focus for them. Subtle squinting reduces the extraneous light and can make a point of focus sharper and clearer.

However, if you squint a bit harder and let your eyes defocus slightly, you'll notice that your picture of the world becomes less detailed. Stripping out the detail allows you to see masses of colour and value (those light and dark areas) much more easily.

Here's what squinting and defocusing your eyes should make things look like...

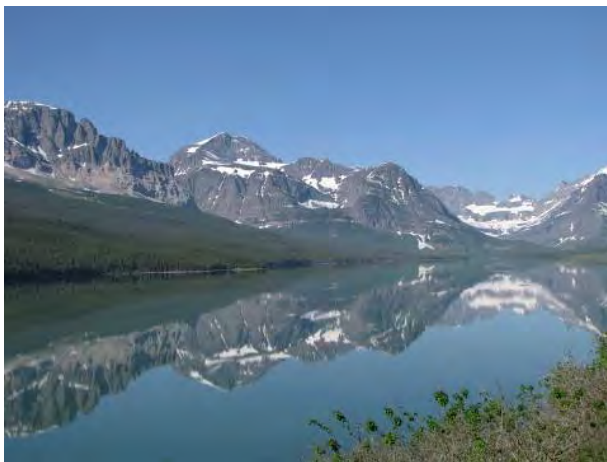


Image 17 – before squinting



Image 18 – after squinting (less detail, darks are darker, lights are lighter)

Squinting and checking for values (both in your own artwork as it progresses and your reference material) is something you should make a habit of. You really can't do too much of it during the painting process.

Let's move on to tool number 2...

2.2 Use a grey scale



If you find squinting / defocusing your eyes doesn't make the various values of an image clear enough for you, you should try using a grey scale.

In fact, even if squinting works well for you, a grey scale is so easy to make and so useful it's well worth having one by your side whenever you paint.

What is a grey scale?

For our purposes, it's simply a strip of card or paper with 5-7 values of grey that range from very light grey to a very dark grey.

I created the one on the left with acrylic paint but you can use any paint medium or a graphite pencil using varying degrees of pressure. It's roughly 8" x 1.5".

We're going to use this grey scale to examine a reference photo of Stalker Castle (Image 19) in Scotland and then create a small sketch of the castle itself.

Image 19



We're not going to work from colour just yet, but I want to draw your attention to a couple of things in the colour photo to the left...

Notice the distant hills, how pale they appear. This occurs quite naturally with

dust particles in the atmosphere and makes features paler and less distinct the further away they are.

Notice also how you can clearly see one side of the roof is lighter than the other because of the way the light is hitting the castle.

Exercise: How To Use A Grey Scale

Print this page out and cut out the grey scale. Use a 'good' or 'best' quality print settings rather than 'draft'.

Image 20

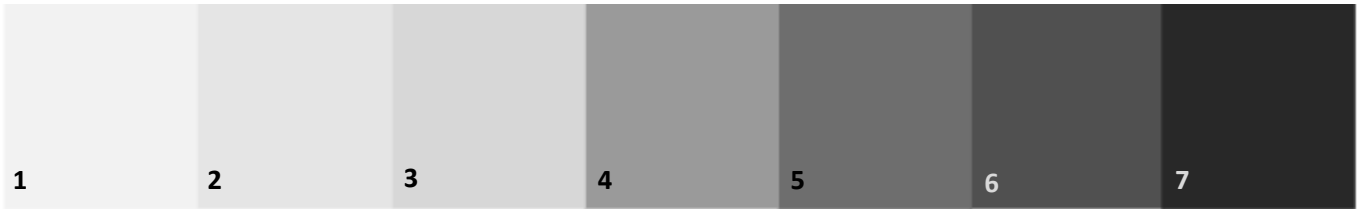


Image 21

Instructions

Place your grey scale (Image 20) at the side of the black and white print out of the castle (Image 21). You're not allowed to pick it up yet though.

Look at the black and white photograph, screwing up your eyes to defocus them, and try to gauge which value on your grey scale most closely matches the following parts of the picture:

- The blue patch of sky above the castle
- The distant hills
- The promontory (darker land mass just below the distant hills)
- The main castle walls (both sides)
- The water by the canoeist

- The grassy area to the bottom left of the castle
- The castle doors and windows
- The floating seaweed

You won't get perfect matches – just choose the number on the scale you think looks about right. There are probably about 20 or 30 subtly different values even in this photo but you can simplify them down to the seven on the grey scale.

Once you've tried to gauge the value by eye, pick up your grey scale and hold it next the various elements of the image. Here's my attempt...

Image 22



Image 23



Image 24

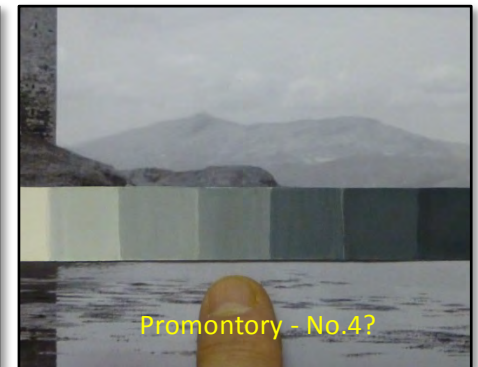


Image 25

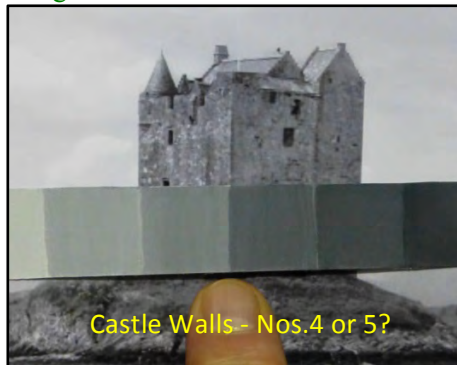


Image 26

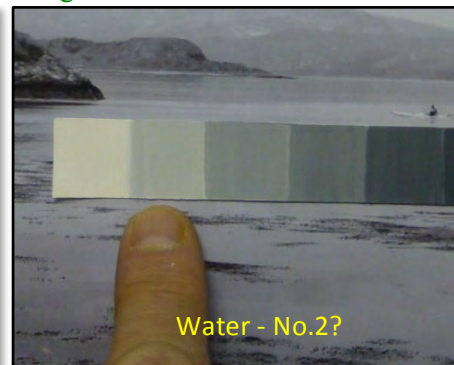


Image 27

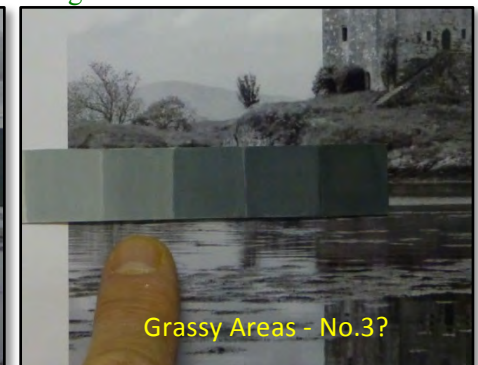


Image 28



Image 29

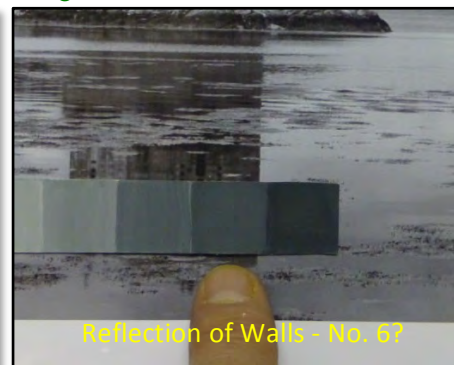


Image 30



So how did you fare? Were there elements of the picture that you found difficult to gauge until you used the scale? Here's one thing you may have noticed...

Note the castle walls

The two main aspects of the castle walls are quite similar in tone (Image 31). Even when you screw your eyes up, there doesn't appear to be a great deal of difference.

This is where you, as an artist, have a big advantage over a photographer. You have the opportunity to strengthen or lighten one aspect of the castle to create a greater sense of dimension (Image 32).

If it's a bright, summer's scene you want to recreate, you can go to town on this and literally turn on the sunlight. If you're capturing a moodier, more overcast atmosphere you can be more subtle.

Image 31

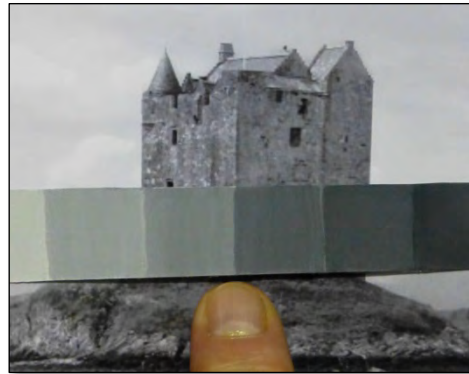
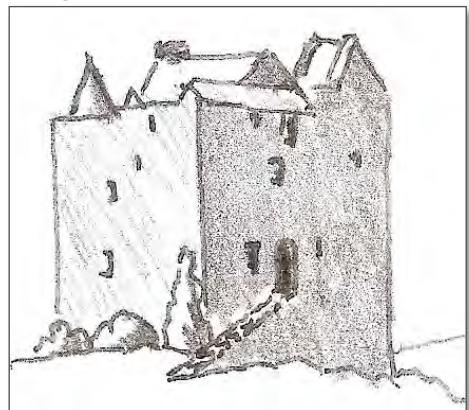


Image 32



A grey scale is a very handy little tool to have by your side – whether it's in your studio or out in the field. Keep several of them handy. Use one at every opportunity. Very soon, you'll hone an expert eye for picking out subtle (and stark) differences in value that give your artwork that master quality.

2.3 Make your own 'redeye' filter

Even if you find that squinting and the grey scale allows you to easily see blocks of value, I highly recommend you out try this low-tech tool. I call it my 'redeye filter'.

What you need

A piece of red cellophane - the sort of thing you find in a florist or a sheet of red acetate or even a clear, red file cover. You only need a few square inches.

If it's quite sturdy (like a sheet of acetate) it will work as it is. If it's flimsy like cellophane, make a simple frame out of card and tape the red plastic sheet to it.

If you struggle to find anything local, do a Google or Amazon search for 'red cellophane' or 'red acetate'. You'll be able to pick up something for next to nothing.

How it works

Hold your Redeye Checker over various parts of a painting or reference photograph. The transparent red will 'lose' most of the colour but will immediately highlight contrast values. Adjacent parts of the picture with similar values will blend into one mass.

This is the equivalent of screwing up your eyes but is easier to check specific parts of your picture. Try it on your existing artwork. If you still have a reference photo you used for a particular piece of art, try it on that too. Is there a difference between the photo and your rendition?

Image 33



Image 34



SECTION 3 – MONOCHROME EXERCISES

3.1 Exercise 1 – Castle drawing

In this first exercise, you're going to produce a pencil drawing of the castle photograph we examined earlier.

What we are NOT aiming for is a detailed, life-like drawing. The entire purpose of this exercise is to get you to 'look past' the details and see overall values.

You're going to make meticulous use of both the grey scale and squinting or defocusing your eyes. If you don't I can almost guarantee what will happen (answer at the end of this exercise!).

You won't have to be this meticulous with your grey scale for future drawings or paintings, but I strongly encourage you to take lots of time checking the strength of light and dark areas for this one. Doing so will really help this habit and skill to sink in.

I'll be creating the drawing along with you and I'll provide plenty of guidance along the way. So grab yourself a beverage of choice and let's make a start...

What you'll need:

- A sheet of drawing paper, A5 is big enough. Printer paper is okay, but a heavier weight, smooth drawing paper is better.
- An HB, B and 3B or 4B pencil.
- A putty eraser. Nothing like being optimistic hey!
- A print-out of the next page of this e-book, which contains the line drawing and reference photo.

Line drawing, reference photograph and grey scale

You'll find these on the next page. The line drawing will print on to half a sheet of A4 printer paper. Trace your printed line drawing on to your drawing paper (see my [Drawing Foundation Course](#) at ArtTutor for a video lesson on this).

You'll want to then cut out the grey scale strip.

And you're good to go!

1

2

3

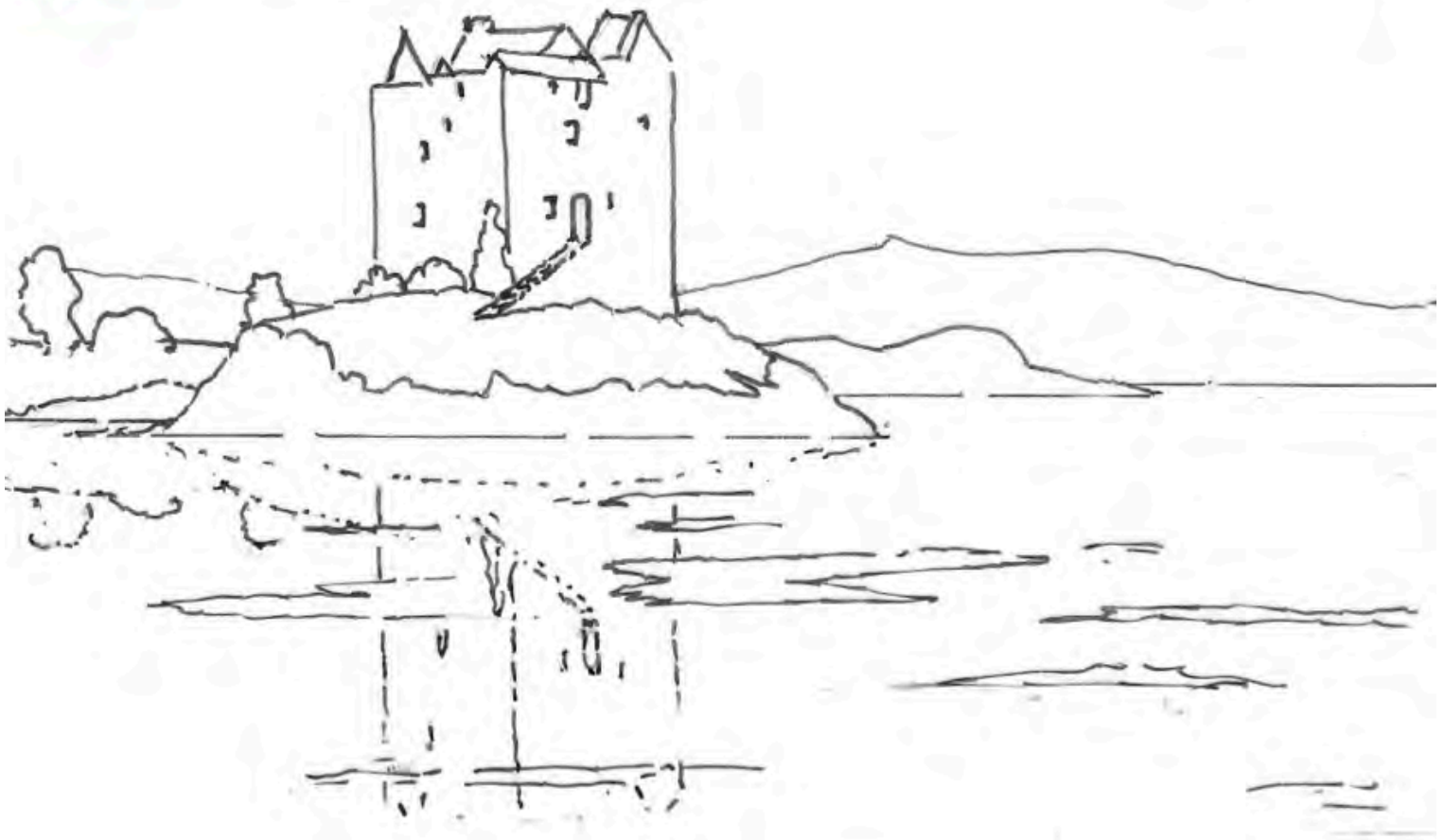
4

5

6

7

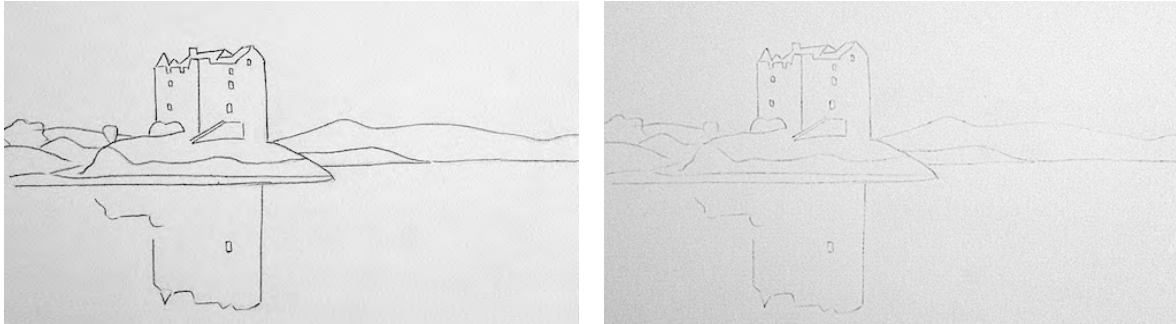
Image 35



Preparation

The first thing I've done is lightened off my line drawing using a putty eraser. It probably won't matter for the castle walls, but the distant mountains will look like they have an outline and this can distort your judgement of the correct value in this area. You'll want to do this whenever you trace a line drawing for a watercolour painting.

Image 36



Sky & Water Area

Look at your reference photo and really defocus / squint your eyes. What value on our grey scale would you say the sky is **overall**?

Overall is the key word here – yes there are patches of cloud and darker areas but if you squint enough and step back from the photo, you should be able to choose a single value that roughly represents the entire area.

I'm going to choose a value #2 and using my HB pencil. I'm holding the pencil almost parallel to the paper and using the side edge of the graphite with the lightest of diagonal strokes to lay down the minimum amount of tone I can. I'll do the same for the water using horizontal strokes.

Image 37

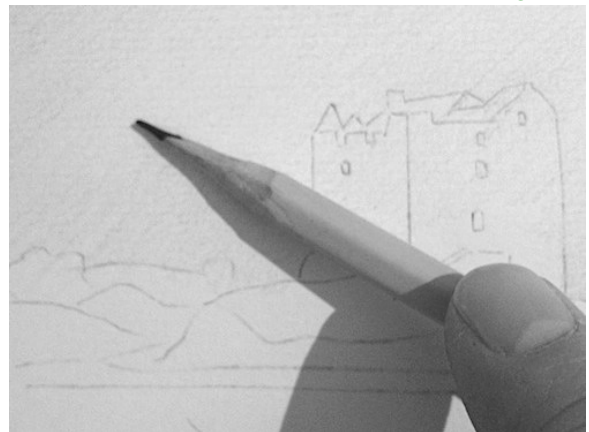
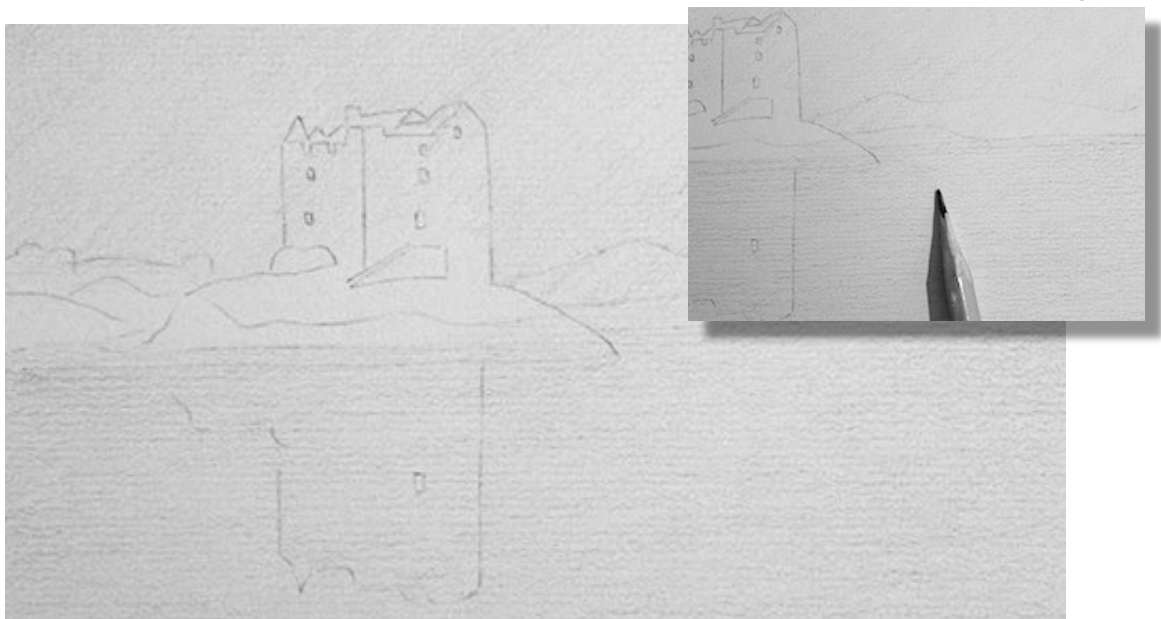


Image 38

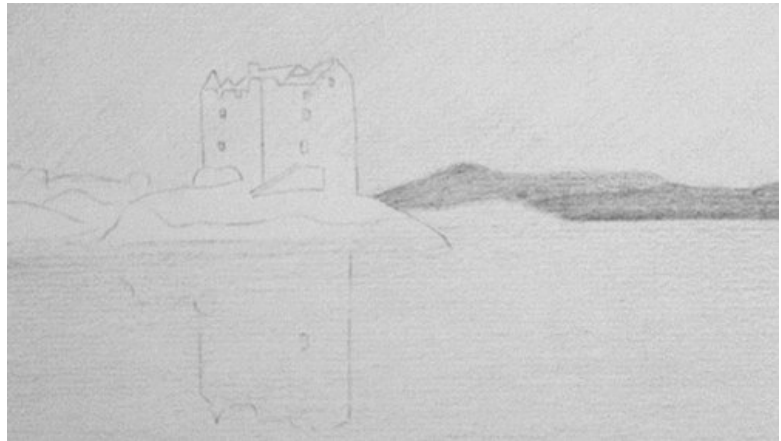


Notice how the water is a slightly darker value than the sky? Again, ignore the details of the seaweed and ripples and cloud reflections. Stand back from the photo, defocus your eyes and compare the area by the canoeist to the sky above her.

Distant Hills and Promontory

Image 39

What value would you choose for the distant hills as a whole? They are slightly darker to the right but I'm going for #3 with my HB.

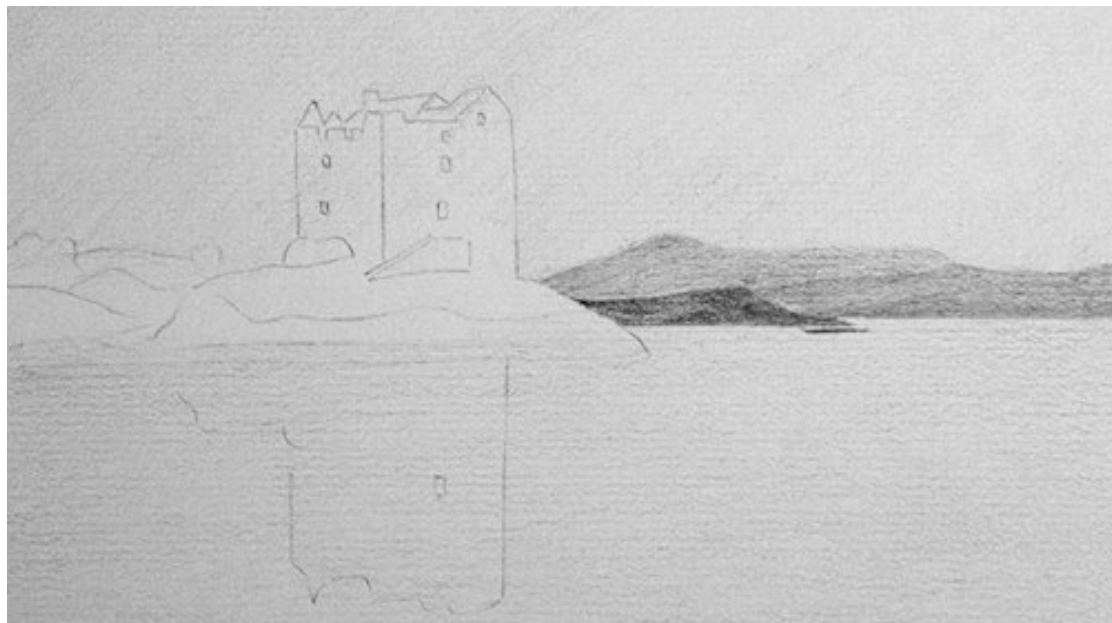


Place your grey scale on a bit of scrap paper and shade a small swatch of graphite directly below the value #3 square. Learn how much pressure and how much graphite you need to apply to create value #3.

Now add this to your distant hills.

For the smaller promontory I'm using value #4. Again, ignore any rocky undulations and details. Just block the area in with your HB. Oh, and while you're doing that make a mental note of whether the promontory is a stronger or weaker value than the grassy bank of the castle.

Image 40



Castle Walls

This is where almost everyone (in fact, everyone) makes the same mistake. Here's what I'd like you to do (and please don't cheat!)...

On a scrap of paper, WITHOUT using your grey scale or squinting your eyes, lay down a block of tone with your pencil that you think is about the correct value for the left hand castle wall.



Image 41

Blur your eyes. Look at the right hand edge of the castle wall in particular. Look at the contrast with the sky. My castle drawing on the top needs to be at least a value darker.

Again, ignore the details of brickwork and weathering and just lay down an overall value on your paper.

Now measure both the wall in the photo and your block of tone with your grey scale (and squint your eyes). Literally everyone sees the wall much lighter than it is. Why?

Because you can't help but seeing the details – the light bricks in particular. But details come later. The overall value for the castle walls is about a #4.5 on my scale.

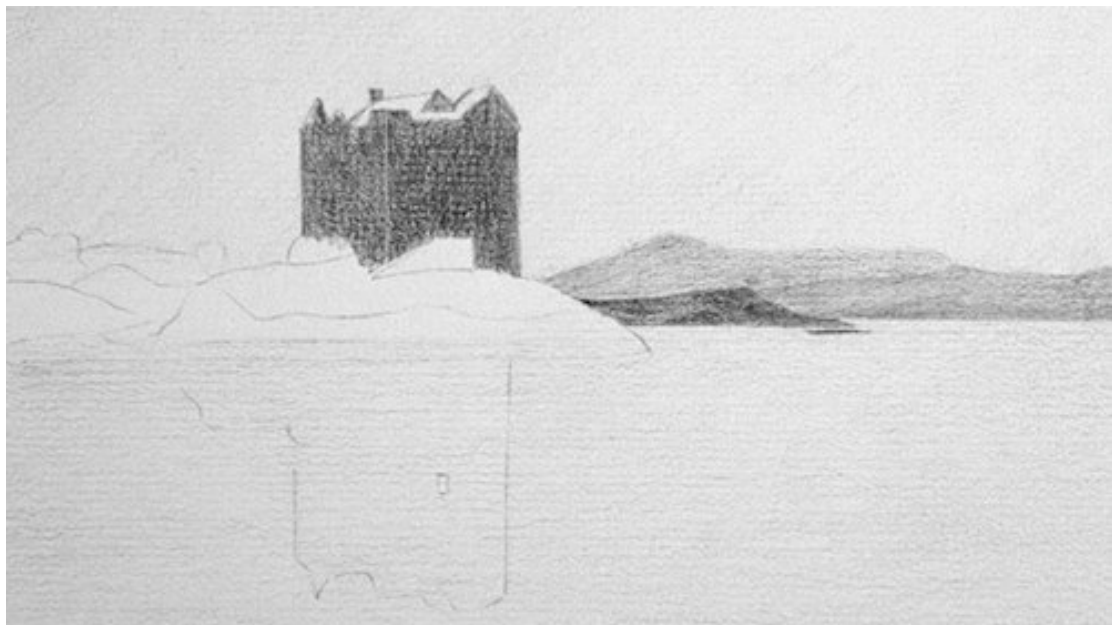


Image 42

Do my walls in Image 42 look too dark to you? I think most people would say so...



Image 43

You can clearly see here they're not! I used a B pencil for this.

Grassy Banks, Rocky Area and Reflection

By now you should be getting the idea, so I'll move quickly through the next few sections...

The grassy banks are slightly darker than the castle. Let's go with a value #5 using the B pencil. What about the white rocky area just above the water?

This is another area I can see where my students *assume* rather than *observe*. You know they're a chalky white colour in real life so the temptation is to keep them quite light.

Blur your eyes to meld the lights and darks of the rocks into more of a single value. Darker than the sky? Absolutely. Darker than the water beneath the canoeist? Maybe about the same so let's go with value #3. Just block in the area for now – we can pick out lights with our eraser and add in some shadow detail later.



Image 44

For dark area at the bottom of the rocks, I'm pressing very firmly with a B pencil.

The castle reflection is an interesting one. I hope you can see it's a noticeably darker value than the castle itself. Reflections tend to mute value contrast – in other words there is less distinction between lights and darks.

You can see a clear example of this by comparing the very dark doorway. See how it's less distinguishable in the reflection? It's slightly lighter and the brick wall is slightly darker.

Windows & Other Darks

Using the 4B pencil we can now add the darkest darks – value #7.

I actually erased back some of the graphite I'd laid down previously over the window and doorway areas because this allows me to achieve a darker dark with a bit more of a tooth underneath.

Image 45



At this stage the exercise is complete. Not a particularly impressive piece of artwork but it's given me plenty of practice looking for and gauging values.

I'm happy that the values are reasonably accurate and now it's time to have a bit of fun...

Finishing Touches (optional)

Using my putty eraser and moulding it to a point, I'm going to pick out some subtle lights on the distant hills, grassy bank, rocks and castle walls. I'll accentuate these and bring back the overall value by adding some darks.

I'll also knead the eraser into a fine 'strip' (Image 46) and pull out some ripples on the water. Again, I'll define these with some darks and add a few more bits and pieces of interest.



Image 46

And here's the finished drawing in Image 47.



Image 47

One last thing

I chose this photograph because unless you really do squint your eyes and use your grey scale, it will catch you out. However, from an artistic point of view we can improve on the photo...

The two aspects of the castle walls are very similar in value. By adjusting one side darker or lighter we can create greater form and a bit more interest (something that would be difficult for the photographer to do).

Let's see what difference creating some contrast between the two walls makes in Image 48...



Image 48

Please do have a go at this exercise. Remember, it's not about producing a highly refined drawing - it's a practical way for you to train your eye to see values relative to one another.

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3.2 Exercise 2 – Monochrome painting: Lake Garda

Using graphite pencil is a great way to start honing your eye to really see the various values in an image. All you need to do is increase or decrease the pressure you apply and you have an infinite number of values at your disposal.

Now, let's progress to the next stage and begin to apply this to oil painting...

Image 49



In the next exercise, you're going to produce a monochrome painting of Lake Garda in Italy (Image 49), demonstrated by one of our ArtTutor instructors, James Willis. You'll be using just white and Prussian blue paint.

Now invariably, students think of monochrome as black and white with various shades of grey in between. However, you could use red, blue, purple, brown, green or any colour, as long as it is capable of giving you several variations of value from dark to light.

The beauty of this process is that, with a little practice, it becomes second nature to select or adjust the values in monochrome and mentally translate them into colours.

In fact, many professional artists will produce a monochromatic painting and use it as a reference when producing their final piece. The painting below (Images 50 & 51) are from one of our ArtTutor video lessons and you can see how instructor [Joanne Thomas](#) has used her monochromatic study to great effect!

Image 50



Image 51



In a monochrome watercolour painting the single colour is diluted with water but when using oil paints the colour is lightened by mixing in white paint (in this example, Titanium White). The mixtures are thinned with a very small amount of turpentine and linseed oil.

In this example I am using Prussian blue oil paint because it starts out looking dark straight from the tube. If you chose a colour looks fairly light to begin with (yellow for example) you will limit the range of dark shades you can make once white paint is added to your mixtures.

Remember! The paint will only be as dark as it comes out of the tube and cannot get any darker by adding more colour. Some other suitable colours for monochrome painting are French ultramarine blue, burnt umber, alizarin crimson, any of the neutral greys or tints.

What you'll need:

- A support – this is the name for the surface you are going to paint on. It can be a canvas, board or oil painting paper. For this exercise I used a sheet of ordinary cartridge paper which has been coated with a layer of acrylic gesso to prevent the oil paint seeping into the paper.
(You can buy acrylic gesso in small pots from your art shop. It is a good way to prepare any painting surface for oil paint and can even be used on newspaper for practice exercises.)
- Oil Paint: one colour – I used Prussian blue; one white – I used titanium white
- Thinners: turpentine, linseed oil (optional)
- A selection of oil painting brushes: I used three flat hogshairs (sizes 8, 6, 3), and small flat mongoose (sizes 6, 2)
- Palette or plate and palette knife: for mixing your paint
- Rag and newspaper: for cleaning up
- A print out of the Lake Garda photograph from page 32

Mapping out your design

For this painting I chose to map out areas of tone as different shapes which will then lock together like a jigsaw puzzle, rather than making an outline drawing to be filled in with colour. In this way the painting will build up in layers. It is a good way to learn to use oil paints but if you prefer you may make a light outline drawing in pencil or charcoal on your support.

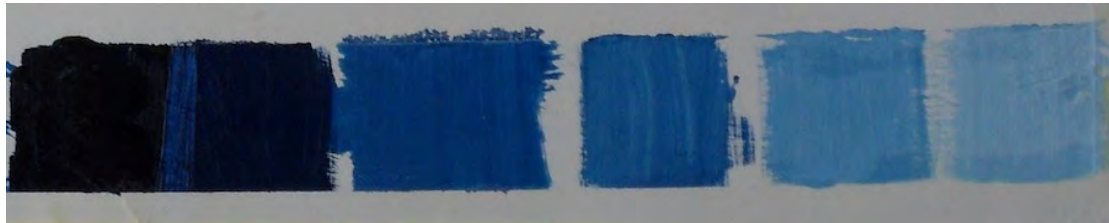
You can use the line drawing of Lake Garda on page 31 in the book and trace it onto your support to A4 size. This will be fine but is a little small for working in oil paints so you might like to try and enlarge the drawing onto a minimum of A3. This will give you more room to work with the paint and different sizes of brushes. And it's more fun!!

I enlarged the scene by eye to approximately 50cm x 32cm.

Monochrome Shades

Here is the monochrome scale that we're going to use as a starting point for our painting. The darkest shade is Prussian blue straight from the tube without the addition of titanium white.

Image 52



To make the lighter tones I gradually added titanium white in increasing proportions to make five different shades. Our seventh tone will be the pure titanium white.

Unlike watercolour, which dries a shade lighter than your mixtures, oil paint dries more or less exactly the same shade that you have made. Consequently you do not need to compensate for this when mixing your tones.

It's good practice to mix up all your shades before you start painting as the oil paint will not dry out during the painting day. This means everything can be prepared before you start painting and can be left overnight if necessary to be continued the next day. (If you are going to leave your painting for more than 12 hours, you might want to cover your palette with cling film first.)

If you want to know more about the properties of oil paint, including how long you can leave it uncovered, take a look at Bob's [Oil Painting Foundation Course](#) on ArtTutor.com.

Image 53

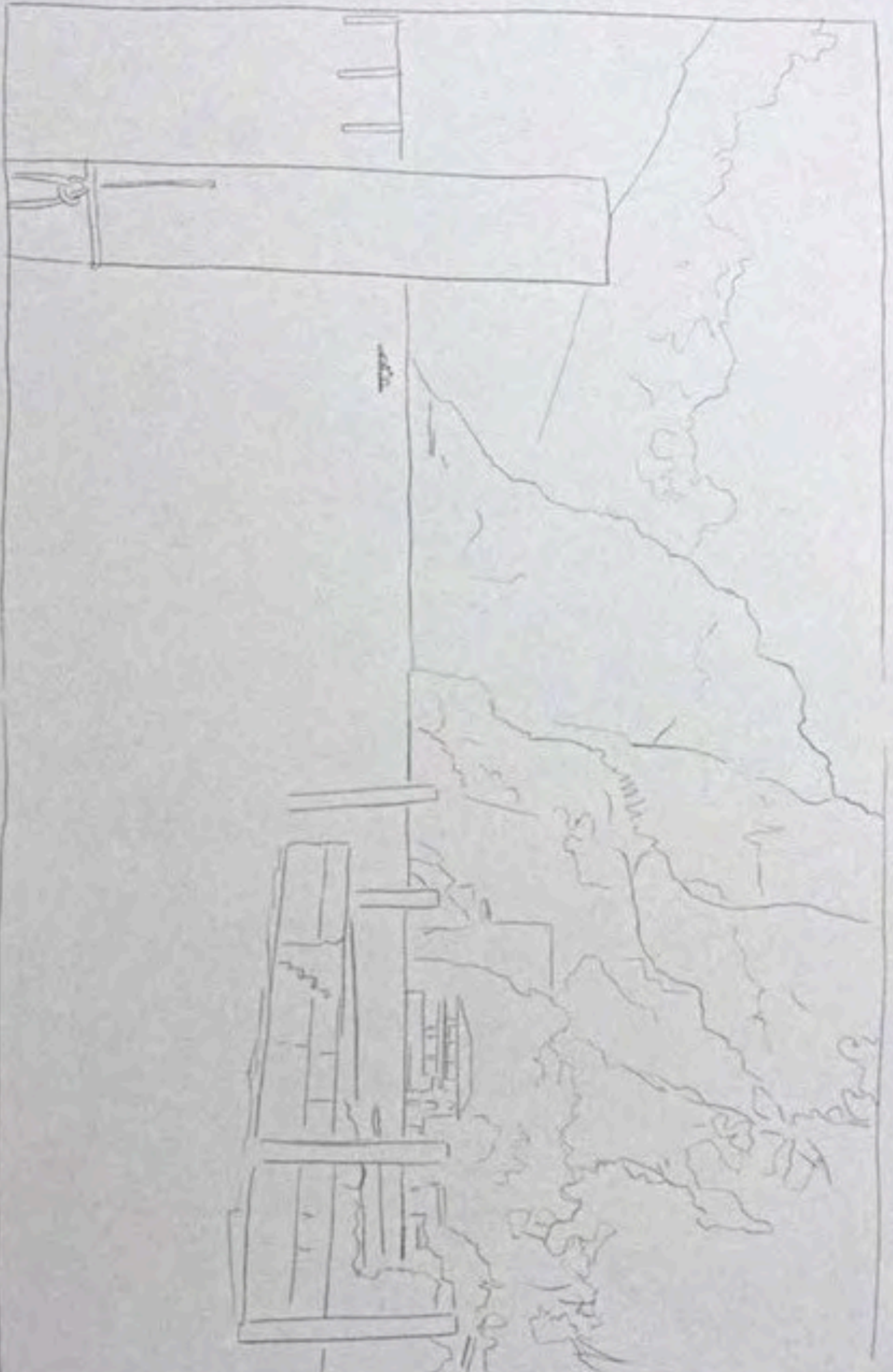




Image 54

[Riva del Garda](#). Used with kind permission from [Geomangio](#).

Tonal Values

In a watercolour painting the lightest shade is usually the white of the paper. This is left unpainted and then layers of light shades are built up until the darkest tones are added near the end of the painting process.

In oil painting it is NOT usual for the white of the canvas or board to be left unpainted for your lightest shades.

In oil painting the traditional approach is to start with the dark shades and add the lighter ones until you paint the white highlights at the end over the top of the darker shades.

We're going to start by using the dark middle range of shades and making adjustments using the darkest shade (neat Prussian blue) and white highlights at the end.

For this exercise the painting will be built up more or less in one go. For this reason we'll apply the paint in fairly thin layers but with good even coverage. If you prefer to build up your painting more slowly you can wait for different layers to dry before progressing on to each next stage.

A small amount of turpentine has been mixed in with the paint to thin it slightly. Be careful not to add too much otherwise the paint will be too diluted and not cover your support very well. The paint should be thick enough to cover in an even layer without becoming transparent and watercolour-like.

Stage 1

Image 55



This is the first stage of the painting of Lake Garda. I started with the two darkest shades from our range to map out the strongest areas of the scene using a large flat hogshair brush (number 8). The strong dark shape of the mooring post and the jetty with water below will be the darkest areas of the painting. These have been painted with shade 6.

We're going to reserve the neat Prussian blue for some extra darks later.

The areas of post, and right hand foreground are all in the same shade and quite loosely painted using patches of colour from the large brush. The paint is applied quickly and not very thickly so that more paint can be added on top later.

The background mountains are blocked in with shade 5 using the same sized brush. Notice how some small areas are left unpainted so that the surface does not get too full at this early stage. This helps further layers stay clean when they are added at a later stage.

Stage 2

Image 56



Using the neat Prussian Blue (shade 7) we're going to add in the really strong dark areas using a smaller flat hogshair brush: the tree has been added over the lighter shade of the background.

Be careful when doing this as some of the background paint might come through your dark shade and mix a lighter tone. If this happens the best thing to do is to wait until the layer is dry (it will take about a day) and add some more dark on top.

The dark reflections in the water below the jetty can also be added at this stage. Notice how little detail you need in order to create a very loose impression of this atmospheric scene.

Stage 3

Image 57



Image 58



Using a small flat mongoose brush (number 2) we're going to paint shade 5 round the tree to define its shape.

We can also paint some shapes within the tree to describe the spaces between the leaves and lower branches – remember we do this by painting over the darker layers.

Take your time painting this to get a good shape and a suitable amount of detail. It is important to use a very light touch and not to pull the paint too much. If you work the surface too much the underneath layer will start to come through and the effect of layered tones will become muddled and mixed up.

Stage 4

Image 59



Let's take shades 5 and 4 and start to build up the background mountains. This is where we can use the different tones to create layers of hills in the landscape. When painting these hills, make sure that as you move towards the distance, your paint gets lighter.

Try not to paint each mountain as one homogenous mass. Study your reference photograph and see how within each shape there are a variety of tones. See how I've darkened the top edge of each range so that it stands out in front of the one behind.

Gradually the mountains will get lighter and lighter as they get further away from the viewer's eye. This is called aerial perspective and is the way tones change over distance due to the atmosphere in front of them.

Stage 5

Image 60



Let's get some more definition in our hills. We'll take our small mongoose brush and add in the lighter areas on the tops of the background trees and other landscape features.

Shade 3 works really well here, but to add a bit of interest, you might want to vary it slightly.

Stage 6

We'll build up the mountains in the distance now. Use shade 4 and 3 to block in some flatter shapes.

Image 61



Stage 7

Image 62



Using a large flat hogshair brush (size 6) we'll paint the lake as a flat area of shade 4. Vertical patches of colour have been dragged down the page to keep the whole area as one flat colour: this will give the water a calm feeling before the waves and ripples will be added later.

Stage 8

Once the first layer of paint for the water is completed, we can paint darker ripples and some lighter highlights near the horizon to give the water a sense of movement and depth.

Image 63



First the waves in the water near the front of the painting are added using shade 5 on a flat mongoose brush (size 4). Drag your brush in a wavy line over the flat area of water.

For the darker waves on the right hand side of the painting we can use shade 6 – you can overlap these shapes to add more movement to the water.

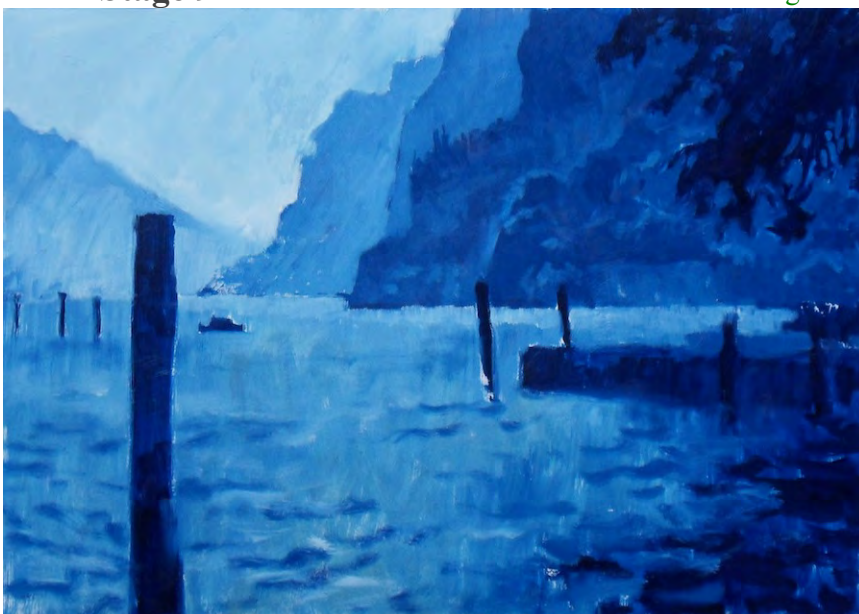
Image 64



Take your flat hogshair brush (number 5) and make tiny rows of vertical patches at the horizon. These represent the sunlight catching the water on the horizon of the lake and will give the whole painting more depth.

Stage 9

Image 65



We'll paint the sky using shade 2. This is the nearest shade to white (shade 1) and is one of the lightest areas in the painting. We can use a large flat brush cover the area in one layer. Notice how this brings the whole image together.

Stage 10

Image 66



Now we've got the sky blocked in, we can start to add some definition by painting in some clouds. We'll use pure titanium white (shade 1) on a small round mongoose brush for this to ensure the paint can be applied gently without scratching off the blue shade underneath. (If you're using a hogshair brush take care for this reason).

If you don't dilute your white paint at this point, you'll find it much easier to get good coverage over the blue of the sky.

Image 67

Stage 11

We're onto our final stage – the highlights!



Image 68



Using the same small brush and pure white we can dab on small areas of white where the water sparkles in the dark reflection below the jetty.

Image 69



Finally extra white highlights are added to help define the edge of the jetty and its steps, the background building and some small bright patches of light in the tree and landscape features.

Image 70



Lake Garda by James Willis

If you've completed this monochrome study by James and my Stalker Castle exercise from earlier, you should start to feel really comfortable identifying and reproducing solid value contrast. Just as importantly...

Actually *doing* these exercises will help the concept sink in and become second nature. Reading about it isn't enough; I really encourage you to go through these two exercises before moving on to colour. Which is what we'll look at next...

SECTION 4 – COLOUR EXERCISES

Look at this image of a red and yellow square next to each other...

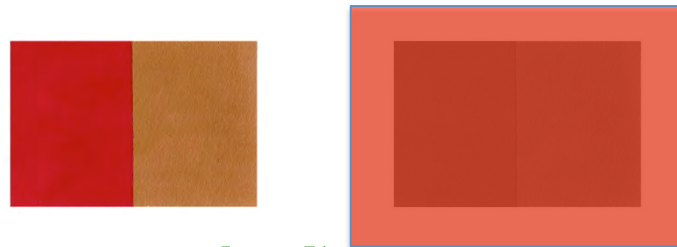


Image 71

In colour, these two squares are easily distinguished from one another. However, if I hold a red piece of acetate over them (my redevye filter) you can see how they merge into one solid block almost.

You might ask the question “*when would I ever view a painting through a red piece of plastic*” and you wouldn’t. But even though an observer’s eye might be able to distinguish between the various shapes in your picture, it will look flat and anaemic.

Moreover, standing at even a moderate distance from a painting has an effect of muting the colours and I’ll guarantee that a picture made up of similar values will look uninspiring at best, from any sort of viewing distance!

4.1 Exercise 1 – Value match real objects

This is a simple and fun exercise and also very useful at training your eye to see the tonal value in colour.

What you’ll need:

- 3 everyday objects. Anything small that you can place on the desk in front of you. In my example I’m using a lemon, a tea cup and a golf tee peg.
- Your chosen painting surface, paints and brush of choice.
- A grey or monochrome scale (a colour scale will provide more of a challenge than a grey scale, so give that a go!)

Image 72



Step 1

- Place one of the objects in front of you.
- Look at the object and squint / defocus your eyes.
- Notice the values of various parts of the object – the shadow areas, any creases or folds, highlights, indentations, details etc.
- Identify in your mind the darkest value and the lightest value.
- Hold your grey / monochrome scale against various parts of the object to confirm the values.
- Repeat this for each of your 3 objects.

Step 2

- Pick the darkest part of one of the objects. For example, I'm looking at the pith at the end of the lemon.
- Mix a colour that you think is the correct value for this darkest area. Don't worry about getting a perfect colour match; your aim is to get an accurate value match.
- Add a swatch of your mixed colour to your paper or canvas (if you're using watercolours, allows this to dry fully).
- Now use your grey / monochrome scale to see how accurate you were.
- Repeat this for the lightest part of the object.
- Repeat a third time for a mid value.
- Finally, repeat the process for the remaining two objects.

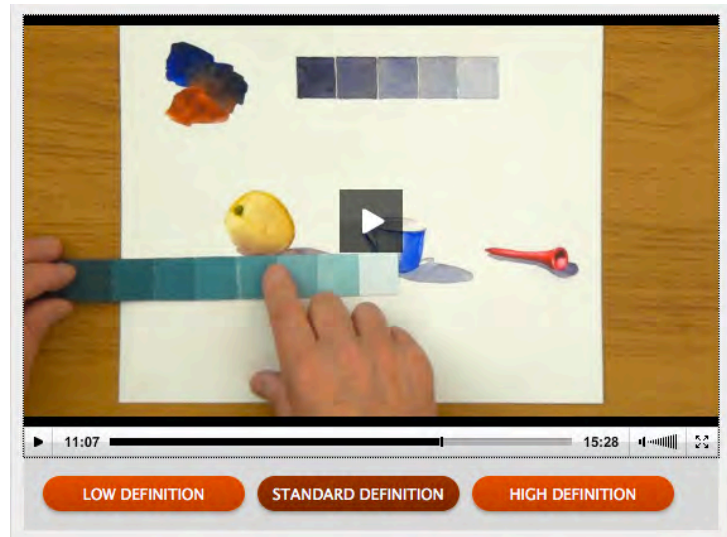


Image 73

You can see a video version of this exercise in my [Watercolour, Acrylics and Oils Foundation courses on ArtTutor.com](#)

This is a great exercise for quickly honing your eye to see the strength of value in various colours. Don't paint the objects in full - there's a danger you'll get caught up in the detail and it's time consuming. Just paint 3-4 patches of colour on your painting surface for each object, and measure. This way, you get cram in lots of learning experiences in a short period of time!

4.2 Exercise 2 – Full colour painting: Big Tones in Rome

It's time to move on to a full colour oil painting!

If you've diligently followed the exercises so far, this could be one of the most vibrant, striking images you've ever painted.



With James Willis you're going to explore the effects of strong tonal and colour contrasts. In this view of a street in Rome taken against the sun nearly all the colour is reduced to light or dark.

This painting is a challenge but well worth the effort to keep the shapes of the figures against the light background. The painting relies on a bold approach and

some drawing but mostly the important technique here is learning to define the figures by adding the light background around them.

So let me hand you over once again to James Willis who'll take you through this painting step-by-step.

What you'll need

- A support: for this painting I'm using a 24'' X 18'' primed canvas. You could use a board or gesso coated paper instead but keep to the same size if you can.
- Brushes: a mixture of hogs hair and mongoose brushes in a range of sizes and shapes
- Oil colours: cerulean, cobalt, violet, burnt sienna, yellow ochre, viridian, alizarin crimson, raw umber, titanium white, Winsor yellow (or Indian yellow)
- Thinners: turpentine and linseed oil
- Palette, easel, rags and palette knife
- A monochrome scale with a minimum of seven steps with the last one as white
- Print out of the photograph on page 46
- We're not going to do much drawing as we'll be building up the shapes as we paint, but if you're not confident enough to go straight in with your paints, why not try a pencil sketch of the reference photograph before you start.



Stage 1

Underpainting

Let's get started! Our canvas is already primed, so we can go straight in with our underpainting. Loosely based on the areas of darkness in the original photograph we'll paint the canvas with three colours (violet, cerulean and raw umber), which have been thinned by adding a little turpentine. In addition add a small amount of viridian to the area where the tree will be painted.

You might want to squint at your reference photograph; this will break the image down into blocks of colour. Assign a light, medium, and dark tone to each area of the photograph and paint them in with your three colours.

The paint has been rapidly pushed onto the canvas using a large flat hogshair brush and very little paint. The layer is an indication only of what is to come. You should let it dry completely before moving to your next stage.

If you're used to painting in other mediums, or if your style is quite tight and restricted, this first stage might be a little daunting for you! Remember that you don't need to be precise. If you work in a thin layer at this stage, it'll be really easy to paint over the top with more detail. Making a pencil sketch will give you a good idea of working with your tones, and it will also help you get a feel for your composition so that you can paint this stage loosely and confidently.

Image 76



Stage 2

Mapping out the main features in the painting

Once the underpainting is dry we can put in a few of the main shapes with a small round mongoose brush. I'm using a size 3 (you can use a hogshair or synthetic brush if you do not have a mongoose brush).

The colour I'm using is a mixture of raw umber and cerulean. This makes a great dark and is perfect for getting those initial reference points onto your surface. Make sure you combine the paint well, and thin it down slightly with turpentine.

You can see that I've indicated the main tree trunks and a few lines where the road is. I've also put in a few more lines that will help me get everything in proportion and perspective as I build up the painting.

If you wish, you can trace these outlines onto your underpainting. Use a soft pencil or stick of charcoal for this, but remember they will disappear as you build up your paint layers.

This is a good solution if you're not too confident drawing freehand. The marks will give a good structure to work on to begin with, but please try to avoid making too detailed a line drawing as the tendency is to colour shapes instead of observing changes in value.

Image 77



Stage 3

Beginning to add in the dark shadow colours

One way to improve your oil painting is to get a better understanding of colour. By learning what colours go well together, you can create a harmonious piece of artwork with tones that mellow and zing next to each other in equal measure!

Using your monochrome scale mix a few colour combinations using pairs of the following colours. Do not add any titanium white or turpentine at this stage.

Image 78

The colours you can pair up are:

- Cerulean
- Violet
- Viridian
- Raw umber

These will give you a range of blues and greys to use as the first layer of shadow colouring in your painting. Match their value against the second darkest tone in your monochrome scale.



When you have made all your mixtures on the palette (about four will do) add a little turpentine to thin them as you use them. Be careful not to over thin them otherwise they will disappear into your underpainting.

We're still working loosely at this stage, so you can scrub the paint into your canvas with fairly random and rapid brushstrokes – your flat hogshair brush (size 4) will do this job very well! The light areas of the roads have been left unpainted at this stage.

Stage 4

Add more dark shade and colour

Image 79



Continue to build up the dark areas in the scene using the thinned colour mixtures. Try varying the colour in certain parts as you go to give variety. It will look very patchy and strange at the moment but do not worry! For this style of painting, we're on the right track: what you are learning is not to get too fussy at the beginning stages of the piece.

Stage 5

Adding some dark detail

With a mixture of cerulean and raw umber begin to add some shapes for the figures. These do not need to be perfect but try to relate the different sizes of the figures to their position in the painting.

Notice how much bigger the foreground figures are compared to those further back. It's a good idea to study your reference photograph to make sure you get this right: the human eye is very astute and will pick up any accidental 10-foot tourists immediately!

Understandably we need more control for this stage. I've switched to a small round brush (size 2) to give more control when painting the smaller shapes.

The figures in the foreground need a bit more detail, but we're going to build them up as we progress through the painting. For now I've merely outlined them – painting lines to indicate the dark areas. This will help us to avoid having shapes that we will end up colouring in. You can also see how the underpainting shows through and is already giving us an idea of form.

You don't have to paint every detail and every figure – leave out whatever you like! Editing from a photograph is an important skill for a painter and keeps both the painting lively and the artist on their toes!



Image 80

Stage 6

Basic layout of darks

Once the main dark shapes and areas of shadow have been added, the subject of your painting should look fairly recognisable. Although my painting has a sort of impressionistic look about it, all the main features are present and identifiable.



Image 81

Stage 7

Mixing the medium shades

When mixing your shades group them together tonally so you can check they are all about the same value.

The method I use is to mix several tones at once, and then add titanium white to make two different tints of the same mixture.

In this way the colours stay related to each other and give that harmonious feel. This is a technique I always use, but is especially useful when painting simple shadows. Remember we always put the light colour on top in oil painting, so your shadow colour (the darker version) will be put on first. By adding white to your shadow colour, you are adding the sunlight! This will give you a very natural light patch, instead of something that awkwardly floats on top of your painting!



Image 82

Stage 8

Adding medium shades to the background

Take your monochrome scale again and mix a range of middle tones for the background.

We'll keep the same four colours as before:

- Cerulean
- Violet
- Viridian
- Raw Umber

Again mix about 4 pairs of these colours.

This time we're going to add in some yellow ochre and burnt sienna. This will warm up our mixes...

Again mix a couple of tints of your new colours by adding titanium white, but be careful not to add too much at this stage: a small amount will go a long way. The colours should still be on the dark side of your monochromatic chart.

When everything is thoroughly mixed, you can begin to paint them in patches on your underpainting.

Image 83



A note about warm and cool colours...

By now you will have recognised the importance of contrasting light and dark shades. If you did the demonstration of Lake Garda you'll have seen how these differences in tone are necessary to create shape when working in monochrome. But by now you should also be starting to realise the impact of placing light tones against dark tones – it gives your painting a real kick!

Throughout the rest of this painting you are also going to find out about using cool, warm and neutral colours to add to the effect, but still applying them as either light or dark shades.

This sounds quite complicated but if you follow these simple steps you will soon get the hang of it!

What are warm, cool and neutral colours?

This chart will explain the difference for this painting:

<i>Cool colours</i>	<i>Warm Colours</i>	<i>Neutral Colours</i>
Cerulean	Yellow ochre	
Viridian	Burnt sienna	mix together a
Violet	Alizarin crimson (*)	warm and a cool
Raw umber	Winsor or Indian yellow	

(* Alizarin crimson is used as a warm colour here but is in fact called a cool red in many books. It all depends on what it is mixed with or placed next to.)

In this painting most of the dark shades in the areas of shadow will have mainly cool colours and the light areas, the warm colours: that is **dark values** will be *cool mixtures* and **light values** will be *warm mixtures*. In the middle tones the shades can be warm or cool or neutral.

In our painting the mid-tones are mainly cool mixtures where the cerulean or violet predominate, but can have small amounts of warm colour mixed in with them (as in Stage 8).

The neutral mixtures in the mid-tones are a combination of both warm and cool colours to give a greyish colour which is neither too blue (cool) or too yellow (warm).

Try out some mixtures to see what you can make using pairs of colours again but remember to check them against your monochromatic chart to keep the correct value. To lighten your mixture, add small amounts of titanium white at a time.

If you make the shade too light it is best to start again rather than keep trying to add colour to get darker. You will end up with a huge pile of the wrong colour!

Stage 9

Background shades (detail)

Image 84



Here you can see where the middle shade of a violet-grey (a mixture of violet, raw umber and titanium white) has been brushed over the first dark blue shadow colour.

Above it a slightly different shade (violet, yellow ochre and titanium white) has been used to differentiate the side of the buildings in the shade from the shadow on the road. You can leave dark patches of the underneath layer to represent figures and windows.

Image 85



See how in Image 85 how the mid-tones have been quickly brushed over the dark underneath layer to leave some of it showing through.

These are both thin layers of paint with only a little turpentine.

Stage 10

Adding some warm and neutral middle tones to contrast with the cool shadows

We're building up the layers of our painting now. Remember our outlined figures? We can now add the mid-tones to them and the buildings.

As before mix two of our four colours and add a little titanium white. You can paint straight over the darker blue shadow layer.

Because this is more precise work, I'm using a small flat mongoose brush (size 3) and only a small amount of paint so that it can cover thinly, allowing some of the previous colours to show through.



Image 86

Image 87

Stage 11

Adding colour shades to figures and their shadows

Your figure shapes should be beginning to take on some form and look more defined.

I've used smaller-shaped brushmarks in a range of colours and mid-tones relating to the central tones in your monochrome chart.

This is a great point to get in some early contrasts between light and dark.

It is a good idea to mix several tones ready on your palette rather than mixing and painting each individually. In this way you will be able to judge the mixtures next to each other before you brush them on your painting.



Image 88



Our figures are still loose, but by layering the different values, they are recognisable and already have a defined form despite the lack of detail.

Image 89



Stage 12

Figures with all their middle shades

As more figure details are added the painting begins to take shape and the scale and distance of the scene become more apparent. Remember the scale of the figures from front to back is very important to convey the sense of space in the painting.

You can see here how the ‘detail’ of the figure shapes is building up and the plainer areas of the shadows and pavements fit in with the style of the painting. This piece is all about using a very suggestive and impressionistic style.

Image 90

A mixture of burnt sienna, titanium white and violet have been mixed to make the skin colours of the figures.

Study your photograph – most of them are in the shade so the tone will be from the middle range in your chart.



Stage 13

Adding the bright to define the figures once the shadows are dry

Up to now only dark and mid-tones have been added. The area of light has been left unpainted. When the shadows are dry enough to paint over (usually about half a day) it is time to build up the brightest shades in your painting. These relate to the values 1 and 2 on your chart.

Image 91



The mixture here is titanium white mixed with a little amount of yellow ochre. Too much yellow ochre and the lightness of the mixture will be lost. The colour is a warm mixture to contrast with the blue-violet darker tones in the shadows.

This mixture of paint has only be thinned with the smallest amount if turpentine and a few drops of linseed oil; it must remain reasonably thick in order to cover the unpainted canvas and underpainting round the figures.

Pay particular attention to painting round the figures. Add the light colour right up to the edge of the figure and very slightly overlap the edges so that the dark edges of the figures are neat and well shaped. It's important your take you time to get this right.

Image 92



Stage 14

Stand back and have a look!

We're well over half way through our painting, but we've only just established our basic range of values. It is the addition of the bright areas that will give us a sense of what the painting will look like as a whole: the contrast between our lights and darks.

Notice too how by using the brights to outline the figures suddenly they appear a lot more defined and 'figure-like'.

This is a really good time to stand back and look at your painting as a whole. It's also a good idea to take some time away from your painting and come back to it with fresh eyes.

When you come back to assess your painting you should be looking at its design: How well all the areas so far fit together to make a composition? Have you managed to get the scale of your figures right?

One of the benefits of working in oils is that it is a very forgiving medium – you can scrape off paint and readjust your drawing, or reapply different values, so please don't worry about making mistakes!

Image 93



Image 94

Stage 15*Start adding colour*

Now the composition and structure of your painting is developed it is time to start adding some areas of brighter colour. These are called **local colour areas**. That means the object is painted the colour you choose for it.

For example the red shirt in Image 94 is painted with alizarin crimson slightly darkened with a small amount of violet.



Image 95



Now you have added more colours the figures begin to appear. The lighter tones in the foreground figure, for example, have been mixed from titanium white, yellow ochre and a touch of cerulean.

Remember the shade of the figure at the front is nowhere near as light as the bright pavement round him. Use your chart to help you decide on the correct relationship.

Stage 16

Bright colours

A vivid green has been mixed using some titanium white and a touch of Indian or Winsor yellow. Once mixed to a light shade (shade 2 on your chart) a tiny amount of viridian was added to tint the mixture green.

Image 96

I used a small round mongoose brush for this, dabbing the brush for the brightest leaves round the edge of the tree.

Suddenly you will notice the sun coming out!



Next you can suggest the canopies with a swift brush mark.

Image 97



You'll notice these marks are not very detailed – too much definition here and it would draw our eye away from the main focus of the painting!

I used a flat hogshair brush loaded with a small amount of a light grey and dragged it across the background to make a triangular shape.

This has to be done in one move otherwise the detail will look heavy and too solid. If you're not too confident about being able to make the right mark with one just stroke, practice on some scrap paper first.

Stage 17
More highlights

Image 98



Next mix up some different light colours using the titanium white with one or two of our basic four colours.

This time we'll start with the white and add tiny amounts of colour so we can keep our mixture light.

Here you can see where small patches of light colour are painted to highlight details such as the light falling on the back of a figure, the red light on the back of the car and the lines on the road.

Image 99

Notice how the light outline on the head of each figure gives the impression of sunlight outlining the hair.

This is a mix of yellow ochre and titanium white.



In the final painting all the highlights have been added. Look at how the areas of red and green colour liven up the strong contrasts between the blue-violet shadows and the pale yellow ochre brights.

Image 100



Big Tones in Rome by James Willis

This painting explores the dramatic dark and light areas of a sunny street scene using an impressionistic approach. The lively effect of the brushwork gives the scene a busy feel and the strong tonal structure keep the whole view well organised and together.

Please do give this painting by James a go. If you're a member of ArtTutor.com, why not add your attempt to the oils forum? We'd love to see it and you'll be sure to get plenty of encouraging feedback from like-minded artists who've followed this e-book like you.

SECTION 5 – BONUS VALUE TIPS

If you've read this far (and followed along), you'll have a greater practical understanding of tonal value than 99% of all leisure artists!

There are just a couple of principles remaining that I'd like to cover, to complete your understanding.

5.1 Abrupt and transitional value contrast

Let's go back to our grey scale for a moment...

The range of values is wide – one end is white, the other end is almost black. If we take a square close to one end and place it next to a square close to the other end, the contrast between those two is very strong and abrupt (Image 101). In other words, one value finishes and the other starts.

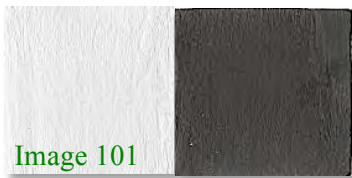


Image 101

This abrupt value contrast is useful for describing angular shapes, with definite sides and strong lines - like a box for example. Stalker Castle in our earlier exercise is a good example.

But not all objects are so angular. Take the obvious example of a ball or sphere.

We still need to make good use of contrasting values to make the sphere look 3-dimensional and solid. The underside of the sphere and cast shadow will be quite a strong value, whilst the highlight will be a very light value.

However, you can see that there needs to be a subtle transition from darks to mid-tones to lights. If any of the steps up or down in value are obvious to the eye or abrupt (as they are with a grey scale for example), the effect of a smooth, round object will be lost.

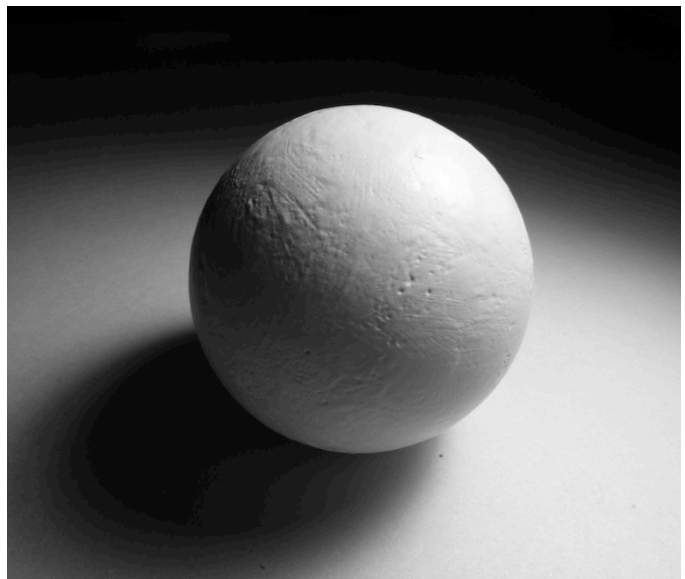


Image 102

Don't mistake this soft transition for a narrow range of values. The range from darkest dark to lightest light still needs to be adequate to make the object look solid.

Image 103



Spheres aren't the only objects that require a soft transition of values. One of the everyday items I see a lot of hobby artists struggle with is clothing and fabric...

Rendering Fabric

When I see a pencil drawing of fabric that a student isn't happy with, it's either because the folds in the material don't have strong enough lights and darks (good value contrast), or the transition (blending) isn't gradual and subtle enough – it looks like a series of shapes rather than soft folds.

Look at this photo of a coat sleeve (Image 104). Note the subtle transition from lights to darks and how the shadows and the lights in the folds - especially next to the stitching – help to tell the viewer that the material is soft and undulating.



Image 104

Now look at Image 105 of this sleeve. Yes, the general shape and perspective is fine and some lights and darks exist, but limited use of value contrast means the image is insipid and flat looking. The weak attempt at shadows actually looks more like abstract shapes printed on the material than folds in the cloth.



Image 105

Now in Image 106 we have made more use of value contrast with some better light and shade, especially around the cuff and the stitching.

However, we're still left with those abstract, meaningless shapes that are supposed to represent folds in the material, defined by light and shadows. To make the folds and creases in the cloth look believable, the trick is to create a much more subtle and gradual transition from light to dark, which will immediately suggest soft cloth.



Image 106

In Image 107, I've started to blend those light and dark areas on the top left of the sleeve to achieve the **gentle transitions**, using a putty eraser and a torchon. See how the initial blending of shades and lifting out of highlights has already improved things considerably?

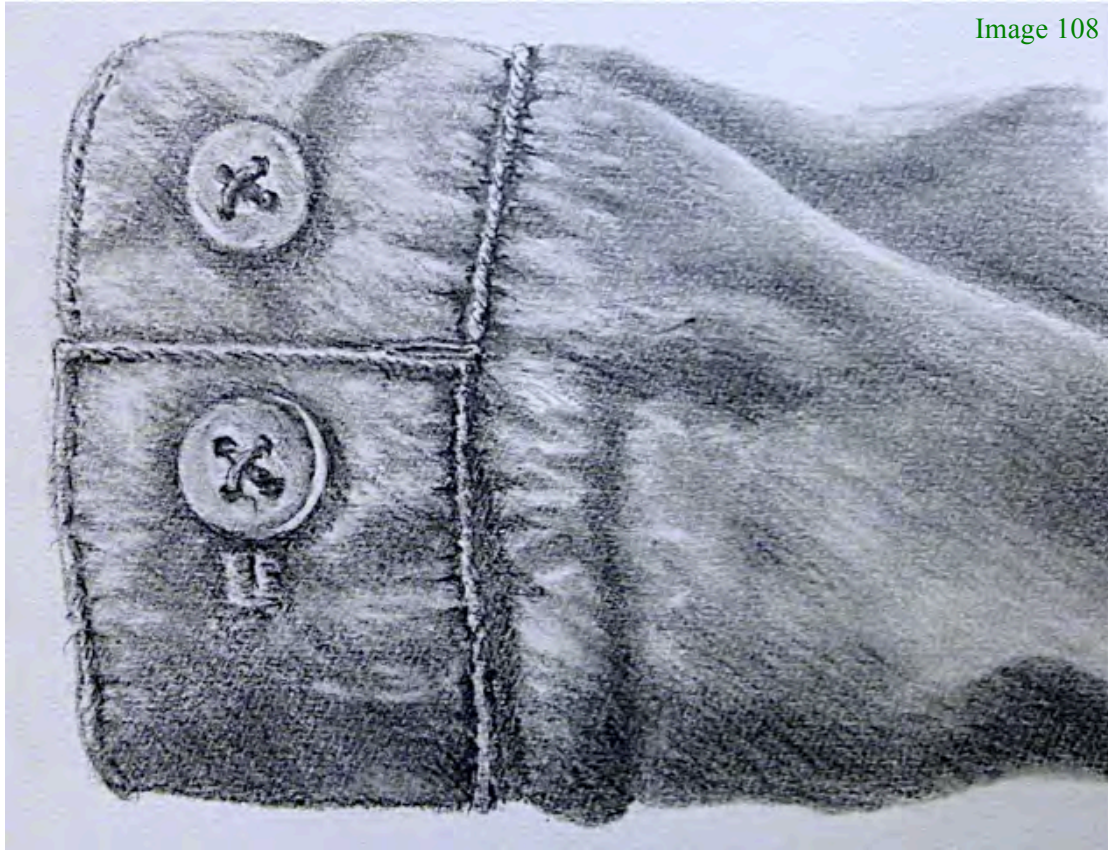


If you haven't got a torchon, use a cotton bud or the corner of a folded tissue. You can use any sort of eraser but the putty version allows you to tear small pieces from it and shape them into fine wedges or points.

Remember, the simple rule with value contrast is that, normally, soft transitions mean round and/or soft material. Sharp, well-defined changes from light to dark generally mean angular and/or hard surfaces.

Finally, in Image 108 we've completed this exercise and even though it's a relatively quick example, you can see the difference compared to Images 105 and 106.

Image 108



At first it'll probably take you time to create a pleasing blend of lights and darks as you develop the skill in getting these transitions just right. However, do keep going. It's enormously satisfying re-creating even a simple subject like this with all the subtle value changes.

So whatever your chosen medium, think about how either abrupt or transitional value contrast will help to create a believable rendition of the object you're capturing.

Within the vaults of [ArtTutor.com](http://www.ArtTutor.com) we have a number of video lessons on shading and blending using various painting and drawing mediums, which will help you achieve nice transitional values.

5.2 Counter change

Understanding what counterchange is and then how to use it in your picture, really is a significant key to a successful painting or drawing.

Simply put, counterchange in art means placing a dark value object or area next to a lighter one, or vice versa, so that they both stand out against each other.

Look at these photos of Bamburgh Castle in Northumberland, England...

Image 109



In Image 109 above we have a very stark example of counterchange – or dark against light – with the castle in silhouette against a bright evening sky. There's no doubt where the castle ends and the sky starts, is there?

Now look at the Image 110 (below) of the same scene. Still pretty good counterchange between the castle and sky because the light stone is still darker than the sky area.

However, look at the walls and grassy slopes on the left of the castle. Because they're all in shadow, their definition is much less clear and if you screw your eyes up, it's not as easy to see where the walls finish and the slopes begin. This is because the tonal strength of these areas is quite similar, even though they're different colours.

Image 110

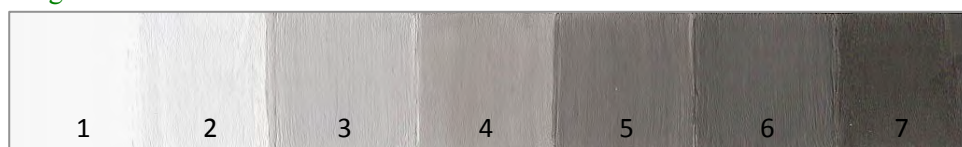


If you were painting this picture you may want to adjust the values to the left of the castle, to make sure that the relevant areas stand out where necessary. Or, perhaps not...

You could leave the value strength as it is, if you decide that you want this area of the picture to be less obvious - quieter if you like - to put the focus on the main part of the castle. And that's so important.

Of course, you'll want to paint more than just silhouettes of castles and inevitably, most parts of any picture do not want or need a high contrast throughout. So counterchange needs to be thought of rather like the grey scale. It's light against dark, sure, but it can be subtle or fierce.

Image 111



Remember, strong counterchange, i.e. the darkest dark next to the lightest light (say Value 1 next to Value 7 on our grey scale) will immediately draw the viewer's eye to that area and artists over the centuries have used this knowledge to create their focal points with this high contrast technique.

Gentler counterchange (say a Value 2 next to a Value 4) still defines adjacent shapes but might be used near the edge of a picture or anywhere where you don't want high contrast.

Think of a picture as the cast in a theatre. You have the leading man and lady as the focal point and the supporting cast who, whilst not the centre of attention, play a vital role by their relative anonymity, in highlighting the main players. Important as the leading actors are, without that supporting cast, they would make no impact at all.

So in a painting, the high value counterchange (the star of the show) is going to give you a strong focal point with real impact – but only if the supporting cast, i.e. the more mundane, quieter areas of the picture are thought through and in their proper place as well.



Image 112

In Image 112 of a bi-plane, we have both strong and gentle counterchange. The strong, red colour of the plane, broken by the white stripes, gives us intense counterchange - the darkest dark against lightest light - and leaves us in no doubt that it is the star of the show. However, the light but varied colours in the clouds provide a much gentler counterchange, especially when set against the slightly stronger blue sky behind the plane.

Let's look at one or two more examples of simple counterchange...

In Image 113 below, a monochrome watercolour of Cockley Beck in the English Lake District, notice how the tree *trunk* is quite light against the dark background immediately above the bridge...



Image 113

Yet the upper branches have been painted quite dark so they stand out against the moonlit sky. You wouldn't see a tree in nature that has a light bottom half and a dark top half! But until it's pointed out, most viewers won't even notice the change – it *looks* natural. As with the tree, you can do exactly the same with fence posts, telegraph poles, ships masts and so on.

Other areas in this picture worth noting are the snow-covered roof against the darker hillside, the snowy area helping the two walkers to stand out, and the dark stone bridge against the snowy banks. It's also interesting to point out that the bridge, though dark underneath, has a snow covering along the top layer of stones to help define it against the dark trees in the background.

Now what happens when you have adjacent areas where two or more of them are the same value? How do you define them without it looking contrived?

Well, this is where the benefit of being an artist as opposed to a photographer kicks in! As the artist you have the freedom to adjust things to make the picture work, where a photographer might have to resort to filters and other devices to create counterchange.

Image 114



In Image 114 of a stag in the Scottish Highlands, you can see if you screw up your eyes that his coat is, tonally, a similar value to the background hills, especially around the centre of his body. However, I've 'invented' a muted light from the left as an excuse to lighten off the rear end and top of his body, thus making it considerably paler against the distant Glen.

At the same time I've added shadow to his chest so now the front of his body is much darker than the hills, not only defining him against the background, but pushing the hills into their proper place in the distance. More importantly it gives him a foreground impact and clearly, the focal point of the picture.

But do you see that even though the rear, middle and front of his body are very different values, he 'looks' right and the light and shade have given him that vital three-dimensional form.

However, let me re-emphasise the really important bit here...

Using value contrast and counterchange shouldn't be regarded as merely a technique. It's as important to apply value judgments to all areas of your pictures as it is to know what the subject of your painting is going to be before you start.

Applying value judgments to every part of your picture must become second nature to you. Ideally, you will plan this before you pick up the brush, but more often than not, you need to adjust value and counterchange slightly as you progress through the painting.

Without developing this state of mind, your pictures will always lack that impact, that 'punch', that certain 'something' that lifts it from 'OK' to a minor masterpiece you can justifiably be proud of.

Remember, you're the artist. It's your picture and you decide how much emphasis you put on each part of the picture, using as much or as little counterchange - value judgment - light against dark - call it what you will - as you want or need.

It doesn't matter *how* you do it – as long as you do!

If you'd like to learn about a vast range of other techniques that can help you with your artwork, take a look through some of our [courses at ArtTutor](#).

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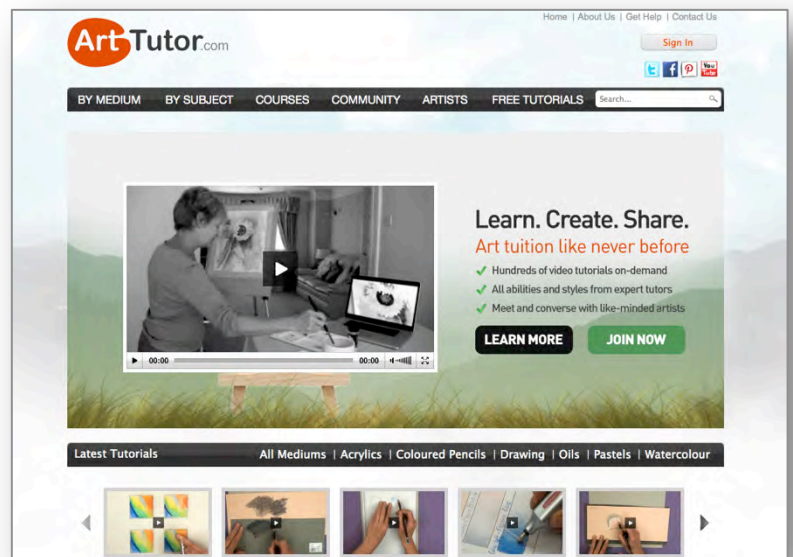


YouTube - www.youtube.com/user/ArtTutorOnline

ABOUT ARTTUTOR.COM

ArtTutor.com was built on the back of my passion to help more people take more enjoyment and more satisfaction from art...

It gives you 24/7 access to hundreds of TV-quality video tutorials from more than 35 professional art instructors. We cover everything from watercolour landscapes to pastel portraits... and we add new lessons every single week.



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My goal is to make ArtTutor.com the best place for anyone looking to improve their artistic skills and get much more enjoyment from the wonderful past-time of painting and drawing. We'd love to see you there!

Bob Davies

ARTTUTOR COURSES

ArtTutor.com is home to hundreds of DVD-quality video lessons across a range of subject matter and styles. We also have a growing number of [courses and series](#) that can be accessed by all members 24/7...

Our courses don't run to a fixed schedule – all the lessons are there permanently for you to dip in and out of whenever it's convenient. Here are a few that might be of interest you...

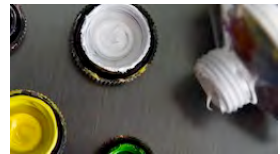
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- Bob Davies' Watercolour Foundation Course
- Siân Dudley's Progressive Watercolour Florals
- Rob Dudley's Watercolour Landscapes
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- Granville D. Clarke's Dynamic Watercolour Skies
- Frank Halliday's Round The World In Watercolours
- Glynis Barnes-Mellish's Watercolour Portraits



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REVIEWS FROM ARTTUTOR MEMBERS

We asked all our members for a fair and honest appraisal of how they feel about ArtTutor... and then posted every single response (good and bad) [here on the website](#). **They are 100% unedited.**

As of writing, there are more than 150 appraisals, 3 of which you could consider negative. Here's a small selection from leisure artists like you:

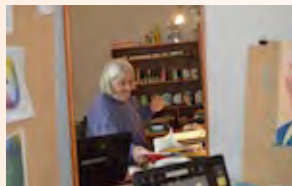


Elizabeth-Penticton, Canada

I love the ArtTutor website. I use it every time I start a painting. The ArtTutor site is easy to move about and the tutorials are such a great resource of information.

As most artistic people are visual the videos are so easy to follow. When I have a question ArtTutor gets back to me promptly. The ArtTutor is for the beginner to the advanced painter and covers all mediums. ArtTutor has some of the best artists on their site.

The one year subscription is less than one art class and you can repeat the lesson as many times as you like. I move around a lot and some of the places I have lived are remote and ArtTutor keeps me up to date and keeps me painting.



Zilpa - South Australia

ArtTutor is great for anyone wanting to learn to draw or paint in any medium. I find I chop and change mediums depending on my mood and this program allows me to do that as there are many artists and subjects to pick from. I have found them all very interesting.

The tutorials are all in easy to follow steps. This site is very easy to use and also very encouraging. There is nothing like posting your artwork on here and being encouraged by fellow artists no matter what your level. I find ArtTutor very supportive and affordable.

It is really exciting to follow the tutorials and then apply the steps learned to my own painting. That is when I sign it and show it off to who ever will look at it. There is no feeling like it.



Ed - Lakewood, NJ, USA

The quality of the video photography is top-notch and easy to follow. The instructors are truly teachers in every sense of the word and they don't 'talk down' or patronize you. Each has his or her own mannerisms and approach and that is welcomed and enjoyed. I can truly say I have learned something about painting from each and every one of them.

Although my list of 'my favorites' contain watercolor exercises almost exclusively, I enjoy the ease with which I can access other forms of art at my whim. I took up art, watercolor specifically, very late in life and I am glad I found it and yet sad I didn't start earlier. I know it is a long process, but with ArtTutor.com (I recommend it all those who are in the same situation as I) I know I will get better due in large part to ArtTutor's wonderful efforts.