

Chapter 9

Painting in Watercolours



We have seen that the use of, more particularly, earths and minerals of different colours, diluted with water alone, or water with which some ingredients not oleaginous has been combined, and applied for pictorial and ornamental purposes, is of the highest antiquity, and that painting with oils, or oleo-resinous vehicles, is a comparatively modern invention. The modes of water painting to which we allude are, of course, tempera, encaustic, and fresco. Watercolours have also been extensively used even in the execution of oil pictures, of which practice our own Turner affords a notable instance. But many, especially of the Flemish and Dutch oil painters, from the earliest period arrived at considerable technical excellence in the separate practice of watercolour painting. Adrian Ostade, and that universal genius Albert Dürer, have left us several examples in the shape of detached studies; and portfolios of Rembrandt's drawings are preserved in the British Museum. These, and even the distemper cartoons of Raphael and Mantegna, are, however, little more than simple washes of watercolour: the more recent processes by which effects are obtained nearly equalling the depth and power of oil painting, and which seem to promise to render watercolour painting the rival of oil in its age, as it was in its infancy, were then unknown.

THE PAPER

Watercolour painting surpasses oil in the purity and clearness of its tones, which arise from the transparency of its medium; it therefore excels in expressing the freshness, vivacity, and brilliancy of nature. But its most distinctive merit is seen in the realization of aerial effects and varied depths of distance. These peculiar excellences — the refreshing brightness and pervading sense of atmosphere — which can be obtained by a novice in watercolours almost as successfully as a Pynacker or a Claude could secure

the same effects on canvas, result chiefly from the textural and absorbent properties of the paper employed to receive the Colours.

The surface of paper is *granulous*; that is to say, it presents so many little hollows and projections, which, while receiving general flat washes of colour, still maintain an alternation of light on the latter and half-light in the former. The minute cavities of the paper permit the eye, as it were, to penetrate the flat surface and follow the vanishing colour; and thus the eye receives illusive impressions of intervening air and distance; while the little prominences of the grain, receiving less colour (if a wash), and therefore retaining their reflective lustre, afford the truthful and beautiful luminousness which watercolour shares in common with fresco.

The facility of obtaining effects of aerial perspective has, however, tempted artists to render them too prominent in this medium by forcing them also in the colour. We find, for instance, the most distant objects, through various gradations of cold colour, too often represented with the brightest blue, and looking like so many holes in the picture. A tendency to rawness and crudeness, and the want of the mellowness of tone of oil, are indeed the commonest faults of painting in watercolours.

Paper is used from the greatest extremes of roughness to hot-pressed smoothness; the latter seldom, however, not having the recommendation of texture. The paper is also sometimes tinted, as in many of Turner's watercolour paintings. There is, in fact, paper of scarcely any surface or texture which this great artist did not employ. Nothing came amiss to him: and some of his drawings are executed upon pieces of crumpled brown paper which had probably enfolded a parcel. Card, or Bristol board, like hot-pressed paper, is seldom used, on account of its smoothness; but Catermole has boldly covered with his opaque sketches some of the very coarsest millboard.¹²⁰

Alterations, Corrections. There are other secondary advantages resulting from the grain of the paper. Rough surfaces, such as walls, gravel and sand, are imitated very felicitously by merely scraping the projecting granulations of the paper with a knife, rubbing them with sandpaper, or passing over them a wet cloth or sponge; by which operations different degrees of rough-

ness are given with the removal of more or less colour from the projections, or by the driving it into their interstices. The hardness of the paper used will admit of these operations, and also of repeated dampings and complete immersions, without becoming what is called 'woolly.'

So that, if to these be added the greatest facility in erasing or effacing—even the power of cutting out a spoiled portion and inserting clean paper in its place; the use at will of transparent or body colours, either mixed or separately, or the one upon the other; together with all the styles of execution common to oil, such as hatching, stippling, scumbling, glazing, or spreading an opaque tint—it will be sufficiently evident, contrary to what is generally supposed to be the case, that the painter in watercolours can make alterations and modifications in his work with as much success as the painter in oil.

Sketches. The artist in the progress of his work is generally beset with unforeseen difficulties: for a thousand purely accidental circumstances occur in the course of the material realization of his idea. The colour, for example, dries irregularly, or collects in unsightly blots; or his brush is too playful, thoughtless, and disobedient, or too stiff, formal, and mathematically exact; his eye wanders, or sees either too much or too little, and his hand quivers with nervousness, or is cramped with rheumatism. These accidents the young artist, intent upon the exact imitation bit by bit of what he sees, believes to be unmitigated evils. Gradually, however, he becomes more certain of his ability of surmounting the obstacles thus presented, and with experience he can more readily anticipate the ultimate effect of the union of the various parts; his attention is therefore more at liberty to examine the nature of these unforeseen effects—when, to his great astonishment and delight, he finds the accidental blots and blurs may be easily 'worked in,' and often suggest beautiful little passages, which excite his imagination, and enable him with a little tact to snatch 'a grace beyond the reach of art,' at least of commonplace mechanical art. He will find, for a single instance, that if he wants a firm outline, he can obtain it by applying the colour in a very liquid state and waiting for the dark edge which it forms in drying; and he knows at the same time that colour thus laid suddenly, and confidently

left to dry, preserves a much greater beauty and purity of tint than if dragged about and disturbed.

But nothing is found to contribute to variety of accidental effect more than the inequalities of the surface chosen for painting. The taking advantage of such effects permits the more rapid completion of a sketchy generalized resemblance of an object. This is the reason, also, why very rough paper is always chosen for sketches in watercolours. But the rough paper has another recommendation for this purpose; which is, that the inevitable imperfections of a sketch are hidden, and an appearance of general harmony and finish given by the recurrence at regular intervals of the granulations of the very coarsest paper. Besides this, watercolours are much better for sketches than oil, for another reason—namely, because sketches in oil, though kept in portfolios, undergo great discolouration in a short time, owing to the quantity of oil necessarily used to enable the artist to paint with sufficient freedom and rapidity; while watercolour sketches so protected will remain unchanged for an indefinite period.

Hanging. There are yet other considerations connected with the effects resulting from the texture of the paper which remain to be mentioned. The artist works, as already stated, with the light above and on one side—generally the left, in order to avoid the shadow from the brush falling in front of him on his work. Consequently, he looks at the paper in a lateral light, which brings out all the inequalities of its surface very forcibly. To illustrate the effect of this in the completed work, we will suppose the artist to make a sketch and a small highly-finished portrait of the same person; the former executed in flat washes, and the latter receiving a great quantity of minute stippling in the flesh—each touch possibly no larger than each little protuberance of the paper's grain. When both are ready for inspection, the artist's subject arrives, and looking at them on the easel, thinks one (the sketch), a mere daub, and the other equal to a highly-finished miniature. He then takes both in his hands, and turns to the artist, with the intention possibly of complimenting him, when the highly-finished portrait of himself looks, to his unpleasant surprise, nearly as coarse as the sketch: he turns back to replace them, when, as if by magic, the minute finishing he has so much

admired is all again restored—the sketch remaining the same throughout. A similar effect occurs when persons make fresh arrangements in a room, and find a pet little drawing of this kind in its new place loses half its charm without any assignable reason.

Now these effects are all attributable to the grain of the paper. The highly-wrought picture is finished by the artist with the point of the brush, and every little summit of the granulation, from its prominence, the more readily catches and retains the comparatively dry colour employed in the stippling process: and not only this, but the painter involuntarily works on the projections. For, let the paper be magnified, and it will be found that each of these little hills, so to speak, receives the slanting ray on the acclivity next the source of light, and throws its shadow into the adjoining valley, so that the surface is a chequer-work of light and shade; and as every point of light attracts the eye, the artist insensibly and involuntarily, in finishing with the point of the brush, touches these slopes of light till they disappear and become blended with and as dark as the shadows they cast. But the necessary consequence, when the picture is reversed, and the light falls from the opposite side, is that not only the original coarseness of the paper is restored, but it is greatly aggravated by every slope upon which the colour basked in light, being now in turn enveloped in shadow, with, in addition, this shadow deepened by unilluminated paint. A sketch, on the contrary, upon which the colour is broadly floated, it will be readily understood, is not liable to much variation.

Of course finish, with no other object than that of obtaining mere smoothness, is very contemptible; but our motive in attempting to give the *rationale* of some watercolour paintings looking so different in different lights, is to draw the attention of the possessors of such works to the importance of hanging them as nearly as possible in the same position in reference to the light as that in which they were painted. Artists, knowing the importance of this, often inscribe in the corner of the work the professional directions—*jour à droite*, or *jour à gauche*, according as the light should be on the right or left. But when these are absent, the right position may be easily discovered in almost every case by observing from which side the

light is gradated. It is also very desirable to observe this gradation of the light as a guide for the hanging of oil pictures.¹²¹ A landscape, for instance, may have the sky very tenderly gradated from left to right (having been painted with the light on the left); but if this picture is hung with the light from the opposite side, the gradation of tone will be partly neutralized. And, further, the effect of the surface and texture of the oil paint demands attention to the rule. For, it will be observed, that where the artist has 'loaded' his colour in order to give brilliant 'catching' lights, when the illuminating rays impinge at a different angle, much of the spirit and feeling with which these have been touched will be lost; and, even if the surface has been clogged with varnish, either a shadow is projected instead, or the light altered in position, and the whole work rendered more coarse and rough.

Such contingencies as these—so prejudicial to the artist together with the still more injurious one, in a general exhibition, of the juxtaposition of unforeseen colour in neighbouring works (which the most careful collocation of pictures cannot prevent)—these and such like agencies have so powerful, though unsuspected, an effect upon the eye, and consequent misleading influence upon the judgment, that they should be frequently pointed out to the public, for few but artists themselves are sufficiently sensible of their existence.

Even miniatures, which, from the perfect smoothness of the ivory on which they are painted, might be supposed to be free from the variable effects at least of grain and texture, are yet found by miniature painters to be not beyond their influence. For, though the texture is so dense and the surface so perfectly smooth, yet in the substance of the ivory itself, especially those parts of the sheet not sawn out of the very heart of the tusk, there is a kind of wavy striated appearance, resulting from the alternation of layers or threads (somewhat resembling the grain of wood), of more or less transparency. And as in miniatures the soft tone of the ivory is seen through the more thinly painted passages—as in the face—one becomes, upon close examination, just sensible of an effect analogous to that of paper, though in a less degree. For a few additional remarks on the subject of 'Hanging,' see Appendix, note B.

PIGMENTS, BRUSHES, ETC

The Pigments. The same great distinction obtains in watercolours as in oil between the transparent and the opaque colours; and the former may be converted into the latter by the addition of white. Colours thus rendered opaque, together with those pigments in their own nature opaque, are (as already observed), from their greater solidity and substance, termed body colours. The permanent earthy and mineral colours were chiefly used in ancient works; and these, together with a few transparent colours, such as sepia, indigo, and Indian ink, satisfied the early watercolour artists of this country. As the art advanced, richer as well as more delicate, though less permanent, colours were quickly added; and as the demand increased, various improvements were made in the preparation of watercolour pigments by the artists' colourmen. Chemistry has supplied many entirely new colours, several of which are as fugitive as they are beautiful. It is, indeed, somewhat strange that in the wonderfully rapid advance of this science it has not discovered any means of rendering permanent such colours as the beautiful transparent vegetable yellows, the splendid red, carmine, and other tints obtained from the cochineal insect—colours which are almost indispensable in flower painting.

The necessity for the use of the colours from cochineal no longer exists, however, in such force since the introduction of the improved methods of preparing pigments from the colouring matter of the root of the madder plant. The colours extracted, called rubric or madder lakes, though not very vivid in abstract power of line, vary in tint from the most delicate rose to the deepest purple; and being more transparent and far more permanent than the old lakes, and working well both in water and oil, they are exceedingly valuable to the painter. These pigments, now so extensively used in dyeing and the industrial arts, we owe to the investigations of science. The artist is likewise indebted to the chemist for another pigment, pre-eminently serviceable as a watercolour. We allude to the white¹²² prepared from zinc, called 'Chinese white.' This, though a metallic white, appears to be quite permanent, unlike all the whites prepared from lead, which when used with

water are changeable even to blackness, sully other tints with which they may be brought in contact, and are far from innocuous to the person using them. This pigment, so eligible in other respects, has hitherto not been prepared with sufficient 'body' for use in oil. It has, however, been stated recently that a Mr. G. Lewis of Philadelphia has succeeded in giving the requisite opacity to this white oxide of zinc, by subjecting it to powerful pressure while grinding in oil.

Now, the use of white constituting, as we have seen, the great distinction in practice termed 'body-colour' painting, and nearly all that is characteristic in the watercolour art of our own time, in so far especially as it is imitative of oil painting, being attributable to the abundant use of white, it is evident that an eligible white pigment is extremely desirable. The leaden blackness which we often find in the place of the highest lights in old watercolour paintings proves that the whites then used cannot be relied upon. And although the terrene and barytic whites have enough body to allow of being applied in thickness and quantity sufficient to imitate the embossed effects of oil painting, yet the terrene whites, from their alkaline nature, are injurious to many colours in water, and barytic white does not work pleasantly—does not, from its clogging, pasty nature, deposit itself on the paper freely, following the lithesome play of the brush; and therefore does compete with the fascinating freedom of handling we admire so much in the oil pictures of, for example, Teniers and Wilkie. Barytic white—called 'constant white' by the colourmen—dries, moreover, many degrees lighter than when wet, so that the artist cannot easily calculate upon the ultimate pitch of his tones. Its extreme brilliancy, however, when used alone, sometimes recommends its use for the very highest lights.

But Chinese white is undoubtedly the nearest approach to the desiderated white watercolour—that colour which should be generally serviceable; which, while permanent itself, should not attack other colours when united with them; which should maintain the same tone when wet as it had when dry; which might be applied in opaque washings, and would cover and conceal a ground darker than itself; which should have so much strength and body as to afford, if required, actual relief to each touch, and

yet be susceptible of extreme tenuity — a colour, in fine, which, like gold itself, should be precious from its own intrinsic beauty, and yet capable of receiving at the hands of the artist the greatest possible amount of extrinsic value, whether wrought and fashioned in dense masses, or scattered in airy waifs, or spread out in floating films.

Pigments, when employed with water, differ very much more than when united with oil in their several working qualities. Unfortunately the most permanent are the most unmanageable. The beautiful transparent but fugitive vegetable colours may be laid in even washes with the utmost facility; but the opaque earths and minerals, having greater specific gravity, will not float so readily; their particles remain where left by the brush, and yet are too coarse to penetrate the pores, so to speak, of the paper. The general rule, that a much purer compound hue may be produced by passing one tint of different chemical character over another than by applying them mixed together, holds good with more force in watercolour painting than in oil. In such operations, however, as the earthy and mineral colours will not bear friction, they must be applied last.¹²³

Brushes. The smaller kinds of brushes are still sometimes termed ‘pencils;’ but the use of the word ‘pencil’ instead of ‘brush,’ as distinctive of and peculiar to watercolour painting, has become almost obsolete; and with reason, for to cover rapidly with floating colour the large surfaces of modern works in watercolour, requires brushes almost as large as those needed for painting ordinary pictures in oil; although, to avoid abrading the more delicate texture of paper, the brushes must not be made (at least for all ordinary practice) of anything so coarse as hog’s bristles. The word ‘pencil’ still, however, retains its place in a semi-metaphorical sense, as generally allusive to the artist’s work, whether he be painter or draughtsman, and in a still more figurative manner it is applied to anything delicately marked, as ‘pencilled eyebrows.’

Brown sable is the hair generally used, being pliant, yet firm; but brushes made of red sable, and also of the squirrel — or ‘camel hair,’ as it is called — are useful for some purposes. Brushes of brown sable are made by the insertion of the hair into quills; hence the size of the brush is recognized

by the various names of the birds which supply the quills employed—as eagle, swan (of various sizes), goose, duck, and crow. The eagle brush is very large and expensive, and seldom used. The duck and crow sables are employed for delicate markings, as in branches, foliage, and architectural details. Flat brushes, in German-silver ferules, are likewise employed; round brushes are also similarly enclosed, and they have the recommendation of not splitting like the quills.

LEGITIMACY OF PRACTICE

Few subjects in art have been more contested than that of legitimacy of practice in watercolour painting. We have already seen the distinction of 'body' colour, and for and against its use the contention has been principally raised. To show the diversity of opinion maintained, we may quote from two or three writers on the subject in question. Mr. Frank Howard, *Colour as a Means of Art*, says to this effect: 'It is to be regretted that, in some few, and those popular instances, the advantage of transparency arising from the legitimate use of watercolours should have been thrown away without obtaining any equivalent other than that of hiding or correcting blunders, and that attempts should have been made, by the use of opaque body colours and a similar method of working, to imitate the effect of oil painting. It is true, that opaque watercolours are supposed to have an advantage over oil colours in light and brilliant parts, and particularly in distances, in consequence of the tendency of the oil to come to the surface. On this account they are said to be used by Turner in distant parts, when he desires to attain great clearness and purity of colour. But used for watercolours, the only advantage of watercolours is abandoned without obtaining the equivalent of richness arising from texture in oil, and the purity of the one art is lost without obtaining the force of the other.' A somewhat similar view is taken by Mr. Burnet in the following remarks, from his *Practical Essays on the Fine Arts*: 'The freshness, the luminous property in fresco painting, is a charm which no watercolour drawing ought to be deprived of, and which no oil picture can contend with. The strongholds of oil painting lie in the deep-toned darks, and those juicy shadows where lighter half-

tints are seen floating half-way down. The characteristic beauties of water-colour are in the pearly lights, and in those flat washes unattainable in oil colour without giving an inferior look to the whole work . . . The power, then, of retaining and giving back light is the peculiar property of water-colour, or rather of the paper, which ought, therefore, to be preserved at any sacrifice, as the artist has not the rich, pulpy, and unctuous glazings to give in compensation for its absence.' Then Mr. Burnet adds: 'And though the genius of Girtin and Turner did wonders in removing watercolour drawings from mere topographical achievements, it is only now that the capabilities of watercolour paintings are beginning to be perceived and spread over England. The drawings of Lewis, Cattermole, Harding, and [W.] Hunt, show what can be done in effect, texture, and colour; and we shall regret if the introduction of so perishable a material as body colour, or a meretricious perversion of talent, for the sake of attracting applause, destroys all remains of simplicity and truth.'¹²⁴

Mr. Ruskin, on the contrary, says, in his *Elements of Drawing*, that he is inclined to think there should be no touch without white, and in several passages in his works speaks highly in praise of body colour. The earliest artists themselves, long after they had emerged from their sepia flat washes, generally, however, considered the use of opaque colour illegitimate. Turner was one of the first to break through this, as all other material restraints. 'To this master, in fact, we owe,' it is observed by Mr. Holmes, 'all the great improvements which have taken place of late years in watercolour drawing; for, in the course of his career, he introduced the use of warm tones into the shadows in the picture, and gradually discarding the use of the vegetable colours, he attained even a higher degree of brilliancy in his work, by reintroducing the use of those which are formed from mineral bases, and which we have seen in the instances of the pictorial representations on the most ancient monuments, still, after many ages, preserve their brilliancy unimpaired. Turner's works, however, are strictly examples of watercolour drawing; but since his time a style has arisen which appears to set aside the careful execution by which he and his contemporaries gained their effects, and to charge the drawing with heavy and unnecessary