

A watercolor illustration of a forest scene. In the foreground, there are various flowers in shades of pink, purple, and yellow. A stream flows through the middle ground, surrounded by rocks and green foliage. The background features tall, thin trees with sparse leaves, rendered in soft, light colors. The overall style is soft and artistic.

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INTRODUCTION

Congratulations! You have decided to paint in a medium that most artists agree is the most difficult. The reason is simply because watercolour, being a transparent medium, cannot be corrected by covering up mistakes and so it requires careful planning, confident application and an acceptance that a watercolour painting will never be perfect. Many “mistakes” in watercolour are easier on the eye than attempts at correction. The beauty of watercolour depends on its unique transparency and much of the skill in watercolour painting is in preserving that transparency.

There are a few guidelines that I try to follow when painting. These are not rules, never to be broken, but I follow them for more than 90% of the time. They are:

Don't even think of putting brush to paper until you have planned your stroke in your mind. - Dabbing at the paper in a vain hope of something happening will not work. Plan what you want to do, go for it, then get out.

Pretend that the paper is extremely delicate - Once you have applied paint to paper, leave it alone. The only effect of continuing to brush over an area of paper is to begin to destroy the surface of the paper and this affects the transparency.

Do not overpaint until the first coat is completely dry - When the paint film is starting to dry, it is at its most delicate. Any overpainting at this stage will result in MUD instead of two transparent layers. Try to plan your painting so that only two or three layers are needed. If you use more than this you risk losing the transparency.

Use plenty of paint and water - If you have to scrub at the paper with a dry brush you will lose the freshness of the paint. When painting a wash, the paint and water mix should flow from your brush. Once the brush is “empty”, re-fill it. Never scrub your brush on the paper unless you are looking for a “drybrush” effect.

If you can follow the above you will avoid 90% of the mistakes that beginners make but there are many other factors that will affect the success or failure of a painting. The more important things to think about are:

Use good quality paint, paper and brushes. Watercolour is hard enough without handicapping yourself with poor materials. Use only artists quality paint - it is more concentrated, more finely ground and has a creamier consistency. Squeeze a decent amount on to your palette - at least a blob the size of your thumbnail.

Any less and you are wasting your time. You don't need dozens of tubes of paint. Three colours will cover 70% of your needs, six colours will cover 99%.

Your choice of paper is just as important. There are three surfaces available - hot pressed (HP), cold pressed (also called NOT - because it is NOT hot-pressed) and ROUGH. Various weights are available as well, they are 90lb, 140lb, 200lb and 300lb. Hot pressed paper is very smooth and difficult for beginners so NOT is a good compromise. 140lb is a good weight for small paintings. Once you find a paper you like, then stick to it. NEVER go into an art shop and ask vaguely for watercolour paper, you should know your manufacturer, surface and weight.

Brushes come in all shapes and sizes. At the moment I use a 20mm hake, size 10 and 7 round sable and a small swordliner for virtually all of my painting. As with paper, find a brush you like. If you use round brushes, it is important that they have a good point. Sable are best but expensive. Squirrel hold lots of water but are a little floppy. Synthetic brushes are getting better all the time but I find some of them to be too springy.

A correct tonal range is vital. For most subjects, the tone basically varies from white to black so ensure that your painting has this full range. It is a good compositional device to place your lightest light and darkest dark at the focal point.

Don't worry too much about duplicating colour. The colour of an object depends on many things including the time of day and the climatic conditions. Too many beginners spend hours trying to mix the “correct” colour. Actually if you do manage to mix the “correct” colour it generally looks too bright and stark on the paper. If you use what are known as the earth colours - siennas, umbers, you will achieve a more subdued colour that looks better on paper.

Some final thoughts: Everything above is my advice based on what works for me. It may not work for you so expose yourself to lots of books and videos. These will show you other and often contradictory ways of achieving results. Trying all of these methods, keeping what you like and discarding those you don't will help to develop what will become *your* style, as personal as your handwriting. It is a funny thing, the more you practice, the better you become. If you paint for only an hour or two every couple of months then you will not advance because you will forget anything you learn. Paint often and try not to become despondent with slow progress. Learning to paint is a lifelong occupation.

COMPOSITION

All paintings consist of SHAPES and LINES, each of which will have a particular SIZE, DIRECTION and TEXTURE and they will be painted with a specific TONE and COLOUR.

Composition is simply the arrangement of these shapes and lines within your picture. Usually the aim is to create a composition that is pleasing to the eye and to achieve this requires practice and a knowledge of the principles of composition. These principles have filled the pages of many books, many of which are extremely boring and likely to put you off any thoughts of analysing composition but as is often the case the basic principles are quite straightforward.

A well composed painting will have a feeling of unity and harmony but with interesting variations. Being more specific, the painting will consist of repetition with variety, emphasising parts of the picture and simplifying other parts. This repetition and variety will vary - it could be mostly square shapes with a few circles, mostly warm colour with some cool, mostly straight lines with some curved etc. Avoid 50:50 divisions - don't have half your picture warm and half cool - avoid the horizon being half way down your paper - don't put a main shape in a central position. A good rule of thumb is that the main point of interest should be a different distance from each of the four sides, not too central nor too near the edges.



GOOD - Varied lines and directions. Main figure groups arranged off centre. Variety of warm and cool colour. Pigeons arranged randomly but "pointing" towards the figures. Simplified background allows the figures to dominate.

BAD - Tonally, almost all of the top half is dark and almost all of the bottom half light. The large lamppost is exactly halfway across the picture. There is an awkward rectangle shape almost in the middle of the picture. This would have been better covered partly by one or more figures as strong geometric shapes tend to draw attention.

It is also important not to assume that because a subject is real, it is therefore perfect and only needs to be copied. When painting nature, you still must create the painting, using the guidelines and changing, moving, adding or

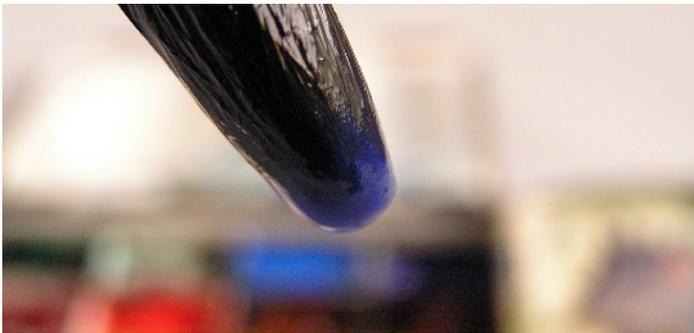


In this example you can see where I have made considerable changes in the treatment of the real subject. I changed tones and colours, not for the sake of it, but to make a more entertaining painting. I hope you will agree that the painting is much more interesting and exciting than the rather bland photograph. Remember that composition is not just the arrangement of the objects but the painting of them.

WASHES AND EDGES

Painting in any medium requires a level of technical skill in the application of that medium. In watercolour, the main technical needs are applying a wash and edge control. Application of a wash is reasonably straightforward as long as you follow some basic principles. A finished wash should be smooth and even, almost as if it had been sprayed on and to achieve this result you need to follow a few basic principles. The most common fault with a wash is a stripy appearance and this is caused by the paint not being wet enough. This can be due to:

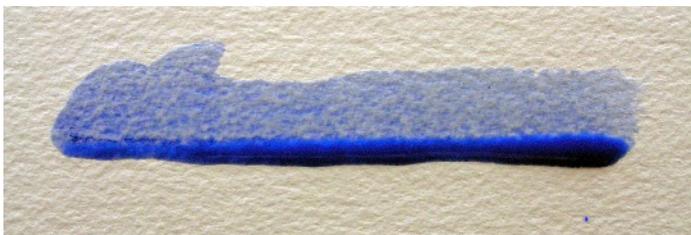
1. Wrong type of, or too small a brush for the size of paper.
2. Using the brush with insufficient paint
3. Too stiff a paint mix.
3. Taking too long to apply the wash, resulting in the paint starting to dry.



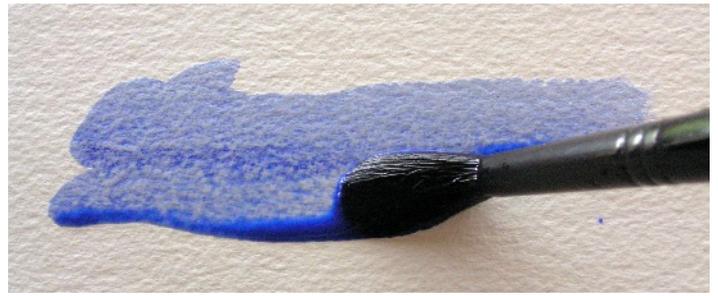
Mix enough paint for the whole wash and make sure that your brush is so full of paint that it is dripping.



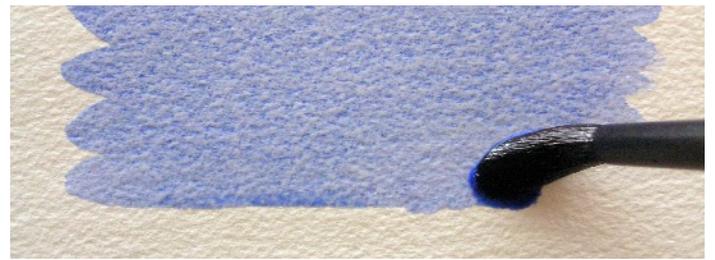
Making sure your paper is at an angle of 20-40°, begin the wash by allowing the paint to flow from the brush. Do not press the brush on to the paper as this will lift the paint rather than leaving it on the paper



Each band of paint should be applied with one stroke of the brush and should be wet enough to leave a bead of paint on the lower edge



Quickly apply your second band by picking up the bead from the first line. The angle of your paper will allow the paint to flow down.



Continue the process until your wash is complete and then LEAVE IT ALONE (unless you want to soften an edge). Do not under any circumstances allow your brush to touch any part of the paper other than the lower edge of each band. If you go back into your wash before it has dried you will RUIN IT!!

It is often necessary to soften edges in your washes. The general rule is that a soft edge between areas of your picture suggests a physical connection whereas a hard edge implies a physical separation. In some cases you may need to simply change the colour or strength of your wash as you paint each band but try to do this gradually - hence a graduated wash. It will often be necessary to soften an edge abruptly rather than gradually. In this case you must be prepared to act while the edge is still wet. To soften the edge, use a barely damp brush and adjust the pressure of the brush on the paper to lift the wet paint at the edge. If you end up with an almost hard edge, you have used too much pressure and if you end up with a cauliflower shape, you have either applied too little pressure or your brush has been wet rather than damp. It can be tricky to estimate both pressure and dampness, but start with a wet brush gently wiped on a cloth or paper tissue.

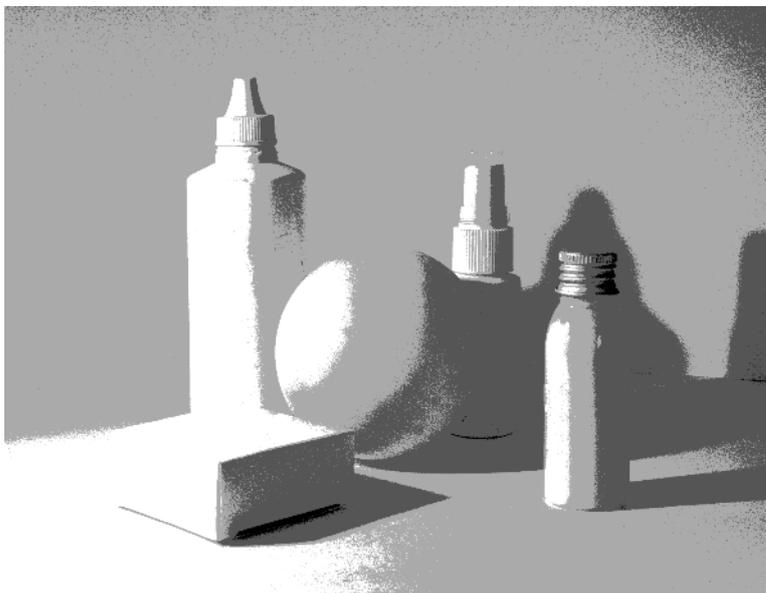
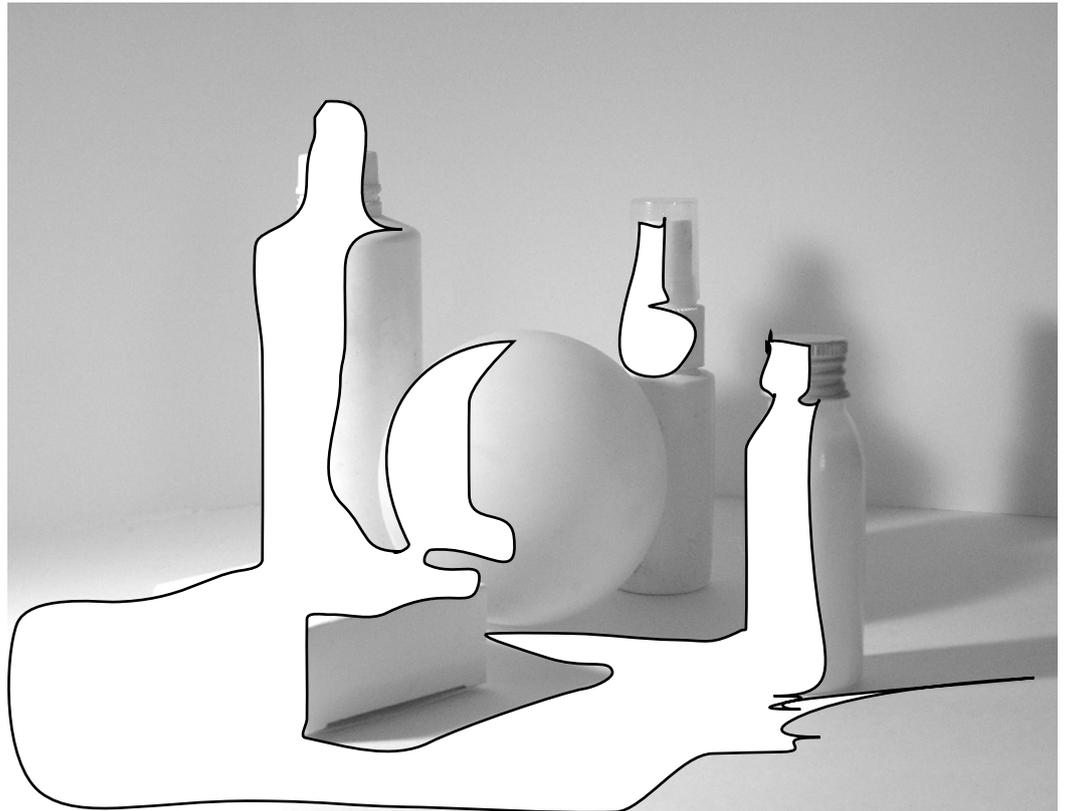


The dampness of the brush and the pressure applied to the paper are the key elements in achieving a soft edge

TONE

Tone (or value as it is called in the USA) refers to the lightness or darkness of a subject irrespective of its colour. In my opinion it is by far the most important factor to help give a picture impact and to suggest reality and a sense of depth. In a simple line drawing, the division between two objects is indicated by a line but in reality and in a painting, the division between two objects should be indicated by a difference in tone. It is fundamental to the painting process to understand this and also to understand that if two objects or parts of objects have the same tone then you should not paint a division between them - **EVEN IF YOU KNOW THERE IS A DIVISION THERE**. Paint what you see, not what you know to be reality.

A line drawing can only create a plan of the subject. In order to give an impression of reality it is essential to think in terms of tone. In the subject, I have roughly indicated the areas where I see the lightest tone. Notice that the new shape produced bears little relation to the shape of any object. Instead the new shape includes part of the left bottle, the ball, the box, the right bottle and part of the background. Allowing areas of similar tone to merge together is one of the most important factors in creating a picture.

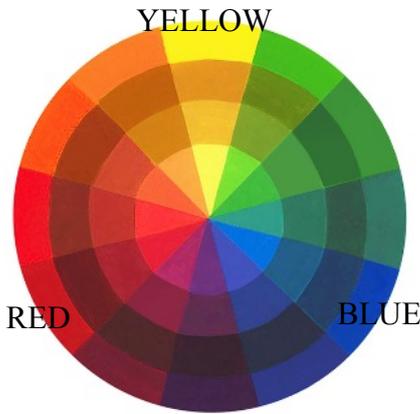


*Here the photograph has been converted into only four pure tones and yet the different shapes are still clearly recognisable **EVEN THOUGH YOU CANNOT SEE ANY LINES**. Tone is essential to give the impression of three dimensions on a flat piece of paper. Any complex subject can be reduced down to a simple tonal pattern and yet will still be recognisable. In the photograph of the couple, there are only two tones and yet there is more than enough information even to recognise them*



USE OF COLOUR

A variety of tone will always have more impact in a painting than a variety of colour and it is vital when planning a painting not to get mixed up with the two. You should first analyse the subject as if it were only black, white and shades of gray before considering colour. Colour can help to emphasize the feeling of depth and when used properly can suggest different moods and atmospheres. Colour can also add a different dimension to the contrast of a painting, but it is important to think of colour along with tone. There is no point in identifying a red house. You must also identify if it is a light or dark red house.



The colour wheel on the left is a traditional method of “arranging” colour. The three primary colours are marked. These are colours that in theory cannot be mixed from any other colours. The colours between the primaries are made by mixing the adjacent primaries and are considered to be harmonious. The colours opposite each other are complementary colours and show the greatest colour contrast. For example, a red house in a field of orange flowers will have less impact than a red house in a green forest. In the real world, life is not so simple.

In theory a tube of red, blue and yellow would allow us to mix any colour but all colours contain impurities that prevent this ideal situation. Instead, a cool and a warm version of each primary is needed. The cool blue would be used to mix greens with the cool yellow and the warm red would be used with the warm yellow to mix orange. Even this is not perfect and most artists use at least one or two additional colours. There is no benefit at all in using dozens of colours. It simply leads to confusion and prevents you getting to know the mixes that are possible.

To mix greys, all three primaries are mixed together, or (same thing) the two colours opposite each other on the colour wheel are mixed. The strength of colour used to mix will allow all shades of grey to be produced, from the lightest to virtually black. This is why greys and black are not essential colours in the palette, although some artists do use them. As in all aspects of painting, the colours you use should be the colours YOU want to use, but my advice is to get rid of those colours that you don't need.



Fig 1. This painting is chiefly composed of greens and blues, giving a harmonious restful effect

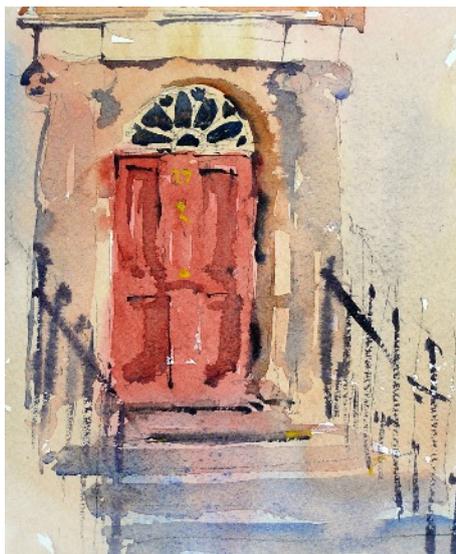


Fig 3. This painting is chiefly composed of warm tones giving vibrancy to what is otherwise a simple subject



Fig 2. This painting also uses harmonious blues and grays but with a splash of complementary orange for local impact

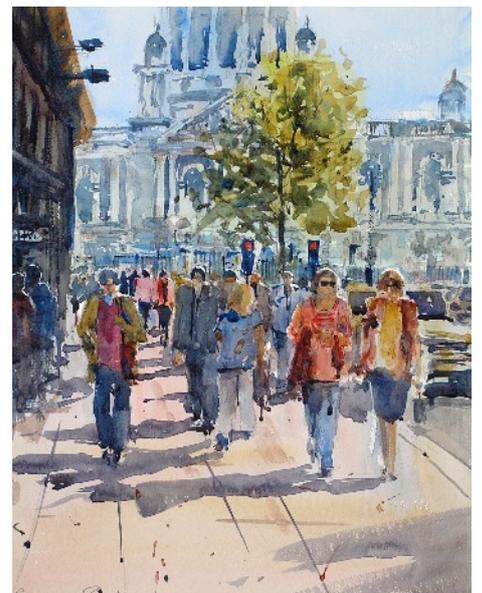


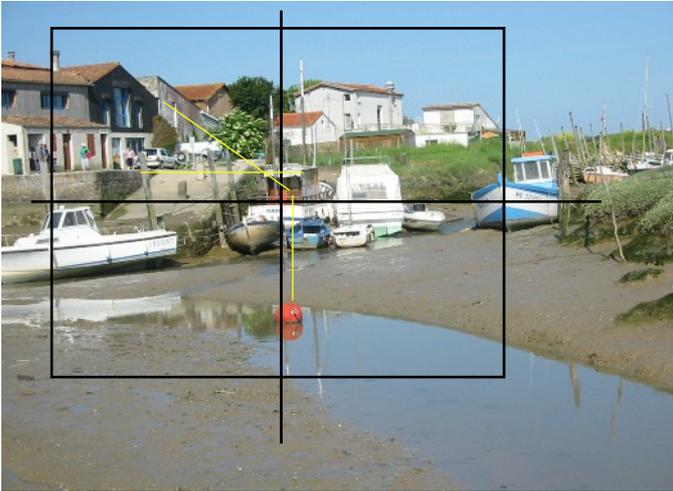
Fig 4. The cool blue background and the warm toned foreground give a sense of depth to the painting. Cool colours appear to recede and warm colours advance.

DRAWING AND PERSPECTIVE

“Oh! I can’t draw.” How many times do we hear that cry of anguish. Well, if you can write, then you can draw. Both involve making marks on paper that demand accuracy of relative size and proportion in order to be meaningful. Remember the hours spent at primary school practicing letters? That is why you can write, and drawing requires the same dedication. As with most activities, a planned approach always works best, so, here goes:

STEP 1

The first stage must be to define the edges of your drawing. This simply means deciding what you wish to place at the extreme left and right edges of your paper. When you decide this, you automatically fix in place everything within these bounds, including what is at



the top and bottom edges. The easiest way to decide on your boundaries is to use a viewfinder. These are available commercially, but can easily be made by cutting a rectangle out of a piece of card. The rectangle should be the same proportions as your normal paper. An even simpler solution is to make a viewfinder from your hands.

STEP 2

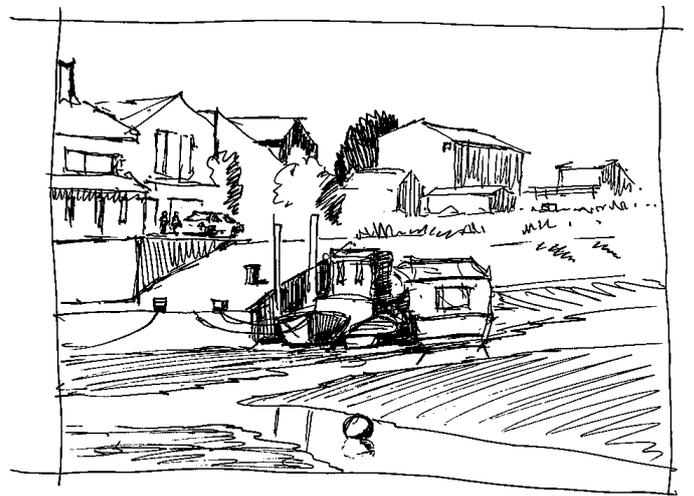
If you look at the illustration, you can see the view I have chosen. I have also placed two lines to divide the rectangle into four. This should make it easier to work out the relative sizes and proportions. All subjects consist of a collection of objects. In this picture we have buildings, boats, water, trees etc. Each object has an absolute position within the frame and this position is also related to every other object. It should be immediately obvious that the red buoy is slightly right of centre, and slightly greater than half of the way down the selected part of the image. This is its absolute position. Every object in the picture should be placed the same way. The top of the red buoy almost coincides with the top edge of the water and it is also directly below the

cabin of the central boat. This is the position of the buoy, relative to the water and boat. The cabin of the central boat is directly in line with the sloped roof to the left and the quayside is directly in line with the top of the central boat. Again, these are the relative positions that link all of the objects. Remember, you need accurate positioning of each object within the frame and this is achieved by calculating the proportions of each object, the relative distance between objects, and the relative sizes of each object.

STEP 3

I begin my drawing by making light marks, to mark the boundaries of the main objects before I actually draw them. If you do not do this, you will almost certainly draw them either too large or too small. Also, I constantly refer to the other objects in the picture to ensure that the relative sizes are accurate. All being well I will end up with a good enough drawing. More often than not however I will find that I have made mistakes. By checking relative positions, this should be obvious and can be corrected. If you wish to rub out, make the correction first and then rub out, otherwise you can make the same mistake again.

This is the first stage of creating a picture and your first opportunity to make additions or to leave items out. Re-



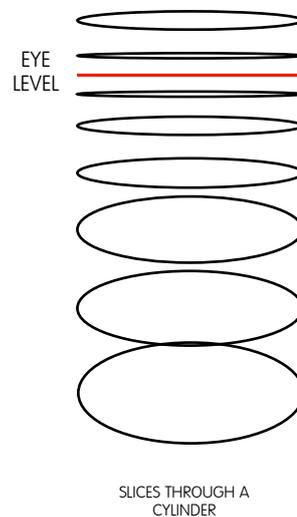
member that a picture does not have to be a photographic copy of the scene. Even if you were skilled enough to make such a copy, I would argue that it is pointless to do so as a camera will always do it better. Your drawing should reflect *your* feelings about a subject. In the example above you can decide to give emphasis to the boats or to the buildings. You can leave out a boat if it doesn’t help the composition. You can simplify shapes to make them less obvious. For example the more distant buildings can be drawn with less detail than the closer buildings. This helps to suggest three dimensions on a flat two dimensional sheet of paper.

The most common form of perspective is known as oblique perspective. When looking at a building, all parallel horizontal lines appear to converge to a point known as the vanishing point (VP), from the closer to the further end. When two sides of a building are visible, there will be two vanishing points. If only one is visible, such as when looking down a street, there will



be only one. The vanishing points are on a horizontal line that is at eye level. This line also coincides with the horizon although this will not always be visible. All vanishing points will be on eye level, even if buildings are not arranged in convenient parallel lines (remember that only parallel lines vanish to one point - a curved line of buildings will have separate vanishing points, but all are on eye level). Because of the importance of the eye level line, it is VITAL that this line is established before starting any drawing. If you can see the horizon, fine, if not then it can be estimated. This rule of perspective applies whether a building is close or far away, but if it is far away, the horizontal lines will be so close to eye level that they are almost parallel to eye level and so it is best not to apply perspective to distant buildings. Technically, vertical lines also follow the rules of perspective in that they appear to converge but unless the building is very high and close, it is best to keep vertical lines vertical. The brain actually corrects slight convergence of vertical lines which is why tall buildings appear to be falling over in photographs but not in reality.

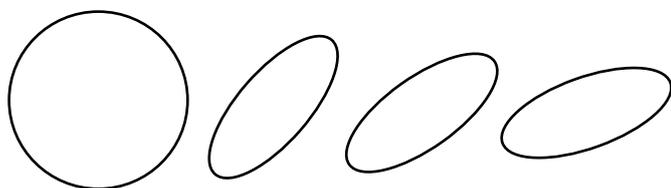
is away from eye level. The vast majority of objects are composed of cubes, pyramids, cylinders and spheres.



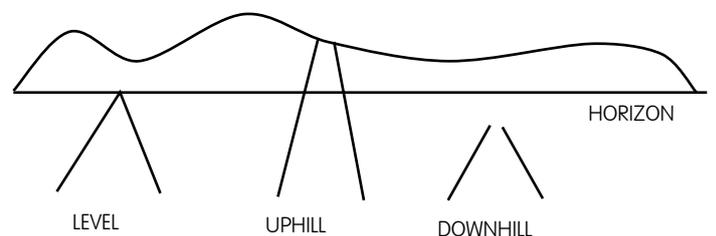
The simple rules of perspective above will cover most situations.

It is not only buildings that have perspective. Tree trunks are variations of a cylinder and clouds in skies appear to become smaller as they approach the horizon. If you think of

the sea or flat fields or beaches as tiled floors, this can help in positioning flow lines on the sea or lines of rocks on beaches, or clumps of grass on fields.



Perspective is simpler with circles and spheres. Spheres are always spheres - the angle of view does not affect this. Circles become ellipses in perspective. They are always true ellipses, never distorted. Note that the ends of an ellipse are not pointed. They are always rounded, no matter how flat the ellipse may be. When considering the perspective of a circle, it is simplest to consider a cylinder, with the circles being slices of the cylinder. At eye level, the ellipse will be completely flat, becoming more circular the further it



Rivers and roads have perspective. For a road to appear level, the edges of a parallel road will appear to meet on the eye level line. If the road is running uphill, the edges will meet above eye level and if the road is running downhill the edges will meet below eye level. As rivers are always level, the banks of a river of even width would always appear to meet at the horizon

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