Watercolor Sketching for Travelers

Peter McReynolds
Thanks again to my patient wife, Rosemarie. Thanks also to family: Susan, David and Linda for their generous and substantial help.

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Sketch to Make Mementos

Given the hurry and hustle of travel, inevitably interesting and beautiful details slip away. Thankfully, sketching is an excellent way to capture and embrace those wonderful memories. Your own watercolor sketches will be vibrant and luminous long after you return home. Sure, you also took some nice photographs, but nothing equals making your own quick little sketches, either during or even after a trip. After all, you put down precisely what caught your own eye. For example, the following page from a small sketchbook depicts a mountain lake where my family used to summer camp when I was a child. (5x7-inches, 70-lb NOT) Although my father was an avid photographer of 35mm slides, sadly few have survived; the film disintegrated through the years. In contrast, watercolor paints, on acid-free paper and properly stored, last “forever”. Having made my sketch a half-century later,
with each new viewing I recall languid August afternoons, floating in a wooden canoe through low green tangles and coils of alizarin-pink water lilies. Sunny warmth seems again to suffuse the back of my shirt. Slowly my fingers trail in the water, tracing above trout idly hovering over the shallow bottom. I hear the soft hum of myriad tiny insects tending the lilies. Then my mother’s voice calls me back to shore. What a feeling to recall such memories! And, it’s a great way to practice your sketching. Grab a brush and start on your very own irreplaceable memories.

**Sketch for the Simple, Playful Pleasure of It**

As children, we might have played with our food. Suppertime, when we saw the lava of burnt-umber gravy filling the pale ochre, mashed potato volcano’s crater, it was irresistible to stir it all up and see everything come to a common burnt sienna. And didn’t we notice that frozen peas had a deeper, more vibrant green than did the canned ones? As adults, there’s still a sumptuous pleasure to painting, a tactile reward in pushing around a loaded brush, watching the trail of vibrant color floating behind, blending unpredictably but brilliantly with colors from the previous strokes. In the sketch above of painters working in a municipal rose garden,
note the clarity and luminous depth of the colors. The vibrancy of watercolor is stunning. Scrumptious, like expensive candy. With watercolors, it’s quite pleasurable to simply take in all those wonderful, luminous colors, many with mysterious old names, reminiscent of fairy tales. The following are a few, although some are no longer available. *Dragon’s Blood*. Dragons? *Alizarin Madder Lake*. *Madder* is a swamp plant. Here a *lake* is a medieval chemical process. *Lapis Lazuli*. Also called *ultramarine* or beyond-the-sea. The best is still mined in a remote corner of Afghanistan. *Caput Mortuum*. Literally, dead-head, meaning the dregs. *Vert Emeraude*. Emeralds! *Mummy*. Ugh, actually ground from ancient mummies. *Indian Yellow Genuine*. Processed from the urine of cows fed only mango leaves. Etc. The romance of color names continues on and is especially true for travelers. There are well more than a dozen names for various blues based just on location, starting with *Alexandria blue*, *Antwerp blue*, … on through *Vienna blue*. And, this is not counting the four heavenly contributions of: *blue celeste*, *celestial blue* and two more named *cerulean blue*. You could mount a pilgrimage to a dozen European cities or more, making a point of sketching with their namesake blues!

Rich watercolors are glorious, seductive, and intoxicating on paper. Study the next scan, from my 24-pan *Winsor & Newton* box. Buying colors still makes me feel like a kid in a candy store. Colors are downright fun. I can get an irresistible urge to go outdoors and paint!
Sometimes I just have to grab my little travel kit, drive up the highway a bit until there’s a place to safely pull over, get out… and sketch. Just as I did in the next image showing a series of timber-covered ridges climbing over valleys filled with mist. Note those brilliant, rich colors. Coming home with a sketch like this is like coming home carrying a fishing rod and straw hamper with cooling fly-caught trout. What a rush!

Sketch as a Meditative Practice
We’re all aware that some meditative practices incorporate a discipline of sitting periods that require a quiet, laser-sharp focus of the mind. Perhaps surprisingly, simple sketching can provide many of the same benefits, albeit in a mundane way. To best sketch, you have to shift mental gears and, instead of a cursory glance, give your subject a really careful, close look. And no, this isn’t what we usually do. To personally experience this right now, let’s exploit something our bodies and minds seem wired to do. Find some interesting, complicated landscape scene. After your
first and usual glance, then give it another look. However, this second time, with your arm outstretched, mindfully and silently trace your pointing index finger around some salient feature of that same scene. Steadily concentrate. Say, first you glance at a house across the street and then look again, the second time slowly moving the tip of your finger around the outline of the roof and chimney. Oh my, in an instant, there’s a deeper, even profound appreciation of that feature! With this different way of looking, in just seconds you more truly saw, more fully apprehended. Famously, this experience, this jump in visual cognition, is difficult to describe in words. But, it is quite real; you actually feel it yourself. Psychologists would say that your vision moved from the left side of your brain to the right side. Whatever this shift is, it is a skill that a good sketcher needs to exploit. Thankfully, it is easier to learn (with just a little practice) than it is to tell.

This cognitive shift in vision is so important that it warrants a curious anecdote. A coworker of my wife had returned from a group excursion down the Colorado River, along the bottom of the Grand Canyon. The whole office was enjoying lunch and passing around the photo prints the traveler just had received back from the film developer. Suddenly several viewers let out gasps of disbelief. There it sat, and also in several subsequent snapshots. It was plain as your own nose, only a dozen steps off the riverside trail. Unbeknownst to the hikers, and even to the man who had pointed the camera, an adult mountain lion had been caught tarrying too long and was trapped between the water and the steep slope of rough talus swooping immediately up the side of the canyon. Apparently the cagey cat had decided better to wait sitting absolutely motionless and let the chattering humans simply wander by, mere yards away. No point in bounding up the scree field and creating a lot of stupid commotion. No sense provoking gales of panicky shrieking. Nobody had noticed the large cat because nobody expected one. Everybody expected more no-cat. It’s a guess as to why even the burros only quietly trudged by. Maybe tired and laden with sleeping bags, guitars, cold steaks, etc., they
simply thought, “There’s that lucky darn cat again. He never has anything to carry in this heat!”

In sum, just imagine the difference if our friend had first attentively contemplated that scene and had even traced the tip of his finger around the shapes in the stones. Instead, his mind was on autopilot, seeing in the viewfinder only the expected sweep of canyon rocks. Just as we would. Thus, for sketching, we need instead to saunter along and look very, very carefully. We need to open our minds as well as our eyes. Of course, we won’t see a mountain lion every time.

**Sketch for the Pleasant Social Company**

Many people enjoy congregating with like-minded others. I know I do. I made the next sketch below, one bright morning, working with other sketchers of a group called *Peninsula Outdoor Painters*, far out on San Francisco bay’s huge empty salt flats. In every locality I’ve become familiar with, there are organizations for sketchers or artists. Some of these are rather formal with elected presidents and other officers. They feature contests and awards and rules. A few groups even require prospective members to apply to be nominated by current members and / or to be “juried in”, to go through some process certifying one’s work as of sufficient quality. For example, I enormously admire the work of London’s *The Wapping Group of Artists*. It’s just 25 artists, chosen by their peers. (http://the wappinggroupofartists.co.uk) Their work is consistently excellent, always a great treat to view.
Railroad Trestle, Palo Alto. 5x12-inches. 140-lb Cotman NOT.
At the other extreme are groups of sketchers motivated solely by the fun. Years ago I knew an old, long-retired newspaper man who, in his nineties, attended demonstrations at the same artists’ society as did I. Upon deeper acquaintance, one-on-one, he would regale me with stories from a much different group, at another place and a different time. He said he had been a participant in the Denver Businessman’s Sketch Club in the 1930s. He stealthily shared some of his old oil sketches. Barely dressed and attractive people were depicted lounging on low-lying branches of trees in the Colorado Front Range above Denver. Apparently fueled by beer and BBQ, young enthusiasts of plein aire fun, weekends repaired to the countryside with paint, boards, palettes and friends. Nowadays I know of no current “Businessmen’s Sketch Club”, but much of the fun can still be found, albeit much tamer, in today’s specifically outdoor painting groups. These largely forego unneeded formalities; there’re no officers, bylaws, prizes, artist-of-the-year competitions, etc. Their focus is entirely on the immediate pleasures of sketching outdoors among simpatico friends. Picnics with painting! Thus, between these two extremes described, formal art societies and loosely organized sketch clubs, one can find a compatible local group offering support and companionship.

What is Travel Watercolor Sketching?
The travel sketching suggested here is making small pictures on paper with watercolor paint and ordinary graphite pencil. The results are small-scale and personal souvenirs, visual mementos of travels, people and places. In sometimes contrast to many snapshots, sketches should be carefully done, with more mindful and focused attention. The sketches might be only the size of postcards. Ideally they are made sur le motif. That is, real time, right in front of the subject. Or a sketch can be completed later at your leisure, away from perhaps distracting crowds or other activities. Maybe finished back in your hotel room that evening,
with or without the aid of the tiny color screen on your digital camera.
The sketch below is of just one beautiful spot along the famous 17-Mile Drive of Carmel, California. (4x6-inches, 210-lb rough Nujabi. Collection of David McReynolds.) This road is a twisting, two-lane blacktop, busy with locals, visitors and tourist buses, especially on weekends. Although there are many auto turnouts and viewing points with limited parking, there is little real opportunity for the leisurely activity of sketching.

When sightseeing with others, I often use a simple system of making brief pencil notes augmented with a few reference snapshots taken at the scene. Later, with paintbox and paper, I combine recall, notes and photos to make an image to my liking. Remember, sketching isn’t to replace photos, but to create a more personal memory of your experience. Also, a sketch can be a very unique gift, meaning more to the recipient than a commercial postcard. Further, I have found myself, and read as well, that sketching enhances the memory compared to just a quick photo, probably because the mind necessarily will have had a more
attentive experience. This is just one more benefit of sketching to get excited about.

**Why Specifically Watercolors?**

Besides using watercolors, I continue to paint extensively in oils and other media. Thus, I’ve learned through much personal experience that your best travel sketching kit is: a small block of paper, a tiny half-pan box of watercolors, plus one or two good travel brushes. Why?

- Nothing is flammable; everything can be “carry-on”.
- The color box can be as tiny as a cell phone, the paper block no larger than a man’s wallet, and the travel brush the size and appearance of a fountain pen.
- Your outfit needs neither batteries nor power plug.
- Your kit costs much less than the average camera.
- It isn’t obsolete every other year. I use some of my mother’s paints and brushes from half a century ago!
- Watercolor supplies are available around the world.
- Watercolors wash off with soap and water.
- You can create your personal postcards and mail them while still traveling.
- Sketchers make friends. If I looked open to the idea, I’ve been approached by nice people, friendly and curious as to what I’m doing and how.
- Sketches are lovely to have. And, to give as gifts!
- They’re permanent. On acid-free paper they can last “forever”. Sketches by Britain’s JMW Turner, from two centuries ago, are fine! Mine won’t suffer, stored in cool, dry, dim, and acid-free environments.
- Watercolors are easy! That’s my belief after years of using other media: oils, pastels, etc. See for yourself!
- Lastly, in my local city park, a young woman recently exhibited a completely unanticipated reaction to my sketching. Whilst being dragged away by her frowning male
companion she enthused, “Wow, mister, that is just totally hot!” Watercolors are hot!

Calm Morning, Crystal Springs Lake. 4x6-inches 140-lb NOT
An Annotated Gallery, A Short Sojourn in Slovenia

The photo above shows my wife, Rosemarie, and me along the river dividing Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. It's a tiny country, formerly part of Yugoslavia, but now an independent nation nestled under Austria and the Alps. Ljubljana was relatively spared during WWII and thus retains much of its centuries-old architectural heritage, so much so that it is often called “little Prague”. It is not the most common tourist destination, but several years ago we accompanied our daughter who had to give talks at a conference there. (Our daughter is a professor of Slavic Literature.) Given the loose parameters of the conference schedule, for more than a week Rosemarie and I had nothing to do but simply kick around the little city. What great luck! We had no ambitious itinerary of must-see monuments, important museums, etc. We could poke about the beautiful old town, meet the friendly natives, and investigate shops, parks, and churches. It was easy; the
Slovenes obviously liked Americans. And of course, I could quietly sketch.

The sketch above (4x6-inches. Canson 140-lb NOT block) looks at the tiny and busy central square at the heart of Ljubljana. It was high summer and very warm. The enormous bishop’s palace peeks over the far rooftops. Although the populace is Slavic, Slovenia has always looked to the west and historically is a Roman Catholic country. The building on the left houses the town’s main department store. It looks a holdover from a 1950s American small town. They sell cloth by the bolt, spools of thread, etc. I wish I had asked to sketch inside because the store interior is embellished with beautiful, life-size Art Nouveau figure sculptures. But like most people, I have only so much nerve.

A large bronze of an admired local poet, hovered over by a muse, dominates the middle of the square. Because a small watercolor postcard sketch takes me about twenty to thirty minutes, and I did several, I spent quite bit of time around this plaza. And because I didn’t just take photographs and move on, I did a lot of people watching at the same time. For example, I did not miss the
tumultuous arrival of several busloads of chanting, saffron-robed monks from Germany. Although Ljubljana is less a less crowded European destination, in no way is it a neglected backwater. There were, albeit in smaller numbers, interesting visitors from all over the world. Plein aire sketching often offers a lot of subsidiary fun. Sketchers slow down and smell the roses. And, they make local friends and chat. They leisurely sample the local food. Etc.

Like many places, centuries ago Ljubljana had rulers whose castle cum fortress crowns a steep local hill. It could be seen from everywhere in town and of course, for the castle’s purpose, vice versa. As always, my subject above was the beautiful scene. (4x6-inches. Strathmore 140-lb NOT) Also, specifically here, I admired the old, four-and five-story buildings, the forest above and even the collection of small, colorful automobiles lining the street. Via a mottled wash of cerulean blue bleaching towards the sun, I depicted the sky as hammered by heat for days. In contrast, the deep, cool forest rested in dark blues and greens. I wish that I also had had time to paint around the castle itself but even ten days are too few to see an entire city, much less to sketch it all. I did
reconnoiter the castle where several young docents eagerly practiced their limited English. One young man even offered me a cursory reading of his latest novel, in his best quick English oral translation. Again, instead of taking a brief and fast commercial tour of many famous sights, I enjoy spending the entire time at one interesting, friendly place. Walk about and meet the ordinary people. Sketch everything!

Divided by that one river, Ljubljana offers many beautiful bridges. It is a city of bridges. Although all sturdy and reliable, none of them looked boring and merely utilitarian. How could you not like a town whose people would go the extra steps to provide a bridge with a serious complement of large, bronze, guardian dragons, and that bridge not located in the political center of the city? The above obviously is Ljubljana’s Dragon Bridge. (4x6-inches. Strathmore 140-lb NOT) My problem was to depict both a sense of the imposing size and majesty of the dragons as well as to note our presence in the city. The dragons are perhaps twice as tall as a person. There are four of them; one at each corner of the bridge.
Plus, in between, there’s a supporting posse of other bronze dragonalia i.e. lizardly lamps and other Arthur Rackham-like fairytale whatnot. With the small scale of a postcard sketch I did not try to detail everything, such as the gang of cat-sized creatures guarding the bridge lamps in the background. Nor would I want to. By simplifying them, I’ve maintained primary interest in the foreground. The viewer’s interest is not scattered.

I couldn’t encompass the entire bridge experience in a single view of the whole. A key part of making a sketch is deciding what not to include. By focusing on just one buttress with people standing in front, I think I made a good compromise. My wife, in the white sunhat, patiently waits; our daughter looks ahead for the next interesting thing. Both are cut off to make the composition I desired. Human figures always come forward and objects at the bottom of the image seem closer still. Being able to rearrange things is an advantage of travel sketching over passively accepting what might be included with in a camera’s frame.
I made the next sketch (4x6 inches. 140-lb NOT) from the little town center called *Three Bridges*. It looks north to the 3-star Union Hotel up the street. We had a wonderful stay there. During our visit Slovenia was great, with its “little Prague” capital, bucolic countryside, Julian Alps, low prices, and evident affection for Americans. Of course Slavic food is quite good and readily available. It’s much like that of the rest of northern and eastern Europe; there’s a historical emphasis on root vegetables and red meats. However, much of the population enjoys a lighter, Italian cuisine; Slovenia was, for some four hundred years, connected with Venice. An old-fashioned department store is at the right; the shockingly bright, salmon-colored Franciscan church is on the left. The bronze poet-patriot and his almost airborne muse occupy the center left. Most of the time, this town center was crowded with people, locals and summer tourists. Here I sketched only a few so as to focus here on the town, not the visitors.

The next sketch above (4x6-inches. Canson 140-lb NOT) shows a lovely side street, complete with neighborhood fountain, pressed hard up against the steep hill capped by Ljubljana’s castle. Note the generally cool, receding colors of the forest complementing the
warm, advancing colors in the foreground. All the colors were mixed on the paper itself, not on the kit’s palette, which thing in any case is minimal in a traveler’s little sketch box. If colors are pre-mixed first on a palette, the color effect can be boring flat areas more like the Sunday comics. If pure colors first meet wet-in-wet on the paper, the effect is much more interesting and convincing of realism.

Perhaps surprisingly, this complex-looking forest more or less painted itself via wet-in-wet daubs here and there. The splashing of water in the fountain was best indicated, not by adding opaque white paint, but simply by scratching down to bare white paper with a small, sharp object. Note the warm light reflected off the pavement at the edge of the fountain. I learned to include this via study of Sargent’s brilliant watercolors of Italian fountains. Study of the masters always pays well.

Although the next sketch (4x6-inches. Canson 140-lb NOT) is simply titled “Ljubljana”, it is again at the town center and again of the 1950s-era department store on the right and the bright red
Franciscan church across the street. However, this time our view is angled sharply up towards the rooftops. I wanted to capture the store’s engaging, bonnet-shaped marquee (gold gilt on black wrought iron) over the front door as well as the life-size-plus statuary on the roof. Almost every public or commercial building supported its own platoon of such airborne heroic figures. As usual, that day the sky was in fact clear, however I chose to invent clouds both to add visual interest and to provide a tonal contrast against which to depict the usually white marble figures. Don’t hesitate to either subtract unimportant or confusing objects or to add useful and generic things like clouds.

The sketch below (4x6-inches. Strathmore 140-lb NOT) depicts a street scene. I couldn’t resist that old wooden oriel, that windowed bump-out, on the side of the building, historically facilitating a family’s hidden surveillance up and down the street. Unfortunately, I feel I made several small mistakes? For scale, I included figures, but painted one smack in the middle of the path, directly underneath the oriel and even in almost the identical hue. Also, although I failed to convey enough of this, the pathway was directly alongside the river as suggested by the drooping willow. (Which
prevents the eye from sliding out of the image.) I remember struggling with this problem and that I finally gave up. Lastly, although I can’t put my finger on it, somehow now I’m not completely happy with the colors I used on the spot. Perhaps those caput mortuum or maroon shadows?

Oh well, keeping it all in proportion, this sketch clearly remains a lovely and enjoyable memory of Ljubljana. My sketches aren’t 100% perfect and yours won’t be either. So please don’t forgo sketching because of either pride or timidity. Besides, often the sketcher is unduly harsh in criticizing his or her work. I see many errors that no one else notices. You probably will judge your work too harshly too. But don’t let it discourage you!

The next sketch is mischievous. (4x6-inches. Canson 140-lb NOT) On a side street, directly across from the archbishop’s palace and just down the street from the cathedral itself, I found a row of nightclubs. This one in particular possessed a provocative if inscrutable sign over the doorway. I have no idea what “CRNI” means, but the overall message of the black cat’s insolent stance is unmistakable. (On a map of Slovenia I later found a tiny town called Crni Vrh?)
Behind the dome and one bell tower of the cathedral, I tried to indicate the failing light of early evening. When the light falls so rapidly, a sketch can be finished later with the aide of a camera’s view screen, while one’s memory is still fresh. I worked to put some red and some blue into that otherwise flat-black sign. (Look closely to see those colors.) Certainly the sign’s local (intrinsic) color was plain black, but a black area on a sketch or painting usually appears just plain dead. I’ve seen the same black-paint trick on some Sargent watercolors. It’s justified as an inclusion of reflected neighboring colors.

Ljubljana is built around a modest river that drains from the Julian Alps before dividing the city in two. On each side a broad, tree-lined promenade fronts upon the water’s prim concrete channel. The city went through a brilliant, master-planned reconstruction at the beginning of the 20 Century, said following a devastating earthquake. Every few hundred meters a pretty bridge spanned the steady, quiet flow.

In this sketch (4x6-inches. Canson 140-lb NOT) I used a deep ultramarine blue for the gloom under the shadowed end of the far
bridge. This is, of course, much exaggerated but serves the purpose of the sketch. Likewise in the nearer willows dripping over the water, in person the darks seemed in fact more a prosaic gray. But, maybe our eyes initially fail us? There again a deep blue looks convincing and boldly complements the gold ochre color of many of the multistory residential buildings fronting the river. Finally, note the dull reddish tiny “Corot spots” on the underside of the distant bridge subliminally pulling your eye there. This also is intended to subtly enhance the overall image. It’s not exactly a falsehood and you probably didn’t see it until I pointed it out. Remember, a sketch or a painting is not necessarily just the objective facts. You can and even should change things, add or subtract things, if those changes that make the final image accord more with your personal idea of the place.

If possible while traveling, I recommend getting out of the cities. In Slovenia, for a short while, near the country’s little airport, we stayed at an inn within a tiny rural hamlet surrounded by grain fields and hop yards. Every few miles at most, a church steeple rose above the fields. We could take in a half dozen churches in a
glance from our third floor window. This church was right next-door, just beyond a field of hops. (6x9-inches. Canson 140-lb NOT block) I think this sketch captures the beautiful but heavy atmosphere of the hot and humid day’s early evening. Notice how one can depict things with the edge of a small pocketknife blade or other sharp object. (Traveling abroad, use a credit card.) With an edge I scratched in the tall poles used to string the hops. Typically, paint will preferentially collect in a channel of damaged paper and deepen in tone. Contrarily, if the flat of the card is used instead of an edge, a squeegee effect results and lightens the area. I remember reading once that some famous artist, brushes already filling both hands, was said to push the (oil) paint around with his nose! The point is, be inventive. don’t be restricted to what you think you’re supposed to do, what “professionals” would do. Think instead what is needed and what at hand might work. Most of all, have fun! No one need enjoy your work but you yourself. And especially, enjoy the process, not just the product. That is, enjoy the very act of sketching, not just any resulting sketches that you feel turn out particularly well.
Where can one keep dozens of such little travel memory watercolor sketches? How can one display them or share them with friends? I’ve attended wonderfully successful gallery exhibits, with perhaps a hundred tiny paintings displayed, none bigger than these. There were scores of little pictures hung in a single row at eye level. However, my home, like most, is neither big enough nor bare enough to carry off this idea. Instead, often I buy well-made memory albums intended for sharing photographs or postcards. There are two caveats: is the album acid-free and will the album mechanically accept your sketches? Check before you buy. Often the albums are either not acid-free or their slots, pockets or whatever, intended to hold the standard-sized photos and postcards, are too small to hold your sketches without damage. Below is an album holding many sketches from our trip to Slovenia. The sketch shown is 4x6-inches. There is no plastic cover or the like over the watercolors. An upside is that the bare
sketches can be better seen and appreciated; a downside is that they are vulnerable to soiling if touched by admiring hands.
Watercolor Paintboxes for Travelers

If you are going to sketch in watercolors while traveling then you’re going to have to carry around a small amount of low-impact painting gear. Wisely chosen, it can be inexpensive yet still quite competent. It should cost much less than a camera kit. Because there’s a chance you may misplace it, it makes little sense to buy the pricey, very best. Obviously, you’ll need some paints, some brushes and some paper. Not so obviously, you’ll use other things as well, for example, clean water for yourself and for your sketching. Additionally, you’ll need a small (about 3 to 6 fluid ounces), empty watertight vessel of some sort to carry away water dirtied while cleaning brushes, etc. Other chapters cover all these ancillary needs and more.

Thankfully, a major portion, the core of your little sketching outfit, can be housed conveniently in a small paintbox kit. "In the good old days", most artists made their own paintbox, the proverbial studio in a cigar box. Interestingly, today many experienced painters still enjoy making their own, custom paintboxes. You could too; I admit it is a lot of fun. Some stores, e.g. JudsonArt.com, even provide the materials and hardware to help you make your own little cigar box kit. However, you don’t need to make your own and I don’t recommend starting that way if you’re brand new to watercolor sketching.

Do-It-Yourself, Make Your Own Paintbox / Kit

Still, if you insist on making your own kit, today there are better ways to start than with a cigar box, especially if you use the recommended pans or half-pans of paint rather than tube paints. The photos below show one of my own favorite kits. The paintbox is a miniscule “Tiny Tin” Altoids can, crammed with six half-pans of moist watercolors. My trusty Pentel 0.9mm automatic pencil on the right gives the scale. (The usual 0.5 mm pencils, even the larger 0.7 mm ones, seem better suited for accountants and
engineers. This 0.9 mm model’s lead is just barely big enough to provide an interesting mark.)
The largest item is the open 4x6 watercolor postcard paper pad. It is shown open here for scale. When closed, a 4x6-inch postcard block or pad is little larger than a man’s folding pocket wallet. On top of the paper is an Arches round red sable travel brush. This brush and similar are available online or from major art supply stores. For rinsing the brushes I have here a 35-mm film container. You can substitute any of those tiny plastic tubs that restaurants and grocery stores use today to provide sides of salsa, salad dressing, etc. I habitually embarrass others by pocketing mine upon leaving a restaurant. Just wash it thoroughly before adding to your kit.
Note that there is no water reservoir shown, no special water bottle. Today, one can better rely on the ubiquitous throwaway (but recyclable) personal plastic water bottle. Like the brush, the individual half-pans of color can be purchased online or from a large art store. Major manufacturers offer literally as many as one hundred-plus different colors. Here I’ve followed a popular palette scheme: a warm and a cool hue from each of the three primary colors, two blues, two reds and two yellows. For example, the tin contains a cool, bluish red and a warm, almost orange-red. Note the tiny piece of paper with six, sample swatches, included in the tin for reference.
Next, the mini-kit is shown closed. This is about as small a kit as is sensible, fitting nicely into pocket or purse. Of course it could be smaller still; watercolor paper is available pre-cut in the size of playing cards, 2.5 by 3.5 inches. However, paradoxically, it can be more difficult to paint smaller than it is to paint larger. 4x6-inch papers are very available, small enough to conveniently carry, and just large enough for me to depict recognizable memories of my travel. Plus, they can be mailed as postcards!

It is convenient to keep all these items grouped together, except perhaps your water bottle and the mechanical pencil. To hold all, you’ll need a convenient container, suitable for travel and able to take a few knocks. I’ve found that soft-sided bags designed to carry a lunch work well for me.

**A Good, Quick Start**

As said, if you want, you can make your own paintbox. But, it isn’t necessary. Fortunately, nowadays there are plenty of ready-made, very competent yet inexpensive alternatives to a cigar box. For a quick start, I recommend buying a name-brand, off-the-shelf
watercolor paintbox with an included selection of moist half-pan colors. With each of the several following choices illustrated below, you won’t go wrong. Certainly I haven’t shown all the good possible choices; there must be others that are as good and as inexpensive. However, I’ve also run into some very bad choices. Typically the bad ones have a name like your all-in-one art studio in a box. In my experience, although cheaper, their quality is discouragingly poor. Literally discouraging, they perform so badly you’ll judge watercolor to be very difficult and might feel like quitting. But it’s only the cheap, poor-quality tools that are discouraging. Give yourself a fair chance; purchase instead one of the paintboxes mentioned below or a good equivalent.

The first several of the recommended paintboxes are from one of the world’s premier artist’s paint manufacturers, England’s Winsor & Newton. This firm has offered excellent watercolor supplies for almost two hundred years. The retail prices of these suggested boxes vary from less than fifteen up to about fifty dollars when discounted on the Internet, perhaps twice that in a local brick and mortar store. Some have a usable round brush included. Unfortunately, typically the included round is so small as to be suitable only for tiny, picayune details. The particular, metal-cased brush shown below is an excellent design, but it is simply too small, unless you are a vacationing entomologist recording the anatomical details of the local bees. I strongly recommend that you immediately buy an additional brush as described in the chapter on brushes. Perhaps you can buy a Cotman 3/8-inch flat, from a local art and crafts store.

The number of included half-pans of paints ranges from eight to fourteen. A half-pan holds a volume roughly that of the common sugar cube. The paint is “semi-moist”, meaning that it looks and feels dry, but the addition of a drop of water quickly brings up some concentrated wet paint. As appropriate for traveling, the overall paintbox sizes range from tiny to merely quite small, in no case much larger than a child's sandwich. Each of the Winsor & Newton offerings is in its Cotman line of so-called student-grade
paints. *Winsor & Newton* also offers a more expensive *Artist’s* line of colors, but these *Cotman* offerings are plenty good enough. Your sketches won’t suffer noticeably as a result. I use both *Cotman* and *Artist’s* watercolor paints all the time and I am hard pressed to note a decisive difference except that the *Artist’s* line of *Winsor & Newton* offers even more (over a hundred) quite beautiful colors.

The first *W&N* half-pan paintbox, here shown open, is probably their barest-bones and lowest priced. It comes with a spectrum of twelve *Cotman* half-pans of color, certainly enough for postcards memorializing an extended trip abroad. As can be seen, there are a warm and a cool hue in each of the three primary colors. Additionally, there are warm and cool green half-pans as well as some earth colors, notably very useful burnt sienna. Unfortunately, the box wastes space by including that almost useless white. A violet would be much more useful. The open lid serves as a mixing area with three wells. The paintbox includes a *Cotman* travel brush

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in which the brush is stored in its own handle for protection. Like those of almost all the other paintboxes in this genre, this brush is really too small except for depicting the finest detail. But, it works and is at least decent in quality.

Shown next below, first closed, then open for business, is another offering from the *Winsor & Newton Cotman* line of half-pan watercolor paintboxes, their “Mini PLUS” model. When closed, it is little bigger than the average PC computer mouse! Holding only eight, well-chosen half-pans, this is close to the smallest broadly available good paintbox, certainly among those at such a reasonable price. (Superb, even smaller ones can be had for $100 or more.) Note… thankfully no useless white. This paintbox includes, as typical, that decent but too-small *Cotman* travel brush, this time nestling cleverly in a recess in the top of the case.
The photos hardly do justice to the tiny size of this unit; closed, it is little bigger than the tiniest cellphone.

The next paintbox is another in the “Cotman PLUS” series from Winsor & Newton, this one called the “Pocket PLUS”. It is shown below, first closed and then open for business. Instead of just eight half-pans, it contains twelve and, paradoxically, costs less and is more widely available in stores than the previous mini. It is a very competent unit, with a slightly larger and more useful travel brush, albeit not the “folding” kind, not one that nests in its own handle, protecting the hairs. I store this brush in a segment of plastic soda straw.
The Winsor & Newton Cotman watercolor paintbox below is the “Field PLUS” model. At sight, it is considerably bigger than the previous units, the “Mini PLUS” and the “Pocket PLUS”. It
contains twelve half-pans. Beyond that, it seems to offer more tools: many more mixing areas, two tiny rinse cups and a miniscule water bottle. (Caution: the bottle stopper looks an unreliable fit for packing water in your luggage.) All this is admirably nested inside. However, a common recyclable water bottle and two used plastic condiment cups are practical and are more easily replaced if lost. There are fully twelve mixing wells, probably at least six too many for sketching.

There is still another, even larger member of this “PLUS” set, the “Painter PLUS”, more suitable for a studio with its larger size and up to twenty-four colors in one of the variations offered.
The photos below show another very reasonably priced and eminently pocket-able paintbox by a quality manufacturer in France, *Raphael*. When open, it reveals a nice selection of ten half-pan colors adjacent to a handy, pre-printed color wheel. (Note: there’s no seldom used white!) Included is one of the better brushes in this class, maybe not surprising because *Raphael* is a maker of fine brushes. Still, I would have liked a longer handle and would have preferred a nesting design. However, this box also is about the least expensive in the class and is widely available.
I do see a problem in the mechanical design of the box, that bending plastic “hinge” between the two half shells. Upon the very first opening, the “hinge” is already blanched white, the beginning of plastic strain failure. This will soon totally fail. *Raphael* should have used a better, two-part rotating hinge for mere pennies more. However, a couple of rubber bands would still hold the box together.
The photos above and below show another excellent entry in this
class of inexpensive yet competent travel watercolor paintboxes, this time in the *van Gogh* (student grade) product line from *Talens* of the Netherlands. It includes a good assortment of eleven half-pan colors, plus white. The box is well-designed with a reasonable count of five mixing wells and a real, two-piece hinge enabling the half shells to easily lie quite flat, a very important property when sketching in the field. (For example, to rest reliably on you thigh.) The included brush has artificial hairs and is too small, but it is a good, nesting design. It’s okay. Note the useful, removable sponge.

The next small, traveler’s watercolor paintbox is a very clever design from *Sennelier* of France, makers of excellent paints. Closed, it is roughly the usual size of the genre, about the size of a 4x6-inch postcard block, yet it easily contains 14 half-pan colors. And it doesn’t waste space on seldom-used white. In the open view, this
is obvious in the sample color key provided above the colors, a very handy device. (I always make my own color key if one is not provided.) Lovely rose madder replaces the white. (Top row, third from right.) The *Sennelier* box provides adequate mixing wells and a good brush, albeit not of the self-nesting or traveling kind. A soda straw cut to proper length provides some protection. Note the handy thumb hole, for holding the box aloft in one hand while sketching with the other. (This is something I prefer not to do although many others might. Instead, I try to find some flat surface to hold everything. I often carry a lightweight plastic board to balance on my lap as a desk.)
A unique feature of Sennelier’s design is a small hole behind each half-pan (not visible from above), enabling one to poke out the individual pans as needed. This is a boon when refilling the unit; some pans become cemented in due the honey and gum resin content of the paints. *Sennelier* is a manufacturer of high quality art supplies including paints in all media as well as brushes. Their watercolors are no exception. This box and the next, the German *Lukas* box made from light metal, are rather more expensive than the preceding ones, pushing fifty dollars or more even on the Internet. However, while you can make do with less, this *Sennelier* kit is superb and, realistically, you’ll really never need to acquire a better paintbox even if you sketch for the rest of your life. It’s superb.

Two identical paintboxes are shown in a single photo below, one box is open, the other closed. They are yet another choice for small, traveler’s sketchbox, albeit a little more expensive. They are from *Lukas* and are typical of the German offerings. These boxes come with 12 colors included. As such, they can cost a hundred
dollars list, perhaps half that on the Internet. In the one shown, I replaced white and added three useful colors from open stock and now have 14 hues in a decent folding box of light metal. (In the closed box, I added even more, six more colors down the empty middle rank to total an amazing 20 hues in such a compact package. That’s very close to being too many.) Two enameled surfaces hinge out level to offer capacious mixing wells. Although metal boxes can be a little pricier than the plastic alternatives, they seem sturdier and less likely to break. (An aside… custom-made, small, half-pan paintboxes of enameled heavy brass can be bought for hundreds of dollars.) Lukas, Schmincke and others offer a series of this light-metal type, with size increasing with the count of half-pans, up to an astounding, patently excessive, 48 colors. Similar boxes are offered in whole-pans. However, the whole-pan variants can be quite heavy. They are beautiful to use, unless you have to walk and carry them for any distance. Perhaps they’re not for backpacking.

In sum, there are many good choices for a watercolor traveler’s
paintbox. Any one of those shown here, if augmented with a better brush or two, could form the core of an excellent traveler’s sketching kit. Finding the better brushes is the subject of a separate chapter covering just brushes.
Watercolor Sketching Brushes

It’s a strong but true statement to say that your brush is your most important watercolor sketching tool. A too common mistake for a novice is to mistakenly buy several mediocre or even bad brushes rather than a single good brush. And sadly, in craft and hobby stores, most of the brushes offered, sometimes all, vary only from outright awful to merely mediocre. However, given its importance, short of first trying out a brush in an actual sketch, how can you identify a good one? What makes a brush a good brush? How do you shop for a good one?

Good brushes are unfortunately expensive, or at least not cheap. If a brush has a price too good to be true, it probably isn’t a true price, or it probably really isn’t a good brush. This immediately eliminates all those multi-brush value packets in craft and hobby stores. If manufacturers can command $50 or more for single great brush, why would they sell them at three-for-$5? List price for a large, top-notch watercolor brush can be more than $500! However, Internet sources commonly sell brushes for more than 50% off list price. Furthermore, perhaps the greatest relief for the travel sketcher is to learn that an excellent watercolor traveler’s brush, because it’s quite small, can be had somewhere for well less than $30. That’s about the price of a good meal. But the question remains, what is a good brush; what kind of brush does all that money buy?
Quick Start Suggestion

If you’re just getting started and so far have only the one, too-small round brush included with one of those satisfactory, off-the-shelf paintboxes mentioned previously in this book, then a good initial step would be to supplement that with a decent small watercolor wash (flat) brush. An inexpensive example is a 3/8-inch flat from Cotman, available from most art supply stores and often from chain hobby and craft outlets. With just these two brushes, you could, in fact, paint nice postcards all around the world.

Properties of a Fine Brush

There are several essential properties of a fine watercolor brush. First, although it won’t be obvious until after the passage of both much use and time, a better brush has a relatively longer service life. In fact, after more than half a century, I’m still using some of my mother’s excellent sable brushes. Given the same use, and absent unusual abuse, a good, albeit more expensive brush will outlast a cheaper brush several-fold over. As with many things in life, you get what you pay for. Again, in plain words, quality brushes can command a stiff price.

But maybe durability alone isn’t motive enough to buy an expensive brush. A second strength is that a better brush holds much more liquid paint. Sometimes, in a quaint way, this is called “having a good belly”. What otherwise might require several trips from the wet paint source in the paintbox to the paper, could be accomplished with one drink with a good brush. This is more important than it might seem. For example, a brush with a good belly of paint, requiring only a single fill, is much better at producing a seamless, unbroken watercolor sky wash. A start and stop approach with a bad brush can be obvious in a patchy final result.

Third, a better brush comes to a sharper point in the case of a round brush, or to a thinner, straighter chisel edge in the case of a flat brush. This makes for a brush that is a more articulate tool in your hands; you have greater and finer control over the marks you
make. And, because of its superior wear resistance; a good brush will continue to be sharp long after the discount ones have degenerated to little more than blunt, cotton swabs.

Materials for the Best Brushes

Not surprisingly, excellent watercolor brushes are made from fine materials. The generally acknowledged best choice for the hairs of a brush is Kolinsky red sable. What exactly is Kolinsky red sable? In a mouthful, these are the longest hairs from just the tail fur, of just the males, harvested only in the deep of winter, from only red sables (roughly, a kind of weasel), and only those of the Kolinsky Valley of Siberia. These make for the most durable, sharpest, and deepest bellied watercolor brushes. You can use brushes of other hair types and some other hairs can make pretty good brushes. For example, there are other fine red sable brushes. Nylon isn’t too bad. But, Kolinsky red sable is considered the best. The brushes aren’t necessarily made right there in Siberia. Brush makers around the world, the people who assemble the entire brush, import the elite Siberian hairs.

Another excellent choice for natural brush hairs also comes out of Asiatic Russia, that of the Siberian Grey Squirrel. Squirrel hair is more lank than sable; it is not as stiff when wet. Thus, watercolor brushes with squirrel hair are a little different in design and in use from those with sable hair. Squirrel brushes tend to be more of a “mop”. A mop brush is just what you would surmise, something wet and floppy. Yet, some outstanding artists still manage to indicate fine pictorial details with squirrel brushes and other mops. As always, although better tools work better, ultimately it’s the hand wielding the tool that matters most. And, this must come from study and practice.

Other than good red sable or grey squirrel, many watercolor brushes are made with some “hair” that is some form or another of artificial filament. Intermediate quality brushes can be made from a mix of some kind of natural sable with manmade filaments. The best of these are at least quite usable and will suffice until you can
afford the better sables. Still another good choice is “oriental” brushes, mostly from Japan. For example, those brushes intended for sumi-e painting can be very well constructed with sturdy bamboo handles and ferrules. Many are made with excellent hair from badgers, badgers being yet another member of the weasel family. As an aside, traditionally the best brushes for men’s old-fashioned shaving soap kits are made with badger hair.

What else is there to a good brush? Besides a well-assembled head of good hair, a good brush also should have a quality hardwood handle and a sturdy, seamless, rustproof metal ferrule (the tubular structure clasping the hairs into a secure bundle at the end of the handle). But, don’t worry about handles and ferrules, because by far most of the expense of a brush is in the quality of hair and the expert hand-labor building that hair bunch into a proper head. That is, manufacturers of quality brushes never seem to stint on the handle and ferrule.
Designs / Shapes of Brushes

There are a great many designs or shapes of brushes: flats, brights, filberts, cat-tongues, mops, fitches, rounds, riggers, pointers, liners, chisels, and more. Fortunately, for the sketcher traveling light, only a few types need be considered: flats, rounds and perhaps mops. A flat (also called a wash) has a shape like a closed book, much like everybody’s idea of a common housepainter’s brush. The ferrule holds the hairs in a thick, long row so the tips come to a sharp and straight edge line. A flat is extremely versatile. Holding it as would a housepainter, you can rapidly paint broad, regular areas of color. Such areas are called washes. The flat’s chisel edge paints can paint lines. With a sharp corner, one can jab down tiny spots of paint. There’s nothing that can’t be accomplished with a good flat and that’s probably why many expert watercolorists swear that’s all they use. Although increasing sizes of flats are sometimes denominated by a progression of numbers, for example, 0, 4, 8, etc., typically they are noted by the length of that chisel edge, in metric or English units, e.g. ¼ inch, etc. A 3/8-inch is an excellent travel flat.

A round is a brush with a cylinder of hairs pulled up into a diminishing cone shape that comes to a sharp point. A round is also extremely versatile; many of the world’s best watercolorists say they require nothing more than a couple of examples of this one articulate shape. Like flats, rounds come in a hierarchy of sizes from a very small 0000, to a huge size 24, large enough to paint furniture! Travel sketchers need only one or two brushes, maybe a 4 round and an 8 round? But, perhaps a small mop as well? Because the price of fine brushes decreases dramatically with diminishing size and because travel sketchers need only small brushes to paint only relatively little sizes of paper, a traveler needn’t break the bank to obtain the very finest kinds of brush.

As said, the shape of a mop brush is just what it sounds like; an extra-large head of rather floppy hairs, coming more to a loose baggy shape, sometimes without much of a sharp edge or point.
Larger numbers, from “0” on up, denote larger mops. A “6” mop is already quite large for a travel brush.

**Travel versus Studio Brushes**

Beyond the materials used in constructing brushes, and beyond the design or shape of the working head of hairs, good watercolor brushes can be defined into two further categories: travel brushes and studio brushes. Travel brushes generally are much shorter overall and smaller than studio brushes. This agrees with a presumption that travelers will be working solely close-up on smaller sizes of paper and also will desire a small luggage volume to encompass the entirety of their sketching paraphernalia: sketchbooks, finished sketches, paintbox, brushes, et al. Watercolor sketching probably is only an adjunct to their trip, not the main purpose. Were painting the main reason for traveling, perhaps they should be moving in a portable studio as some artists have done in the past. Both Claude Monet and John S. Sargent famously even used dedicated small boats, sometimes just a hired gondola, but at other times a purpose-constructed floating studio. Today some artists travel our back roads in custom-outfitted minivans, not just for sleeping and eating, but also for use as mobile studios. In such cases, why worry about the size of one’s brushes?

The photo below shows two of my favorite travel brushes, both from *Arches* and available on the Internet, if not at your local art supply store. At the bottom are Siberian squirrels, one brush open, the other closed. This shows how the case, like an open cigar tube, also functions as the needed extension of the handle. That is, the brush stores inside its cap, much like an old-fashioned fountain pen. The squirrel’s ferrule is the classic design used in Brittany; a split quill from the feather of a sea bird (or plastic), wrapped in gold wire (or other rustproof wire). Because squirrel fur is relatively lank, the brush can function effectively as a mop. However, it also has an excellent point like a good round. The two brushes at the top, one open and the other closed, are rounds made
with Kolinsky red sable. When traveling light with only small paper blocks and a small set of half-pan colors, I really need only two of these brushes, one of each type.

If you don’t like travel brushes that fold or collapse or otherwise reduce in size, then a set of modestly sized, ordinary watercolor brushes like that shown below may be your answer. *Isabey, Raphael* and other manufacturers offer small sets like this, here with the largest single brush a size 8, plenty big enough for small sketches.
And, if you decide to be a mop kind of watercolor sketcher, one or two like those shown next might serve you well. These are all from Isabey of France, in Kolinsky sable or Siberian grey squirrel.

Whether mop or round, any brush must be protected, unless it nests defensively in a cap, like the Arches previously shown. An easy
and inexpensive solution is a bamboo rollup. They are available purpose-made from art supply stores. Or like these for half the price, they are simply a common kind of dining table placemat (or an even smaller sushi roller) that I secure with rubber bands.

“Oriental” Brushes
A less common but quite satisfactory watercolor brush, travel or not, is the so-called “oriental” brush from Japan. These are available where Japanese-style painting supplies are sold, e.g. for sumi-e classes. Although the brush handles appear a little different from the brushes shown so far, in fact the business ends and the manner of use are the same. Of the four shown in the photo below, the middle two have been wetted to appear as they would in use, two good, quite large rounds made with some kind of red weasel fur.

Don’t be put off by the disheveled “bad hair day” look of the two dry brushes. To judge any brush by its appearance, first wet it then give it a mild shake or quick snap as if to flick off an insect sitting on the hairs. The brush should come to a good, pointy shape. In fact, to use a brush in sketching and painting, first rinse the brush
in clean water. Then give it this good shake before dipping it into the desired color. For a drier effect, give it a second, gentler shake after getting the color but before touching the paper. Messy? Yes, but we’re sketching outdoors!

**Care of Brushes**

It requires only some minimal amount of common-sense care to maintain fine watercolor brushes for a lifetime. When you open the packaging around your new brush, gently rinse the brush first in clean water before trying to bend the hair. (A new brush arrives with a kind of hairdo done by the manufacturers in water-soluble glue. They must fear you might be disappointed otherwise by the natural, “psycho” appearance of even the finest brushes unless wetted.)

Subsequently after each painting session, thoroughly but gently rinse the brush in clean water until no further color comes out of the ferrule. Then pat the brush dry with paper toweling before laying it flat on a clean surface to finish drying. I like to also gently shape the hairs to a good point between my fingers before setting it down to dry. Do not stand the drying brush on its fur; in fact, NEVER stand a brush on its head under any circumstances. The sight of a good brush standing, working-end down in a water glass, head of hairs shoved to the side, can make an artist ill. Often that is the terminal ruin of the brush; the bunch of hairs will take a permanent set to one side. This kind of “permanent” is not good for a brush!

Moths and other insects that attack paper, woolen fabric, etc. also pose a danger to fine brushes. After all, an insect can’t distinguish between a sable watercolor brush and a sable fur coat. Brushes can be stored in a drawer with cedar wood. Perhaps surprisingly, good brushes can have other natural enemies. I was shocked to see my newly adopted, feral-rescue, adult cat attempt to chew on the heads of some *Winsor & Newton Series 7* Kolinsky red sable brushes standing upright in a jar! Thankfully, Betty is a very smart and
well-behaved cat. After I gently explained the situation to her, she never again even thought of gnawing my valuable brushes. Unfortunately, additional natural enemies of fine brushes are the other humans in your household. A watercolor brush must never be used for anything else but your watercolors. No matter how much others may profess that they know all about brushes, they should never be allowed to use yours. With your good brushes, they could: apply shoe dyes or nail polish, scrub bath tiles and boots, clean cooking pots, etc. People who don’t sketch will never understand fine brushes or your close relationship to them. So, if necessary, you must hide your best brushes, perhaps underneath the sweaters in your dresser drawer, along with some cedar wood blocks.

Brushes are particularly vulnerable to mechanical damage during your travels. Because of this, I prefer to carry travel or so-called “travel” or “folding brushes”, like those shown, which can store inside their caps when not in use. An alternative is the bamboo roll-up. The roll-up’s open structure also provides needed ventilation, facilitating drying of wet brushes. Some otherwise unprotected tiny brushes, shown included in paintboxes, can be slipped into soda straws that are cut
to the same length. For example, I keep my smaller “oriental” brushes slipped into soda straws. I’m always on the lookout to recycle mundane items, like water bottles, soda straws, disposable condiment saucers, recyclable jars, well-made cigar boxes, paper sacks, old toothbrushes, etc. to some second life serving art. (FYI. Recycled plastic soda pop bottles seem better than plastic plain water bottles. The extra strength is probably needed due the carbonization pressure of the soda.)
**Watercolor Papers for Travelers**

Paper is one of the two most important material things in watercolor painting and sketching. The other critical element is your brush. Perhaps surprisingly, the watercolor paint itself is not as crucial; in a pinch you could sketch with coffee and food coloring! You can’t watercolor sketch with regular paper. You can’t use drawing paper, sketching paper, computer printing paper, writing paper, newsprint, etc. They don’t lie flat when wet. Also, whether soaking wet, merely damp or bone dry, the other papers simply are not strong enough. You need special, heavy paper made for watercolor.

**Quick start.** To begin practicing your brushwork and color mixing, buy a pad of *Strathmore 400 Series* watercolor paper (not the *300 Series*), about the price of a fast-food cheeseburger. Or *Fabriano Studio* papers. Or *Winsor & Newton’s Cotman* line of paper. As you progress, you will become familiar with better, more expensive papers offered by these same manufacturers.

**How the Finest Art Papers Are Made**

Paper is manufactured in different ways today. Suffice it here to describe very roughly how some of the best watercolor papers are made. Perhaps surprisingly, excellent papers today are made much the same very simple way as they were made five hundred years ago. This means that, if you want, you can make your own paper. In fact, I have purchased small hobby kits for making or recycling my own paper. It’s fun, informative and inexpensive!

First, you make a sort of watery pre-paper mush by mixing finely chopped cotton rags (and perhaps recycled good paper) with water to a consistency of potato soup. If desired, gelatin can be dissolved in the soup to make a harder, less porous and less absorbent final paper. This is called volume-sizing the paper. Then place this liquid in a shallow tub larger than the final desired paper sheet. Take a very fine screen, for example a small window screen, and hold it under an open frame (much like an empty picture frame)
called the deckle, of the same size. Now, tightly holding these two pinched together, slide them under the soup and troll gently back and forth while slowly lifting through the mixture until you obtain an even layer of the chopped fibers on the screen, more or less corralled inside the deckle. When the layer of fibers is of a desired thickness, lift the screen and deckle through the soup. After most of the water has drained through the porous screen, take off the deckle. Note atop the screen’s frame, a ragged edge of wet mush remaining due to inevitable leaking through the narrow gap between the deckle and the screen. This effect is called deckling. Cover all with a tight felt cloth and carefully turn over. Gently lift off the screen, leaving the paper behind, atop the felt. Then, place another felt on the exposed paper and press to complete the draining. Finally, hang the damp paper sheet like laundry to finish drying. One last thing, at the end of the process, just before it is completely dry, you can pass the paper through a hot ironing (pressing) if you wish a smoother surface. Fortunately, you don’t have to start chopping up old dress shirts for rag, because you can purchase excellent readymade watercolor papers at a reasonable price.

**Practical Travel Sizes of Watercolor Sketch Paper**

There are a few more things to know in order to make an informed purchase of your watercolor sketch paper. Watercolor paper comes not only in molded single sheets up to 30x40-inches in size but also in wide and continuous machine-made rolls of arbitrary length. Of course, for travel sketching one needs only much smaller pieces. About the smallest useable size is roughly 3.5x5-inches. That is, small postcard size. At the other extreme, about the largest convenient size for my travel sketching is roughly 11x14-inches. In between, there are many available ready-made sizes. Some are square (6x6-inches and 8x8-inches) and some are rather eccentric (e.g. 4x10-inches for landscape). All are available in three finishes: rough, cold (not so rough, smoother), and hot-pressed (very smooth). Of course, one is free to custom-cut
whatever size one wishes from the larger sheets. This is a good idea; I cut many of my sketch papers in offbeat sizes, for example to fit old photo frames bought from thrift stores, antique shops, etc. There are some restrictions if you plan to mail any sketches as postcards. The US Postal Service has a web site giving the current rules for what can and what cannot be mailed. Check first; rules change. (Abroad, simply mail at an official post office.) A first-class US postcard requires less postage than a regular letter. Postcards must be at least 3.5 inches tall by 5 inches wide by at least 0.007 inches thick … but no more than 4.25 inches tall by 6 inches wide by 0.16 inches thick. This is board-like, about a sixth of an inch thick! Don’t assume that smaller, postcard-sized sketches are somehow easier to do. Personally, I believe that they are actually more difficult to do than are those on, say, 6x9-inch blocks.

The photo shows some watercolor postcard brands I currently use. They come in blocks, pads or individual sheets within a pochade
folio, a sort of large envelope. I use postcard size (roughly 4x6-inches) more than any other for travel sketching. And if I’m in a hurry, this size being the most useful, it is the only one I carry. For example, one summer, visiting Boise, Idaho, I had the evenings free for my own painting. After a quick dinner, I would drive miles up the scenic canyon of the Boise River, finding picturesque scenes for sketching. Returning to my hotel, I would post the results home from the front desk. Thereafter I received special treatment, or at least friendly notice. To the staff, I became the interesting artist in room 202! Note that the sketch contains my pencil notes and was subjected to Post Office handling; routing information was printed on the front by some machine in the postal service process. For a memory album, personally, I like these effects. But if you don’t like them, then just bring home your sketches safely in your luggage.

Because here I still see some notation as to colors, I can say that I must have started this quickly in failing, early evening light. Then in darkness, I must have taken it back to my hotel room to finish. Viewing this, I can sense again the setting sun behind my back as it
illuminates the bare sienna hills in the far distance. I can recall the high, dark-umber bluffs of eroding ancient volcanic flows deepening the gloom enclosing the cool river muttering at my feet. I suppose an expert photographer might have captured all this as well. However, with a camera I would have simply pressed the shutter and left. Sketching, I had to pause and open both my eyes and my mind in order to carefully see, jot down, to take in that magnificent and magical scene. This printed the image indelibly in my memory.

These were much more enjoyable evenings than if I had spent them plopped in front of the TV in my hotel room. Even if the days had been winter short or the weather inclement, nonetheless I could have painted from the warm and dry interior of my rental car or inside my room. Yes, I even have watercolors inside hotel rooms! That’s excellent practice. Maybe there’s a coffee table book there, “Traveler’s Hotel Rooms”.

As said, for travel sketching, more than any other painting ground or support, I use the postcard-size, 140-pound, cold-pressed block or pad. And, if I am out strolling aimlessly about with no particular plans, then that is the paper I will take with me, along in a tiny sketch kit. However, when packing for a trip I include several others types. The photo shows my favorite sizes and formats, usually all in 140-pound, cold-pressed paper. For a week or two stay, I pack a couple of postcard-size blocks, a larger, 6x9-inch block, maybe a single, eccentric 4x10-inch landscape block and, of course, a small 6x12-inch watercolor sketchbook. Don’t get a plain “sketchbook”; the weaker paper won’t do. You’ll need a sketchbook made expressly for watercolors.

With these, I can sketch anything I wish. If the paper is in small blocks, there’s no tedious and messy wet preparation of stretching with gluey taping. Because I can finish within a half hour or so, there’s no anxiety about moving shadows, cows going back to their barn, boats hoisting anchor and the like. If I am working in my sketchbook, I have at most only a few sketches accumulated. Misplacing it wouldn’t be a huge loss. I’m not journaling for
months in a fancy, embossed-leather, hardbound book. I’m just walking about having fun while making individual quick sketches. Most importantly, I’m enjoying myself and getting more familiar with the place and its people.

If I have a more ambitious idea and if I don’t want to mail the sketches home as postcards, I often opt for 6x9-inch, cold-pressed watercolor paper blocks. They’re not much bigger to carry than the postcard size and offer the same 2-to-3 aspect ratio, attractive for either landscape or portrait (vertical) format. However, although only a little larger than the postcard size, they offer more than twice the area to paint and thus can accommodate that much more narrative detail. In my opinion, this is about as small as a painting can be and yet still be hung framed on a wall, to be comfortably read by standing viewers. Paintings or sketches smaller than 6x9 usually look better in small, tabletop frames or collected into albums.

The next sketch shows the beach in winter at Coyote Point County Park, a public picnic area within an open forest, and yacht basin
facility on San Francisco Bay near my home. (6x9 Canson 140-pound, cold-pressed block) One day I’d like to sketch an entire 4x6 pochade folio of ten views around this pleasant retreat. Or, maybe it should be larger? Pochade collections from many of my local county parks are another project on my long sketches to-do list. I’ve heard people frequently lament, they have “nothing to paint”. If we open our minds and our eyes, nothing could be further from fact.

Another excellent choice for a traveler’s watercolor sketch paper is an extreme landscape format block (e.g. from Sennelier of France). It’s roughly 10x4-inches. Like the postcard sizes, these blocks also are quite handy for travelers. An example is below. (4”x10” on 140-pound, cold-pressed block.) Arches offers larger blocks in cold-press and rough at roughly 20x6-inches.
This format, although a great pleasure to paint, can be a small problem to display. A few years ago, Kodak introduced a similar, but slightly smaller, 35 mm print color film format. This inspired a few makers of frames, albums, etc. to produce compatible products. Unfortunately, they are no longer made and, at any rate, were slightly smaller and required cutting the watercolors down slightly. (Sometimes the frames still can be found at thrift stores and the like.) Nowadays, I often varnish the sketches and simply place them in bookcases, folding them slightly to stand like miniature screens or scrolls.

If I were willing to forgo the convenience of a paper block, I could cut down my own wide papers from large stock and in exactly the correct sizes for available albums and frames. This is worth emphasizing. If, while traveling, you have room for a small, lightweight drawing board on which to tape down individual small sheets of paper, then you will be free to use paper cut to any dimensions you choose. I use recycled, 15-inch-square, lightweight boards of corrugated plastic. Remember that if you don’t use a sketchbook and leave your works inside it, then you should also bring a small, light portfolio in which to carry safely your completed sketches. An ordinary paper file folder will do short-term, in a pinch.

Sometimes I find a good use for this ultra-wide format turned up, in portrait format. In the midst of a grove of redwood trees, I found this old timer with the intriguing hole. (Redwood Tree. 4x10-
inches. Sennelier cold-pressed block. Collection of David McReynolds.)
The fourth of my favorite traveler’s formats is a small watercolor sketchbook.

My sketchbooks are inexpensive, 6x12 inches with cold-pressed, 140-pound paper and less than two-dozen, spiral-bound pages. *Strathmore 400 Series*. Larger would be too much for my convenient travel. They’re not smaller because in smaller sizes I’d rather use a sheet, pad or block. Spiral-bound means that it will lie truly flat on my lap; other types of sketchbook binding do not. With so few pages, it isn’t too large. I don’t want to carry a whole history around and, because these books are quite inexpensive, I can have a shelf full of them rather than one, albeit beautifully
bound tome. My sketchbooks are working books. Also, I use the sketchbook mainly for recording practice fragments such as this flowerpot and a water glass with the old rose on the page shown below.

**Thickness of Paper**
Besides differing in length and width, watercolor papers differ in a so-called “weight”. Typically, watercolor paper thickness and strength are indirectly indicated by the actual weight of a ream (500 standard-size sheets) of that paper. That is, a stack of 500 sheets of 70-pound paper, about the thinnest usable for watercolor sketching, weighs just that. Under aggressive handling, paper thinner than 70-pound paper is too prone to damage. Very importantly, lighter weight papers are more prone to buckling when wetted by water or paint. Paper cockling and buckling can make sketching almost impossible. 1111-pound paper, about the thickest available, is almost a board made of paper. For travel sketching, paper in weights from 90 to 200 or so pounds is best, is the most practical. Papers of these weights can easily withstand moderate erasing, scraping, sanding, scratching, etc.

**Surface Sizing**
As mentioned, paper can be sized in bulk when it is still in the wet pulp stage. Sizing reduces the absorption and increases the hardness. Besides sizing in bulk or volume, paper can be surface-sized, the sizing applied just to the surface of the final paper. Sizing prevents the watercolor paint from sinking much past the surface further into the paper’s interior. Thus, sizing can make the colors appear more brilliant, more intense. Regardless of the paper, some watercolorists alternatively obtain this less permeable surface by applying a thinned wash of white or other light-colored acrylic paint, or thinned acrylic medium, and letting it dry thoroughly before using. Dried acrylics will not dissolve when again wetted; their drying is permanent, irreversible. Acrylic medium is approximately acrylic paint without a pigment. It’s water clear, or
clear when dry. Some artists recommend using a thin wash of white acrylic gesso, however gesso contains abrasive pigments and this abrasive rapidly will wear out your valuable watercolor brushes!

A paper with a dried light wash of acrylic will look bright and any applied watercolors will seem to float more brilliantly atop the surface. If the paper you wish to surface size if already toned, then a thin wash of just clear acrylic medium is preferred. Note that the wash must be thinned. Any wash of acrylic without thinning would completely seal the paper and the paint would simply dry atop an impervious plastic surface, much like a kitchen countertop. Then the slightest wipe of the hand could completely remove your sketch. Artists, who paint watercolors on such supports, typically also apply a final varnishing to seal and protect the work.

**Surface Pressing**

The paper surface roughness, or complementarily its smoothness, is important. A smooth surface will support finer detail but is also less forgiving of rough treatment. Contrarily, a rougher surface won’t support the finest detail but lends itself to a more impressionistic appearance and is more forgiving of rough handling. The paper’s surface texture results from how the paper is finally dried. If the paper is ironed between hot metal rollers for greater smoothness, then the surface is called “hot”, as in hot pressed. “Rough” paper results if it’s dried only pressed loosely between coarse-textured felts. Treatment in between is called “cold” or “NOT” as in not ironed. Cold-press paper surface is a good compromise for watercolor sketching.

**Toned Papers**

Paper having a noticeable overall color, paper that is distinctly not white, is called toned paper. Of course it cannot be too strong a color or it will be too difficult to paint over with transparent paint. Further, cool colors require extra emphasis when painting on a warm-toned paper and vice versa. Most toned papers are warm
light tans, but cool pale greens or blues are used also. All are commercially available. Besides setting an overall mood, toned papers also facilitate color harmony.

At larger retailers you can find heavy paper suitable for watercolor, already toned by the manufacturer. Or you can tone paper yourself, especially when traveling light. It can be as simple as applying a light color wash on ordinary watercolor paper and letting it thoroughly dry before further painting. The sketch below was done over paper toned simply with strong coffee! Confession. I like to have a separate small block of paper that I give a warm tone via the morning coffee. It means carrying two little blocks, one with virgin white paper, and one with the top sheet toned. Two blocks may seem burdensome but that’s better than carrying a package of variously toned commercial paper sheets. I suppose teas should work a similar effect. Or, some teas might make a cooler, pale greenish tone? Let’s look into that!

Above is a sketch I made of a street scene. I wanted to capture the old-world twilight of this town in the former Yugoslavia. Although I used the red, blue and green watercolors right from my kit, the
underlying coffee, although remaining dry and not mixing, somewhat neutralized those overlying colors as expected. (4x6 on 140-lb, Canson cold block with brewed coffee. Collection LS Chaffin.) Note that I also used a sepia-colored pen. An obvious caveat or caution is that homemade colors like coffee are not to be completely trusted as archival. That is, under harsh, bright lighting or corrosive vapors in the air or simply the passage of many years, this coffee toning might fade somewhat. Then again, it might not if kept away from sunlight. But regardless of method or materials, watercolor work should be kept away from bright light and bad air, acidic smog, acrid tobacco, auto exhaust fumes, etc. So should we!

**Color Response of Paper**

Perhaps unexpectedly, different paper types can respond quite differently to various colors. And, this is something you should manage in advance. Many factors can influence this. As previously noted, some papers are pre-toned with a pale wash, usually a warm color but sometimes a cool one. Obviously, this affects the both the overall color scheme and the paper’s response to applied colors, e.g. on a warm toned paper, it will be more difficult to make a cool blue statement. Some papers are not deliberately toned but never the less still have a faint color, typically a warm, pale beige tint. In addition to any color of its own, a paper may also affect applied colors via uneven absorption, even an absorption affecting some paints more than others. Thus, despite being evenly applied, your colors may end up spotty and biased. Examine the first scan below. I made two color keys to be included in a *Lukas* paintbox of mine. The key, on the left, is on a national brand, but cheaper watercolor paper, purchased at a chain craft store. The key on the right was made on 140-lb Cotman NOT paper. Both papers are acid-free. While an excellent paper, the Cotman paper is Winsor & Newton’s less expensive, student grade paper, not its best Artist’s grade. A careful perusal reveals that, on the average, the colors on the right, on the Cotman paper, are notably more vibrant, more vivid, this despite the vagaries of my non-scientific test application. The
second scan, of the reverse sides, shows that, depending on the color, the paint partially bled through the other, cheaper paper. Which paper would you rather use? It’s possible that a thinned wash of acrylic might seal the cheaper paper to an extent that the variable and mottled bleed-through is stopped and uniform color brilliance is restored. However, what then remains of the advantage of the paper’s lower cost? This is an excellent argument for buying and using only better watercolor papers.
Deciphering the Paper’s Label

The above scan zoomed in on a small part of the label attached to a pad of good, toned paper from Italy. Reading it is straightforward and reveals all one needs to know. Paramount for the buyer to ascertain is the property, “acid free”, sometimes stated as “neutral pH”. Note that the Italian word, “blocco”, does not mean the same as the English, “block”. This was in fact a pad, not a block; the sheets were glued on only one side. “Trawling” is simply a charming mistake in spelling. Despite these minor errors, the soft and pale, cool-blue paper is superb.

Finally, here’s a last word about papers. Use papers you like. Pick them for their appearance, for their working characteristics, etc. Make your only caveat that they be archival, acid-free. Once you like a paper for its appearance, for how it reacts to your techniques, paints, etc., then it doesn’t matter one whit whether it is hand-made, mould-made, cotton, linen, heaven knows what, as long as it is acid-free. Sargent notoriously used materials that were just good enough. In oils, he painted on cotton duck canvas, not on fancy imported linen. His paints couldn’t be fugitive, but that was enough. Beyond that, Sargent didn’t seem to care. Neither should we. Don’t be seduced by such irrelevant blandishments, as maybe the paper is said cast from nests of free-range wasps. Fancy custom papers are beautiful art in their own right, but our focus here is on the traveler’s sketch.
Color Choices, Your Personal Palette

The Color Wheel

When you begin to sketch in watercolor, a good grasp of color is helpful. The “color wheel” is a useful aide, like the homemade one shown above. (I outlined coins in pencil, and then filled in the circles using my watercolor travel paintbox colors.) When interpreting the color wheel, it helps to think of the face of a clock. Shown are 12 colored circles, each placed where an hour is found. The largest circles are: yellow at noon, blue at 4 o’clock and red at 8 o’clock. These are the primary colors, so-called because no one of them can be created by any combination of the other two. For example, yellow and blue cannot be mixed in a way to make any kind of red. Mixing two primary colors in equal parts makes a color called a secondary color. Yellow and blue make green, at 2 o’clock. Blue and red make violet at 6 o’clock. Red and yellow make orange at 10 o’clock. These are depicted with the second-largest circles. The smallest circles denote the tertiary colors, for example, green-yellow at 1 o’clock and magenta or violet-red at 7 o’clock. These are combinations of a primary with a secondary color. Again addressing the primaries, any two of the three, with mixing in various ratios, can only make the colors lying between
them on a chord of the color wheel. For example, combinations of blue at 4 o’clock and red at 8 o’clock can only generate the violet evening colors between red and blue. Primaries red and blue will never make a green, much less a bright, fierce yellow.

**Secondary and Tertiary Colors**

All hues (colors) on the wheel can be approximated from mixing just those three primaries. And the tiniest watercolor travel paintbox could contain just these three half-pans. Well, that is sort of true. If the very smallest size of paintbox is of paramount importance for you then a three-color box can work. However, there’s a drawback. When one mixes primaries to make the secondary and tertiary colors, say mixing red and blue to make violet, then something will be sacrificed. That something is the intensity (chroma) of the violet color. Paint manufacturers can make violets from intrinsically violet pigments, rather than mixtures of red and blue pigments and such native violets can be stronger, more vivid than the mixed ones.

This is illustrated in the top row of this scan where a bright red mixed with a brilliant blue produces a nice, in fact, a quite beautiful violet. However, in the bottom row are five different violets picked at random from an assortment of tube colors. The two spots at the right are close in hue to the mixed violet yet noticeably more vibrant. A useful convention is to place the most vivid colors at the very edge of the color wheel and to locate the less vivid ones in the interior. The mixed violet could be found roughly close to the straight-line chord cutting across the color wheel from the bright red to the brilliant blue from whence it was mixed. And this is what is done; conventionally the duller, more neutral colors are in the interior of the color wheel circle, located farther or nearer the circumference in proportion to their neutralization.
Color Neutralization
As mentioned, a color formed by mixing other colors may not be as vivid as an intrinsically hued pigment. If less vibrant, a color is called neutralized. Thus a palette, capable of producing strong, vivid colors around the entire color wheel, can’t be only the three primaries: red, yellow and blue. A workable choice of half-pan colors for a paintbox might be all twelve colors shown in the color wheel above. Nonetheless, very often a sketcher, particularly a travel sketcher, requires only a neutralized paint, not a vivid one. For example, in landscape painting the pure green hues available from the manufacturers do not make a realistic, a believable scene. In fact, many landscape painters reject any use of pure, manufacturers’ greens, instead arguing for all the various needed greens to be made by mixing colors. If you’re after realism, neutralized greens are the more believable vegetation in nature. Painting flowers is an important exception. Flowers have forever challenged manufacturers to produce the most vivid colors imaginable.

This figure shows the mutual neutralization of red and green. Any two colors that lie diametrically across the color wheel from each other, like red and green, are called color complements. An efficient way to neutralize a color, to reduce its vividness or chroma, is to mix into it some of its complement. The more admixed, the stronger the neutralization. Thus a little bit of red into a lot of green, grayed the green and, along the way, darkened it. A little green browned the red and darkened it. Complements can be mixed in proportions so that the darkest, most colorless gray / black is the result. Many artists prefer these dark neutralizations to purpose-manufactured black or gray paints. Their belief is that intrinsically black pigment placed on a painting
appears like a “dead” spot, floating on the surface like some superficial scum, whereas a very dark, neutralized color seems to have a transparent depth, like the deepest shadow at night. Then your eye doesn’t stop at the front surface of your sketch, but looks through the paper, searching for what might lie behind.

This next illustration is the same color wheel as before but now with the addition of dime-sized paper buttons painted with a handful of manufactured neutral colors. Because these colors are not as intense in chroma as the manufactured primaries, I’ve placed them inside of the color wheel’s outer circle. For example, Winsor & Newton’s indigo (a beautiful, neutralized blue) is shown inside the more vivid primary blue. A very dull green, Davy’s gray, is almost at the very center of the wheel. Just across the center from Davy’s gray is burnt umber, a very neutral red. People usually call burnt umber “brown”, but so-called browns are simply heavily neutralized reds and oranges. It is a helpful organizing scheme to recognize that high chroma, brilliant hues lie properly on the rim of the color wheel. Neutral colors, the so-called grays and browns, are best not thought of as separate, independent colors, but as derivative colors obtained via neutralization, from the bright,
fundamental hues along the edge of the color wheel. Thus, there is no “warm brown” but, instead, a strongly neutralized orange. Commercial marketing labels for color pose a constant frustration. Our mind’s eye can almost imagine a fabric colored “Root Beer with Cream”, but “Bohemian Taupe” seems only marketing fluff, having little information content for painters compared with maybe “tint of burnt sienna”.

The sketch following the color wheel below is of a scene in San Mateo’s Central Park. Note that all the colors are somewhat to heavily neutralized. Further, although the drawing and brushwork could be considered a little abstract, the colors look believably natural. However, the sketch was not painted with any manufactured neutral colors, but instead with initially bright, vivid colors neutralized during the painting process via mixing wet-in-wet with their complements right on the damp paper.

Color Temperature
Another useful parameter for describing and working with a color is its so-called temperature. A color is either warm or cool.
Imagine a diameter drawn across the color wheel roughly from 1 o’clock to 7 o’clock. Any colors on this line and to its left are said to be warm. For example, red is warm. Colors to the right are cool, for example blue-green is cool. But colors also can be warm or cool not only in this absolute sense, but warm or cool relative to each other. For example, consider violet on the color wheel. If a violet is more to the red side, say 6:30 o’clock, then it is said to be a warm violet (magenta). If a violet is more to the blue side, say 5:30 o’clock, it is a cool violet (mauve). This description can be extended to all colors. On one side of primary yellow, an orangey yellow is a warm yellow; on the other side of primary yellow, a lemony greenish yellow is cool.

Note: Strongly neutralized warm colors are the browns of ordinary language; strongly neutralized cool colors are our grays. When complements meet at the very center of the color wheel, the result is dead gray or black without either hue or temperature. This temperature categorization is not just the profitless exercise in nomenclature it might seem; color temperature has useful implications for sketching and painting. For one thing, all else being equal, for two items depicted in blues, one a warmer blue, the other a cooler blue, will not seem at quite the same distance from the viewer. The warmer blue will slightly “come forward”, that is, it will seem closer. The lesson is, “Warms advance; cools recede.” For another thing, in realistic representations, complexity is convincing. For example, at a distance, a redwood tree’s canopy overall averages a cool green, however, the tree seems more real if it’s spiced with small amounts of other, warmer greens. And, even a tiny touch here and there of bright reds and violets!

**Opaque versus Transparent Colors**

“Transparent watercolor” is the most popular kind of watercolor and is our subject here. This method and material for painting is distinguished from opaque watercolor, body color, and gouache watercolor. The differences spring from different degrees of the paint opacity and the exploitation thereof. Imagine a cartoon figure
drawn in black ink on white paper. If you paint over that drawing with some watercolor paints, for example alizarin crimson, the lines underneath can still be seen quite clearly. It is as if only a sheet of clear red cellophane covered the drawing. On paint tubes and pans, a letter T, signifying the relative transparency of the paint, categorizes alizarin crimson as “transparent”. However, if instead you paint over that ink drawing with cadmium red, then the drawing would be somewhat obscured, partially covered up by even a thin layer of paint. Thus, this paint is denoted as “opaque” via a letter O, often on the label. In fact, different so-called transparent watercolor paints are, at one extreme, as cellophane-transparent as alizarin crimson and Prussian blue, to as opaque at the other extreme as yellow ochre and cerulean blue. And, there are other pigments with various opacities in between. So why are some whole palettes or paint sets called “transparent watercolors”? Partly because it’s just relative. Manufacturers offer other, related kinds of paint. Gouache paints are frankly meant to be completely covering. To this end, opaque chalk is added to the pigments. Another variant is “body color” in which the manufacturer achieves greater opacity simply by extremely heavy loading with pigment.

An analogy with layered sheets of colored, transparent glass or cellophane at least partially illustrates the making of a sketch in transparent watercolors. As light enters, alizarin crimson filters out much light with wavelengths other than bluish-red. The white paper then reflects much of the surviving light back, again through the alizarin crimson color, for still more filtering out of other-than-
bluish-red colors. Note the role played by the white support; it doubles the passage of the light through the filtering process. Prussian blue performs in a similar, transparent color manner. However, cerulean blue works quite differently. Much of the incident white light strikes the facing surface of opaque pigment particles. Here, pigment particles absorb the non-blue components of the light and directly reflect only the blue fraction immediately back to the viewer.

A logical question is, why include a distinctly opaque paint like cerulean blue in a transparent watercolor palette? First, some artists believe that there is no transparent substitute for the exact color of cerulean blue; they believe cerulean is artistically necessary. Second, even if there is a decent substitute… well, watercolor and watercolor standards aren’t all that consistent! And needn’t be; watercolor is not pure optical physics. Perhaps it could better be called mostly transparent watercolor. To repeat: opaque versus transparent is only relative. The scan below gives an idea of the range of transparency. For both the red and the blue, the opaque hues are the top row, the transparent hues in the bottom row. Cadmium red above is somewhat opaque compared to alizarin below. Genuine cerulean blue is much more opaque than Prussian blue. Here the cerulean blue is in a very thin layer; in a thicker application, the letters would not be seen at all.

Colors, Genuine versus Hue

The look of a watercolor paint is associated with its pigment’s chemical and physical composition. This isn’t a perfect, one-to-one association. That cadmium yellow lemon from Winsor & Newton might not look exactly identical to cadmium yellow lemon from Talens shouldn’t be a surprise. However, they should be quite close because both manufacturers produce highest quality paints. But even high-quality companies try to make available additional, less-expensive lines of paint with appearances similar to those using the expensive pigments. Cadmiums are some of the more expensive pigments, so substitute pigments result in a
significantly less expensive product. If a substitute is used for cadmium, then a high-end manufacturer will call the result, “cadmium yellow hue”. Similarly, a genuine color should be so labeled, for example, “rose madder true” or “rose madder genuine”. Besides price, sometimes an important difference is that, due the typical use of industrial dyes rather than mineral pigments, the hue substitute usually will be more transparent. Typically the hue has a different tinting power, i.e. will be notably weaker or stronger than the true color when combined in mixes with other colors.

As seen, many watercolor paints are identified by their distinctive fundamental, even iconic pigment or dye, such as ultramarine blue (“across the sea”). Ultramarine is a mineral, Lapis Lazuli, mined even today in the remotest parts of Afghanistan. It was so expensive that Michelangelo could not afford it. His patron, Pope Julius II, obtained it himself to only dole out to the artist. However, many other colors have a more plastic recipe, are formulated in different ways from diverse ingredients, and can vary widely in composition and appearance from manufacturer to manufacturer. Examples are: sap green and Naples yellow. The best information about any specific formulation comes directly from the maker, often on a web site.

**Two Special “Colors”: Black and White**

For a physicist, neither black nor white is a color. A color is an effect, a sensation in the human eye / brain triggered by a particular narrow band of consecutive wavelengths of visible light (electromagnetic radiation). Reds are relatively long wavelengths clustered at one end of the range to which the human eye responds. Blue-violets are at the other end, relatively short wavelengths. If all the visible wavelengths are equally present impinging on the eye, then the sensation in the brain is a “white”. If no light of any visible wavelength is present, then the sensation is “black”. Radiation (light) not quite still in the visible range and just off in the longer wavelengths is called infrared. Although most human
eyes cannot register it, it can be felt on the skin. At the other end of the visible spectrum or range, radiation of wavelengths just shorter than blue-violet is called ultraviolet. Skin can be burned by ultraviolet radiation. It can also rapidly bleach out dye-based watercolors.

**Black**
As described, black paints can be expected to absorb light of all colors. It can be used as a paint in its own right, say to depict black shoes, or it can be used to deaden or neutralize paints of other colors. Some people condemn this neutralizing with black; others use it to great effect. Claude Monet decried its use; John S. Sargent said he couldn’t work without some black paint. And they argued over this while they painted outdoors together! Monet told Sargent he had no black paint to lend; Sargent replied well, that just finished him for the day. Amusingly, this is a typical artistic contretemps; for every rule, there is a brilliantly successful contradiction. Try black yourself. Play with it. Mix it with other colors and see if you like the results. Always question the accepted wisdom and rules. The best answers come from your own experiments; after all, what is the worst thing that can happen? A single caveat is to pay close attention to advice on permanence. I sometimes carry black in my own paint kit; most often I do not.

**White**
As described, a paint that’s really white simply reflects all colors. But, in transparent watercolor practice, that’s the role that the underlying paper properly should play. However, in real practice, white paint sometimes is used to recover the white of paper after it has been lost, perhaps after some small mistake. For this task, the white paint typically included in readymade paintboxes, “Chinese white” (zinc oxide), performs quite poorly. Further, in the act of applying it, one usually muddies it up with the underlying paint to be covered. However, in expert hands, this behavior can be constructively exploited. Some white objects, such as boat sails or hot Mediterranean villages in the distance, can be made a more convincingly off-white by thinned Chinese white mixed with
another, very pale color. As with black paint, experiment with Chinese white yourself.

In contrast to Chinese white, diluted opaque titanium white in an acrylic base can make a decent small repair, if you’ve lost the white of the paper. But, acrylics must be used with extreme care in transparent watercolor painting. Further, while use of thin repair washes of acrylic may be justified at home or in a studio, acrylic white isn’t worth including in my efficient travel sketchbox. Because it seems so unnecessary, I do not carry any kind of white paint in my tiny travel kits. Aside from recovering the white of the paper, the best white for making small and brilliant highlights might be a dash of dry, white chalk, for example, a small dry pastel stick. Sargent, and other great watercolorists like JMW Turner, used chalk to great effect for this purpose and more. The marine sketch above illustrates the huge role that the untouched white of the paper can play in transparent watercolor sketching. (Note also the tiny, almost unseen “Corot spots” of bright red color.) For examples of watercolor paintings that make brilliant use of the paper’s untouched native white surface, see

*Monterey Bay.* 5”x7”, 140-lb, NOT. Collection of LS Chaffin.
works by Charles Reid on the Internet, perhaps surprisingly, even his figural watercolor paintings.

If the paper is pre-colored or toned, then that tone color plays a large role in the sketch. (Unfortunately “tone” is easily confused with a color darkened and neutralized with black paint.) Toned papers can be any hue, warm or cool, although almost always a very light color. An overall tone hue tends to pull color things together; it builds color harmony. That is, if the sketch otherwise is a mess of colors, looks like a spilled bag of assorted jellybeans, then a colored paper could have diminished that bad effect. Also, an overall tone tends to shift all colors from what they would otherwise be on a white background. This sketch was done on a warm, orange-yellow paper. This made it difficult to state that paper’s cool color-wheel complements. This warm background automatically somewhat neutralized the cool blue-greens for the tree’s foliage, making the painted canopy appear more natural. In contrast, the warm paper also made it easier to state warm colors. This makes the warm burnt sienna of the redwood’s bark almost seem exaggerated.

**Tones, Tints, & Shades**

**Tones**
The next two scans illustrate the differing tone or intrinsic lightness / darkness of pure colors. A casual selection of pure paint colors is arrayed across the top of the table. An ascending order of tone in B&W, from light to dark, is arrayed down the side. When you squint your eyes, you can see that some pure color paints are darker than others, pure primary yellow always being the lightest. For the second scan, the B&W, the color chips were moved down approximately to a level corresponding to their intrinsic tone. Pure phthalo blue paint is naturally very dark; yellow is quite light. In fact, it is even more complicated than this. There is no dark yellow at all. Any attempt to darken yellow invariably results in orange or green. This behavior is often exploited by nature sketchers who produce a wide variety of convincing, realistic greens for vegetation via mixing different darker colors, especially blues, with various yellows.
Formally, what is a tone? In one usage, already mentioned, it is the intrinsic lightness or darkness of a color. Think of a B&W photograph of that color. Another use of the word is to label a darker color mixed from a lighter one by adding the color black, as in a tone of green. As with adding whites to make tints and getting shifts like a warm red becoming a cooler pink, mixing black with a color typically not only darkens the other color but also alters it. This alteration can be almost unnoticed as when a tone of blue is made. It can be desirable as when a tone of green is made to depict foliage. As mentioned, it can be so strong as to result in a wholly different color as when a tone of yellow is attempted, resulting in a green. Yellow plus black makes a green!

**Tints**

Formally, what is a tint? A tint of a color or hue is that color lightened by the addition of pure white. For example, pink is a tint of red. Often a color is not simply lightened by tinting; pink is also somewhat colder than the parent red. An attractive and useful variation on tinting is to use not exactly white, but a very light color analogous to that hue being tinted. For example, instead of adding Chinese white to tint cadmium red, add a very pale yellow-orange. A warmer version of pink is the result.
The attribute, “tinting strength”, while related, is a little different idea. When colors are mixed, some, like stronger food spices, go a lot farther than others. For example, if white is added to cerulean blue, just a little added white quickly results in a very pale, chalky blue. A very little cadmium yellow suffices to make cerulean blue into a green. Cerulean blue has little tinting power. In contrast, Prussian blue is very strong in tinting. It takes a lot of white to produce a pale Prussian blue. However, tinting strength is relative. Although cadmium yellow has much tinting strength it can be overwhelmed when used with Prussian blue to make a green. The safest approach when mixing colors is to start conservatively, trying very tiny exploratory amounts at first to gauge the relative tinting strengths.

**Shades**

If a color is mixed simultaneously with both black and white, that is, is mixed with a neutral gray, then the result is called a shade of the original hue. Ordinarily, when a color is mixed with its color wheel complement, both colors not only neutralize or lose hue vibrancy, they also darken. Thus, in order to generate a neutralized color, yet avoid any automatic darkening, add a gray, rather than a complementary color. Again, as with tinting, use of a faintly colored, very light gray might produce a more attractive shade for your sketch than would the addition of a cold gray mixed from just black and white.

**Selecting Your Palette (Choosing Your Own Set of Colors)**

**The Commercial Introductory Paintbox Choice**

Art often names that clean flat surface where you can mix different colors, the “palette”. For example, in the photo below of an introductory level paintbox, the inverted white lid, with four mixing wells, can be called a palette. (a *van Gogh* paintbox from *Talens.*) However, the word is ambiguous. Art also refers to your personal choice of a set of colors as your “palette”. As seen directly in the twelve half-pans or, better from the color swatches on the paper, this paintbox came with a useful selection of colors.
There are the primary colors: yellow, two reds and two blues. There are the secondary colors: orange, violet and even two greens. Finally, besides a black, there are two neutralized browns, so-called earth colors including that very useful reddish-orange, burnt sienna. Art calls some colors earth colors because historically they derive literally from the very dirt prevalent in several regions of ancient Italy. For example, fierce heating of the mineral soil around Umbria resulted in a brown (dark neutralized red) called burnt umber. The colors stem from one or another crystalline forms of iron oxide plus traces of other minerals, e.g. manganese oxides, at different ratios, occurring in the soil. With the greens, blues and earth colors, this paintbox offers a choice of colors, a palette, leaning towards landscape sketching. See the scan following of a sketch done on a local hiking trail. In contrast, a palette intended for sketching people’s faces offers an extended choice of warm colors for skin hues.
Do-It-Yourself, Select-Your-Own Palette (Color Choices)

Once you have a little experience with watercolor sketching using a prepackaged assortment of colors in an off-the-shelf paintbox, you might be tempted to try your own choice of hues, your own personal palette. Most sketchers do eventually. However, you’ll soon run into the problem of examining, previewing colors before you buy. One frowned-upon and limited method is to open all those tubes in the display case at your local craft or framing store. What a mess that leaves; don’t do it! A better approach now is via the Internet. As you might suspect, many manufacturers maintain a good web site. Schmincke has a great site with an extensive list of colors and their sample color patches. (Schmincke.de) Natural Pigments has a superb website (Naturalpigments.com), Winsor & Newton’s web site is excellent too. It also is enormously informative technically and a visual delight to navigate. (Winsornewton.com) Their table of watercolor color swatches is lovely to view. Additionally, betimes there are short essays on artists and their materials, e.g. early 19 Century British watercolorist JMW Turner. Sadly, some of W&N’s competitors have delegated their communication to a confusing cacophony by retail vendors of widely varied abilities. Some of those vendors do a very good job of at least displaying the colors, e.g. ASW and Dick
Blick. Others do not. None rises to the level of the Natural Pigments or Winsor & Newton sites; they offer almost an education.
Yet another Internet choice for detailed opinion about pigments and paints, in general and by different brands, is a range of independent experts. An example of a good one is Hilarypage.com. On these sites you will read of faults that the manufacturers don’t volunteer but, nevertheless, might impinge upon the success of your use. Although most artists necessarily work alone, it is amazing how many of them are willing to share their thoughts. A good start is to do an Internet search based upon the name of the hue, e.g. mineral violet. This kind of check is especially important with colors of more plastic composition, e.g. modern Naples yellow. The composition of even straight-forward, ostensibly single pigment colors such as cadmium yellow can vary slightly from maker to maker. More complex colors like lovely jaune brillant #2 can vary considerably.

A Quiet or Neutral, Landscape Palette

**The Neutrals**
Black (better, Payne’s Gray)
Burnt Umber
Burnt Sienna
English Red (or Indian Red)
Alizarin (or Rose Madder)
Raw Sienna (or Yellow Ochre)
Indigo (or Prussian Blue)
Terre Verte (or Davy’s Gray)
Caput Mortuum (or Permanent Magenta)

**The Vivids**
Cadmium Yellow Lemon
Cadmium Red Medium
Ultramarine Blue (or Cobalt Blue)
May Green (or Sap Green)
Dioxazine Violet
The above table shows fourteen colors that form a good and generous choice for a realistic landscape and townscape palette. It’s common for watercolorists to have a different palette or color set for different general topics, say, one for concentrating on landscape, another one targeting portraits, yet another for still life. For travel sketching, a landscape palette seems a good choice. The neutrals list can depict almost any natural scene with at most a minimum amount of color adjustment. However, many people, I included, find that a sketch done entirely in neutrals, while possibly quite faithful, lacks a certain snap or pizzazz. Apparently, 19 Century French landscape artist Corot also felt so. Thus he gets credit for a device in painting named the Corot Spot, a very small and localized touch of vivid color, in an otherwise neutral scene, little more than subliminally accentuating the topic or focus of the painting. Perhaps it is the relatively bright red smock on just one of the fishermen in the small boat at the lower left eye of the painting. You usually don’t pay it explicit attention but, if you momentarily hold your thumb over it, you can appreciate its crucial role. The brilliant British watercolorist, Trevor Chamberlain, is just one modern master of the Corot Spot whose work you can admire on the Internet.

Note: You don’t expect to use black very often as a color in its own right; few things in nature are actually black. And, you don’t often desire to darken a color via admixing black. However, mixing black with other colors can produce unique and attractive third colors, for example, black mixed with yellows or greens can produce useful landscape greens.

Most of the neutral colors are old, even ancient pigments, natural metal oxides obtained simply from raw dirt or baked dirt from the vicinity of some renaissance town. This explains the names, for example, Raw Sienna, Pozzuoli Earth, etc. Some have little tinting power, are weak when mixed with others. For example, in mixes, Terre Verte is quite puny. Other colors are bully strong, almost overwhelmingly so in mixes, for example, the iron oxide, Caput Mortuum (literally “dead head”, meaning the dregs).
The above choice of palette is informed by an appreciation of the Munsell color wheel that postulates that more likely there are five primary colors rather than the usually accepted count of three. Roughly, Munsell added a violet and a green to the usual red, yellow and blue, basing this opinion partly upon a study of retinal fatigue, those visual after-images defining color complements. That is, for example, what color do you see on a white wall after staring for a few minutes at lemon yellow? At any rate, the addition in a lightweight kit of both neutralized and vivid hues in violet and green certainly helps me more than does the presence of either black or white. In this palette choice I have no white and possibly include any black almost solely as a modifier.

With minor variations and compromises, a naturalistic palette like this easily can be built (online, if not from your local store) from any major manufacturer’s half-pan offerings; Winsor & Newton, Sennelier, Lukas, etc. If you are motivated by historical integrity, smaller online vendors offer other coherent kits as well. For example, on the Internet, the site, naturalpigments.com (Natural Pigments), sells readymade paintboxes outfitted with half-pans of now unusual yet historically authentic pigments reflecting topic
goals more exactly, such as 18th Century landscapers, and even specific landscape artists. The photo above illustrates my choice of naturalistic palette. As always, I made sample patches of the colors (as in the list above) to facilitate sketching. The neutralized colors are lovely, even in tiny swatches. But remember, here quality makes a difference. These are artist grade paints. The cheapest grades of neutral colors, those less than student grade, those in oddball “your whole studio” kits, can look dull and muddy. Before you even start, all your effort would be condemned to look sad and dreary. Don’t skimp on materials, brushes, paints or papers. There is a quality to fine transparent watercolor that isn’t captured by the usual parameters of description. There’s more to it than just hue and chroma. Vivacity? Clarity? I feel that this brilliant vitality explains much of transparent watercolors attraction. The following scan better shows the sample sheet. It makes me want to run right out and plein- aire sketch this very minute! As an aside, just as the scan is more faithful than the photograph, the face-to-face reality of a good watercolor is even better still. Seeing in person, a Sargent watercolor for example, is a transforming experience. Watercolors can be breathtaking!
Extreme Minimal Palettes

Sometimes people seek to create the least, the smallest palette technically possible, a short list of colors that is the minimal necessary yet still sufficient for their targeted use. Generally, the least palette would have to include the usual three primaries, a yellow, a red and a blue. The color experts at *Winsor & Newton* have given this some good thought and recommend, from their line of about five-score colors: Winsor Lemon, Winsor Blue (red shade) and Permanent Rose. Per *Winsor & Newton*, this is the smallest set of colors one should use in general. A somewhat less restricted set of six is their selection: Winsor Lemon, Winsor Yellow, French Ultramarine, Winsor Blue (green shade), Permanent Rose and Scarlet Lake. This latter set is just a fine-tuned example of the common suggestion to take both a warm and a cool version of each of the three primary colors. While such a small set of colors no doubt can be carried in a small package, remember that the real limiting item in size for travel always is the paper to be painted upon. That reasonably cannot be reduced beneath about postcard size. At roughly that size, you can cram at least twenty half-pan colors in a tiny box! Therefore, in consideration of travel palettes, extreme miniaturization of your color set should take a distant second place to what are the specific colors. And, acquiring and accumulating sets of colors and tiny paintbox kits can become almost an addiction, an expensive obsession. Still further, it can be a distraction; the most expensive paints or the most optimal palette is not what stands between me and any success. Remember, your most critical item is your brush and, next in line, is the quality of the paper. Your paints are the third most important item in your kit. For the moment, you should obtain or build a small enough and good enough set of colors and just start painting. Paint. Paint. Paint!
A Watercolor Sketcher’s Overall Kit

Nothing in sketching is worse than to walk some distance only to arrive at your possibly remote site and then discover that you have forgotten some key, absolutely necessary item of your kit. I have done this myself more than once. The very best way to avoid this disappointment is to keep your sketching kit ready to go in a small, dedicated knapsack or the like. The next best thing is to at least have a complete written list of all the things that you will need. With such a list, you will more confidently pack your kit just prior to leaving. Note that there are two rough categories of things you must have. First, are the absolute essentials you need for sketching itself, for example, a good brush. Second, are those items you need simply because you are there. For example, sun screen.

Harbor, Coyote Point. 7x10-inches. 140-lb Arches NOT.

Sketching Kit

You’ll need:

- your color box, enough of each color,
• a couple of brushes and
• watercolor paper (sheets, pads, or blocks).
• A small sketchbook.
• A paper file folder, to carry your work home. Be optimistic.
• Water, for sketching, but also for you. Twelve to eighteen ounces is enough for me. But people and conditions vary.
• Two small cups, e.g. empty plastic sauce cups. To clean a brush, I first gently wipe it, then swish it thru a “first stage” cup. After wiping it again, I swish it thru a “second stage” cup. This conserves water yet provides a clean rinse. A vigorous shake can replace wiping.
• A small spray bottle and a tiny water dropper. (My droppers are ex-medical, e.g. for a cat’s eardrops.) The first dampens paper, the second wets paint pans, creates blooms, etc.
• A small, wide-mouth plastic jar with a tight lid. This carries away dirty rinse water. As my little rinse cups get dirty, I empty them into this. Don’t pollute!
• A few paper towels.
• A plastic bag for your damp “garbage”, e.g. soiled wipes.
• A small sponge. For daubing, etc.
• Masking tape
• A light sketching board. Mine are about 16x16-inch stiff, plastic. Anything water-resistant, flat, stiff and lightweight.
• A 0.9mm automatic pencil with an eraser on the end. 0.9mm is not as easy to find as 0.5mm, but worth the effort. The 0.9mm lead is the smallest that makes an interesting mark. The eraser is “wrong” but works for me.
• A small wax candle for masking details, e.g. a birthday candle.
• A few soft pastel pieces. At least a white one for brilliant highlights. I sometimes carry six half-sticks: white and a light tint of each of the five primaries (per Munsell). Carried on cushioning cotton, in an Altoids tin.
- A pocketknife. For making telling marks and moving paint. This cannot be carried on airplanes.
- A simple digital camera. Before sketching, I record the scene, in case things change, I can finish up at home. Things change.
- A knapsack to carry all. If not far from their car, some people manage with an attaché case or briefcase. An air travel roller carry-on works for some.

Note. For simple walk-about while traveling, you really only absolutely require a little paintbox, one brush, the watercolor paper and your own water bottle. Don’t forgo travel sketching because you think it requires too much baggage. The complete list above is nice, especially if you are working close to your auto, hotel room, etc. Perhaps most of the items are not strictly necessary.

**Personal Kit**

Of course your painting kit isn’t going to go out on its own. You’ll be going along too and that means that there are some extra items that you could need for yourself.

- Bring water for your own needs, not just the sketching.
- Comfortable shoes. You’ll not only be walking, but probably standing for considerable periods of time. Perhaps in a damp area.
- Weather can change. Your outer clothing should incorporate the multiple-layer method, including a windproof jacket.
- A wide-brimmed hat to keep the sun from broiling your brains.
- A plastic garbage bag, closed corners cut off, is an effective lightweight rain poncho.
- Lots of sunscreen.
- Insect repellant.
- If you need prescription glasses, don’t forget them!
- If you like sunglasses, make sure that they are color-neutral. And, outdoors, sunglasses are almost a necessity.
- Darker, neutral-colored clothing to avoid projecting color bias onto your work.
- A loud whistle. If security is an issue, paint in groups. In fact, it’s always better to sketch with others.
- Your cell phone. Charge it before leaving home.
- Just-enough cash and your basic ID, certainly your driver’s license if you drove!
- I often bring a lightweight folding chair.
- A small amount of toilet tissue. You never know.
- Some take an umbrella, not for rain, but for keeping the sun off their work. Sargent sometimes employed three at once! Others merely stay under any shade. I’m a shade tree guy.
- With possibly most of the above, a knapsack is needed. Or for some people, a rolling trolley.
As said, this isn’t to insist that all this is absolutely necessary for the traveling or accidental sketcher. Often, I’ve gone out from my hotel as just another tourist with the exception of including a tiny paintbox, a brush, a postcard paper block and the ubiquitous plastic water bottle. And a hat! However, no matter where I find myself, if I’m going out intending several hours of sketching, I carry only as much of this list as needed.
A Local Landmark, The Golden Gate Bridge

A good preparation for travel sketching is creating your own coherent set of watercolor sketches about a common hometown theme, perhaps about a recognizable local landmark. Call it practice and exploring. Although many of us might judge our own locations dull or prosaic, this is almost never true. Everyone lives near something that others would deem interesting and iconic. Among worthy topics might be: a local mountain range, a river, seaside villages, rolling prairies, silos and barns, etc. Because I live nearby, it was natural for me to select the Golden Gate Bridge in Northern California, spanning the water from San Francisco northwards.

Above is a sketch of the bridge. (Strathmore 4x6-inches. 140-lb NOT). The view is from the north, inside The Gate, looking south past a picturesque rock, towards a Coast Guard rescue station located on a tiny spit of land immediately under the bridge’s north tower. In the late afternoon the fog is sliding in through The Gate. The light slants in from the west (right). The city beyond is
dissolved into misty blues. Because it is now easily accessible public parkland, this spot is an excellent site for sketching. Behind you, and within a short walking distance, are a museum, a good restaurant and hotel all housed in the former fort’s old buildings. Technically, note the pinholes in the paper. I no longer pin my papers to a small wooden board while sketching; I now use ordinary masking tape. It is easily sufficient to prevent buckling in paper as thin as 70-pound, at least in small postcard sizes. I don’t use those special masking tapes targeting painting. The commercial house painter’s version has a fierce bright blue that throws my color sense off. The pale white, special “fine art” version of masking tape, as promised, doesn’t harm delicate watercolor papers, but mostly because it doesn’t seem to stick to anything at all. Try ordinary masking tape first.
The next sketch (Canson 4x6-inches. 140-lb cold block) is a view from a point barely inside The Gate, on the bay and almost immediately below the (unseen) bridge’s south tower. It’s a view eastwards towards San Francisco’s Presidio district, one end of the city’s waterfront and downtown. The water here is very rough when strong winds clash with an extremely powerful tidal current racing home towards the open ocean. There is no beach here, only little more than a narrow path pressed against a wall of rock. Breaking waves frequently soak the pedestrian. Because here The Gate is less than a mile wide, this is an excellent place to observe vessels of all kinds, from little kayaks to enormous cruise liners, entering and leaving the bay. Note that I taped the paper to the board not only avoiding pinholes but also obtaining a pleasing white surround and slight vignette effect. This also leaves a white paper band for notes in pencil. I don’t recall a bank of fog conveniently behind the city skyline. However, inventing one must have made sense at the time because the light colors make the dark cityscape legible. The violet shadows and pale green water are realistic; the ceaselessly active surf beats a constant froth of air bubbles into the water.
The quick sketch below (4x6-inches. 140-lb, NOT Canson block) depicts the south shore outside the bridge as the bay moves inland and narrows toward the decisive choke point of The Gate. The large rocks swimming in the foreground are well known to local mariners. The smaller, farther one is called Seal Rock due its suggestive shape and is known to be a haunt of striped bass. Obviously, these rows of semi-submerged rocks have been a hazard to shipping since the bay was discovered. This sketch, like many of mine, is a view from a long footpath stretching for miles from the ocean back to the bridge and continuing inside the gate. It is quite popular with joggers and day hikers, thus I was not too isolated. Elevated high above the water and rocks and moving in and out of brush and forest, the trail offers wonderful views, not only of the bridge, but also of the steep, rocky and uninhabited north side of the narrowing waterway.
In retrospect I feel I’ve made the rocky fingers stretching into the water too orderly, too regularly spaced. Even if that is the factual reality in front of me, I should have varied this a bit. A common error in sketching is automatically putting things down exactly as they are, rather than as they might better be. Once again, I’ve portrayed the sky in the background as lighter than fact in order for the viewer to more easily read the bridge, the focus or principal subject of the scene. Also, although the sketch was quickly and otherwise loosely done, the bridge itself was rather carefully drawn in order to be sufficiently convincing. I’ve painted this scene many times, in both watercolor and oil, and the water here on the south side of The Gate has always been this sort of jade or pea green. However inviting, the water’s edge here is unreachable by foot, to the benefit of local marine wildlife such as otters and harbor seals. The sketch below (4x6-inches. 140-lb, NOT block) is from an easily reached public beach on the south shore, about a mile outside the Gate. It is part of a federal park system and offers car parking, picnicking, etc. It is so accessible, one doesn’t have a reasonable excuse to not sketch here. Note that simply the white
paper plus a very little bit of sky and sand colors suffice to credibly indicate the overturning surf. Oddly, even many otherwise successful painters often do a poor job of depicting breaking wave action. Ocean surf is very easy to overwork. Especially with breaking waves, as in Zen, your “better” may remarkably be simply your quieter “less”. In the distance, straight burnt sienna nicely indicates the striking red-orange Franciscan chert rock formations. Almost, I also dabbed a little burnt umber, wet-in-wet, here and there.

As I often have to do, I invented the clouds. The sky here in the Bay Area is frequently an empty blue bowl. San Francisco’s weather can be so mild that it becomes visually boring. I placed the fictional clouds more to the right (south) to indicate subtly the direction of the sunlight. One can see remnants of the original pencil layout. If pencil marks are objectionable, erasing can almost eliminate them just prior to applying any paint. Personally, I usually like the pencil left intact, but this is entirely your choice. A caveat is that heavy pencil marks can generate dark gray smears if your washes are rubbed in and very wet. Also, perhaps remarkably,
light pencil lines usually can be erased after the paint is thoroughly dry.
The next view shows the bridge from inside the bay, from a small, narrow beach on the south shore, in front of the Marina District and its great meadow, right next to the St. Francis Yacht Club. (4x6-inches. 140-lb NOT.) It is late afternoon and the light, from the upper left and almost contre jour, dulled all appearances. Unlike its signature red-orange local color, the bridge appeared to me as almost simply a dull dark neutral. A falsely bright red-orange in the sketch would appear odd under this lighting, although the viewer may not guess why. As always when striving for realism, sketch it as it looks, not as you think it should be. Sketch patches of light and dark. Sketch patches of colors. Don’t sketch things. Don’t sketch houses and cars, boats and trees, etc. I’ve exaggerated the light background fog to help show the bridge. Further, I’ve also extended it up on the left (south) to help indicate the direction of the light.

At one point, a young man, deep in some pensive thought, slowly and deliberately stepped across the sand. This was one of those
happy accidents and I eagerly included him in the scene. He accurately appears lost in thought. People who do best at including figures are those who consistently fill their sketchbooks with rapid gestural drawings of people. Even during business meetings, feigning note-taking, I sometimes surreptitiously sketch others in pencil. Family times, such as watching television together, afford an easy opportunity to practice sketching figures. Even when alone, you can try rapidly sketching figures appearing on the television. Different kinds of programs offer differing model speeds. The figures change much more quickly in basketball games than they do on Sunday morning roundtable news reviews! Thus, you can always have someone to sketch.

This next sketch (6x9-inches. 140-lb Canson cold block) is again outside The Gate, but very close to the bridge. I could hear the continuous roar of the traffic. I wanted the bridge to be believable so I made my preliminary pencil sketch with more care than usual for a quick travel sketch. So-called architectural topics like bridges often require extra care in drawing. I also left intact the preliminary
pencil of the bridge to suggest more convincing detail. Because of the close proximity, I made the rest of the sketch also more clear and with more vibrant color. The sky was left almost, but not completely blank, with just a wipe of pale cerulean blue here and there. (More evident when the sketch is viewed in person, however difficult to capture in this digital scan.) As always, this pale treatment shows the darker topic, the bridge, to be seen with greater clarity. This is called counter-change.

My geologist friends tell me that the striking red-colored bedrock is called Franciscan chert. These bright outcrops appear here and there throughout San Francisco and environs. The north bridge tower is firmly fastened directly into this stony red massif. By contrast, the bridge’s south tower has to sit atop an enormous concrete pier reaching, down through weaker, muddy stuff before reaching its own firm bedrock. The trees, firs and cypresses, were sketched with a couple of cool greens then daubed wet-in-wet with the ultramarine blue of the sea. This makes not only convincing evergreens and color harmony but also a striking color contrast to the warm tones of burnt sienna and burnt umber of the Franciscan chert.

The watercolor sketch below (4x6-inches. 140-lb, cold pad) shows the bridge from the ocean, looking back from Land’s End near the site of the former Sutro’s Baths spa, destroyed a century ago by fire. This is the point on the south shore where the land suddenly turns sharply to the south. After here, one finally faces out to the Pacific Ocean rather than across the width of the Golden Gate. I’ve invented another fog bank so that the bridge could be seen. This is not farfetched; ocean fog often invades the bay via other gaps besides The Gate. Overall, because the sun was behind my back, the scene is shown in a high key to appear sun-struck.
At this point, Land’s End, the hard red chert rock has given way to weak, yellow, crumbling sandstone. Thus, the foreground rocks are now primarily sienna and ochre, with a little white of the paper left for breaking waves, sun glare, and bird guano. Remember, the very best white in watercolor is the white of untouched paper. Watercolor enjoys this, perhaps the best white in painting. Absent this white paper, transparent watercolor really has no satisfactory white. So-called Chinese white paint (zinc oxide), present in most ready-made kits, offers little covering power. However, in transparent watercolor painting any opaque passage looks out of place, looks like a crude patch over some mistake. That is, to the extent that it necessarily appears white, white watercolor paint also looks bad. Damned if you do, damned if you don’t! If I must paint a small white passage, I use neither Chinese white nor a gouache (opaque) titanium white. Instead, if at home, I might use a cautious, thinned application of acrylic titanium white. If out and about with just a small traveler’s sketch kit, I use only a discreet
swipe of dry white chalk. For this purpose, in my kit I include a tiny piece of white dry pastel.

Here is a (4x6-inches. 70-lb HOT) sketch of the bridge from just inside the Gate, on the south side. There’s a scrap of a park, little used and almost hidden, just off the toll plaza with only a single picnic table, access to the bridge’s clean restrooms and this wonderful view. This sketch differs from the others. First, it has a portrait, or taller-than-wide, format that is somewhat uncommon for a postcard. Second, it is painted on a warm-toned, 70-pound, hot-pressed paper cut down to postcard size.

Use of toned paper tends to facilitate color harmony, tends to help to bring the sketch together color-wise.

Yes, besides buying ready-made blank watercolor postcards from either a local art supply or an online store, you can easily make your own. This saves you a little money but more importantly, enables a wider choice of papers. The ready-made postcards seem to be all 140-pound, cold-pressed white. So for something different, I keep an eye out for other papers to use. Sometimes I actually post my postcards; sometimes I do not. There’s a sort of
risky, frisky thrill in entrusting your handiwork to a government agency, but the authenticity offered by a little travel grime and an official, perhaps even foreign postmark, can be worth it. Although some of my postcards have taken as much as three months to make it from Eastern Europe to my home, honestly, they have never failed to straggle in eventually, every single one!

What can you do with all of your postcards on a theme? One choice would be to cover a wall with a multitude of little frames. Another, perhaps more sensible, choice would be to frame several of them at a time in one of those larger frames with a mat cut to hold several images at the same time. Still another choice would be to sketch and gather them in a pochade portfolio like the one in the photo above. This particular one from India is handmade from cotton and hemp. It comes with ten blank, individually mold-made and fully deckled 4x6 postcards for you to fill with your travel watercolor sketches. This Nujabi paper from India is about 210-lb weight, rough and without size. The great absorbency, due the lack of sizing, can make it a little difficult to use. The paint can seem to fall endlessly into the paper and the potential strength or chroma of the colors thereby can be much reduced. Alternatively, you can size each sheet via a wash of dilute transparent acrylic medium,
well prior to use. Trouble, yes. However, the rewards might be worth it. Sized and not, I’ve filled several of these pochades and given them as special gifts to good friends and family.

Note. The central sketch in the photo above shows again how easily a little sky and sand color depict a crashing surf. You need no special “surf colors”!
Some Useful Techniques for Watercolor Sketching

Confession. Not everything in a painting or sketch has been meticulously constructed, tiny color dot by tiny color dot, using some amazingly pointy and microscopic brush. Frequently painters, especially watercolorists, use large scale “tricks” to plausibly suggest entire sets of things with perhaps one single but deft stroke. Sargent has been described as painting (in oils) the buttons on a portrait subject’s clothing as follows. On a single brush he would carefully dip into perhaps three different colors of paint. Approaching the canvas, he would abruptly stab the brush into the proper location, then, with an exaggerated twist, quickly withdraw the brush. Depending, as it seems, heavily upon fortuitous accident, this gamble failed more often than it succeeded. Portraying ten buttons might require fifty hopeful thrusts and forty disappointed scrapings amid much muttered, mild cursing. Point is… tricks are not some lazy shortcut; they may be the best, practical way to achieve a needed effect.

The fact that even very fine-textured effects are often NOT obtained via incredibly laborious work with a tiny brush can be a surprise and I suggest, sometimes a real disappointment. A man, who had just obtained an oil painting of mine depicting the central California coast, phoned to express his amazement over the “hundreds of tiny flowers” I must have painted within an ocean of ice plant spilling from the road down to the sea. He was a technical type, an engineer by training, so I thought he’d enjoy an explanation of how it was done. No, I did not place a tiny carmine dot for each flower. I first carefully covered the coarse surface with a very fluid wash of carmine red. Naturally, the thin, runny paint settled deeply into thousands of irregular pores. After this had almost dried, I then briskly covered most, but not all, of the rough surface with the various greens and browns representing the foliage. For this I used drier, stiffer paints and only a light pressure on the brush, enabling me to skip over many of those miniscule, carmine-filled pores. Viola! Apparently a few score tiny “flowers”
remaining, peeking out. Although I had expected from the man some mild expression of admiration for this clever method, instead there followed only a cool, brief conversation on a different topic. He was clearly disappointed, had wanted to hear instead of an achingly laborious effort. For the same general reason, you must never divulge how little time and work it can take to make a really nice travel sketch!

**Salt and Other Sprinkles**

Perhaps the most common trick or shortcut for obtaining some watercolor texture effects is sparsely sprinkling certain materials, typically table salt, into wet paint. The hygroscopic (water absorbing) property of the tiny crystal grains pulls the wet paint close and very locally takes up, absorbs most of the water content. This has the effect of concentrating the pigment in the immediate vicinity of each grain, thus leaving a darker freckle of color upon drying, surrounded by a paler halo of reduced color. It doesn’t have to be salt, although salt has advantages. It is readily available, even on the table at a café. Yes, sugar works, except that dried sugar might attract ants and other insects; neither the salt nor the sugar ever goes completely away. Ground black pepper and ground coffee work too but leave a decidedly brown cast to the resulting freckles. As does tea, although tea leaves, due their larger and varying shapes, work a more interesting variant of the texture. Of course, the tea and all the other choices must be dry when dropped into the paint on the paper. Otherwise, the water of the local wet paint would not be absorbed, thus the nearby color would not be concentrated into the desired freckle. And, whatever is sprinkled into the wet paint must again be dry before finally removed. Otherwise, the freckling effect will be smeared and the still-wet paint may simply flow again, healing over any created texture.

While sitting in the café nursing your coffee and pastry, feel free to experiment with anything on the table as a sprinkle. For example, newspaper or paper napkin shredded into fine, random confetti can make an otherwise featureless sky into something more interesting,
as in the sketch below, *Julian Alps*, from memory. (140-lb NOT Strathmore 400) First, I made an even wash of cerulean blue. While this was still wet, but not too wet (it’s a matter of judgment informed by experimentation) the confetti was gently and unevenly dropped onto the paper. Next, a light, even weight was applied, e.g. a book, dinner plate, etc. However, not too heavy a weight; too much pressure and the confetti would simply blot up all the blue, leaving again an almost even wash. The pressure must be gauged such as to make thicker piles of confetti press more into the paper than other, thinner patches of confetti. Thus, the blue is unevenly removed, yielding the desired random variegation.

The next scan shows the completed sketch. After the sky was dry, I added a violet alpine skyline with a mix of cerulean blue reddened by alizarin. No sprinkles for this effect, but I did use another trick, tilting the sketch back and forth to move the paint around until it dried. This caused the gradient of tone from bottom to top as well as the sharply defined edge, giving an effect of smoky mountain valleys. After the paint was nearly dry, I could have softened the hard edge with the tip of a clean, damp brush. Even now, I still could soften it with a damp, cotton swab. However, I wanted a sharp edge although admittedly, a softened skyline appears to roll
over and away, heightening an illusion of space and distance. Generally, “Hard edges advance; soft edges retreat.” is the maxim. But, it’s your decision for the effect you wish.

To create the middle ground of trees and vegetation, I first daubed in splashes of a variety of greens, blues, yellows, and even a little red. I dabbed here and there, minimizing any deliberate color mixing as possible. Then, while all was still wet, I sprinkled red pepper flakes. (I’m continuing the conceit that we are sitting in a café, perhaps in Sicily. So of course there’s a small jar of red pepper flakes.) Even before the mid-ground pepper flakes were dry, I dropped in a foreground of burnt umber, green, violet, and, once again, cerulean blue. I’ve added at least a tiny bit of this blue to every area of the sketch, for color harmony. While this earth mess / mix was still wet I also sprinkled ground black pepper and table salt. (Any waiter would think me a dangerous nut!) An obvious caveat for travel sketching is the longer time taken for everything to dry. Only after all was bone dry, did I use a sharp edge (blade, credit card, etc.) to carefully pick off all the debris,
back down to just paper and paint. Voila’, a credible mountain scene with almost zero brushwork per se.

**Blooms**

When a drop of clean water is plopped into a patch of wet paint on paper, a “bloom” or “back run” can result. The wet color seems to flee the drop of added water (an effect opposite to that of sprinkled salt). This centrifugal effect can be very useful to depict some forms in nature, for example, some clouds or the canopies of deciduous trees. The quick plein aire above is of a mountain lake nestled in a long wrinkle in the earth, created by California’s notorious San Andreas Fault. (5”x7” 140-lb Fabriano NOT) Look closely at the trees on the opposite shore. I made those convincing shapes simply by first placing uniform blobs of color, waiting a bit for the proper drying (surface water gone, only a slight sheen left), then dripping a small drop of clear water onto each spot. That moved some pigment towards the edges, painting a tree canopy as
seen from a distance. Variations of this create different soft effects. As always, experiment with this yourself.

**Dark-to-Light**

Most watercolorists paint “light-to-dark”. That is, a light-to-dark sketch slowly progresses as each light wash after previous, now dried, light wash accumulates on the paper, much like adding to a stack of colored but transparent cellophane sheets, until the desired end result is obtained. Waiting for successive washes to thoroughly dry could consume an entire day, regardless of whether it’s a small sketch on a postcard block or an enormous painting on an imperial sheet. Thus, some travel painters proceed in the opposite direction, dark-to-light, particularly when doing rapid sketches. Today, Charles Reid is perhaps the most notable American exponent of the dark-to-light approach in watercolor. For oil painters it is the usual practice. In a nutshell, it can be done in oil because oil is “forgiving”. Errors in oil can be corrected, even light passages painted opaquely over dark ones. In watercolor this is almost impossible, light paint will never cover up dark paint. Therefore, the usual light-to-dark method proceeds cautiously in watercolor, step-by-step, avoiding any sudden, irreversible dark mistake. Obviously then, the opposite path, dark-to-light, is inherently risky.

The plein-air sketch below was done dark-to-light. (7”x10”, 140-lb Arches NOT. Collection Susan Oddo.) Immediately after I did the early evening sky washes, I laid down the very darkest passages along the water’s far edge. The difference between the darkest water and the light sky set the possible range of values for the rest of the picture. Note that the variegated sky washes were done vertically, rather than horizontally, to enhance the look of a failing afternoon and arriving evening.
The above sketch occasions an important caution. When sketching outdoors, in either very bright or rather dim light, remember to cast your sketch with the correct appropriate lightness or darkness to ultimately be properly viewed, typically in average indoor light. When sketching in fading light, because it’s difficult to see, it’s easy to sketch too lightly. Contrariwise, in bright light, perhaps sunlight glaring onto the paper, you will tend to paint too darkly. On sunny days, I try to sketch in the shade!

**Light-to-Dark**

As said, this is the usual approach for transparent watercolor painting, no doubt motivated by the fact that placing darker washes first is irreversible. That is, a very dark wash cannot be nicely removed nor can a lighter passage be painted over it. This is in contrast to oils and other opaque, covering media. Contrariwise, a darker watercolor passage easily can be painted over a lighter passage. To depict the brilliant wild mustard flowering along the northern California coast in the next sketch, I first painted most of
the foreground in various light and bright yellows. (7”x10”, 140-lb Fabriano NOT) After the yellows dried, I went over much of that with assorted blues, the resulting yellow-over-blue mixtures formed most of the different greens. The reverse does not work; the result would be very different if I first had put down a lot of dark blue and then had gone over that with some light yellows. Note: Much of the rest was done wet-in-wet, for example, the vegetation at the edge of the cliff, beyond the mustard field. Colors are mixed right on the paper. The rocks in the water and the far bluff are also wet-in-wet. As is best, the breaking water is not an application of white paint, but is reserved (unpainted) white paper, with most edges softened later with a damp brush. Note the cooler greens in the distance to suggest separation of planes. Note also the soft, the un-sharp horizon to also suggest distance. A sharp horizon fails to recede.
Wet-in-Wet
Wet-in-wet painting requires tight, dynamic control. To even partially control the mixing of an added color with the underlying and still wet color, you must gauge the dampness of the paper from second to second. Too dry and there is no mixing. Too wet and everything blends into an amorphous, neutralized mess. Thus, even the weather, via the humidity, plays a strong role. The sketch below is mostly wet-in-wet. (6”x4”, 140-lb NOT Canson) The sky, blue-green for color harmony, was done top-down segueing into clear water. The farthest, viridian trees were also simply color dropped into water-dampened paper. Coming forward, the middle-distance trees first were painted in alizarin with viridian later dropped in wet on the tops. The wet alizarin thus fled appropriately to the bottom edge of the canopies. Finally, the rare, deciduous redwood at the left was done in warmer greens to come forward. However, deep blues and more alizarin were repeatedly dropped into parts of the foliage, resulting in persuasive variegation plus darker, shadowed tones to come more forward still. (Both darker tones and stronger contrasts advance, seem closer.)
Employing “Tools”
In the sketch above, note the vegetation depicted in the foreground. (7x10-inches. 140-lb Cotman NOT.) If you didn’t know better, you might think that this required a lot of detailed brushwork. Nope. First, from the tip of my brush, I dabbed a few colors into the wet green. Blues, burnt sienna, red, etc. Second, I worked those areas over with both the point of my pencil and with the flat of a pocketknife blade. (The corner of a credit card will do.) Drawing paint away from the spot with a pencil point allowed extra pigment to settle darkly back into grooves of damaged paper. When I wiped the blade flat on the paper with a lot of pressure, I removed most of the paint making very light “leaves”. Thus, besides a brush, there are many tools to move paint. And, it isn’t always about applying more color; often it’s about artfully reducing or moving some paint.
Elsewhere in the sketch I’ve also moved paint without using a brush. For example, the deep blue afternoon shadows in the rocky
cleft at the upper left, were simply scribbled about with the point of my pencil. The fog is not a positive application of some whitish light paint but instead mostly the negative removal of bluish sky pigment via damp blotting out with dry tissue. (See section on “dabbing”, etc.)

**Scratch Out**

Scratching out may be only another case of using non-brush tools, but it is so important that it warrants special attention. The two scans are before and after some scratching out. The second shows sun sparkle off the water and some mild surf breaking near the shore, both effects achieved via using a sharp blade to scrape away dry paint down to white paper.
These are many ways to depict interesting texture in watercolor without directly using a brush. Elsewhere in this chapter, there are descriptions of other methods for altering paint that do not require a brush. The sprinkles technique involves dropping (usually finely divided) foreign material directly onto wet paint, then letting it all dry before removing to reveal the effect. Another type of technique, using tools, offers ways to make eloquent marks in wet paint. The tool is most frequently a sharp knife blade but really can be from an eclectic range of sharp, hard objects like fingernails, car keys, credit cards, the tip of your brush’s handle, etc. Here in this next section, dabbing, lifting and Tonking move wet paint more softly. The daubing and pouncing methods are about applying the paint rather than moving or modifying it after it is already on the paper. Essentially, one applies the paint with various soft and improbable tools.
Dabbing, Lifting and Tonking

These techniques remove paint from the paper, either wet paint or re-wetted paint, of course to some pictorial purpose. The sketch below is from memory. (I’ve sketched there numerous times.) At Davenport, on the Northern California coast, as the land eroded into the sea, it left a unique and picturesque finger pointing upright in the surf. Here, on top of a rather complete pencil under-sketch, I brushed in a wash of cerulean blue for sky, with a little alizarin for fog at the horizon. (Note the admixture of a red, alizarin, with the blue to make a neutralized violet, rather than fog’s completely neutral gray. I always prefer some color rather than dead neutral blacks and grays.) I then had to let this dry thoroughly in order to be able to scan it. However, outdoors, I would have dabbed the paint immediately in order to more easily and evenly lift out the areas intended to depict the dissipating fog. (140-lb NOT sketchbook)

The sketch’s next scan shows some of the blue and alizarin lifted, via dabbing the re-wetted paint with a dry paper napkin, to indicate morning fog burning off under the climbing sun. The same technique produced the sky and fog layer in the sketch of the same subject under the “Employing Tools” section. There the effect is
smoother. Here the inexpensive sketchbook paper exhibits uneven staining by the paint, leading to a more mottled appearance. Not that this adversely affects the sketch here. Remember some things about staining. Point one, different papers can stain differently, some more, some less. And point two, less expensive papers may not behave homogeneously, the properties, including staining, may vary unpredictably from spot to spot. Maybe not a problem when depicting the random vagaries of lifting fog, but in a different sketch, such mottling might ruin a smooth sky wash. Point three, different paints / pigments stain differently. In staining, pigments that stain more, penetrate the paper more deeply and cleave more tightly to the fibers, making the color more difficult to remove by dabbing, blotting, lifting, etc. Alizarin crimson and Prussian blue are two examples of highly staining colors. Earth colors with relatively large mineral pigment particles, such as yellow ochre, are easier to remove. This kind of varied and idiosyncratic behavior of materials is a hallmark of watercolor, making it a much different enterprise from say, oils or acrylics.

The sketch below (Bleak Morning, 5x7-inches NOT, Collection Rosemarie McReynolds) shows some close-in rocks along the famous 17-Mile Drive on California’s Monterey Peninsula. It was morning and the weather was just clearing after a storm. One of the
challenges was to portray a convincing perspective in the exposed rocks trailing out in the fog-bound, tide-drained shallows. That is, to make each farther rock seem still farther away. Here it is accomplished via aerial perspective. The colors fade in tone and in intensity or chroma and also tend to cool and blue with increasing distance and with increasing intervening moisture in the air above the albeit mild surf. With a great deal of effort, I could have mixed each of these receding colors.

Instead, as I also often do in oils, I remembered Sir Henry Tonks, British contemporary and associate of John Singer Sargent. I carefully “tonked” the rocks, tonked them the more, the farther out they stood. That is, I quickly painted them all and painted them pretty much in the same colors and intensities. Then, while they were still wet, but rapidly drying, I firmly pressed an absorbent scrap of paper against the farther rocks. This to flatten and remove much (but not all) of the paint I had just applied. I pressed the hardest and the longest on the furthest rocks. And, pressed less and less with the closer and closer rocks. Voila’! Here’s a convincingly
modulated range of color saturation, a simulacrum of aerial perspective through intervening distance and humidity. Tonking can be understood as careful dabbing or lifting out to some specific effect. I’ve read that Sir Henry used newspaper to tonk his oils. However, watercolor requires cleaner, more absorbent stuff.

**Daubing and Pouncing**

Daubing and pouncing artfully add more paint to the paper, but in a decidedly non-brush manner. Watercolorists typically employ a sponge; however other things will work as well a sponge. A caveat is that whatever you use, that it makes random deposits of paint so as to muffle the artifice. To this purpose, natural sponges often are stipulated, the idea being that a manufactured, e.g. mundane kitchen sponge will betray itself via paint marks that are undesirably regular. Personally, I have not found this to be a problem. Nonetheless, very small natural sponges suitable for small travel watercolor kits are quite inexpensive, even at hobby or framing stores.

In another scan of a previously shown sketch about dabbing skies
(Davenport Beach, 140-lb NOT Strathmore 400), I’ve now added the middle ground and the foreground. The “vegetation” of the foreground was added by daubing in shapeless colors with a small, natural sponge. After the greens, yellows and blues and a little alizarin were in place but still wet, I used a pencil point and the screwdriver blade of my trusty pocket tool to indicate believable vegetation: leaves, stems and flowers. Notice the blue “plants”. I doubt if cerulean blue could be actually there, but I add a little of the sky colors throughout a landscape for the artificial purpose of color harmony. You likely would not have noticed unless I confessed. The sketch just looks better!

**Pen and Wash**

An attractive and interesting variation on watercolor sketching combines watercolors with ink line drawing. It isn’t suitable for every topic. For example, it doesn’t seem attractive for people’s faces! But, I like it for older and eccentric architectural subjects. The scan below is an example. (*Twilight in Ljubljana. Collection of LS Chaffin. 4x6-inches, 140-lb NOT*) It is a quick method, enabling one to rapidly make a convincing sketch. The watercolors and the ink line are put down separately, one allowed to dry completely before the other is applied. Many people might feel it is natural to establish an ink drawing first, to be filled in later with the washes. (Most people feel more confident, more in charge with a linear medium, e.g. pencil or pen.) However, if the washes, which are more difficult to control, are done first, then the ink line can conform better to the prior reality of the washes. This is a quick method of sketching. Pressed for time, a few rapid washes can suffice until the line is added later back in your hotel room.

A more interesting sketch can be done with a more variable ink line. A constant width, such as that from a ballpoint pen, can be boring and inarticulate. Felt tip markers offer some advantage and at a good price plus convenience. With a broad chisel point, the line width can be varied widely as appropriate. With markers one also has a choice of colors. In many cases a hard black may be
suitable, but in others, as here, a sort of sepia or dark brown seems be better. When traveling, I carry both black and sepia pens. Finally, it seems better to err on the side of too little line. Too much can look mannered.

**Pencil Under-sketch**

The scan below shows a studio work in progress. It is about 11x15-inches, rather large for my watercolors. Also, the under-drawing is more complete than typical because it is a recognizable subject, well known to my intended viewers. The scene is out the back of a family residence in San Francisco’s historically Italian-American neighborhood, North Beach. The view stretches across Fisherman’s Wharf, past Alcatraz Island (a former federal prison housing gangster Al Capone among others) and on to the dry vineyard hills of Solano County. The expected familiarity with this almost iconic scene necessitated a detailed and careful sketch before applying even the first washes of color. Errors as little as some out-of-place windows, much less added or subtracted
architectural features, would have elicited disappointed comment if noticed or caused vague unease if not explicitly recognized. For my intended viewers, this scene is as familiar as a family face. Even in less stringent cases, those of an individual touring abroad, of smaller images, smaller sketches, accuracy can be aided via an initial pencil drawing. I know, I’ve been on the other side. I recall viewing an exhibit of paintings made around San Francisco by a well regarded, visiting British painter. Whether he only had worked from a photo of the Golden Gate Bridge or had seen it partially obscured on a foggy day, in fact, his painting showed the north end fastened into the rock in a patently wrong way. Upon viewing this, one’s reaction might be to nervously giggle in embarrassment over the artist’s mistake. As if he had painted a milk cow terminated with a dinosaur’s tail. Never “fake it” with iconic subjects.

Sizing
Watercolor papers vary in the amount of sizing incorporated during manufacture. The sizing can be nonexistent as with homemade papers or some papers imported from Asia. Then it can
seem as if one is painting on dry cotton, perhaps because that is indeed the case. The paint just falls into the paper making it difficult to make a strong statement in intensity or tone. At the other extreme, the sizing can be almost overwhelming in the case of some inexpensive papers. Then it feels like one is painting on white plastic. The paint does not absorb, but seems to rest entirely on the surface. A lot of sizing does make the hues look more brilliant but also makes the paint more vulnerable to mechanical accident such as simply rubbing off the surface. In that case it might help to varnish the sketch after completion. In the first situation, that of too little or no sizing, if desired, the paper can be amended before painting by painting an even coat of either very diluted acrylic medium or clear acrylic gesso. I use the plain medium because I don’t like the extra tooth added to the paper via an abrasive in the gesso; I worry that the abrasive will wear down my expensive brushes without adding any effect I desire.

In short, with papers I deem too soft and absorbent, I make a light wash of water-diluted acrylic medium maybe an hour before painting. With papers I notice to be very “hard”, i.e. to have a great deal of sizing, I generally finish the painting or sketch with a final watercolor varnish no sooner than several days after completion. Hopefully this prevents any paint from simply wiping off.

**Use of Brushes**

Good use and care of brushes is pretty straightforward. In use, **don’t push** a brush on the paper. Lean the handle forward in the desired direction and **pull** it, drag it. Use the point of a good round as little as possible to avoid wearing it down. Instead, lightly press the belly of the brush almost level into the paper. Don’t use that sharp point unless you need to make the finest statement. Same with a good flat brush; **don’t use** the straight chisel edge unless you absolutely need it.

After use, **always clean** a brush. This is as simple as a thorough rinsing in clean water. You **don’t** need soap. Use your watercolor brushes only for watercolors. Never use a good brush for masking.
fluids. Never use one for acrylic paints. Only use good brushes for your watercolors. (Beware: some otherwise excellent gouache paint, still called “opaque watercolor”, nowadays may have an acrylic base.) Never let others use your brushes. No matter what they say, they won’t appreciate the brushes’ quality and vulnerability. Never stand a brush on its head; never stand one hairs-down onto a surface. That includes standing them, hair down, in a drinking glass. Don’t soak your brushes interminably in water; the glue in the ferrule can soften and the brush will simply float apart.

**Final Caveat**

A last caveat… even though many of these “tricks” can produce perhaps amazingly convincing effects, they should be used judiciously. When used too often or too heavily, your work might take on an obvious appearance as just a slick confection, a pastiche’ of such tricks. I personally believe the best watercolors are done as much as possible with just a brush, but in the most skillful hands.
Exercises, Sketching Nature’s Shapes

Whether you are just beginning with watercolor sketching, returning to watercolor after a long hiatus, or just bumbling along and enjoying the world, sketching organic (natural) shapes is fun and an excellent exercise. You can begin by sketching things as simple as a single, unlovely potato placed on a kitchen counter. You can do this, all by your self, indoors, in the middle of a cold, blustery day. You can be a rank beginner, quite understandably unsure of your ability to satisfactorily depict anything at all. You might be intimidated by the thought of others harshly judging your first efforts. Perhaps worse than the discouraging opinion of others, you might dread disappointing yourself. However remember, no one else need ever see what those exact potatoes really looked like and vegetables do vary enormously. Any first sketching results are truly a success if they look only vaguely potato-shaped and are just sort of potato-colored. Who knows, who’s to judge? And, the same is true for sketching other small and humble, natural, around-the-home subjects. After potatoes, you can progress to other, more complex and exciting roots like fresh carrots. I’m not being sarcastic; this isn’t insulting baby stuff. Famous and enormously skilled watercolorist, Charles Reid, often incorporates carrots and other modest vegetables in his still life and his watercolor work is rightly judged to be absolutely marvelous. Then, there are all the other fruits and vegetables to learn to sketch, available at a market: oranges and apples, tomatoes and bananas, cauliflower and red lettuce. How exciting, one could paint for weeks!

A very first thing to start out with might be a pile of some homely, dumpy potatoes. Let’s get started! I’ve placed three spuds together simply because I feel like it. An odd number is usually more interesting than an even number. I’ve also arranged them as asymmetrically as possible, symmetry, like even numbers, is often boring. I didn’t place them in a fancy and expensive studio lights set-up; they’re simply sitting on a white paper napkin, atop a small
box on my breakfast room table. You don’t need special lights or equipment. Charles Reid often paints kitchen stuff on his breakfast room table.
I’m going to use my plastic Cotman, student-grade, full pans watercolor kit. There’s nothing expensive or arcane here. I can’t say I won’t get started because I haven’t spent a lot of money to date.

Next, I roughly sketched the three potatoes. No, I didn’t first arrange some fancy light source; there’s just the overhead ceiling light. No, I didn’t first make some special kind of drawing, such as
a blind contour drawing. I don’t want to delay my watercolor travel sketching until after I’ve mastered those preliminary skills, drawing, color mixing, perspective, tensor calculus, nuclear physics, etc. Ready or not, art-world, I’m starting right now!

In the sketch below, I’ve used my inexpensive set of colors and a round sable brush and painted those potatoes. It’s as simple as that. First, I determined that the potatoes were mostly raw sienna. Then I used some raw umber for the darker spots, along with some kind of red. Note the sort of potato pimple things I placed with the pencil point. I like to improvise as I go along; you can too. I made the faint shine from the light on the potatoes by, with my barely damp brush, pulling off some of the still wet raw sienna. Finally, I mixed some red and blue to make a dull violet for the shadows under the tubers; a dull violet makes a good shadow for yellow potatoes, because they’re color complements. Sketching really isn’t any more complicated than this!

Exercise
Without further delay, place some simple fruits and/or vegetables (oranges, potatoes, whatever) on the table and sketch them with your travel kit. Spend no more than 40 minutes on each. After you get a little more practice, try building compositions out of individual players, including and arranging them not only for their individual appearance, but also for the contribution of each to a larger, an overall team effort, an example of one plus one can
equal more than two. That is, try sketching a real composition. For example, try pairing orange carrots with Italian red onions, a mild contrast of colors and of shapes. A way to make all this more fun is to arrange inert still-life components into social arrangements or tableau vivant. Extraordinary painter Thomas Buechner, in his book, *How I Paint...* (see bibliography), demonstrates this with anthropomorphic groupings of simple fruits and vegetables evocative of street crime a la *West Side Story*. For example, in one beautiful painting, a dominant and thuggish pear has already knocked another pear down and now menaces a third, intervening, good citizen pear. I know, I shouldn’t laugh. However, they are only pears and the overall point is… art should be fun too! I suspect Mr. Buechner would appreciate that.

The next two scans, my *Care for You*, show first a quick pencil under-sketch and then the completed watercolor. On a small cardboard box I arranged a banana around the mandarin orange in a sort of protective and affectionate embrace. I believe most viewers would have wordlessly sensed the gist of the message even without that bit of explanation.

Exercise
The next time you go grocery shopping, spend a few minutes more in the produce section looking for such possibilities. Such storytelling or narrative arrangements can make your sketch practice more fun.
The sketch below shows a lemon and two tomatoes arranged in a friendly group. The sketch was an exercise in depicting round and ovoid shapes.
I have relatives and friends who periodically pass on (unsolicited of course) aesthetic advice and what they feel are insightful, even cunning, art business tips. Usually, they report running across “really great, truly fabulous art” that they are certain should motivate me. It sells so well. Invariably, their gushing, almost manic praise of others emphasizes, “Her paintings look so amazingly real, just like actual photographs!” My advice to the beginner is, if you must share your watercolor efforts, then just inform friends and family that, unfortunately, you have already eaten those particular potatoes, lemons or tomatoes. But yes, how sad they missed it, missed seeing the work in progress while standing before the actual subjects in your kitchen. However, they can rest assured, your sketch does look precisely like those inspiring but now-consumed fruits and vegetables. It’s just like a real photograph!
Exercises, Sketching Man’s Architectural Shapes

If you intend to watercolor sketch on your travels, almost immediately you must address depicting architectural subjects. That is, you’ll need to successfully sketch manmade things, like tables and chairs. Also, bigger things like bridges and buildings. Further, when appropriate, you’ll want to include mobile objects like boats, trains, cars, and so on. Fortunately, this is much easier than you might suspect. A few examples and a little practice will suffice to learn some archetypes: boxes, cylinders, cones, disks, etc. And, once you’ve done a few of these, you’ll successfully carry the ideas forever in your head. Also encouraging is the fact that you can get started right in your home. You don’t have to begin with a real tugboat crossing the bay or an actual horse barn among the oaks; you can start with soup cans and cereal boxes in your kitchen and even the kitchen itself. For realistic travel sketching, what you’ll most need to learn is to really truly see and then to report accurately on the paper just what you saw, not what you believe you should have seen. You need to see what Claude Monet saw, not what Pablo Picasso would have you believe he saw. Along the way, you easily will acquire a practical and sufficient grasp of the sometimes intimidating, art-theory subject called perspective.

What you should learn and practice in this chapter are two things. First, how to sketch simple geometric shapes like round balls, boxy rectangular parallelepipeds, cones with pointy ends, etc. Second, how to see these simpler geometric shape residing inside most seemingly more complicated, real-life objects such as an automobile composed of three adjacent boxes, a fir tree shaped like a fuzzy cone, deciduous trees looking much like scruffy, misshapen balls, etc.
The sketch here (Pepsi Can. 70-lb. NOT sketchbook.) shows this idea. I set up a can of soda pop and my eyeglasses next to the window on my breakfast room table. Light from the garden filled the room. One problem here was drawing a believable cylinder for the standard soda can. Everyone is very familiar with the shape; it can’t be too tall or too short. Another problem was depicting a plausible pair of eyeglasses. In the sketch, I think both the soda can and the eyeglasses read well. It is instructive to note that most beginners first would have concentrated on mixing the local colors just right. In my opinion, carefully preparing just the correct colors on your palette before starting the sketch is your least important and least helpful task. Instead, determine a pleasing composition, get the drawing right, understand the tones (darks and lights) and then select colors that best complete what you have begun on paper. It is a watercolor sketch, not intended to be a police evidence photograph. It’s entirely, only what YOU want!

Exercise
Place some simple kitchen objects on a surface where you often eat. First, draw them in pencil; second, sketch them in watercolors. Spend no more than 30 minutes on each setup. Quick work can look graceful; painstaking work can look forced and stodgy.
I sketched the still life sketch above, flowers and candy plates, on my breakfast room table. (Looking at his instruction books, I suspect that Charles Reid makes most of his watercolors after breakfast. There’s flowers, bowls, cereal boxes, etc.) My primary task here was to believably portray the nearly circular dish of Depression glass. Like all round objects, when seen from an angle, the plate presents itself more as an ellipse. Viewed from almost level with the table, it would appear as a mere line segment. From directly above, it would look just like it is in the abstract, a circular object.

_Candy Dishes. 70-lb. NOT_
Here is a view from inside my kitchen, looking outside through the French doors, to a redwood deck and flowering plants beyond. I made this sketch to challenge myself to plausibly depict sharply rectilinear objects. If the doors were not straight and plumb, if they were not also properly set within a square and plumbed-up room, then the sketch would have obviously failed. Sure, I might be living in a curvy house of maybe adobe, wherein each wall zoomed and swayed as in some carnival fun house, but that isn’t likely. Any viewer would mistrust such an image. No, the viewer expects his or her own reality, or at least a reasonable facsimile thereof. And, reality typically resides in rectilinear housing. Therefore at home I practice sketching rooms and their contents to develop the necessary skill. The next sketch is *Sawdust Accumulator*. Aragon
High. 70-lb. NOT. Note that the subject consists largely of a big rectangular box atop two truncated and upside down pyramids. I always try to visualize seemingly complicated things as just assemblies of simpler shapes like kindergarten blocks. This is the central point of this chapter.

In good weather I can venture outdoors and still do my “around the house” sketching exercises. I live but a few doors down from a public high school. Weekends I can roam the campus, watercolors and sketchbook in hand, and find plenty of scenes and objects profitable for practice. There are windows and doorways in the buildings.

There’s equipment on the sports fields and miscellaneous equipment parked here and there over the weekend. Local parks and schools provide a plethora of weekend sketching opportunities for us to take advantage of!
About a hundred years ago, after a near fatal automobile accident, California artist Albert de Rome turned to watercolor sketching while recuperating for weeks in a San Francisco hospital room. And, 60 Minutes TV news correspondent, Morley Safer, is well known, while traveling on business, to spend evenings in his hotel room sketching in watercolor. Yes, sketching the closet, the bathroom, his shoes, etc. Like some character in a comedy film, you can be so shy about your beginning work, that at first you lock yourself in the bathroom with your tiny watercolor travel kit. That’s okay. In fact, that’s great! Start there. You’ve got nothing to lose, you can’t go wrong. Shown is my own Blue Bathroom, from an early sketchbook.

Exercise
Sketch a corner of your bathroom, perhaps the sink, the tub or the shower stall. Note that there’s typically a lot of white. That’s an advantage of watercolor to exploit. On white paper, watercolor excels in whites.
**Exercises, Figural Shapes**

Unless, for example, you’re sketching ancient dead Pompeii on some rare day that no tourists are allowed to visit, humans should often be in your travel scenes. Admittedly, if you’ve never done it before, sketching people might seem intimidating. What could help is to realize that your sketched figures need not be great portraits. Sure, it would be wonderful, like famous watercolorist Charles Reid, to sketch a recognizable face, say that of a beachcomber in Jamaica, a sketch that everyone agrees really captures the likeness. But, that’s neither likely to happen nor a prerequisite for enjoying traveling with watercolors. Don’t fret; get over it. Don’t delay starting in travel sketching; settle for the less ambitious success of depicting quite believable people who fit well into your scene. Thankfully, achieving this more modest goal is surprisingly easy.

Although sketching people is not difficult, some homework, or practice, is necessary. The really good watercolorists, that I have studied, keep sketchbooks handy and fill them with quick notes on people (and everything else) when possible. This is just like my musician friends who are frequently picking away at their instruments and who don’t expect to play superbly, if playing but just one or two hours a week, solely during formal concerts. They constantly pick and you should often sketch, for two reasons. First, no one reaches his or her best without constant practice. Second, the skilled simply love to practice!

**Getting Started with Figures**

I always have handy a sketchbook to fill with all kinds of quick, pictorial notes. Below is a scan from a page. At the local indoor mall, I escape the house during bad weather. I exercise by walking and I just enjoy the people watching. Because the shopping subjects can be briskly moving I have at most a few seconds to draw.
Here is another page of rapid sketches of passing people. Later, either back at home or sitting in the mall food court with a cup of coffee and a pastry, I can finish the drawings with watercolors. I make no effort to faithfully copy the original clothing colors but rather I choose them for the overall needs of a sketch. Typically, I have first the color, its hue and tone, of the background behind the figure. I wouldn’t make the Belgian cathedral bright blue just to go well with a figure’s jacket. It should be the other way around; I would pick colors for the figures to either blend with the background or stand apart from it, via so-called counter-change. Here, I just whimsically made up the colors.
Simply getting started is the biggest difficulty that most people have with including figures in their sketches. That is, actually putting down the beginning indications of people. I assume that you would start with your pencil, as would I. Loosely speaking, I employ two approaches to sketching a figure: gestural drawing and “pillow people”. This work shows gestural drawings underlying the subsequent watercolor.
Gestural Sketches or Pillow People

Gestural sketches
Each of these two methods, gestures or pillows, works equally well; choosing one way over the others is more a matter of temperament or mood at the moment. My choice is usually gesture drawing. In this, my pencil point seems to fly rapidly, perhaps nervously and indecisively, about the general planned outline of the figure, as if not quite certain of where definitely to land. Look at the examples above in the scan from my sketchbook. It is as if the pencil is a mosquito, cautiously circling, trying to judge the best time and location to settle. The result is a sort of diffuse cloud of competing outlines, weak at first, then becoming firmer and denser as I become more sure that, yes, this is the figure I want. The sketchbook examples above were done in my gestural manner. Some people will finish such gestural drawings with a final bold summary line drawing, incorporating their best idea of the subject’s “gesture”, from all the tentative beginnings. And further, they may then erase those fainter beginnings, leaving only that final summation. Finally, some sketchers erase the entirety of their pencil work with only watercolor paint remaining. The choice is ours, mine and yours. My own preference is to leave most of the light preliminary pencil work intact. It is just a matter of choice, taste. The only caveat is to not erase the graphite pencil lines while the paper is even slightly damp or the result will be an unsightly dark grey smear.

Pillow People
Sometimes, instead of gestural drawing, I approach sketching people from a slightly different direction… making my pillow people. Pillow people are depictions compiled from stacks of imaginary pillows and furniture cushions. Just like it sounds. As can be seen below in another scan from my mall sketches, I first place a big pillow representing the largest part of the subject, the bulk, the upper body. The pillow can sag to the bottom or swell at the top, depending upon the person’s build. For a head, attach a
smaller pillow, maybe a floppy cushion from a couch, to the top-front of the body pillow. Larger or smaller bolsters form the arms and legs. Obviously, this game of substituting assemblies of pillows and cushions for people is simply a way of focusing on the shape rather than the factual identity of what you depict. That is, if you try to sketch a leg, you might be misled by what your symbolic mind insists proper legs should look like. A pillow person sketch is a drawing of just the shapes actually in front of you.

**Exercises.**
Sketch in pencil your own people, gestural or pillow people, in your own local, public venue: a city park, library, shopping mall, bowling alley, playground, etc. Finish them with watercolors. Sketch your own people from television or magazines. Finish them with watercolors.

**Placing People in Your Sketches.**
Your initial, but naïve, choice for placing people in a sketch is to simply report them as they actually occur in the scene right in front of your eyes. However, this may not be the best idea. For example, there may be too many people bumbling about the scene like bees in a hive. Or, too few; there may be none at all to animate the otherwise oddly empty site. Maybe those there are just in the
wrong places, e.g. blocking your view of Yosemite Falls or the Eiffel Tower. The point is, for the purposes of your sketch, you may need to add or subtract people, perhaps just to move some around to a better spot. This is okay, is not dishonest; this is part of your “artistic license”. Three reasons for placing or moving people in your sketch are: to animate the scene, to provide proper scale and to support believable visual perspective.

Scale
Recently I was showing someone a nearly perfect marine watercolor hanging in a public building. (Not my own.) It had won a prize. It was an ocean salmon trawler painted resting almost broadside in a familiar harbor. It’s a wonderful painting with almost everything right. Almost. Suddenly, I heard a snort, then a derisive hoot. My companion, with some years of experience at sea, pointed contemptuously to the figure depicted on deck. This was far too small relative to the open passageway behind it in the painting. Was this boat manned by some seagoing kindergarten? After this, nothing else could be noticed in the painting; all was negatively overwhelmed by this one error. It was either a giant boat or a miniature crew. Yes, what a hoot. Unfortunately, a negative detail usually makes for a bad total experience. I felt very bad for the artist who otherwise had accomplished an excellent painting.

Yet, it was easy to avoid. How had the artist gotten all of the other relationships, the relative scales (like the height of the masts to the length of the waterline), so plausible, but then made the crew this tiny creature, relative to the open door, maybe a foot tall? Therefore, the first thing about the people in your sketches is that they be in the proper, believable scale relative to the other objects. Proper scale is easy; it only requires attention. In the three loose sketches below, a figure in a dingy, the first two are evidently too large or too small. Only the third looks able to man the oars. Because it isn’t obvious whether the boat is small or large, I sized the figure relative to those oars. Abroad with your sketching kit,
handy references for scaling your figures are doorways, chairs, autos, etc. In one form or another, these handy yardsticks are everywhere.

**Perspective and People**
Placing the people in perspective in your work is a little more complicated than sketching them in scale. Consider the crude sketch below. A street, with a single fronting building, moves towards a large body of water in the background. Pedestrians move towards that distant place. There’s nothing extraordinary here.
The next sketch below shows the same scene, but annotated. A dark blue horizontal line emphasizes the horizon. Know it or not, every scene has a horizon. Recognizing that, if not explicitly indicating it, is a critical element in making any sketch. Around any large body of water, the far shore is an excellent estimate of that horizon line. What an artist or a sketcher should also know is that the horizon line also determines the eye level of the painting. This is the imaginary flat and horizontal sheet that passes through both the artist’s two eyes and the distant horizon. Not so incidentally, this also determines the best height to hang a picture on the wall, for the scene to read with proper perspective. The viewer’s eye-level should be roughly the same as the artist’s; the viewer should be looking over the artist’s shoulder, so to speak. If all of the depicted passersby populating the scene are as tall as the sketcher and if they are all standing on the same level surface, then all should share the same eye-level and thus all the heads should be at the same level. In reality it’s plus or minus a bit for varying individual’s heights. My red cartoon face, drawn level with the horizon, illustrates this idea. Of course, in many if not most of your travel sketches, you may not directly see any far horizon, such as an opposite shore on a large lake. However, even in a crowded city scene, if you simply guess at where the distant horizon behind all the people and buildings might be, you probably will be close enough for your sketches to read properly. Same with people, and buildings for that matter, standing at different levels and at different angular orientations, your guess informed by a little experience will be good enough. As a bonus, note the dark green arrows / lines in the cartoon. Rectilinear buildings set level have edges that appear to converge to common points on the horizon. Here I’ve shown the edges of the roof and of all of the windows and doors properly aligned. Finally, note that the pedestrian shown nearest the building’s door is in believable scale and that the others, closer to the lake, diminish in height accordingly.
Exercises.
Look for proper scaling of any people in the artwork of others, at exhibits, in books, etc. Look for a horizon line / eye level in the artwork. Are the figures in proper perspective? Is the picture hung close to the best level? That is, are your own eyes anywhere near the horizon of the scene?
Do the same as above but in the photography of others. Note that professional photographers often deliberately use a low eye-level, as if a poodle took the photo. At work, they are almost always seen shooting on their knees, looking up at the subjects towering over them. Pros must know that this introduces a mild perspective distortion thought flattering to the subjects. Fashion models look leggier; athletes look more imposing, brides look trimmer, etc.
Exercise: Sketching From Your Photographs

Okay, right at the start, let’s admit it. Many people think of painting or sketching from a photograph as at best childish, at worst, somehow cheating. There, with that statement now behind us, we can get on with it. Sketching from photos may not be ideal, but it sure is better than doing absolutely nothing. Yes, there are a lot of caveats. Black and white prints have no color, but that’s not the end of the world. You can choose your own colors in that case. Color photos typically distort color, often making both reds and greens luridly exaggerated. That’s intentional. Early on, film manufacturers determined that most photo customers, especially amateurs, preferred artificially strengthened colors. Thus, if accuracy is an issue, a film photographer has to seek out special natural color films. A digital photographer has to set his camera to record in the actual, honest colors, not in artificially heightened ones, the default setting in many cameras and printers. Camera lenses suffer another color defect called flare. Flare dulls colors. For example, if you take a photo of a small but strongly red rose against the larger background of the bush’s deeply green foliage, you will be very disappointed in the final printed image. Yes, the lens will send most of the red color to the film location of the rose and will send most of the green to the bush places. But, not all colors will go to the right places. Unfortunately, to some extent, the camera lens splatters some red light all over the green bush image and splashes some green light onto the rose bloom’s red image. Three-dimensional perspective is flattened in photos. Lenses selling for less than hundreds or even thousands of dollars, also introduce noticeable geometric errors with upsetting names like “pincushion”, “barrel distortion”, etc. We are so accustomed to these issues in amateur photography that we routinely overlook, for example, wobbly buildings teetering in a tourist’s photo print. Of course, many of these issues can be corrected when you make a watercolor sketch from your photo. You can restore the sharpness
of a rose bush’s reds and greens to the levels remembered from nature. In a broad landscape, you even can make the reds and greens either photograph exaggerated or make them as naturally gentle as you recall. As for the camera’s geometric distortions, you know that in reality the edges of the house are both straight and upright, and can sketch them so. So, unless you slavishly copy photos, errors and all, you can use those pictures you took under a Tuscan summer sun to make watercolors in your gloomy Illinois winter kitchen, when nothing else seems attractive. Still, I believe sketching from photos should be a last resort, when there is nothing else to do.

My remaining caveat is to sketch from your own photos. Legally, you can sketch from the photos of others as long as the resulting sketches are only for your own, personal use. You can sketch from newspapers, magazines, travel flyers in the mail, etc. But, your sketched copies cannot be sold or exhibited without the explicit permission of the photo’s owner. Ethically, even in your own, private use, you should practice giving proper attribution. For example, in a few cases I couldn’t resist trying to copy a gorgeous painting by Sargent. However, I signed it with my own name, not as “John S Sargent”. And, I also wrote right on the work itself, “after John S Sargent”. Additionally, I did the painting in a different size and in a different medium, e.g. oils instead of watercolor. I do the same with the photographs of others, regardless of where found, magazine, newspaper, etc. I sign my own name and add, “After so and so”. Copying it as if it were your own original work is plagiarism, plain and simple. Writing a play for your community theater group, would you claim as a creation of your own genius, dialogue like, “Romeo? Romeo? Wherefore art thou”?

**Preserving Old Memories**

An excellent use of your watercolor sketching exercises with photographs can be saving old and fading family memories. A personal case in point for me is a small collection of my father’s
now failing Kodachrome slides of family vacations. Dad took these more than half a century ago, a mile high in California’s mountains around a large and remote mountain lake. Those were halcyon times spent in a pristine place. No wide highway sped there to feed a ski lodge or a crowded RV park. Sadly, there’s little like it anymore left in California.

As mentioned, the old slides are rapidly and surely failing. The remaining colors are shifting far to the blue and the fine details are dissolving into some molecular mist. In 1950 one probably assumed that these films could last forever. Isn’t that why we take these photos? Alas, film in ordinary practice is not immortal. However, sketches made with non-fugitive modern watercolors, on acid-free paper should last a very long time. Those of WMJ Turner from the early 1800s are still intact and looking very well. So an obvious thought occurs, why not preserve treasured images in a dedicated watercolor folio? If I do this, then at the same time I’m indoors practicing my sketching on a dreary day and also accomplishing this larger, worthwhile task. Most of us have some old family photos whose image could be preserved in this way: family vacations, reunions, an old family homestead, etc.

The photos below give you an idea of what Dad’s slides now are like. Some were, albeit well-intentioned, cross-eyed fractured by Kodak’s image-splitting 35mm 3D camera accessory, necessitating an untangling of what the whole image must have been like. A very few slides are okay today, but could decay tomorrow. Some images are fuzzily out-of-focus. Remember, prior to instant or digital photography, there was no immediate review of an image; thus one could return from vacation unaware that the recording of a treasured scene could be faulty. Lastly, through the intervening half century and more, some slides have developed problems due errors in the original handling and developing. For example, some of them seem to have accidental swipes of some sort of now dried processing gel or cement that, at first was transparent but now obscures the underlying image.
Image rearranged by a 35mm camera lens 3D accessory.
Image accidentally contaminated during initial 1955 processing. On the following pages are some of the sketches made from photos.
Cinder Cone.

8x5-inches on
140-lb Strathmore
400 NOT.

The sketch above employs several somewhat unusual methods. First, after laying in the principal washes, I deliberately “overworked” the piece including several overall washes with diluted coffee, this to create an aged and softened, woodblock print look. Second, the light glinting off the water was made by razor scrapes at the very end, not some white paint. Third, some of the foliage at the bottom was made with marks of soft pastel, soft pastel having the same ingredients as watercolor, pure pigment and gum arabic. This pastel business is a trick used by Sargent, Turner and others. When travel sketching, I carry no liquid masking fluid of any kind. As odd liquids, they attract suspicion at airports. Further, masking liquids are notorious for ruining brushes, so much so that some advise carrying a
second, dedicated brush sacrificed for that purpose. Why bother? Soft pastels can work wonderfully for very small effects and corrections.

**Bluff Above the Lake.** 6x9-inches. 140-lb Strathmore 400 NOT.

This approximates the scene in the 35-mm slide print above wherein the image was split and confused by the mirrors in the camera’s 3D lens attachment. The goal, besides the preservation of the memory in the failing film slide, was to untangle the cross-eyed view into something like the original scene. The original image was photographed in horizontal or landscape orientation in the then prevalent 35-mm Leica 2-to-3 (24x36-mm) format. Thus, I chose a 2-to-3 format for the sketch (6x9-inches) and arrayed the items in the scene proportionally along the x- and y-axes. Easier done than said. The tiny white highlights, both in the distant lava flows as well as the closer tree trunk, were too small and numerous to depict by conserving the white paper with masking fluid. Instead, after the colors were almost dry, I picked the highlights out with a small, sharp knife blade. I used a small fan brush to drybrush in much of the sparse, bright grass. (Drybrush uses very little water or
paint on the brush.) Note a little cadmium orange in both the lower left and right; Corot Spots to both enliven the surface and to draw the viewer’s eye back from the distant lava across the lake. I’m not sure why, but in retrospect, I wish I had placed that orange solely on the left side, not the right as well. Or, vice versa? That’s just one possible problem I see here, but I’m neither anxious to repair any of them nor willing to start all over again.

The sketch above is from a wonderful photograph made by my son. It was taken at the Indiana Dunes Park in northern Indiana. The original is a remarkable image and it didn’t need to be rendered in watercolors. A beautiful photo is not improved by copying in watercolors or oils. However, I couldn’t resist! And, a watercolor can capture more of the actual, natural colors of the bushes, trees, grasses and wildflowers in such a scene as this. The advice of a 19 Century French artist (whose name escapes me) illustrates another, related caution about making a sketch or painting from a photo. Basically, it is to leave the depiction of exceptional, unusual objects like “two-headed dogs” to photography. In those days, more innocent than our own, people
generally believed that photographs were quite difficult to manipulate. Thus, a photo of an exceptional thing was thought to be the “truth”, but anyone with pencil or brush could easily invent any oddity, even the sight of downtown Chicago, clear across the lake, smothered up to its neck in thick lake fog. However, now in our day of digital photography and photo editing software, we’ve grown up and wisely have learned to mistrust photos as well. Here in this case, the fog was honestly there!

Finally, there’s a potentially fatal danger in sketching from photographs, your own or anybody else’s. That is, it’s too easy to end up with something totally different from a sketch. With the photo in front of you, you are almost irresistibly absorbed by too much detail and the watercolor work easily becomes too labored as you are pulled into rendering the entirety, every single bit. Although it is often mistakenly given as the explanation, the problem is not that there is too much detail in the photo. In fact, the actual scene behind the photo (and theoretically available to you, were you there outdoors sketching in person) obviously must contain almost infinitely more detail than that modest print. No, the problem is really that you have too much time to spend with the photo. Truth be told, in nature, sketching plein air, you might have contended with dubious passersby, a moderately upset stomach, blowing sand, changing light, a hot sun or a cold wind, flies and wasps, suspicious dogs, etc. “Are these bees those Africanized ones?” “Oh my, what did I just step in?” “Why is she staring?” With plein air, a successful sketcher quickly assesses the gist of the scene top down, edits it severely, quickly and fluidly indicates a graceful liquid summary, then gratefully beats a hasty retreat into the nearest cheery coffee shop that promises pastries and a clean restroom. And yes, it’s still enormously fun and rewarding!

Thus, if you want to develop your skills at watercolor sketching, but indoors staring at a photograph, with the entire afternoon available, then you must exercise a severe discipline. You must imagine yourself outdoors at the same scene and give yourself only a brief thirty minutes at most. Otherwise you’ll not be practicing
for watercolor sketching; you’ll instead be laboriously rendering a photo into the closest imitation of that photographic print. At best, your watercolor will look exactly like the print. That’s an admirable skill, copying things, but it is absolutely not watercolor sketching. And, the end result, good or bad, will look just like whatever it is, not a sketch. How can you tell if it’s a sketch? One question to ask yourself is, if you see a small mistake do you very much desire to carefully fix it? A “yes” answer suggests that it is more likely not a sketch.
Storing and Sharing Your Watercolor Sketches

**Acid-free.** Perhaps the most important consideration in storing and displaying your watercolor sketches is that originally they be done on acid-free paper. Furthermore, their subsequent immediate physical environment, mainly their frames, albums, etc. also must be totally acid-free. Any acid present, from any source, will immediately begin to oxidize your sketches. Albeit slowly, paper exposed to acid fumes starts to turn brown and brittle. (Like the rusting of iron, this oxidation is precisely just a very slow, flameless burning of the paper.) But, you ask, where would this harmful acid come from? If there is any wood in near contact with your sketches, then it should be assumed that harmful acid is present as well. Wood produces acid, just breathes it out. Absent any knowledge to the contrary, the presence of inexpensive paper also indicates acids. After all, most common paper is made from pulped wood. Ever handy newsprint is very bad. So, unless the paper explicitly is said to be “acid-free”, assume that it is not. Let acid-free be your inflexible mantra here.

Besides acid-free, there are a few other environmental conditions that should be met. Your watercolor sketches on display, in glazed frames or not, should not be exposed to very bright light such as direct sunlight. Sketches and paintings should not be subject to very high humidity (almost condensing humidity, as in a kitchen or bathroom). Nor should watercolors be exposed to other vapors and fumes, e.g. tobacco smoke. Besides kitchens and bathrooms, watercolors, even in a good frame, should not be hung on a home’s uninsulated exterior wall. Frequently such walls are prone to local water condensation. (A museum study in Britain determined that corrosive fumes from the visitors were attacking the open paintings in their galleries, fumes from wet woolen clothing and from what was obliquely referred to as digestive gases.)
Storing Watercolor Sketches

Watercolors sketches and paintings (and indeed any art on paper, e.g. quality photo prints, etchings, etc.) are best stored flat in a dark and acid-free environment of moderate temperature and humidity. However, the temptation is almost irresistible to simply slide watercolors into a common paper office file folder and slip all into a (probably wooden) furniture drawer. Please don’t. Inexpensive acid-free storage portfolios are available, at least on the Internet. At a minimum, store your sketches in a dark place, flat between two over-size sheets of acid-free, inexpensive watercolor paper. Another option is a box lined with cheap but acid-free paper. Of course, watercolors should never be folded or even rolled.

An easy and very inexpensive quick start to storing at least your smaller travel sketches is to use recycled flat plastic boxes. Nowadays, we all are inundated with quite usable, if flimsy, disposable plastic containers. I use some that originally held salad greens, but now, carefully washed clean, easily hold stacks of watercolors up to and including those 6x9-inches in size. Such boxes are no doubt not “archival” in that they may very slowly outgas plasticizers but they are good enough in the short term. (See photo below, sketches in clean plastic boxes formerly holding food.)
Displaying Watercolor Sketches
There are many ways to publically display, to share, your finished watercolor sketches. Small sketches can be shared easily and inexpensively via ready-made photo albums. Or, they can be shared in portfolios or pochades. They even can be varnished and simply displayed on their own, like little oil paintings. They can be framed to display either on a wall or atop furniture. Nowadays, they can be computer scanned and displayed in tiny, TV-like digital LCD frames, copied as “prints” on paper, or even printed onto cloth as with tee shirts.

Sharing Watercolor Sketches via a Photo Album
A conventional photo album makes a great way to store and share your watercolor travel sketches, provided the following conditions
are met: the album’s construction materials are acid-free, the album is made to hold standard sizes (usually 4x6 photo prints) and your travel sketches were done also on standard-sized paper, e.g. 4x6 blocks. The photo shows 4x6 watercolor postcard sketches in a standard album designed for 4x6 photo prints. A caution about using such albums is that often the pockets are very precisely cut to hold only cards very tightly cut to just 4x6-inch photo print size. Commercial postcards as well as postcard-size watercolor pads and blocks can vary in size through a small range. Some are slightly larger than 4x6-inches and thus won’t fit in a precisely made album.

The next pictures below show two albums capable of holding either postcards or photo prints. The publisher, Chronicle Books, resurrected an old Arts & Crafts tourist design for these albums. They don’t have plastic pockets requiring an exact photo print size
and shape as do many photo print albums. The albums below (shown closed and open) simply have clusters of die-cut slits to fit the corners. These can accommodate forgivingly a range of postcard sizes, at the expense of hiding the extreme corners of the sketch. The first album is a one-picture-per-sheet model. The second, a larger album of the same family design, can hold three postcards per sheet. (Note, for the viewers’ ease, the grouping on the same sheet of all three postcards, are all in either portrait or all in landscape.) Albums like these can be found on the Internet if not locally.

The watercolor postcard sketch below is from a trip to Slovenia.
These watercolor postcards below are from visits to Chicago.
Sharing Watercolor sketches via a Portfolio / Pochade

The photo below shows the use of both readymade, inexpensive photo frames and of small watercolor paper portfolios or pochades. The tiny portfolio shown here is from Nujabi, a paper source in India. (Similar products are available from France and Japan.) Each portfolio typically comes with ten postcard-size, blank watercolor papers. These acid-free Nujabi cards are effectively without sizing, about 210-lb weight, rough surface, and with all four deckle edges intact. They are handmade and come with a hemp tie in that handmade cotton and hemp paper portfolio. If you can find them, they are lovely and typically quite a bargain. These are from the Internet.

In the case shown I have filled one with sketches made along California’s Pacific Coast just south of San Francisco. Regardless of size, portfolios are particularly suitable for a set of images about
a common topic or theme. My largest such portfolio is a “Watercolor Pochette” from *Moulin de Larroque* in France, filled with ten sheets of handmade, 9x13-inch, 200-lb paper. Beautiful! Lovely paper. I can’t decide yet what to sketch for this: views of the many San Francisco Bay Area bridges, Coastal scenes, forest scenes … what?

**Frameless Display**

Although to many watercolorists it is heresy, watercolors need not always be displayed in a frame behind glass or acrylic. Just like paintings in oil or acrylic, watercolor on paper can be varnished. Varnishing provides some protection, albeit not nearly as much as an intervening glass window. Typically, varnishing also somewhat alters the appearance of the sketch. The colors darken slightly and increase in chroma or hue intensity. The physical optics responsible is familiar to anyone who has wetted a dusty dry pebble to bring out better the native colors and patterns of the
stone. Like the thin layer of water between the air and the pebble, the varnish interposes a clear layer with optical properties intermediate to those of the sketch and those of the air. The resulting less extreme and abrupt changes in optical properties enables more of the underlying light to escape off the sketch. This significant change in the ultimate appearance of the sketch can and should be anticipated at the start.

There are at least two ways to varnish a watercolor painting or sketch. One way is to use the same organic, solvent-based art varnish intended for oils or acrylics, and apply it as usual, either by spray or via a soft brush. One caveat is that, if too much varnish is applied (easily done), the sketch can take on an unintended and unattrative yellow, almost a jaundiced, bilious hue. Another caution is that, once a watercolor is varnished with an ordinary art varnish, then it cannot reasonably be removed. It’s forever.

Another approach, once a watercolor sketch is thoroughly dry, uses the natural resin, gum arabic, as a water-based varnish. This varnish is a diluted water solution of gum arabic (already a common component of watercolor paints). If a soft brush is used to varnish, then not only must the sketch be absolutely dry, the application brushing must be done with a very light, sable touch and done deftly, with no return strokes, so as to not stir up the underlying soluble, albeit dried, paint. More safely, the gum arabic also can be aerosol sprayed. If the gum was not sufficiently diluted in water, then the coating will appear both yellow and be prone to a kind of surface checking, like dried mud. A commercial solution of gum Arabic should be diluted with clean water in a ratio of about 3- to 5-parts water to each part gum solution. Caution: a watercolor can easily be ruined if this water-based varnishing goes wrong.

All this is not unique to watercolor; painters in oil face the same question, to varnish or not to varnish. As it does with watercolors, varnish protects an oil-painted surface and also alters its optical properties, hence its appearance. Some artists were adamantly opposed to varnish, for example, East Coast Impressionist Child Hassam and Seldon Gile of the California Society of Six. As a
result, in person, their paintings have a pale and dusty look. Ironically, the photographic reproductions of their work, the only images available to most people, often do not suffer this pastel and powdery appearance; subtly photography has elided this effect. For me, an unvarnished oil painting is one of the rare and unfortunate instances where the work might not look better in person.

**Miniature Screens**

If you frame a watercolor, the protective benefits of the glass window can be worth the downside. But, if there is no frame and you varnished the watercolor, then more options for display are available. For the exaggerated landscape formats I enjoy, often I’ll make a kind of miniature screen. I do this by making several shallow creases, very lightly cutting the back of the paper. Then after gently folding it accordion-style into those same thirds or quarters, I simply stand the sketch, much like a miniature oriental screen, in a sheltered spot like in a bookcase. The two small screens below are about ten inches wide, each slightly folded into quarters to stand inside bookcases.

*Rest Stop, 280. 4.5x10-inches. 140-lb NOT*

Looking south from a rest stop on Highway 280.
View from the Dam, Crystal Springs. 4.5x10-inches. 140-lb NOT
Looking west, from the dam, past the emergency overflow, Crystal Springs.

From my Window. 4.5x10-inches. 140-lb NOT
Rosemarie above 280. 3x4-inches. 140-lb NOT
The above is a tiny varnished watercolor notecard placed on a miniature easel.
Acrylic Frames without Mats

Quick start. The photos below show watercolors displayed in readymade plastic frames made for displaying photo prints without mats. Plastic hobby shops, TAP Plastics among others, sell them in the usual small photo print sizes, 4x6, 5x7, 8x10, etc. I even have some in very wide 4x10 landscape format. Unlike some conventional photo albums wherein a slightly too large sketch simply won’t fit, these acrylic frame dimensions are generous, hence forgiving of slight variations in sketch sizes. With the frequent albeit small disagreements between metric and English dimensions, this is appreciated. And, unlike those other frames, there’s no 0.25-inch cutoff loss around the edges. The photo below shows a sketch displayed in an acrylic photo frame. A fold in the acrylic sheet at the back acts as a stand, either in landscape format (here) or portrait. Each frame can stand in either landscape or portrait orientation. The sketches slip in and out with great ease, unlike those in conventional picture frames. Thus, it is easy to rotate a collection in and out, changing as desired. For example, try
rotating through four sketches of a family vacation spot, one for each season of the year.

**Conventionally Framed Watercolor Sketches**

Besides those minimalist acrylic frames shown above, more conventional ones can display your sketches also. You can have a shop professionally frame them or you can do it yourself. Where I live, I can put my sketches in the usual kinds of frames, for roughly a fourth the cost that a commercial framer needs to charge.

Given a few caveats, framing watercolor in roughly the same quality that framing shops offer is neither expensive nor difficult. The photo below shows a 6x9-inch plein- aire watercolor sketch I did in a mountain valley behind my town. Not only is it my own sketch but I also framed it myself. I simply bought the ready-made frame and a ready-cut, acid-free mat. (See next section about mats.) I first removed the acidic papers and fake photo image that
shipped with the new frame and replaced all that with my sketch behind the mat and a further sheet of blank and inexpensive yet acid-free watercolor paper behind the sketch. This extra, blank sheet of watercolor paper serves as a barrier to acid vapors. Voila’, a nice framing. Personally, for about a dollar more, I also like to replace the frame’s heavy yet fragile glass with a safer sheet of thin acrylic from the local plastics hobby store.

**Matting**

A well-chosen mat and frame make a sketch look better, simply by providing a color and texture segue between the sketch and the surrounding wall. Choosing a good mat for style and colors is an aesthetic, an artistic decision best made by you. Additionally, matting can serve an essential technical purpose. Properly implemented, a mat prevents the glass window from actually touching the sketch. Such contact can damage a watercolor in at least two ways, mechanical and chemical. Because watercolor paints contain sugars (e.g. honey) and gum arabic, a sticky natural gum or sap, a sketch can simply adhere or stick to the window,
especially after the passage of time. This can appear like a defect and can cause the sketch paper to tear if the framing is opened up to remedy the problem. Contact between the window and the sketch also can lead to chemical problems. The glass or acrylic surface can retain oily manufacturing residues and chlorites and other oxidizers left over from its last cleaning. These cleaners can damage the paper and pigments of the sketch. Because, a mat is needed minimally to hold the sketch away from the frame and window surface, if you wish, the mat could hide entirely within the frame around the edges and not be seen. However, most of the time a mat is prominently visible because it was selected to also enhance the appearance of the sketch via some harmonious color or design. Finally, It is of the utmost importance that the mat material be entirely acid-free. Perhaps surprisingly, some readymade mats are sold that are not acid-free. This obviates their most important purpose. Most chain store craft or framing stores sell inexpensive pre-cut, acid-free mats in a variety of sizes, colors and styles. Always check the label for “acid-free.”
Fog, Monterey Municipal Wharf. 4x6-inches. 140-lb. NOT. The sketch above sits in an off-the-shelf photo frame. The (almost invisible) white mat used is a pre-cut commercial one sized for a 5x7-inch work. In this instance I first glued the 4x6-inch sketch onto a sheet of watercolor paper that I had deeply toned with burnt sienna. I then framed this combination within the larger 5x7 mat and placed that mat into a standard tabletop photo frame. Feel free to take such liberties with your own watercolors.

**Glazed or Not**

A framed oil painting usually has no glass. Framed watercolors are different. A frame for art on paper (photos, prints, watercolors, etc.) usually incorporates a transparent protective window made of glass. (Acrylic is a little more expensive.) A window mechanically protects watercolors and other works on paper by imposing a protective barrier to environmental hazards like: spittle, insect spots, tobacco smoke, volatile kitchen grease, etc. An important decision when selecting a protective window is added UV filtration.
or not. That is, whether or not the glass type also removes more of the higher energy, the ultraviolet light next to the visible light spectrum. This is desirable because ultraviolet greatly accelerates color fading. Ultraviolet occurs in large quantities in sunlight and also, perhaps unexpectedly, to some extent indoors from some fluorescent fixtures. Some beautiful historic watercolor pigments (e.g. rose madder genuine) are so fugitive, so susceptible to bleaching, that museums reduce even the usual visible kind of light in their galleries. Thankfully, in contrast to many older paints, modern watercolor pigments are highly resistant to fading by ordinary visible light. However some relatively fugitive colors are so unique and gorgeous that they are still available. Lovely as watercolor paints are, take a walk through a nursery to admire the flowers, such as fuchsias. Their unequalled, but sadly transient beauty brings despair to color chemists.

**Non-glare or Regular Glass**

Another choice to be made is whether the window should be non-glare or regular material. Non-glare glass reduces annoying reflections from the window’s front surface. You’ve seen such glare before when you saw not only the painting but also yourself reflected in the glass. It is as if you were standing on a sidewalk before a shop window, seeing the offered goods but also yourself and the street scene reflected back in the glass. Non-glare glass is slightly frosted on its front surface, where most reflection takes place. This renders the glass very slightly merely translucent at the expense of perfect transparency. Personally, I find that a non-glare window unacceptably degrades the image behind, particularly with small or finely detailed works. Of course, the choice is yours.

**Glass or Acrylic Glazing**

Yet another framing decision to be made is between a glazing of glass or of acrylic (or another kind of transparent and rigid plastic sheet). Frames come from the store with plain window glass, the cheapest, default choice of the overseas manufacturer. But, I prefer
thin acrylic sheets. This plastic is both significantly lighter in weight and is relatively shatterproof. If a picture frame is dropped, usually a glass window will shatter into dangerous sharp shards. These can slash the paper artwork. However, perhaps the most important reason for selecting the shatterproof window is for human safety, particularly for children who are usually lower than the adults.

**Backing the Sketch**
For protection, mechanical and chemical, something always has to be sandwiched behind the sketch’s watercolor paper. If the frame is an inexpensive photo frame from a craft or framing chain store, the backing included will always be common (not acid-free) paperboard. It may be necessary to retain this piece if it also incorporates the metal wall hanger or the foot brace for standing the frame. In this case you must prevent any acid from reaching the sketch via two interposed materials. Next to the sketch, place one or more blank sheets of inexpensive, acid-free watercolor paper. Between this layer and the included, likely acidic, backing, place a layer of kitchen aluminum foil that will act as a complete vapor barrier. (The acid commonly migrates as a very weak but ultimately still damaging gas or vapor.)

**Sketch Edge Wrapped**
To complete the isolation of the watercolor from any acid in the framing one can wrap the edges of the combined window / mat / sketch / backing sandwich with more metal foil or tape. The tape or foil, of course, should not be visible from the front. If desired, special acid-free, "barrier" tapes are available.

**Hanging on the Wall or Just Sitting Around**
On the Internet, investigate the much sought-after watercolors of Trevor Chamberlain, David Curtis, John Yardley, etc. They are relatively small in size. For example, 7x10-inches up to 10x14-inches are very common sizes. You can either hang such small
works, sometimes in groups, on the lesser walls around your home or you can stand them on furniture. In other words, good art can come in small packages!

**Ready-made Frames, Standard and Not**

A great variety of off-the-shelf, ready-made, glazed frames are available from framing and art/hobby stores. Motivated almost entirely by photographic print sizes, these imports come in standard sizes, for example, for 5x7-inch prints. If you find frames that you like in frame shops, then you can always find watercolor paper cut in standard sizes to fit those frames. For example, 8x10-inch frames are available, as are watercolor in 8x10-inch pads. The converse is sometimes not true. 7x10-inch is a nice, very popular size in Europe for watercolor paper blocks, yet in the US I have never found ready-made photo frames in that size. I could still use an off-shelf photo frame for my 7x10-inch sketches, but I’d have to cut the sketches down. Thus, before buying a lot of paper blocks, it is advisable to see if suitable frames are freely available. For example, there are plenty of 5x7-inch frames to go with the popular 5x7-inch size watercolor paper blocks. Be advised that the opening in a frame is somewhat smaller than advertised. For example, a 5x7-inch frame’s opening is a quarter-inch-less all around. That is, the opening is actually 4.5 x 6.5-inches. The quarter-inch overlap retains the image and glass in the frame. Below is a photo showing some small, ready-made photo frames, in a range of standard sizes, quite suitable for watercolor sketches. Note that these three are all of a similar style, roughly Arts & Crafts. In fact, off-the-shelf photo frames come in a variety of coherent styles, Southwestern, Modern, Driftwood, Rustic, etc. Note further that these frames can be used either with or without a mat. Ready-made and acid-free mats are sold in the same stores with standard-sized openings. Again, there is the caveat that the mat openings, like the frame openings, are actually smaller than stated, again to hold the image. The mats’ exterior sizes are
typically over-generous, allowing one to cut down the mat to fit a range of overall frame sizes. Another possibility for using already-made frames is to acquire your own small inventory of small, custom-sized, used frames from thrift stores, garage sales and the like. An upside of this method is obtaining at reasonable cost, frames of very interesting sizes and appearances. This is not surprising because typically used frames are erstwhile custom framing pieces and sometimes even beautiful antiques. A downside is storing these frames, their acrylic windows, and an a-priori cut sheet of paper for each specific frame, if you desire a sketch that properly fills the frame. Additionally, to use such idiosyncratic frames for travel sketching probably requires one to carry a motley gaggle of odd paper sheets. Or alternatively, one could make a list of the odd sizes and a small ruler, with which to measure off those odd sizes onto the sheets of a large-enough travel sketchbook.

My own approach is to mat a standard-sized sketch with a mat of standard-sized interior picture opening, but then to cut down that mat’s outside to fit the eccentric dimensions of the recycled frame. Don’t forget, a mat has two sizes, the interior one for the picture opening and the exterior one for the frame opening. As mentioned, the exterior opening is quite generous, often allowing
you to cut the mat down to fit a custom frame. The photo below shows an example. The mat’s interior opening fit my sketch, but the outside dimensions were too large for this old frame. However, I liked the height-to-width of the frame relative to the sketch, so I cut down the outside of the mat. Also mentioned, unless the frame is a bona fide museum piece, I like to replace its heavy glass window with a thin acrylic sheet. Despite these minor bothers, some of my favorite watercolors are framed in unique, old and oddly formatted frames that years ago were made originally to hold photos of 19 Century dental school graduating classes, beloved puppy litters, etc. Check your local thrift store for some gems.

Another option is to affix the sketch onto a thin but stiff backing that then alone can be hung on a wall. That backing could be augmented with a kind of foot brace to enable standing alone on a surface like a standard photo frame. Again, experiment!
The Effect of Ambient Lighting upon Viewing Sketches

All light that appears white isn’t necessarily the same, despite the testimony of our eyes. White light from different sources is different. Light that seems white in one room, coming from a tungsten bulb, is not the same as light judged as white in another room, coming instead from a fluorescent tube. And, neither tungsten light nor fluorescent tube light is the same as light outdoors from our sun. Furthermore, noonday light directly from our sun, is not the same as noonday light coming indirectly from the sky to the north. All these differences can have an enormous impact on the appearance of our sketches. Unfortunately!

Sketches made while traveling typically will be made out of doors, sometimes not in full sunlight. At the height of day, sunlight has equal amounts of all the colors in the visible spectrum, from deep red to far blue-violet. The whole mix, if all parts are equally present, appears white to the eye and in the mind. Thus, your sketch is made with colors selected and employed in a lighting consisting of all the colors equally. Of course, a sketch made under light from the direction of north will be more cool blue and work done early or late in the day will be more warm or yellow, but you should recognize and accommodate this.

However, much later, when any completed sketch is shared via a frame on the wall, in an album on the table, whatever, it almost certainly will be seen indoors. There indoors the light may appear white to you but it is not the same white as the sunlight under which the sketch was made. Tungsten bulb light can be significantly warmer (low in blues and high in reddish yellows) than the sunlight present when your travel sketch was originally made. Indoor light can even have a strong green cast with older fluorescent lighting. Modern LED lighting is quite cold, obviously blue. LED lighting is admittedly extreme today but in indoor lighting, “white” light usually is strongly skewed one way or another, so much so that cameras taking photos are well known to have to account for this with countervailing corrections.
The effect of false whites upon the appearance of your watercolor sketches, which (unlike a camera) have no ability to compensate, can be very strong. I made the sketch above outdoors during a summer heat wave near Chicago. Before my eyes, enormous billows of warm, wet air rose like pale sienna balloons off the dark, burnt umber of the plowed farmland. The warm, moist air pushed into a blue sky already crowded with whiter clouds. You can apprehend this above because the digital image scanner I used employs a color-balanced light source, like the sunlight, for illumination. Unfortunately, because of the interplay and fine balance between blue, white and yellow, this sketch is difficult to appreciate in most room light, that is, in tungsten or fluorescent light, light other than the true daylight under which it was first made. (A purist would note that a little color error also occurs in scanners and computer monitors. In my experience, this is relatively small.) In fact, the bolus of rising warm air often cannot be seen when this sketch is viewed indoors! I have no quick or inexpensive solution; my only advice here is to have some ability
to enjoy your sketches with the true daylight white under which they were made. If you are willing, you can buy color-balanced, true white light bulbs to use for indoor viewing of watercolors made outdoors.
My Local Municipal Park

My small town is blessed with a wonderful public park. Among its assets is a rare treasure, a beautiful Tea Garden, donated and maintained by the local Japanese-American community. Entry is free. Although understandably, eating there is not allowed, nobody objects to discreet sketching. I don’t stand in the plantings and I don’t block the paths. I use only a tiny pencil and watercolor kit. Although people sometimes take a friendly and accommodating interest in my sketching, I don’t push the boundary. Above is Japanese Tea Garden (4x6-inches, 140-lb NOT). I don’t remember the date this was done, but at least once a year the garden celebrates a Japanese folk festival involving large and colorful, kite-like paper banners. Irresistible!

I made the springtime sketch below (4x6-inches, 140-lb NOT) at the central meadow of the park. With the return of pleasant weather, couples and families begin again to enjoy sunny picnics or just sunbathing on the grass. Using a variety of greens and dropping different reds and blues, wet-in-wet, into those greens, I tried to convey a realistic complexity to the natural scene. Note the use of scratches with a sharp point (pocket knife, pencil point, etc.) followed by more paint to indicate branches in some types of trees. The figures appear large enough to be read properly as people on the grass rather than just colored blobs of perhaps discarded
laundry. I don’t include people depicted larger, closer than about this because I don’t want to intrude. These subjects had no idea I included them and their images are not detailed enough to be recognizable and hence require a model’s permission. Also, I don’t go to the park to sketch portraits; I go to the park to sketch the wider, overall scene.

Looking at this now, I notice that I do not include dates in the pencil margins. Maybe that would be a good idea? An art and antiques dealer / friend, once chided me over this omission. She claimed that the lack would make a dealer’s work more difficult, and perhaps even lower any prices, after my departure from this world.

When I began to sketch the volleyball game shown below (4x6-inches, 140-lb NOT), I immediately knew I faced two problems, two depictions too easy to overdo. One is the transparent nature of the volleyball net. It somewhat blocks your vision, but you can also partly see through it. I didn’t want to literally make it a plethora of tiny, crisscrossing lines; instead I made it a light blur of
neighboring colors. I think I made a good compromise; the viewer effortlessly accepts it as a game net. The other common problem is the American flag. We all know what one looks like and demand reasonable accuracy, perhaps too much. However, if I had used even a bit more bright blue and vivid red it would have seemed cartoonish. Contrariwise, less blue and red might have struck false as well. At any rate, to ameliorate the flag’s vivid red, I also used the same color to describe one player’s shirt and the guy lines of the volleyball net. Hold your finger over those other red passages and see if the flag red then doesn’t seem a bit over the top. How, you ask, does one learn such “tricks”? My only answer is my personal one, constant trial and error. This requires my willingness, even eagerness to experiment and to accept that many times a failure results. In this book, I haven’t included the one out of two attempts that I found disappointing. A watercolorist can be like the fly fisherman who often returns home empty-handed, without a trout. We’re out there to enjoy nature and the fun of trying. Don’t expect us to either succeed every time or to share all our failures.
The paper used in the sketch below, *Baseball*, (5x7-inches, 80-lb HOT) differs materially from the other papers in this series. First, it is very smooth due the hot-press drying at the end of its manufacture. Hot-pressed paper is generally held to be a little more difficult to use. I suspect this opinion is due the fact that smoother, harder papers are less forgiving; they show more obviously any erasing and reworking. Second, the paper is toned or colored; it was already lightly colored prior to my use. In this case, the paper’s color is the warm, pale yellow seen both in the sky and of course in the margin forming the sketch’s vignette. As expected, the paper color works to bring color harmony to the sketch as a whole. I depicted the trees wet-in-wet, dropping in various reds and blues onto some greens and yellows.

The fencing above the diamond backstop is simply the original graphite pencil under-drawing, as are the marks for the overhead lighting. In some of the lighting, paint for the foliage accumulated along the line of paper damaged by the pencil and serendipitously darkened those lines. That lone bird soaring in the upper left, one
of those ubiquitous seagulls, is also just a quick, calligraphic
gesture with my 0.9mm HB automatic pencil. Did I cheat? No.
All’s fair in love and sketching. My overarching goal was to have
fun making a nice sketch to remind me of that warm spring day,
the enthusiastic amateurs diving for flying balls to the cheers of
friends and family in the little grandstand.

In my municipal park, there’s a handsome senior center sitting
across a rustic path from the beautiful Japanese Tea Garden. Of
course, the center hosts frequent, scheduled indoor events, but in
good weather it also holds affairs on either an outdoor stage or the
large patio sketched below. Walking by with my ever-present,
pocket-size watercolor sketching outfit, I saw a crowd watching a
demonstration by a tango club, a group apparently dedicated to that
dramatic Argentine dance. How could I resist? Thus, the
cartoonish *Sunday Tango Group* (4x6-inches. 140-lb NOT).
Although I was at the back of the ad hoc audience, I sketched the
scene as if I were standing in front. I wanted to sketch the dance,
not the onlookers. Such editing is easily achieved in a sketch, if not
in a snapshot. While sitting under a tree that flamed with yellow foliage, a row of judges observed two competing tango couples. The blazing tree might indicate that the time of year was autumn, but now I cannot be sure. The park also functions as an arboretum with a great many exotic and colorful plants and trees, all able to do well and even thrive in the mild California weather. The park is a favorite site of mine for watercolor sketching, in any season. Only a few steps away, a city block at most, there are many different take-out food choices available, from Mexican-American burritos to Japanese-American bento boxes, from lunches of East Indian curries to Italian deli sandwiches. At the height of the day, I can go downtown to people watch, eat lunch and watercolor sketch, all at the same time.

Sometimes I simply have an itch to go to this park and sketch something. Anything. If there is nothing going on besides private siestas, by default I will just sketch the trees and buildings in the park. In the first sketch below, I tried to capture some obvious differences between the two coast redwood trees on the left and the one tall eucalyptus on the right. For one thing, the latter seems to
have more and more noticeably reddish foliage. Eucalyptus trees also appear to hold their foliage in rotund if sagging bunches, as cheerleaders hold their round, quivering pom-poms at a football game. When you sketch, you stare and open your mind as well as your eyes.

There are only three kinds of redwood tree left in the world and two of those are native to California. The coast redwood is the height champion at close to 400 feet in some groves of northern California. The giant sequoia is the heaviest and, at over 250 feet tall, is also quite impressive. It grows in California’s Sierra Nevada range of mountains at elevations between 4,000 to 7,000 feet. Just one branch of the largest is bigger than any entire tree east of the Mississippi River. The third type of redwood, the Dawn Redwood from China, stands apart by being a deciduous conifer. The park contains a magnificent specimen, whose portrait sketch is included elsewhere in this book. Curious about what I was sketching in this park, I learned all this about my tall and noble subjects. Yes, parks are great for sketching and learning; find one near you.
The next three sketches are simply more of the trees and structures of and around the park. Five-story apartment buildings around the edge give a Parisian look, particularly this one with attractive roof elements of green oxidized copper.

I’ve read advice from watercolorists whom I deeply admire, that recommends a program of painting the same subject over and over again, much like Monet painted his varied and famous series: the cathedrals, the haystacks, etc. The idea is that returning to the same subject, but under different daylight conditions, different season of the year, etc., enables one to discern the subject factored at least two ways: the intrinsic and invariant properties versus the changeable and superficial.
Certainly I’ve come to see parks and people more clearly and deeply, the more I sketch in my local park. But, I also respect my college German professor’s admonition, “Never read the same book twice.” Yes, I believe this too, even though I’ve broken the rule more than once if I thought a book was good and if I believed there was more it could offer. Did Frau Bohr really mean Der Steppenwolf should be read but once even if that was by a callow eighteen-year-old? No. I steer myself through this dichotomy by acknowledging the wisdom of both aphorisms. I read the daily newspaper once, and then not even all of it. However, I’ve read Hermann Hesse’s Siddhartha more than once and may well read it yet again. There’s always more to learn from Hesse. He was also an avid sketcher in watercolor. He attributed his very sanity to months-long solitary forays through northern Italy, traveler’s watercolor sketching kit in hand. In my kitchen I’ll paint raw potatoes over and over, albeit different kinds, because I then learn
about more than potatoes. I learn about nature and about people. I learn about watercolors, light and sketching.
References / Sources of Information:

Easily Available Magazines / Periodicals
In the United States there still are popular magazines devoted to painters in watercolor: *Watercolor*, *Watercolor Artist*, and *Watercolor Magic*, to name just three. There are also two monthly popular and amateur magazines more generally devoted to the non-professional making of art, chiefly painting: *American Artist* and *The Artist Magazine*. Some, not all, of the content is of interest and use to a traveling sketcher in watercolor.

Internet
Specific watercolorists accomplished in landscapes, well worthy of study, living or deceased, can be searched on the Internet to see reproduced examples of their work. Some in this category include: Alice Schille, John Singer Sargent, Winslow Homer, John Whorf, Alice Ravenel Huger-Smith, John Marin, Charles Reid, Trevor Chamberlain, John Yardley, David Curtis, etc. Groups of artists maintain shared web site that are rewarding to visit, e.g. *The Wapping Group of Artists* and *The Royal Society of Marine Artists*. Search for these on the web and look for a “Gallery” tab to see representative works. These are artists, whose paintings aren’t available face-to-face for the average person. They reside in galleries, museums or private collections. There is a particularly fine and extensive web site for the work, both oils and watercolors, of Sargent. Just search for *John Singer Sargent*.

There are more and more free sources of information on the Internet about different technical aspects of watercolor and sketching. Some sites are very good. One is Handprint.com supplied by Bruce MacEvoy, artist and technician. Here you’ll find reasoned opinions on a variety of topics such as good brands of paint or who are / were the artists in watercolor more profitable to study. Some manufacturers maintain good web sites offering a lot of good technical information. Many watercolorist groups provide informative web sites. Videos, both good and not so good, can be
viewed for no charge on sites like YouTube. Perhaps, not surprisingly, the better videos seem to offer only an introduction before asking for payment.

**Books**

For ease of navigation the references are divided very roughly into two rather arbitrary categories, how-to books and books about an artist / style. Admittedly, many of the books have considerable elements about both method and artist. However, each is placed according to a judgment of the preponderance of usefulness. Some books can be checked out from a good public library. Others volumes are quite old and out-of-print but might be purchased reasonably, on-line, from used book dealers. Some, alas, may be difficult to obtain, but who knows, you may be lucky!

The key to the entries is: Title, Author, Date, Publisher, ISBN number or Library of Congress number if any, and lastly, Comments.

**Somewhat Technical References**

are something of a categorical dilemma being clearly almost formulaic how-to yet filled with wonderful illustrations. Reid is a top-notch original in watercolor, a delight to view. (I once read a disappointed review complaining bitterly that this book held no actual secrets. I laughed out loud.)


3 **Joy of Watercolor.** (Also: A complete course in watercolor using your sketchbook as a workbook.) Millard, David. 1992. Watson-Guptill. ISBN 0-8230-2566-7. 144 page paperback. Illustrated in color. Eleven inches high by eight inches wide. In some ways odd. Are we supposed to copy the illustrations or not? How else are we personally to visualize a small village in Wales? Still, a reader will be well entertained and informed. Nice sketches!

4 **Painting Flowers in Watercolors.** Reid, Charles. 2001. North Light Books. ISBN 1 58180-027-4. 144 pages, 11.5 inches high by 8.5 inches wide. Generously illustrated in good color. A how-to book addressing florals and still life. A common topic, except that Reid’s paintings are quite uncommonly good. Also unusual for this genre in that the book is organized around an excellent course of exercises. In short, a real how-to by an outstanding artist. Reid promotes an alla prima approach, carried over from oils and very suitable for travel sketching.

5 **Solving the Mystery of Watercolor.** Taylor, David and Ranson, Ron. 2002. International Artist Publishing. 127 pages. Good color illustration, reproductions of Australian
Taylor’s (mostly) excellent paintings. 8.5 inches high by 11 inches wide (landscape format). A look at current watercolor painting “down under”. What’s the mystery? Apparently the beautiful color harmonies are. Nice work.


Aquatic Park to The Gate. 4x6-inches. 140-lb NOT

Artist References
These can provide a broader perspective, See the great variety of works in watercolor, now and in the past.

1 Albert Thomas DeRome 1885 – 1959. (Also: Being a story of his life and a picture diary of his oils and watercolors.) Nelson-Rees, Walter A. 1988. WIM Fine Arts. ISBN 0-938842-06-4. 11 inches high by 15 inches wide. 164-page hardbound. Written and published by one-time art gallery operators / dealers. Nelson-Rees and his partner James Coran would discover relatively ignored but deserving and deceased California artists, sometimes writing entire, well-produced books about them. DeRome was a trained artist who initially found employment in the 1920s as a traveling candy salesman whose territory included the upper halves of California and Nevada. In those days there was no color
snapshot film. Instead, DeRome, making his rural sales rounds, stopped his auto frequently and made many small sketches in watercolors and oils. Most are nice but just reportorial. Competent, not brilliant landscape.


Interesting to see the approach of each to the same subject, i.e. a canal in Venice.


9 **Masters of Color and Light.** (Also: Homer, Sargent and the American Watercolor Movement.) Ferber, Linda S. and Gallati, Barbara Dayer. 1998. Brooklyn Museum of Art. ISBN 1-56098-572-0. 223-page, eleven inches wide by nine inches wide paperback. Many color illustrations. Accompanied an exhibit. Title says it all, Homer, Sargent and other Americans, e.g. Thomas Moran, William Trost Richards, etc. A historical review and study of watercolor in the US.

wide. 160-page hardbound. Excellent production in a series called *The Library of American Art*. Prendergast was a true genius, an original in watercolor. His Venetian scenes and his work with mothers and children are very skilled and especially delightful.


might hope to generate in watercolor from travels. Two pages per sketch; image on one, identification, notes and comments on the other. Just about ideal. Obata, a Professor of Art at the University of California, Berkeley, in his later years journeyed back to his native Japan. There he traveled about making these sketchbook notations.

15 **Trevor Chamberlain, a personal view.** (Also: *light and atmosphere in watercolour.*) Chamberlain, Trevor with Gair, Angela. 1999. David & Charles. ISBN 0-7153-0845-9. Well done 128-page, 12 inches high by 9 inches wide book. Copiously illustrated in excellent color. Written in the canonical form of the how-to art book, including such topics as what colors, what papers, etc. that Chamberlain supposedly uses. One should read it simply to be inspired by the stunning watercolors. Gorgeous stuff. Chamberlain is a currently active British artist.


Watercolor Glossary

**Acid-Free.** A necessity. Ordinary paper, made from wood pulps, is acidic. Acidic means it has a pH less than 7.0. (pH values range between 0 and 14. A pH of more than 7 means increasingly basic; less than 7 means increasingly acidic.) Vinegar is mildly acidic. Lye is extremely basic. Neutral pH means pH = 7, neither acidic nor basic. In between. Problem is... both acids and strong bases eat things up. Even weakly acidic means your art-on-paper will disintegrate, given time. Paper products may be made acid-free (or pH = 7.0) via the addition of dissolved chemical buffers such as calcium carbonate. (Just like in stomach-acid lozenges.) Papers made from raw materials other than wood, such as cotton fibers, may have an intrinsically less acidic or more neutral pH. Acidic papers can decompose rather rapidly, on the order of only perhaps months. The acid decomposition is a slow oxidation, a slow flameless burning.

**Block.** A block is one form for using watercolor paper, generally in smaller sizes, from as little as about 3 by 5 inches to as much as about 18 by 24 inches. The sheets of paper, with all deckled edges removed, are stacked and all four edges firmly glued together. The advantage is much less buckling when the paper is wetted, hopefully obviating any need for taping to prevent cockling. After use, each sheet must be individually cut out from the block.

**Blooms.** A watercolor effect, accidental or deliberate, wherein one moves paint by dropping pure water onto wet paint already on the paper. Perhaps contrary to intuition, the pigment or dye will appear to flee from the region of less concentration to a place of higher concentration. A bloom is sometimes a disappointing accident, sometimes a clever way to produce convincing clouds, tree canopies, etc.

**Chroma** is the vividness or pure intensity of a color (of a hue). Cadmium lemon is a higher chroma yellow than is raw sienna.

**Cold-pressed** paper possesses a medium smoothness. During manufacture, as the paper is squeezed dry, it is not hot pressed but
simply is allowed to dry against the smooth felts pressing water from the paper sheets. Thought to be the all-around most versatile watercolor paper surface. Sometimes denoted as a NOT surface. As in "not pressed".

**Composition.** The rules of composition are a loose collection of arbitrary and sometimes-contradictory strictures intended to improve a work. They are too numerous to reasonably enumerate. Faithfully obeying all such rules often produces, at best, an unsatisfying, clichéd’, even hackneyed piece. Typically, an outstanding art piece brilliantly violates at least one common rule of composition. Composition rules often involve the placement of picture elements. Examples are, “Place nothing of interest too near an edge!” and “Have no more than one focus of interest!” Compositional rules also include color choices. “Have but one dominant color hue!” or “Employ the fewest colors possible!”

**Conservation.** Conserving a piece means making it both as close to the original and long-lived as possible.

**Covering** or covering power is the ability of a paint type to cover up what is underneath. Opacity.

**Deckle.** Papers with a ragged edge formed during the molding are said to possess a deckle, or to be deckled. Strictly, the deckle is part of the mold in papermaking. It usually is an open wooden frame corralling the paper pulp as it drains atop a porous screen. Inevitably there are gaps between the mold parts, the leaking pulp resulting in random deckling. A paper sheet’s deckle is often thought desirable and can be preserved even through the final framing of the picture.

**Elephant** is a very large size of watercolor paper sheet, roughly 26 by 40 inches.

**English or Stitch** is a method of watercolor painting wherein adjacent areas of different hue or tone are simultaneously painted without running together because a very thin borderline of blank, dry paper is left separating them. When the painting is dry, the areas are “stitched together” via finally painting over that thin
separation. The ability to paint adjacent, differing areas while still wet, enables a faster plein aire sketch. The border is finished later.

**Ethyl alcohol** can be added to the water wetting the watercolor paints to speed the drying in very cold and / or humid conditions. Artists have been known to carry clear, potable spirits in a small flask ostensibly for this purpose. Vodka and gin are popular examples.

**Ferrule.** The ferrule is that part of a brush that holds the hairs in place. Typically, it is a thin-walled, nickel-coated brass cylinder, although stainless steel or other non-rusting materials are used as well.

**Flags** are hairs out of place in a damaged watercolor brush. Flags can result in paint being deposited where it is not intended.

**Flat.** A design of a brush’s assembled hairs. The ferrule clasps the hairs into a flat, spade-like shape. Flats are broadly useful brushes preferred by many painters, particularly for washes and large works.

**Foxing** is a term for spot-like brownish blemishes on works on paper (e.g. watercolor sketches) due fungal attack, acid oxidation, or other contaminant problems.

**Fugitive** colors fade quickly, particularly when exposed to corrosive chemical vapors or gases as well as strong light.

**Glaze.** A thin wash of transparent color laid over a completely dry, previous layer. Among other purposes, glazes are useful for achieving color harmony.

**Glycerin** can be added in very tiny amounts to slow the drying of watercolors in very hot and dry conditions. Added to watercolor paint, glycerin works an effect opposite to that of ethyl alcohol.

**Gouache** paints are watercolor paints intended to be opaque. Gouache hues have a heavy loading of pigments. Gouache tints have added opaque white or light pigments. Gouache paints generally are made with pigments rather than dyes, because higher covering power is desirable. Most gouache paints are resoluble so that any subsequent layer will dissolve / disturb the underlying, previous paint layers. However, fast-drying acrylic-based gouaches
now are also available, so that opaque layers easily and safely may be superimposed.  
Gum Arabic is a natural resinous exudate from certain bushes. It’s somewhat akin to tree pitch. It is added to watercolor paints to aid in the adhesion of paint to paper. It also improves transparency and brilliance.  
Hardbound. Watercolor sketchbooks can purchased with the individual sheets bound in signatures sewn to a spine, as in quality hardbound books. Hardbound sketchbooks are the sturdiest but cannot lie as flat as spiral-bound ones, making it a little difficult to work both pages, across the gutter, into a single sketch. Fancier than spiral-bound, but more difficult to work with.  
Hog bristle. A brush made with stiff hairs from a hog’s back. More for oils, they are seldom useful for anything in watercolor except for scrubbing out color prior to lifting.  
Hot-pressed is a smoother paper surface. During manufacture, as the paper is drying, it is passed between smooth, hot metal rollers. HOT papers are thought a little more difficult to use by beginners. It is suitable for fine, detailed work.  
Hue is the “color” of a pigment. Yellow is the common hue of all yellows whether bright and formulated from cadmiums, or dull and made from iron oxides (sienna), etc.  
Impasto is a build up of paint above the support surface. More common in oils. Additives are available for achieving a very small impasto effect in watercolors. Seldom used.  
Imperial is a large size of watercolor paper sheet, about 22 by 30 inches.  
Kolinsky is the name of a valley in Siberia whose native sables (a sort of weasel) possess red fur very suitable for soft brushes. The very best Kolinsky red sable brushes are said made only from the tail, of only the male and only harvested in the dead of winter, when presumably the fur is most lush. One hopefully imagines a sort of humane and sustained farming operation.  
Lake is a pigment made by chemically precipitating a dye onto a tiny, colorless (white) host pigment particle such as clay. The dye,
typically a vegetable dye, is said to be laked to make the resulting color. An ancient process.

**Lifting** is a way to remove paint from the paper. Typically the paint is first wetted then lifted out via pressing on an absorbent material, e.g. tissue paper. Lifting is akin to extreme Tonking.

**Light to Dark / Dark to Light...** refers to two contrary methods for proceeding with a painting. Most watercolorists recommend starting with the lightest deposits of paint and then proceeding to the darker passages. This is yet another rule sometimes broken with great success. For example, watercolorist Charles Reid and others, paint from dark to light. Light-to-dark can be time-consuming, too much so for travelers.

**Lignin** is a component of wood pulps leading to acidic paper.

**Liner** is a design of brush hairs, with relatively long hair held by the ferrule in a very narrow cylindrical shape. A liner is useful for applying long, continuous strokes or lines of paint.

**Madder** is a marsh plant whose roots for centuries have provided brilliant, but unfortunately fugitive, reddish dyes.

**NOT** describes paper of a medium smoothness. “NOT” is not pressed. Also called cold-pressed.

**Opaque.** Meaning one cannot see through it. Typical of paints made with pigments rather than dyes. Physically, the colors of the incident light are modified by selective reflection off the face of the tiny pigment particles (tiny, but huge compared to dye molecules). For example, red pigments absorb the complementary green wavelength of light and reflect back just the red. Cadmium red and cerulean blue are two good examples of opaque colors.

**Ox Gall** is a natural, reactive material that can be added in very small quantities to watercolor paints to aid in paint flow via increasing the wetting of the paper.

**Pad.** Pads are one form for using watercolor paper. The sheets are stacked, typically with deckled edges removed, and one common edge firmly taped or glued together.

**Pan** colors refer to watercolor paints kept in solid but semi-moist cake form in small pans arranged in a palette box. Pans can be of
several sizes: tiny mini-pans, quarter-pans, half-pans, full-pans and giant pans. Pans are generally more practical than tubes for travelers. Immediately prior to use, pan colors must be activated by application of a small amount of water.

**Paper Stretching.** The larger and thinner a sheet of paper is, the more it tends to buckle and wrinkle when wetted. Buckling makes sketching very difficult to outright impossible. This buckling is greatly reduced if the paper is first held in place around the edges while wet, then, still restrained, allowed to dry taut. This is usually done via taping or stapling down the edges to a rigid board. For travelers, buckling can be avoided more simply by a combination of using blocks instead of free sheets and increasing the weight of the paper as the size increases. For example, 300-pound paper is available in 12 by 16 inch blocks. Of course, thicker paper is more expensive.

**Perspective** is depicting the appearance of depth in space. In geometrical perspective, either one-, two- or three-point, achieves the illusion of 3 dimensions via the appropriate converging of lines (parallel in space) to one, two or three different points at infinity. Aerial perspective uses two tricks. One trick is the dimming of images, in both clarity and chroma as they recede. The second trick is the cooling of colors with distance, typically becoming more blue.

**Pochade** is French for literally a “small board”, supposedly to paint upon. Pochades are generally, any small painting itself or a small painting support, e.g. piece of paper, with or without painting. A small container with a reduced painting kit and capable of holding a painting in progress, sometimes is called a pochade box.

**Red Sable.** See Kolinsky, although not all red sable brushes are from the Kolinsky region.

**Rigger** is a more extreme liner brush. It is a round brush with only a few, very long hairs. Painters of marine subjects invented riggers to facilitate depicting the fine rigging of sailing vessels.
**Rough** is a paper surface notably rougher than cold-pressed. Rough is difficult to use for beginners. Also, rough is more suitable for larger works than smaller.

**Round** is a design of brushes. In these brushes, the ferrule holds the hairs in a round or cylindrical shape, typically rising to a sharp point. It is a broadly useful brush preferred by many painters, particularly for small to moderately sized works.

**Scratch out** is carefully removing not only the paint, but also often the top layer of paper, with a very sharp implement to restore the appearance of white paper. Scratching out is useful in very small amounts on small areas, for example to depict the sparkle of sunlight on distant open water.

**Sedimentation** is an effect of some mineral pigmented paints, e.g. yellow ochre or ultramarine blue. As the paint is drying, more pigment particles settle into the small pores of the paper than on the high points leaving a finely freckled appearance. Intentionally developed and desired in some instances.

**Sheet.** The largest watercolor papers are available only as loose, individual sheets. Larger sheets commonly can have either two or four deckled edges preserved.

**Siberian Squirrel.** Not surprisingly, much as with Kolinsky sable brushes, that frigid part of Russia also provides the best grey squirrel tail fur for brushes. A squirrel brush is more lank than a similarly constructed sable brush. Here also, one imagines Siberian tail fur farms, albeit with the useful squirrels kept strictly separate from the red weasels.

**Sized** paper contains added starches, glues or gelatins. Papers are sized to increase strength and reduce absorption. The starches, etc. can be added either to the shredded “soup” of paper manufacturing precursors prior to finishing (bulk or volume sizing) or added only to the outer skin of the ultimate molded paper (surface sizing). Because sizing makes the surface less absorbent for wet paint, any paint lies closer to the surface making the colors both more brilliant and easier to lift or remove.
**Spiral Bound.** Watercolor sketchbooks with the covers and paper sheets bound together via a stiff wire spiraling through a multitude of holes along one edge. Among sketchbooks, spiral bound ones can lie the flattest, a desirable feature. Also, individual sheets are quite easy to cut out. Often, spiral-bound is not as robust as hardbound. **Stipple** is a technique for applying paint to the paper wherein the bristles or hairs of a lightly laden brush are stabbed vertically into the paper. The result is an uneven distribution with close and tiny spots like pimples of extra color. **Tint.** A tint of a color is both lighter and has less chroma, due to the addition of white, either white pigment or white paper showing through thin paint. **Tone.** A tone of a color is darker, due either to the addition of black pigment or to the addition of the color’s complement. **Tonking** is the partial removal of paint via blotting, done to some esthetic purpose. **Tooth** is the surface roughness of a paper noted by the user. Tooth can be increased via thin washes of gesso. **Transparent** means one can see through it, even read type letters through it like clear glass, tinted or not. Typical of paints colored by dyes rather than by reflecting pigments. Alizarin crimson and Prussian blue are two good examples. **Tube** watercolor paints are available in small aluminum tubes from 5 ml on up (ml = milliliter or cubic centimeter, about the volume of a sugar cube). Watercolor paint in tubes is already wet, albeit extremely concentrated. Tubes are generally more practical for bigger, studio work needing larger quantities of paint available for immediate use. **Varnish.** Contrary to much opinion, watercolor works on paper usefully can be varnished, although they seldom are. One choice of material is a dilute water solution of gum arabic. It must be dilute, perhaps no more than 1 in 5 (water to commercial preparation) otherwise a thick layer of the gum will form and subsequently check like dried mud as it dries. The underlying watercolor must
be completely dry or the wet varnishing will drag up the preceding paint. The profit of such varnishing is a modicum of protection for the painting and enhanced brilliance in the colors, much as with a colorful pebble when wetted.

**Wash** is an even application of a color mix over a relatively large area, e.g. a clear blue sky in a landscape. Often, a wash is a single color, but washes can be variegated with smooth, almost imperceptible segues from one color to another. Washes also can be modified via glazing.

**Weight** is the strength and thickness of watercolor papers. It is denoted indirectly by the number of pounds a ream (500 sheets) weighs. Watercolor paper is available from light (and a little unsatisfactory) at 70 pounds up to 1111 pounds, a weight for a paper that is more like a wooden board. The most common and practical weights are between 140 and 300 pounds.

**Wet-in-Wet** is the technique of applying wet paint onto paper already wetted with previous paint. This is useful for mixing colors right on the paper, rather than first on a palette.
About the Author

Peter McReynolds is an award-winning artist working successfully in several media: watercolors, oils, pastels, pencils, etc. He’s written a great deal on art. It runs in the family. Peter’s mother and father were both avid amateurs in art. His father, an Asian languages scholar, enjoyed Japanese sume-e watercolors; his mother painted seascapes in oils. Peter’s paternal grandmother was an avid painter of the desert in the American Southwest. His maternal grandmother and her sisters were accomplished professional marine artists in their day, teaching, exhibiting, and selling. Peter has been making art his entire life. Early in grammar school, he was happiest while coloring “outside the lines”. Peter has had several excellent teachers. He’s devoured scores and scores of books about art, both from his very extensive personal collection and those in the local library.

Peter’s favorite medium today is transparent watercolors, in a representational but loose style, meaning that it shares with the viewer the infinite complexity and beauty of our world. Peter’s working method is a quick, wet-in-wet a premier coup. Typically, his work is relatively small, 11 by 15-inches or less. This reflects an intention to be enjoyed in a typical home and fits with a preference for painting outdoors when possible, en plein aire. Large influences on him typically have come from the various American regional movements around the United States. Movements like: Connecticut’s Old Lyme, Indiana’s Hoosier Impressionism, New Mexico’s Taos Ten and, most of all, California Impressionism as well as the works of outstanding individual American watercolorists: John Sargent, Alice Ravenal Huger-Smith, Alice Scheele, Winslow Homer, John Whorf… The list is endless!

Peter continues to most enjoy wandering through city and countryside with board and small kit to watercolor sketch sur le motif.