

Drawn to architecture

Buildings make interesting and challenging subject matter for **Clive Wilson**. He describes his techniques for achieving lively, loose watercolours



Clive Wilson



Mezquita, Cordoba, watercolour, 11×15½in (28×39.5cm)



I enjoy painting buildings: they create interesting shadow patterns and the perspectives they offer give distance and depth to a picture. This solidity and structure is something that is frequently difficult to find in a landscape of trees and hills.

Effort

Each time I find myself launched on a new architectural picture I discover all the complexities of the view that originally attracted me. Drawing and painting buildings is quite simply extremely difficult, and requires a lot of painful effort. You have to get it right because, at the end of the day, the three-dimensional structure of the building (often with multiple perspectives and vanishing points) has to look correct. Even if some parts of a building are hidden from view by trees or planting, the parts that are visible have to make sense as a single structure.

Drawing

On the whole, lively, loose, spontaneous watercolours

San Giorgio, Modica, watercolour, 11×15½in (28×39.5cm)

are best achieved with minimal preliminary pencil work. However, there are not many architectural subjects you can launch into without the help of a pencil to get the measurements and perspectives right. Sometimes only minimal pencil work is required, just to get things in the right place, but mostly the complex structure of the building, particularly baroque buildings, demands very precise measurement – see *San Giorgio, Modica* (left) and *Mezquita, Cordoba* (above). Personally I find that a really good pencil drawing accurately measured and

Paper

Clive uses Two Rivers 200lb (410gsm) Not, in a sand colour. See www.tworiverspaper.co.uk for full details, or telephone: 01984 641018. This is a hand-made cotton and flax rag paper; he doesn't stretch it because his pictures are not large and the paper is heavy.



▲ **Mas de Falet**, watercolour, 11×15½in (28×39.5cm)



► **San Giorgio dei Greci**, watercolour, 11×15½in (28×39.5cm)

with correct perspectives, gives the opportunity to paint quickly and loosely, although that can be difficult to envisage in such a precise subject.

Mas de Falet (above) is a subject that required only a minimal pencil sketch. I was fascinated by the mottled shadows on the tumbledown 17th-century steps going up to the high wrought-iron gate, with the fountain in hot sun in front and the fine old Provençal manor house in full sun behind.

Measuring

Most people measure by holding a pencil vertically at arms length, move a finger along the pencil to take a measurement, lay the pencil on the drawing at the angle required by the subject, and mark off the measurement. You have to be careful to hold the pencil vertically and not be tempted to align it with what you are measuring, otherwise your measurement will be too short or long. This mostly works well, but sometimes you are too far away or too close to your subject to be able to work 'sight as seen', ie the measurement on the pencil being the same as the one you record on the page, and your drawing could overflow the page or be far too small.

In this case, the simplest solution is to try to move your position until the subject as measured fills your page satisfactorily. If you can't do that, you may have to resort to doubling all your measurements (or worse, add 50 per cent, which is a nightmare.) If you get the measurements



A swatch showing some of the colour mixes that Clive works with



Deep Shadows – Villa Palagonia, Bagheria, Scala Grande, watercolour, 11x15½in (28x39.5cm)



Santa Maria della Salute, watercolour, 11×15½in (28×39.5cm)

wrong, even with a simple drawing, the perspective will be wrong from the outset and you're lost.

By contrast, *San Giorgio, Modica* (page 28) required an awful lot of measurement and, being a baroque building, has few straight lines to help with the basic shape. I must have spent four to five hours getting the drawing right, by which time the sun had moved round and I was looking at a quite different picture to the one I started with. As I worked I noted the times when the shadows fell which meant that I was able to go back the next day and, thanks to my very accurate drawing, paint the shadows, very quickly, to catch the right sun effect. So, the first essential, however complex the subject, is an accurate drawing; this will enable you to paint fast and loose and capture the light.

Shadows

I put a lot of emphasis on shadows, because they give

the feeling of solidity and mass to a building. The complex structure of the *Scala Grande at Villa Palagonia* (page 29), took an afternoon to draw and a second visit to

catch the shadow colours in watercolour. Even then, the sun moved so fast that I could not catch them all before the light had changed completely. In anticipation of the fact that I might have to go back a third time for the finishing touches, which is frequently impossible, I always take a photograph to remind me exactly what it was that had caught my eye.

I frequently prefer a *contre-jour* effect, as in *San Giorgio dei Greci* (page 29), which requires very little detail in the shadows. The challenge is to make the shadows interesting by 'sloshing on' the right combinations of colours in shadows to get the tonal balance right and give a sun-drenched effect, but avoid monotony.

One of my favourite colour combinations for shadows is rose madder genuine (RMG), cobalt blue and aureolin. This is what I used for the glowing shadows of *San Giorgio, Modica* (page 28); this combination of colours makes a grey and the wonderful thing about it is you can swing it towards yellow, green, blue, pink, violet or orange as required. You have to work fast with a very wet brush dipped into neat colour from the tube; don't touch the colours until

completely dry once they have started to settle, or you'll end up with mud. So, for the tower, I added a bit more yellow, and a bit more RMG at the top; for the palazzo to the extreme left, I used more or less yellow.

Venetian bridges are very pretty, but the contrast between the red brick and the white stone copings can be a bit stark. This is where working *contre-jour* can be a help, as in *San Giorgio dei Greci* (page 29): I disguised the contrast by using an overall wash of cobalt and RMG, and then washed in a little light red to give the effect of sunlight reflected onto the brickwork in the shadow of the bridge. Whatever I used for the newsstand on the right had to be strong and provide contrast; this is where Indian red and Winsor green are highly effective in a very loose wash. I added a dash of ultramarine, some burnt umber and burnt sienna lower down, to bring out the reflected sun in the shadow.

Detail overload

I have emphasised the importance of accurate drawing, but you must also avoid the temptation of adding too much detail. Of course there is an



Scuola San Marco, watercolour, 11×15½in (28×39.5cm)



Clarendon Cross, watercolour, 11×15½in (28×39.5cm)

overwhelming amount of detail in *Santa Maria della Salute* and the *Scuola San Marco* (both left). Choosing a *contre-jour* view of the Salute was a good way to avoid this temptation, but nevertheless you see it, and it's hard to ignore it. In this case, the need for accurate drawing is obvious: this building is so well known that if you get it wrong, everyone will know!

Having got the drawing right, I used my favourite RMG/cobalt/aureolin combination with a bluish bias to wash in the domes, then the whole of the church, very quickly as one wash. You can see where I varied the grey by adding more or less of each colour. I used the same for the buildings on either side. The important thing with an all-over wash like this is not to worry if you don't get it perfect: it will lose spontaneity if you try to correct. When it was all dry, a few essential architectural details were added in Winsor green/Indian red, with a dash or two of Prussian blue or ultramarine in places. I had certainly never seen sails in front of the Salute – an amazing and colourful sight, beautifully set off against the background grey of the church. The trick here was to block out the shapes of the sails with

masking fluid before applying the grey wash.

By contrast, the Scuola San Marco was coming into full sun with a strong shadow cast by the church of SS Giovanni e Paolo (page 29). The temptation to include too much of the detail of that fascinating façade had to be resisted. Actually, it was just so difficult to draw accurately in the time available that the only possibility was to wash in the shadow of the church in cobalt, with a dash of burnt

umber to lighten it and give the effect of sunlight reflected in the shadow. I then used the same combination, drawing with a brush, to sketch in the main details of the façade as shadows. The sunlight reflected up onto the façade of the church was achieved by a loose wash of light red, with irregular dashes of viridian.

Of course, your chosen subject may be in more or less full-frontal light, as with *Clarendon Cross* (above) and *St Paul Preaching by Floodlight*

Clive Wilson

discovered his love of painting during his schooldays, while on a French exchange. He has since studied at the Slade Summer School, the Royal Watercolour Society and New English Drawing School. Clive's work has been in the mixed exhibitions in aid of Venice in Peril and is in collections in Europe and the USA. He has had solo exhibitions in London and Newbury; group exhibitions include New English Art Club, the Sunday Times/Singer & Friedlander Competition and others. He has also undertaken many private commissions. www.clive-wilson.com.

(below). In this case, you can escape neither local colour nor detail. In *Clarendon Cross* (above left) I was lucky that the colour of the houses made such a delightful combination. But what really brings the sun into the picture is the shadows in the windows and doorways, and on the pavement in the foreground. In *St Paul Preaching by Floodlight* a detailed pencil drawing provided an essential foundation for loose flowing watercolour in the shadows. □



St Paul Preaching by Floodlight, watercolour, 11×15½in (28×39.5cm)