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*Dawn on the Back Waters*,  
watercolour, 10½×14½in.  
(26.7×36.8cm)

## PURE JOY

Clive Wilson reveals why he prefers the medium of pure watercolour, and describes his techniques for achieving translucent effects

How often people say: "I can't do watercolour — you can't make mistakes, can you? I stick to gouache (acrylics/oils), so I can make corrections if something goes wrong."

But watercolour is far more versatile and forgiving than most people realise, and beliefs like these are by no means good reasons to eschew the beauty and richness of pure watercolour. If you use a good-quality paper, it's amazing the extent to which you can sponge out mistakes and make changes by lifting out with a brush. If a mess does happen — and, of course, we all make messes — you can always use the kitchen roll to lift it out in seconds.

The experts define a watercolour as 'a painting in a water-based medium on a paper-based support'. This includes media such as gouache and acrylics, and combinations of media, as well as traditional pure watercolour.

I'm on something of a crusade for traditional pure watercolour. To many people it is the most beautiful and expressive of painting media: infinitely subtle, with great



luminosity and richness. Its beauty depends on transparency, the reflection of light passing through pigment and being reflected back from the paper, and the subtle build-up of depth of colour through the successful application of repeated washes. Watercolour can be applied wash upon wash, each wash adding more richness to the tone. Experiment in building up rich colours wash upon wash. But don't scrub them! If you do, you will get the dreaded mud.

Unfortunately, many contemporary painters have lost the art of using the unique quality of watercolour, and have been seduced by the covering quality of acrylics and gouache. The results can perhaps appear bolder, but the subtleties of pure watercolour — letting the paint surprise you — are more interesting to me. We don't all have to try to imitate oil painting.

### *Atmosphere and light*

I have always been fascinated by atmosphere, temperature and light, and how to achieve them in my pictures.

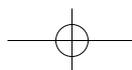
Watercolour gives the ability to capture light and atmosphere very quickly.

*Dawn on the Back Waters*, above left, and *Sunrise at Mankotta Island*, left, are the results of two different mornings' painting from more or less the same position on a river on the backwaters in Kerala (South India). I went out while it was still dark on four consecutive days and caught the sunrise, working on two pictures at the same time (one portrait, one landscape), allowing the wash on one to dry while I worked on the next, and then swapping over.

Catching the effects of sunrise means you have to work very quickly (particularly near the equator, where the sun goes up so fast!). Watercolour (very watery) is the perfect medium for this.

I worked in exactly the same way each day, starting with an all-over graded wash on damp

*Sunrise at Mankotta Island*,  
watercolour 14½×10½in.  
(36.8×26.7cm)



paper to catch the different colours in the sky and putting the first picture on one side to dry while I worked on the second. One morning the mist was dense (maybe with smoke from cooking fires), and the sun rose as a vivid red ball through it (*Sunrise at Mankotta Island*). On the second morning I caught the pre-sunrise dawn effect (*Dawn on the Back Waters*).

Once the background wash was dry I worked on the distant trees, using different washes: cobalt and rose madder genuine, or a very dilute wash of Prussian blue and burnt umber, in both cases mixed very dilute on the page.

For the river bank, the coconut palms and the reflections, the pre-sunrise effect required less contrast against the sky, so I used a medium-strength wash of Prussian blue, burnt umber and raw umber. The red sunrise required greater contrast, and palm trees can be very dark indeed, so for this painting I

## "I had laced the water with vodka to try to prevent it freezing"

chose Prussian blue and burnt umber, but also French ultramarine with burnt sienna. In both cases I forced myself to make quick brush strokes, letting all the colours flow together, not over-working, and not worrying too much about accuracy; I wanted to portray the atmosphere of the morning.

### *Winter oaks*

By contrast, *Winter Oaks — New Year's Eve*, top right, and *Winter Oaks — New Year's Day*, above right, imposed time pressures for very different reasons — it was just so cold! So cold, in fact, that at one point my wash froze, rather than drying on the paper, even though I had laced the water with vodka to try to prevent it freezing. In this case using watercolour enabled me to catch the atmosphere extremely quickly, and get back indoors to thaw out.

I love the spontaneous, lively, unexpected effects that happen in watercolour. In *Winter Oaks — New Year's Day*, the effect of applying another wash on top of the one that had frozen produced a rather interesting



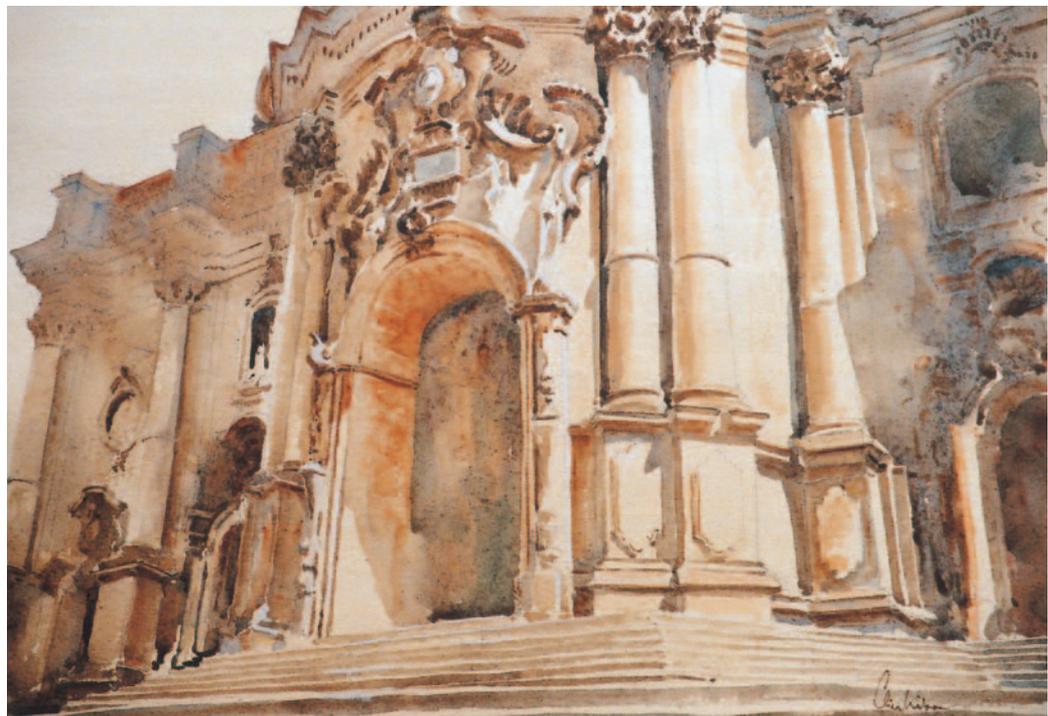
LEFT  
*Winter Oaks — New Year's Eve*,  
watercolour, 16×18in.  
(40.6×45.8cm)

BELOW LEFT  
*Winter Oaks — New Year's Day*,  
watercolour, 16×18in.  
(40.6×45.8cm)

BELOW  
*10 o'clock Shadows — San Giorgio, Modica*, watercolour, 10¾×15in.  
(27.2×38cm)

fuzz, which represented the confusion of ivy on the tree trunk rather well.

With watercolour, less is often more. The finest and most brilliant watercolours are often composed with minimal washes and brush strokes of such skill (and speed) as to leave the rest to the imagination of the viewer, a very rare skill that few artists have attained. Sargent was unsurpassed in this respect: the speed and vigour of his brush strokes are astonishing. Having looked very closely at many original Sargent watercolours, this is what I aim for: I try deliberately to paint as loosely and quickly as possible, with free-flowing washes, dipping the brush into liquid colour straight from the tube, having sometimes two or three colours together on the brush without mixing, letting the paint settle and finding unexpected and often exciting effects.



## Watercolour



*Brahmin Village – Veiled*, watercolour, 10½×13in. (28.6×33cm)

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*Retaining spontaneity*

But it doesn't always work that way: frequently an obsession with 'getting it right' makes you more careful, and this spoils the immediacy and excitement of the result. One mistake to avoid (difficult) is messing about with a stroke that looks wonderfully fresh and exciting, but isn't quite right in terms of accurate drawing: second thoughts and further touching up invariably ruin that first fine careless rapture!

I have found that standing at an easel, rather than sitting on a stool, frees up my brush strokes. It allows you to use your whole arm, rather than working only from the elbow which tends to make me (at least) fiddly.

So what is the role of drawing? Essentially, watercolour is all about drawing. Some artists, myself included, often work entirely with a brush, and this works well. My Kerala pictures were entirely drawn with the brush. Draw with the brush and try to achieve the effect you want with the fewest possible strokes

Where the effect you want relies on specific patterns of light or shadows, for example the way the sun plays across the façade of a building at a particular moment in the day, careful composition and accurate drawing allow freedom for your washes. Washes underscored by good drawing can be handled with more freedom and fluency. For example, *10 o'clock Shadows — San Giorgio, Modica*, page 29, had to be drawn very accurately to

everyone has to experiment and discover what works best for them. Try taking a piece of scrap watercolour paper, of the type you normally use, and play around to find combinations that work well together and produce interesting, even exciting or dramatic effects, see below. A knowledge of how different colours on your palette relate and mix with one another is fundamentally important; it is preferable to work out a limited range of colours that you get to know very well.

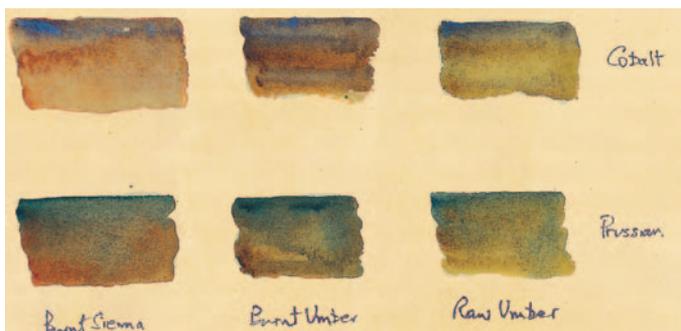
*Layered colour*

One of the most exciting qualities of watercolour is the extraordinary depth and richness achieved by layering one colour over another on the

light (not necessarily white) paper background, for example in *Brahmin Village — Wedding Preparations*, below, and *Brahmin Village — Veiled*, left. I now use, almost exclusively, a sand-coloured paper handmade by Two Rivers (01984 641028), which I find gives increased strength and substance to the image (by comparison to white, which often turns out a bit thin).

In *Brahmin Village — Wedding Preparations*, the browns are all built up with multiple washes of mainly light red, viridian, and burnt sienna, plus some ultramarine or Prussian blue for the darker parts. The deep shadows inside the courtyard use a lot of Indian red and Winsor green, plus some ultramarine for added depth. In *Brahmin Village — Veiled* the deep, glowing shadow under the thatch roof is developed using multiple layers of rose madder genuine, aureolin and some cobalt blue. I was lucky with these two pictures, in that the women in both were prepared to act as models (veiled of course) — unusual in Rajasthan! □

Clive Wilson's paintings can be seen on [www.clive-wilson.com](http://www.clive-wilson.com)



Examples of colour experiments on sand-coloured Two Rivers paper

*Brahmin Village — Wedding Preparations*, watercolour, 14½×10½in. (36.8×28.6cm)

ensure that I captured the effect of the sunlight as it caught the complicated architecture of the great doorway. Once I had the drawing right, this gave me freedom to slosh on the shadows on the right and left sides of the picture, using ultramarine and light red on the left and ultramarine and burnt umber on the right, where the shadow was deeper.

You will have noticed that I often use complementary colours blended together in a wash: Prussian blue with burnt umber, ultramarine with burnt sienna, cobalt blue with raw umber, and also light red with viridian and a dash of aureolin or raw umber for greens, and Indian red with Winsor green for deep shadows and rich, distance greys.

I have found these combinations work well for me:

