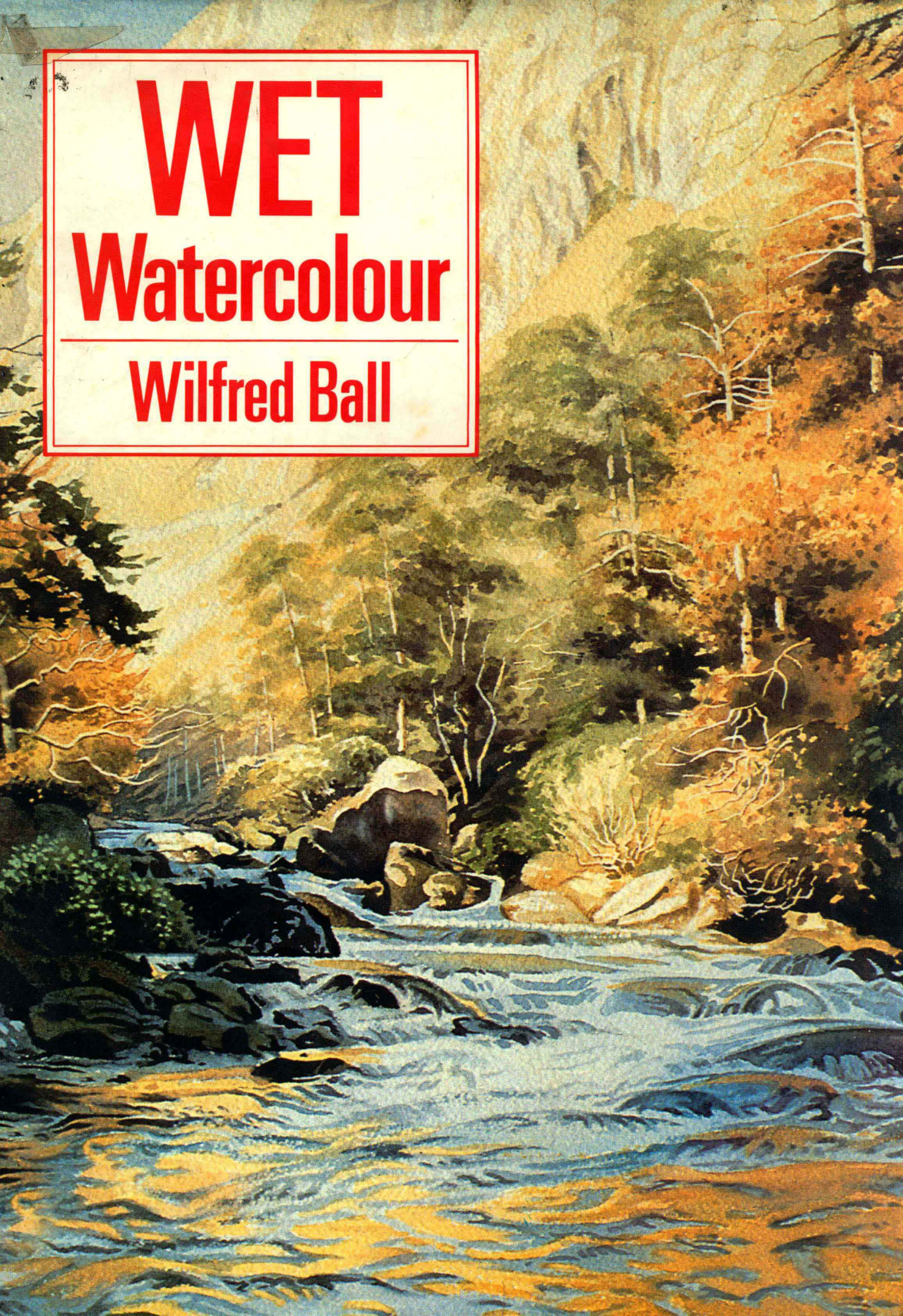


# **WET Watercolour**

**Wilfred Ball**



**WET**  
**Watercolour**  

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**Wilfred Ball**

B. T. Batsford Ltd, London

*To Vickie*

*Black and white photographs by Les Parkin,  
Raymonds Photographic Agency, Derby*

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# **WET**

## **Watercolour**



*The frontispiece, The Wharfe after Rain, Langstrothdale, displays to the full how much weather and atmosphere are dependent on a mastery of the wet technique. Before the typical stone farmstead the infant Wharfe, filled with flood water, rushes helter-skelter towards the wooden footbridge. The cataracts of broken water erupt in glistening white foam but are still coloured with the amber peat stains characteristic of storm water in moorland areas. A flock of Swaledales moves towards us in the hesitant sunlight.*

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## Introduction

The adjective in 'wet watercolour' may seem superfluous, as watercolour is wet by definition, but I seek to differentiate between the two basic watercolour techniques of painting on wet paper and painting on dry paper. In the latter we can achieve great precision of edges, clarity of colour, a superb transparency as the light reflects back off the white paper through the pigment, and the sparkle that only comes through dry brush techniques, when the brush is dragged across dry, rough paper. It is most apt in painting the harsher landscapes of hot climes, when a clear blue sky complements pastel-tinted buildings and sun-baked fields. In this century abstract painters like Klee, and the Fauves like Matisse, have exploited to the full the intensity of saturated colour that is possible using this method.

But the tradition of British landscape painting is a romantic one full of space and softness, magic and mystery, mist and melancholy, light and luminosity. It reached its greatest heights with Turner, who was able to mirror the tragedy and nobility of the human condition in the landscape, blessed and transformed by the vagaries of the weather. This quality in landscape painting is poetic and emotive. It is matched perfectly by the potential of wet watercolour, which offers light and transparency, faded forms and fluidity, movement and metamorphosis, lost and found edges, and shapes that are fugitive or vaguely present. These qualities are inherent in the very nature of the medium, when used wet-in-wet, and this book explores the infinite possibilities of this area of technique and demonstrates its uses.

In my mind's eye I can picture the halo of creamy light around a full moon, or a coral red cloud trailing across a rose sky in the evening. Sheets of heavy rain slant down from weeping clouds. Lakeland crags hide their heads in low cloud and wisps of hill fog trail between the conifers. The river lies under morning mist above which stand tall trees on tiptoe. Crashing breakers spurt silver spray above inky rocks. Embers glow in the last of the bonfire while its climbing smoke veils the moon. These are all subjects that demand the use of wet techniques, as do all the most exciting and beautiful effects in nature.

But it is not only subject matter that makes its demands upon technique in contemporary painting: exploration of the full potential of the medium is

expected, especially since the Abstract Expressionists of the Forties and Fifties. Since then, individual technique and style have often been regarded as more important than the subject matter itself, and so today's artists will find their techniques scrutinized as never before. Since watercolour is perceived as a lively medium, freshness and spontaneity are highly-regarded qualities. Experimental techniques are valuable in achieving these ends and I propose to examine some of these and the best ways in which they can be used to advantage.

When seeking to improve one's style one is usually encouraged to 'loosen up'; most art students will be familiar with this advice. Since wet techniques can be loose in the extreme I hope this volume will also help those painters who seek such development of style.

Paramount in my aims, however, is the exploration of mood and atmosphere in landscape painting. Let us develop those forms of expression which best achieve the magic and mystery which is at the heart of the English landscape tradition.

Finally, I shall discuss some of my more traditional painting procedures in order to show how the drier finishing touches are applied after the wet stages have been completed. Only rarely can a painting be worked entirely in the wet-in-wet method. I am inevitably reminded of Turner's procedure in this respect. His studio would be festooned with cords from which he had hung the soaking wet papers on which the basic background colours had been tinted in, fluid and free. After they were dry he would add those characteristic finishing touches in his inimitable calligraphy. Before the domes and towers of Venice, glowing under a golden sky, he would dash in a gondola and a few figures. With a finger-nail he would scratch a gleam of silver across the lagoon. Most of us use similar procedures nowadays; indeed, Turner still seems adventurous and modern today. Because of the legacy of adventurous attitudes and achievement he left us, modern watercolourists have enormous horizons. The ways in which watercolour can be used have encouraged a wide variety of methods and styles of which the wet-in-wet method seems the most significant and effective.

**NB** All painting dimensions refer to their complete unframed size, and do not take into account any minor cropping considered necessary for this book.

# 1 Materials

The only *essential* materials for a watercolour painter are brushes, paper, paints and water. The search for a wider range of means of expression has, however, added others, and a number of exciting new effects have become available to the modern watercolourist. Before looking at these, let us first examine the traditional materials.

## Brushes

The choice of brushes is a personal one. Figure 2 shows a collection of my own. If your forte is the *trompe-l'oeil* technique then a collection of small sables will be essential. On the other hand, if your style is broad you will depend mainly on wash brushes – large and full. Whichever style you indulge in I'm sure you will cling to your favourites long past their best. I have one that has now lost most of its bristles, but it still makes interesting marks.

Always clean brushes properly after use; they are too expensive to be treated carelessly.

## Paper

Papers are differentiated according to weight per ream. Anything below 200lb will need stretching before use. To avoid this rather tedious procedure I always use 300lb, usually Fabriano or Arches. A heavy paper such as this will stand up to all kinds of rough handling. Its surface is so tough that it will take a good deal more scrubbing with a stiff bristled brush to remove unwanted pigment than a lighter paper will. It can also be used on both sides, should your first attempt not be worth saving. Although expensive, therefore, it has economical attributes that make it well worth considering.

Watercolour paper is made in three surface textures: SMOOTH or *Hot-pressed*; NOT, which is slightly rougher, and ROUGH, which has a definite rough surface and suits the bolder style. I use Fabriano Rough or Arches Rough, both excellent surfaces. Fabriano has a more irregular biscuit-like texture which I particularly like, while Arches is even rougher but more regular. It is an excellent paper for dry brush work, when trying to produce the effect of light sparkling on water, for example.

Under normal washes they produce a slightly textured effect – even under a flat wash. When used with a granulated wash they are particularly effective (see Chapter 2).

## Paints

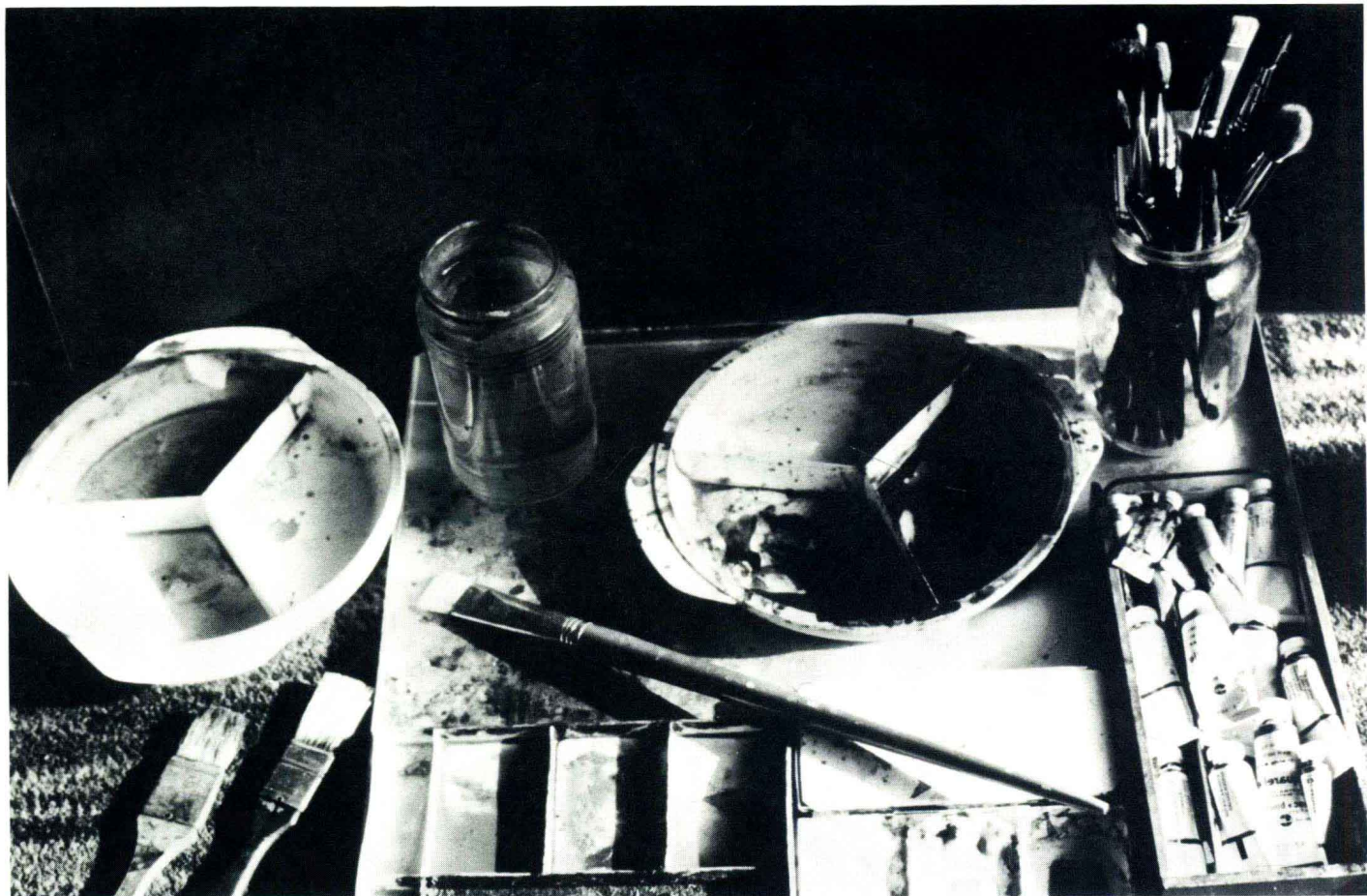
I personally do not like pan colours. When they have not been used for a while they can become very hard, and it is rather tedious to soften them into a working consistency when you are eager to proceed with a painting. Moreover, they wear out sable brushes very rapidly. So long as you screw the tops on properly, tube colours are always fresh and ready to use in an instant. I strongly recommend them.

It is advisable to develop a palette of colours which suits your style and personality. This means that decisions are much easier to make when you are painting, and is one of those good habits you need to form so that you can concentrate on other problems. One can easily be seduced by the gorgeous hues in the colourman's charts, but these should be resisted.

Select the colours you use regularly and learn to forget the rest. I used to have a box full of hardened tubes of individual colours which I had used once and never needed again. These were finally thrown out of my regular watercolour box to create some space.

My palette consists of Yellow Ochre, New Gamboge, Burnt Umber, Cadmium Red, Alizarin Crimson, Winsor Green, Cobalt Blue, Ultramarine Blue and Cerulean Blue. I also use Burnt Sienna or Brown Madder (Alizarin). The latter is used when I wish to increase the warmth in a particular colour composition. This collection of twelve colours seems to solve all my essential problems.

The basic greys I use are mixed from Burnt Sienna and Cobalt Blue or Burnt Sienna and Ultramarine Blue for a more dramatic strength of tone. In colour jargon 'grey' is not a mixture of black and white, which is more properly called 'neutral' grey. There are innumerable greys in nature, made by mixing a cold colour with a warm colour from opposite sides of the colour circle. If you mix different reds with different greens, for example, you will produce an infinite variety of browns; and in the context of colour brown is just another grey.



1 Basic equipment



2 Brushes

As there is no black in the landscape, I do not use it. There are innumerable darks you can mix which will serve your purpose better. If you add black to another colour it kills its luminosity and produces an artificial-looking result. Nor do I use white, preferring the simple classic expedient of leaving white paper showing where I need it.

However, I see no objection to the use of white or other opaque colours, if you prefer them. There has long been a tradition of gouaches in the mainstream of watercolour painting. It is important to use what suits *you*.

## Other materials

Looking at my studio shelves, I find all kinds of other media and tools which I have occasionally used in experiments with watercolour. Indian ink, coloured wax crayons, oil-based pastels, a candle end, salt and masking medium are the main ones. Besides brushes, I use a motley collection of knives, sponges, sandpaper, cloths, kitchen roll, sand, blotting paper and gummed paper tape, not to mention natural objects such as leaves and feathers. Chapter 3 describes some of the intriguing effects that can be achieved with these media.

# 2

## Washes

The normal procedure is to start a painting with broad washes using a large full brush. I often cover the whole of the paper in this way, except for any previously selected highlights which are left as clean paper. This allows stronger colour to be added while the initial washes are in various stages of wetness, leaving the final strong accents to be put in when the paper has dried. It is a good idea to get into basic habits of procedure like this as it allows your mind to concentrate on the other myriad problems of technique and tackling the unexpected which watercolour always provides. All decisions about tonal composition should be clear in your mind before you start to paint.

I consider the basic broad washes to be the most essential skills; once you have mastered them properly the rest is comparatively easy.

### Flat wash

This is rare in traditional, realistic landscape painting, as natural surfaces are never even in tone and texture. However, all other types of wash are variations on this basic procedure.

Take care to mix more colour than you expect to use so as to avoid running out of colour half way through a wash. It is virtually impossible to mix exactly the same strength and combination of colour again in an emergency, and the first part of the wash will probably have dried partly or completely by the time the second mixture is ready.

Be aware of how much lighter watercolour is when dry, and allow for this by always mixing your colour darker than you expect it to dry. This is the sort of decision that only experience can teach you to master.

Before starting a flat wash rest the drawing board on a book or some other support so that it is tilted at an angle of about ten degrees. (I never use an easel, not having found it necessary.) Fill a large wash brush with pigment and run it horizontally across the top of the paper. A pool of colour will begin to form at the bottom of the brush stroke. Make another brush stroke slightly overlapping the first, again with a full brush. Repeat this until the wash is completed when the surplus paint can be taken up with a damp brush or a sponge.

### Graded wash

This is a wash that begins dark and gradually becomes lighter, though it can be in reverse. It is the sort of wash one would use for a cloudless sky. The procedure is very similar to that for the flat wash except that for the second and succeeding brush strokes the half-emptied brush is dipped into clean water, thus progressively weakening the pigment. This is repeated until the wash is completed.

### Granulated wash (3)

One of the advantages of using Rough paper is that this type of wash is much more effective. Some colours are opaque and will therefore settle into the hollows, while the more transparent ones remain on the humps of the surface. This separation adds interest, particularly in a large wash.

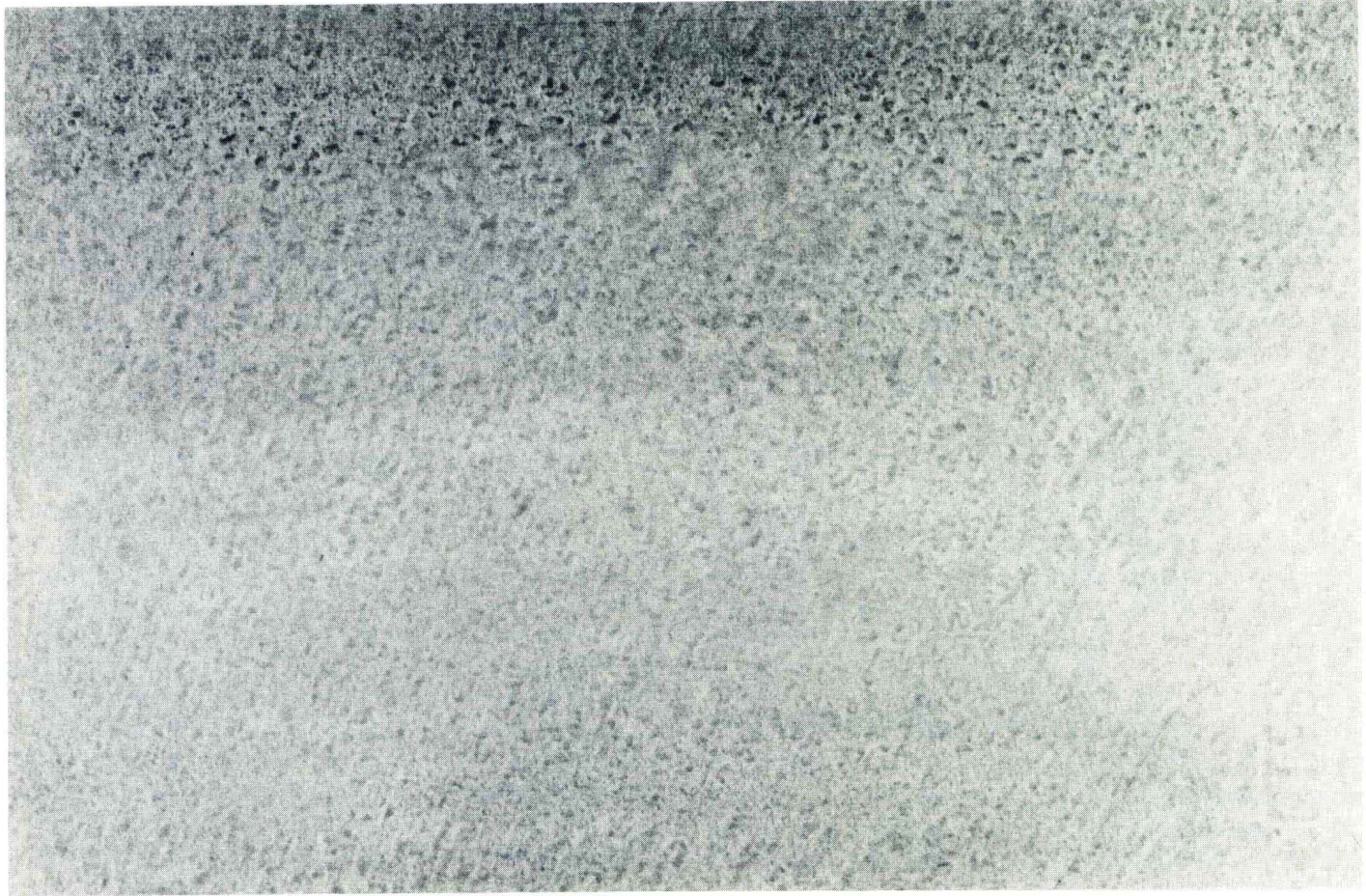
Opaque colours in my palette include Yellow Ochre, Raw Umber, Cerulean Blue, Cobalt Blue, Ultramarine and Cadmium Red. The others are more or less transparent by comparison. When washed over a glaze of transparent colour the opaque ones will settle as sediment in the hollows.

If a wash made up of an opaque colour and a transparent one is put on with a full brush, the process of separation and granulation can be accelerated by shaking the drawing board gently from side to side while the pigment is still very wet.

### Wet-in-wet wash (4)

This is the most frequently used by a landscape painter. It is the technique most suited to the medium, which is fluid and capricious and lends itself to the 'happy accident' more than any other.

First damp the surface of your paper with clean water, applied with a sponge or large brush, or even hold the paper under the tap. With a brush full of strong pigment coat the paper with your basic colour. Remember that the water already on the paper will dilute the pigment considerably. The way in which you apply the colour will allow you to vary its strength in different areas as you wish. Then apply forms with an



3 Granulated wash



4 Wet-in-wet wash

even stronger colour, to give the effect of clouds in the sky, for example, or misty trees. There must be considerably more pigment in these gestures or the colour will just merge into the background wash and disappear. By trying a few experiments you will soon find the required strengths. This procedure will produce vague forms, highly evocative of misty, atmospheric phenomena.

It is important to perform this technique with the board flat, otherwise the darker colour will drift down the paper and lose the shape intended. However, if you wish to make use of this tendency, the board can be tilted so that the cloud-like shapes can 'weep'

downwards like rain (see Chapter 5 for more detail on skies).

Other materials can be added to the wash, while in various stages of wetness, in order to add texture or form. A wide variety of implements may be used to remove areas of colour or make marks, again while the colour is still wet. It is most important to allow it to dry completely before superimposing another wash, unless you are positively seeking to create 'accidents'. In the almost-dry stage a watercolour wash is most vulnerable and ready to play its most devilish and devastating tricks on you. If in doubt, leave well alone!

# 3

## *Experimental Techniques and their Application*

### Developing a looser style

It needs a positive effort of will to accept that change is necessary in one's own work and to seek ways to improve it. The most important method of improvement is to devote a great deal of time to the practice of painting; there is still no alternative to enthusiasm and hard work. But it is possible to approach the problem intellectually and to make a list of new attitudes and approaches that could be tried. Most important is the acceptance of the need for change and the development of a questing attitude in both thought and action.

Here are a few practical suggestions recommended from personal experience.

*Change your palette.* Try a new colour and see what it adds to your style. I can well remember using Cerulean Blue for the first time and the way it improved my painting of springtime subjects in particular.

*Work larger or smaller.* When I started to paint full Imperial-sized landscapes it forced me to use much larger brushes than I had done before. Indeed it was not until then that I obtained some of the largest brushes I still use. This change alone served to loosen my own style more than anything else I'd tried before.

If by nature you are careful and painstaking and particularly interested in detail, then it may be useful to paint a few miniatures. However, such a style is rarely suited to the wet-in-wet applications considered in this book.

*Try abstraction in order to free your painting from the demands of realism.* Experiments with line, form, colour and texture are much freer if you no longer have to paint what you see but rather what you feel.

*Paint on tinted papers.* Although this will necessitate the introduction of white to your palette it may awaken unexpected responses in you.

*Use mixed media.* Working with inks, wax crayons, acrylics, etc. may put more variety into your work.

Taking up this challenge, the following section will introduce a range of practical developments capable of imaginative use.

### A willingness to experiment

My intention is to incorporate the discoveries made in this chapter into the landscape paintings to which the second half of this book is devoted. Before attempting this, however, we must try these technical experiments in isolation.

#### Retaining or creating highlights

##### *Retaining*

The obvious and traditional way to retain highlights is to paint round them, leaving the white paper blank. However, if the highlight is delicate or detailed, this may be impossible, and in such a case masking medium might be the solution. Frost-covered seed-heads or the delicate tracery of a spider's web may be achieved in this way. A more vigorous use of the medium (frisket) is to spatter it vigorously onto the painting surface for textural effects of a free, uninhibited nature.

Another way of creating a lively and textured resistance to watercolour is to draw candlewax details before starting to paint. This is particularly suitable for the effect of light reflections in water. Spattering paint from a toothbrush round a stencil or chosen object can leave clear or ghostly white shapes.

##### *Creating*

If you need to create a highlight in an area already covered with wet paint it is possible to remove the paint in several ways. None of these will leave highlights as crisply as if you used the retention methods, but they take off most of the pigment and, if anything, produce a more natural effect.

The most obvious way is to remove the colour with a damp, clean brush. Soft-edged shapes are produced and this is one way of creating highlights on cloud formations. The sail of a distant yacht could be suggested in this way, too.

Other softer materials which can be used in a similar way are papers, tissues, soft cloths, blotting paper, lace or sponges.

Harder-edged shapes can be created by using harder materials such as brush handles, knife edges, even finger-nails (as Turner did). The clean edge of a piece