A watercolor illustration of a park scene. In the foreground, a large green lawn is filled with people sitting on benches and walking. In the middle ground, there is a fountain with a tall, thin monument. In the background, there are buildings, trees, and a large orange crane. The sky is a pale, hazy blue.

Stewart White brings a unique perspective to watercolor from a career spent in architectural illustration.

By Meredith E. Lewis

a fine balance

Simple Is Better “*Morning in Luxembourg Gardens* [watercolor on paper, 12x16] is a good example of saying just enough without overstating things,” says White. “The stately palace, the fountains, the joggers—it’s all there.”



Watercolor exposes everything you do,” says Baltimore-based artist Stewart White. “From the initial line drawing in pencil to the slightest variation in a wash, it’s impossible to hide. For that reason, many shy away from watercolor, but that’s what I like about it. What you did is what you did.” For White, the honesty of watercolor is much like architecture: If the foundation fails, the entire project goes to pieces.

White’s experience as a career architectural illustrator readily informs his work in watercolor. Understanding geometry, line, proportion, space and light give him a natural (if also studied) facility with drawing that provides a blueprint for paintings that are strong on composition, structure and balance. “Balancing positive and negative shapes in a painting is as





Made for Watercolor “As much as I love to travel to the Caribbean, Europe and all points west in the good old U.S.A., it amazes me how diverse and seemingly endless the sources of inspiration are in Maryland,” says White. “The subject of *Saw Mill in Snow Hill* [at left; watercolor on paper, 11x14] caught my eye as a *plein air* painting subject because it had so many elements that watercolor does so well: the hazy clouds of sawdust that softened the edges of the milling machinery; interesting details; sunlight and shadows. The train nearby was a perfect device for leading one’s eye into the space.”

material matters

Stewart White finds that paper is the key to a successful watercolor painting. “Beautiful in and of itself, paper is one of the reasons I’m drawn to watercolor,” he says. “The texture and feel is actually more satisfying to me than linen or canvas. Plus, it’s the paper that gives the colors life and creates edge and textural possibilities. Indeed, paper makes up the majority of a painting; paint merely suggests forms as it shapes around the light and tints the surface.” Although his taste is always evolving, White’s current favorite substrates are Saunders Waterford 140-lb. and 200-lb. cold-pressed natural white.

His preferred paints are Holbein. “They have a consistent body and a great color range,” he says. “I particularly like their ‘cream-type’ colors: lavender, horizon blue and jaune brillant No. 2. They have some white in them that mixes well with other transparent colors to create nice pearly washes.”

When painting *en plein air*, White uses 12 colors. Although his particular palette may vary with each painting, he always relies on a selection from the following: (warm colors) carmine, vermilion, burnt sienna, cadmium orange, cadmium yellow pale, jaune brillant No. 2 and yellow ochre; and (cool colors) cobalt blue, cobalt violet light, ultramarine blue, royal blue, umber and lavender. To these he adds neutral tint and permanent white gouache. When he works in the studio, White prefers the large Tom Lynch signature porcelain palette and will typically use more colors, specifically green gold, cerulean blue, viridian, raw sienna, mineral violet and rose dore.

Other tools include two watercolor containers—one for cleaning and one for painting, as White believes “muddy water can kill in slow, imperceptible ways”—and wax crayons, tape and fluid masks, which are used if a painting demands a resist. The artist also enjoys experimenting with brushes. Favorites include the Escoda Perla series; kolinsky sables; inexpensive Japanese calligraphy brushes, riggers and squirrel mops; Isabey flat wash brushes sized 1-inch or greater; small mops; and Winsor & Newton pointed rounds in Nos. 4 to 8.

Complex Made Simple “By connecting edges and moving paint along while it’s still wet, great areas of complexity can be made surprisingly simple, as they were in *Late Afternoon Inner Harbor* [opposite; watercolor on paper, 10x14],” says White.

important as balancing the number of windows on a wall,” he explains. “If a scene has things that are in the way, such as street signs and lampposts, I move them or delete them.”

Design Foundations

While the digital age is leaving its mark on the field of architectural illustration through Computer Generated Imaging (CGI), White is quick to point out the lasting importance of solid and practiced aesthetic design sensibilities. It’s these same sensibilities—for light and shape, form and function—that provide him with a solid foundation for his fine art painting. “Many illustrators are able to imbue their work with a poetic sense of the power of architectural forms,” White says. “Thomas Schaller, Dennis Alain, Frank Costantino and Michael Reardon come to mind. By working with architects and designers, I’m continually thinking of how best to communicate their design intent and, at the same time, create a beautiful and compelling image. I understand some laws of perspective, the nature of light and shadow, and have some knowledge of construction. These disciplines inform my ‘fine art’ work much the same way that the knowledge of anatomy helps a painter paint the figure or a portrait. I like to paint a building so that you know it won’t fall over, and



Inspiration Abounds “Easton, Maryland, is a lovely place to paint, with no end of interesting subjects in the area,” says White. “I regularly participate in The *Plein Air–Easton!* Annual Competition and Arts Festival, which is where I painted *Side Street in Easton* [watercolor on paper, 12x16].”



The Power of Snow “There’s nothing quite so effective as a snow scene at showing the power of the unpainted paper,” says White of *Snow Tracks* (watercolor on paper, 10x14).

when I’m imagining a building project I like to give the effect that it’s already built.”

For his fine art painting, White enjoys both studio and *plein air* work and believes that one supports the other. “*Plein air* work teaches you good observation,” he says, “whereas studio work teaches you good practice, observational memory and design.” While studio work might require a keen rendering ability, *plein air* painting may be less reliant upon detail. Nevertheless, a solid drawing, composition and design for the piece as a whole must be equally present in both for each to be successful. “A knowledge of geometry can help me locate the center of just about any polygon, which is especially handy in drawing buildings in perspective,” White says of his own expertise. “Knowing where to locate vanishing points helps me to give a scene a natural feeling of depth, as well.”

Favorite painting subjects for White include architecture, gardens, scenes with interesting atmospheric conditions and spaces that yield imagery rich in depth. In particular, he searches for subject matter that makes the best use of watercolor’s qualities. He enjoys playing with transitional washes, shifting tones, glazes

Artist's Viewpoint White painted *Between Heaven and Earth* (top, right; watercolor on paper, 14x18) at the Mountain Maryland *Plein Air* event. "Beside the challenge of painting graffiti on rocks that the scene provided, I loved the visual metaphor of art (as evidenced by the painter positioned on the outcropping) conveying great natural beauty," he says.

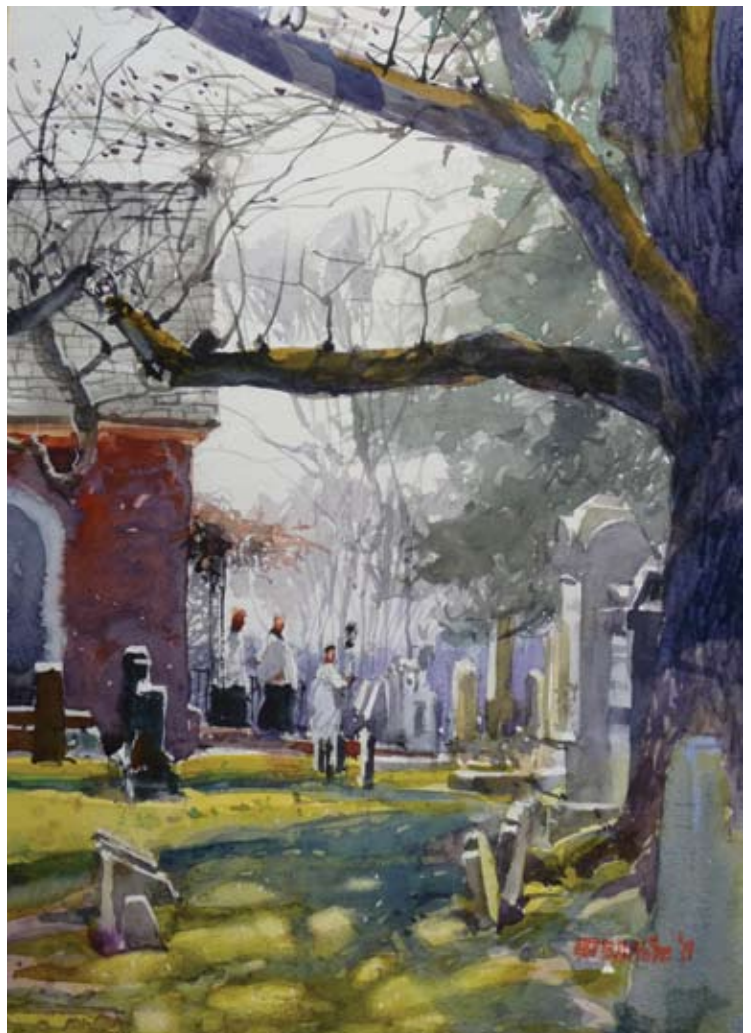


and color. And he admires a wide range of masters, from Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853-90) to the Japanese woodcut artists Ando Hiroshige (1797-1858) and Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), John Singer Sargent (American, 1856-1925), Maurice Prendergast (Canadian-born American, 1859-1924) and a contemporary Joseph Zbukvic.

White is also enthralled with photography, especially the work of Henri Cartier Bresson (French, 1908-2004). He encourages other artists and painters to study the compositions of great photographers, but urges caution when composing a painting with a camera. "The camera can double as a compositional tool quite nicely, but be leery of the too-wide angle and the telephoto features," he says. "Those images never look as natural as the way your eye sees the scenes in real life."

"I'm always inspired by what my fellow *plein air* painters show me of the great spiritual underpinnings of nature."

Lighting, Color and Texture



Drawn to watercolor in his own fine-art practice, White appreciates the medium's ability to harness the fleeting and emotive quality of light. The movement of light around a subject, combined with the interaction of paint with its support, can effectively bring a painting to life. "The power of any watercolor comes from the white of the paper," the artist says. "It's the paper that gives the color its force and brilliance. The illusion of light is created as much, if not more, by what you don't paint than what you do paint. I can convey the time of day or season of the year by the softness or hardness of a stroke I use to indicate a shadow. Ambient light from other sources is effectively conveyed by flooding color from the shade into the shadow of an object."

For *Side Street in Easton* (opposite), White worked to capture the brutal morning heat baking the side of an old theater. Painted

Spiritual Enrichment Of *Church Letting Out* (at right; watercolor on aquaboard, 16x12), White says, "A church in Northern Baltimore County hosts several painting events a year. Church and *plein air* painting are a good mix, actually."

a note to watercolor painters

“The next painting is always your best painting. By keeping a childlike wonder about yourself when painting in watercolor, you’re sure to have never-ending moments of discovery. There will always be accidents—and that’s not a bad thing. Make them work for you. If all the world loves a lover, then most of the world loves a watercolor painter.”

—Stewart White



Under Construction White painted *Street Menders* (watercolor on paper, 14x10) while teaching field sketching to architecture students in Chartres, France. “I love travel, and painting is my passport to many wonderful experiences,” he says. “I particularly enjoy construction sites like this one.”

during the Plein-Air Easton! Competition, in Maryland, the piece began with a value study but progressed quickly before the quality of the light and shadows changed. “I’ll lightly draw the main forms with an HB mechanical pencil, occasionally elaborating on a window or fire hydrant,” the artist says of his process. “The drawing should look as interesting as possible, as it, too, is part of the painting. I’ll begin at the top and pull down water and color.”

When approaching color, White thinks quite simply in terms of “warm” and “cool.” “In order to bring out the unique brightness of a particular color, I’ll spin the color wheel (in my head) and find a complement to bring it out,” he says. “I like to mix color in triads; that is, a green (blue and yellow) wants a red to neutralize it a bit. One point I like to stress is how much care it takes to extract color from mud, and it doesn’t take much for the paints to go back to being mud. It’s important not to overcrowd your colors with too many opposites, or to over-glaze. Even in the darkest washes, the energy from the paper needs to show through.”

The horizon in *Side Street in Easton* began with cobalt blue and cadmium orange with a touch of jaune brillant No. 2. While the painting was still wet, White added cool green-violet grays to the tree line and warm yellow ochre and cobalt violet to the plane of the ground. It was at this point in the process that the artist began to look for opportunities to paint shadows and run colors together. “This is where the fun starts,” he says. “It’s playful to work wet-into-wet, when the big ideas start to take shape. Edges get lost and found at this stage. I’m trying to make as many physical connections as I can at this point and link colors together as much as possible. I reinforce the notion of local color. That is, if the local color is a warm ochre pink, then I include traces of that color throughout the composition.”

Textures come next, with the artist waiting for the paper to dry before scumbling, scraping, glazing and dragging color. “I look for a variety of edges and marks to keep the eye entertained,” White says. “I know I’m near the end when I go over the painting corner to corner



and there's a consistent look throughout. I also make sure I haven't overly labored or neglected one part over the next. If I'm searching for what to do next, I should be alert to the possibility that it's 'cooked,' and I can step back."

Tracing an Experience

White likens his painting approach to storytelling, emphasizing that the trick of the entire exercise is successfully translating his initial impression and excitement about a subject in such a way that it comes to life in the mind's eye. While he may augment or subtract certain aspects of or from a scene, he does so only with the intent of championing his main idea. "Hemingway spoke of *le mot juste*, the right word," says White. "It means stating what you need to state, without over elaborating, by using an economy of means. My watercolors are most successful when I achieve that balance of having said just enough. In that way, the painting can have more of a dialogue with the viewer. That is, there's more room for the viewer to participate and explore passages within the painting, rather than having so much spelled out for him."

While watercolor's portability, light effects and natural imperfections are all winning qualities for White, it's the process of mark-making itself—the voyage of tracing an experience of a scene onto the white of the paper—that makes the medium such a natural fit for him. "I'm not working to get to the end of the painting," he says. "It's a journey of listening to the paint and timing, and of the marks that I'm leaving behind—and what they seem to suggest." ❧

MEREDITH E. LEWIS is a freelance writer and editor based in Central Pennsylvania. In January, she received her MFA in writing from the Vermont College of Fine Art, in Montpelier.

World View "A wonderful thing about *plein air* painting events is the opportunity to see new parts of the world," says White. "Carmel and Carmel Valley in California are spectacular places to paint. The people you meet at events such as the one depicted in *Carmel Art Festival* [above; watercolor on paper, 10x14] are immediate kindred spirits—artists and collectors alike. And, of course, the vineyards are fun as well."



Enjoy more of Stewart White's *plein air* landscapes at www.artistsnetwork.com/medium/watercolor/white-landscape-gallery.