

LEAVING WHITE SPACE

Generally speaking, we live in a midtone world within which light and dark tones occur. An artist working with oils or gouache is able to put light colours over dark, but this is not possible with watercolour without losing its

luminescence. Consequently, the challenge with this medium is to identify where the light areas are in your composition and decide how you will tackle them before you first put brush to paper.



Working around the subject

Rather than painting this little white pot I painted the background, allowing the shape of the pot to appear within the darker tone of its surroundings – a technique known as painting a negative shape. The only paint that has been applied to the pot itself is the shadowed interior and a little light tone beneath the rim to give some modelling to what would otherwise be a flat shape.



Using a resist

Here I rubbed candle wax on some of the paper to create a resist – an area that will not accept paint. I laid a midtone over the whole area and then, when it was dry, added a darker tone. This gave the pot light, middle and dark tones.



Scraping out

After laying a flat midtone wash I scraped out the shape of the jug with a knife. Scraping out more paint on the righthand side, using the flat of the blade, gave the pot some modelling. The linework on the left side of the pot was scraped out with the point of the blade.

This approach is best suited to a good-quality long-fibred paper such as cotton rag where the surface will hold together better. The paper must be completely dry right through before you start cutting into it otherwise the fibres will tend to split badly.

USING WHITE SPACE IN A COMPOSITION

As a project, do one or two sketches that concentrate on leaving white shapes to help you become accustomed to thinking about negative spaces. When you move on to

paint, making a similar sketch first of your subject will help you enormously.



Balancing white space

Here white space has been used to make a tonal impact in a painting of a building. In this example the dark tones of the windows and door make the white shine out. Other forms within the shape of the building are hinted at by midtone washes on the changing planes of the architecture. The off-centre placing of the building and the light and dark tones help the eye to scan across the picture. The two strong bars of dark tone coming in from the left are then picked up by lozenges of white where the light hits the bushes on the right-hand side and echoed by dark strokes leading off to the right. This counterpoint of tone makes the picture very lively.

Placing white shapes in space

White shapes can jump out from the rest of the composition, making for a tonal imbalance. Here the white areas of clothing have been reserved against a midtone background, and have been prevented from coming to the foreground by putting dark tones in front of them. The dark rails of the chairs across the figures place them further back in the picture plane.



AN ALTERNATIVE PATH

If you find this approach very difficult at first you can use opaque white watercolour such as Titanium White or white

gouache. However, those whites will be very hard and flat and you will lose the luminosity of the paper.