A little planning goes a long way when turning your snaps into great works of art

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR REFERENCE MATERIAL

by Maria Field

Tulip Trio, 37 x 27cm
Combining photos

I really loved the light and shadows, colour and shape of these beautiful tulips, but neither photo could be used as they were. I picked one main flower as my star and placed it in a "rule of thirds" compositional layout. This was balanced by a secondary flower to the other corner. However, the main flower is the only one with hard edges all around and is also enhanced by greater tonal contrast. Notice the lost and found edges on the other flowers and the soft, wet in wet background.

You may relate to this scenario - you've been to workshops or classes, you followed the tutor step by step, but somehow, when you returned home and tried it yourself, with your own reference material, it was difficult to create those "wow" paintings. What's going wrong for you?

Photos, photos everywhere!

I won't go into the "plein air versus photos" debate because we all know how beneficial it is to work directly from nature. However, let's say you are developing quite a collection of reference photos and sketches (and hopefully have your own simple system for filing them), but what do you do with them now? How do you turn a good (or probably average) photo into a great painting?

The importance of design and planning

The answer, more than likely, lies in the time you take to plan, design and really look at your photos. Copying the photo exactly as is, is a common mistake. Just because God designed that scene so perfectly does not mean that it will make a great painting. Often, there are just too many glorious competing elements. It doesn't matter whether you are painting a still life, seascape, street scene, interior or floral, a quick thumbnail plan shouldn't take long and will make all the difference. If you feel inclined, a tonal and sometimes a little colour plan can also help. However, if that much planning takes the excitement out of your eagerness to paint, then at the very least do a quick, simple design plan.

But I want to paint NOW!

I know you may be eager to pick up your brush, but spend a little time just thinking "why?" you want to paint that picture. If you can work out "why" then often the "how" will be half answered. If it is because you love the texture on the old building, then surely there will be some dry brush or textural qualities

Dartmouth Deckchairs, 37 x 27cm
Cropping

How could I not be inspired by the line, rhythm and colour of deckchairs casting wonderful patterns of shadows. I simply cropped off the last few people, so it wouldn't be too busy and had fun with those colours! The background was simplified.


"Whatever is your main focal point or reason for your painting will be the main actor on your stage."

The Hague Alley, 37 x 27cm
Using colour to enhance the mood

This photo would probably be discarded by many, but I loved the long shadows formed by the "contra-jour/into the light" effect. I kept the main people and their shadows, added some lovely colourful washes to enhance the mood and simplified everything else. Strong perspective lines and, warmer colours in the foreground help to give the necessary depth. Don't forget that photos deaden shadows to a colourless black hole, so paint them with a glowing underwash and/ or charge colour into the shadow wash while it is still wet. This will make them lively areas.
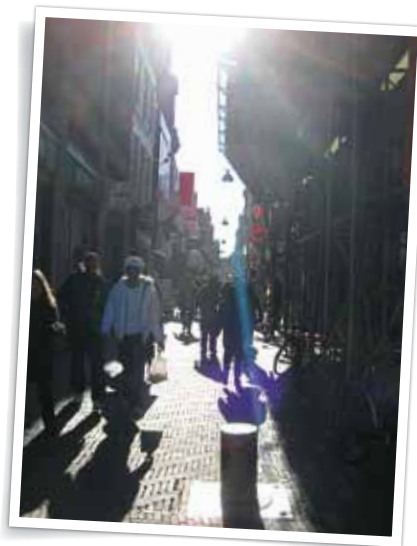
Lunch Hour, 37 x 27cm
Eliminating detail

I was obviously drawn to the wonderful shadows formed by the tree, people and the building, so wanted to enhance these. I eliminated the park bench and the red bus stop, which really were superfluous, although I did like the idea of something quite vibrant and included a figure in bright red. I also included a couple of figures walking towards us to help engage the viewer.
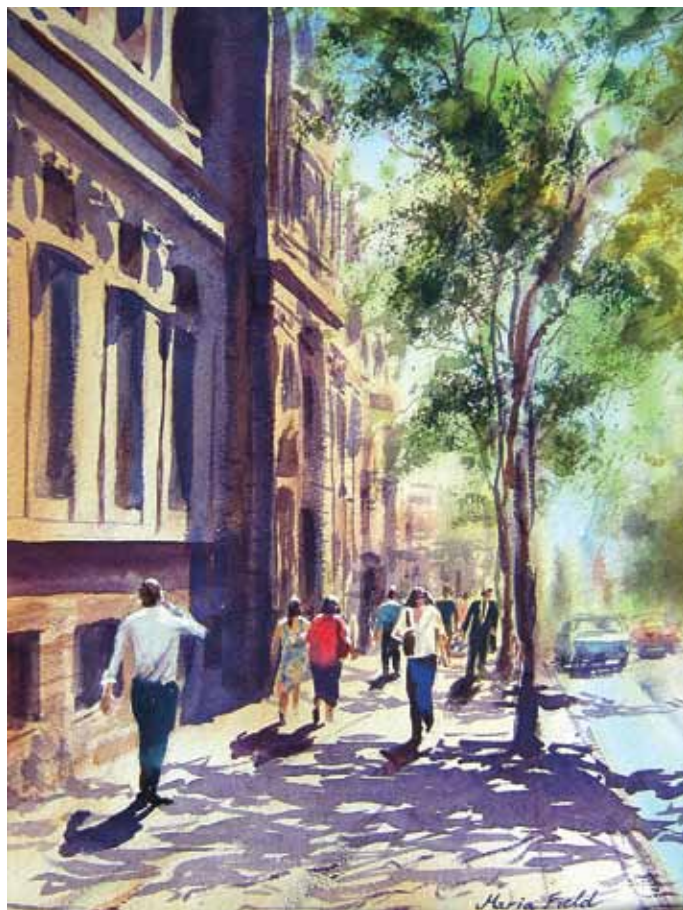
needed there. If it is the mist or the mood of the scene, then it may scream "soft edges - wet in wet." If it is the light or shadows that have grabbed you, then you might like to pump up the tonal contrast. If it is the colour of that flower/ building/sky then an underwash might be the answer. If it is just that you like the flower/shed/cat/ whatever, that is fine too - at least you know why you want to paint it. It really doesn't have to be something deep and meaningful, just as long as you are making a connection with the subject and then hopefully your viewers will too.

The director's cut

So you've worked out the "why?" - now comes the "where?" You are the director of this play - we can call it "This Painting will be My Best Yet!" Whatever is your main focal point or reason for your painting will be the main actor on your stage. Where can you place them on the stage so that they command the most attention? This is where your composition guidelines come in handy. Place the main actor in the best spot. Use your rule of thirds, or L frame, S shapes, Triangle or Cruciform compositional formats. While you're there, think about what colour you could use on your main actor/focal point to grab attention. Complementary colours could work. Try putting some spotlights on them by making sure your greatest contrast of light and dark and hardest edges are around them. ➔

Hydrangeas in Harmony, 37 x 27cm
Moving elements for a better composition

I love hydrangeas, but the very nature of all those little flowers means they need to be simplified. I moved the main flower head to a rule of thirds composition and balanced it with the others. The hardest edges, darkest tones and detail are confined to the main head. The background was merely suggested. I started this painting with a loose wet in wet wash and then defined petals. Note the range of warm and cool pinks and purples for variation.

"Try putting some spotlights on the main actors by making sure your greatest contrast of light and dark and hardest edges are around them."

what the artist used

If it is fine and not too windy, I work on the deck. Otherwise, the kitchen bench is my studio... well, until dinner needs to be prepared anyway!

Support
300gm Rough paper ¼ sheet

Brushes
Large hake, filbert, #8 #10 rounds, rigger

Other materials
Spray mist bottle, old credit card

Colours

Permanent Rose   French Ultramarine

Raw Sienna   Sap Green

Cobalt Blue   Permanent Mauve

Burnt Sienna

Stage 1
Planning the design

I loved the contrast of the dark interior with the light from behind and the colourful bougainvillea sprawling over the rusty shed. A few quick thumbnail sketches helped me sort out the best design and placement as I combined both the photos into an interesting cruciform composition. The peaked roof of one photo added variation to the straight shed. Other elements like the background, the trees and even the foreground, would need to be kept simple so as not to compete with the stars of the show.
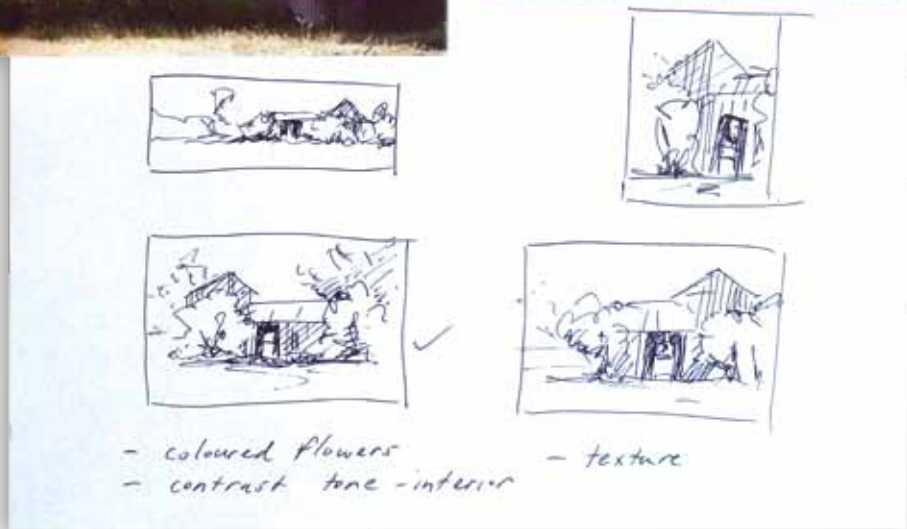
Stage 2 Painting the sky

After lightly pencilling in my main shed shape on 300g rough paper, I turned the image upside down to paint in the sky. This enabled me to get a nice hard edge along the roofline, but where I wanted it softened into the background, I pre-wet that area.

Stage 3 Background and foreground

Since I knew I wanted to keep the background, tree and foreground simple, I wet the entire area and working wet in wet. I had lots of fun dropping in a combination of the colours that I would be using elsewhere in the painting. I dropped in some Permanent Rose in the foreground to echo the pink I would be using in the flowers later. The warmth also helped to draw this area forward. The tree was put in dry in damp for a soft and blurry, yet still recognisable image. Remember to use thicker pigment when doing this to avoid back runs.

Stage 4 Creating the bushes

I wanted the bushes to be colourful and lively, so I dropped in thick pigments onto the paper and let them do their own thing. If I had mixed all these colours together on the palette, I would most likely have made mud.

Stage 5
Scratching in/out branches

This was a tricky bit. I wanted to put a variety of branches running through the bushes. For the darker ones, I scratched into the wash while it was still wet. This enables the paint to flood into the mark I have made and causes it to be darker. For the lighter branches, I needed to wait until the area was nearly dry to scratch back with my credit card. If you are unsure of the timing, it is best to let it dry completely, then rewet the area slightly and have another go later.

Stage 6 Putting in the tree

With my brush on its side, I painted in the tree with light, medium and dark tones and colours, letting the colours bleed into each other. A loosely held rigger brush was used for the branches.

Stage 7 Softening the tree

I then spritzed some of it to soften the edges. You could also just soften with a damp brush or alternatively, wet the area first before painting the tree.

— coloured flowers
— contrast tone - interior
— texture

Stage 8 Putting in the dark

For the side of the shed, I painted a purply shadow colour and while it was still damp, dropped in other colours for variety and texture. Alternatively, you could also paint the colour first and brush the shadow over later. Putting in the darks always excites me. I made a lovely thick mix of French Ultramarine and Burnt Sienna and dropped in more colours on the paper while it was wet, letting them do their magic.

Stage 9 Completing the shed

A few dry brushstrokes are all that's needed to capture the rust on the shed with some darker accents. Note how I have painted negatively around the flowers, with the darker shed giving them harder edges and contrast of light and dark, and yet they have lost edges elsewhere for variety.

Stage 10 The finished work

I brushed a shadow across the right-hand side and tweaked the foreground with a few soft grass strands and then put the work away for a week. I also find that it helps me to work on several paintings at once. That way, when I look at them, I am seeing them with new eyes and any problem areas usually jump out at me.

MY 5 POINT CHECKLIST

PLAN
Ascertain focal point/mood, plan composition, work out the other elements.

TONES
Counter-change light against dark, especially around the focal point.

VARIATION
Have a variety of shapes, warm and cool colours, light and dark, hard and soft edges, and a mix of brushstrokes - wet-in-wet and dry brush.

EDGES
Keep hard edges around the focal point. Soften edges away from the focal point.

STOP FIDDLING!
Drop that brush right now. Put the painting away for a week and then see if it really needs that extra stroke.
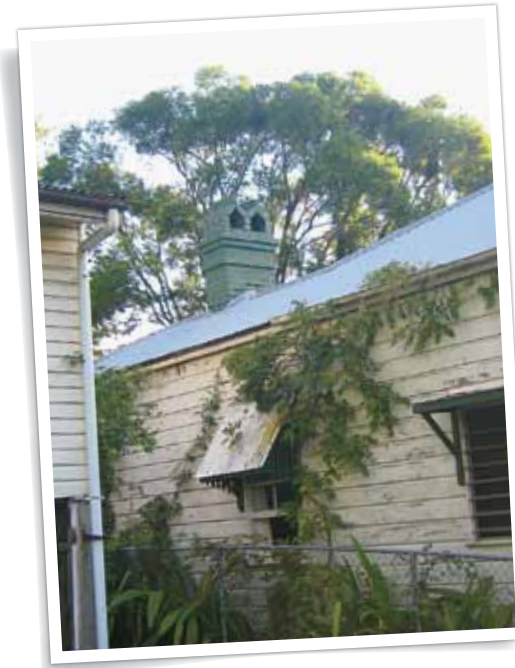
Red Curtain, **37 x 27cm**
Adding light and shade
Look at that wonderful vine creeping over the wall. However, by itself the photo is not much to look at. I bumped up the light and shade and made it a really rusty roof. The chimney was interesting too, but was in line with the window, so I moved it slightly and the tree behind was not needed at all.
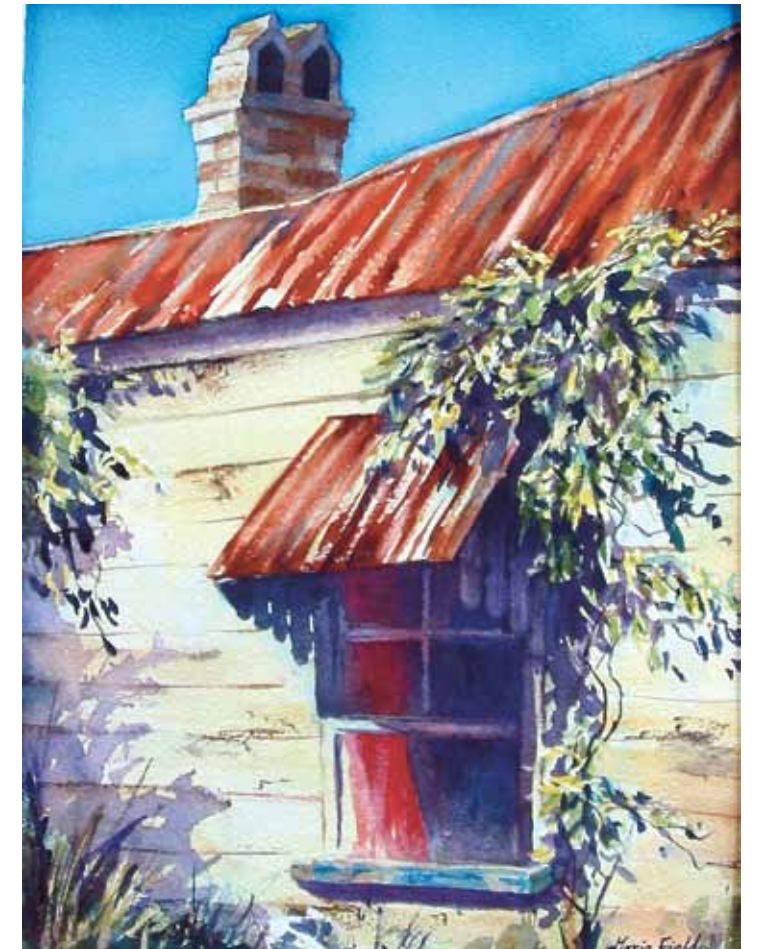
Look at me too!

→ Next, have a look at your photo. What are the other elements in the photo that you were considering including? They are the supporting actors in your play. I stress the word 'supporting'. If they are jumping up and down, crying out "No, look at me, look at me!" then something must be done to put them in their place. If they support, balance or help lead the eye to the main focal point, then by all means leave them in. However, if they distract or lead the eye away, then make them smaller, move them, change them or leave them out altogether. Remember also, that not only trees, fences, posts and streams are elements in landscapes - a big dark cloud is also an element and can be used for balance.

On the other hand, maybe your painting could benefit from another element that is not in your photo; for instance, a couple of people walking up a deserted street or beach. This is where your reference photos and sketches of people will come in handy.

The rest of your painting is just the 'backdrop scenery' for your play. Simplify, simplify, simplify this! It could be trees or mountains in the background, or it could be the grassy foreground. Don't put as much detail here. Give the viewer some work to do. It's only fair because you've done all the rest!

Assessing your painting

Put the painting away for a week and then look at it anew. If nothing else, check your tones and edges. If there are some hard edges drawing your eye where they shouldn't, then soften them. Are there soft edges that need to be tightened up? Are your values interesting? Could some more darks add excitement? If not, sign it and leave it alone. □

Parliamentary Paper, 37 x 27cm
Adding life

This painting is all about texture and light. The heavy drapes, the overstuffed chairs, the opulent carpet, the light streaming through the window and reflecting off the shiny surfaces, and of course, the wonderful shadows again. There was so much in this that it needed to be simplified. However, it needed some life in it also, so I created a figure as the focal point with the greatest tonal contrast and hardest edges. I also eliminated a few unnecessary chairs and only hinted at the bookcases. Note the variation in warm/cool colours, soft/hard edges, wet/dry brushwork, light/dark areas.


In the Shadows, 37 x 27cm

The star of this painting is the lovely old building with the greatest contrast of light/dark and hardest edges. The yellow umbrella adds balance and interest. All the figures and details in the shade have been kept soft by adding them in while the shadow was still damp. The big building to the right is merely hinted at.
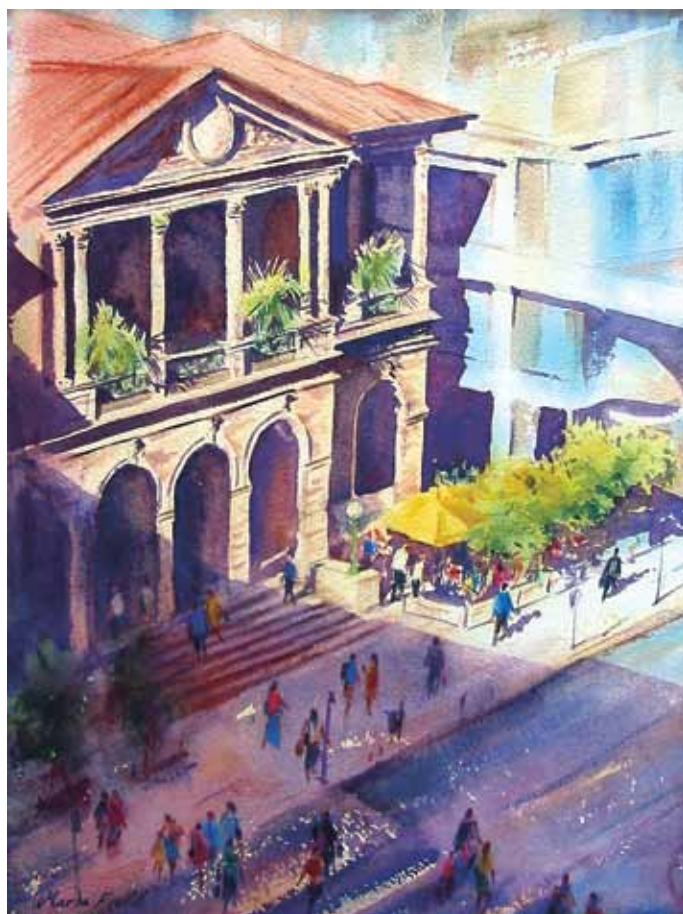
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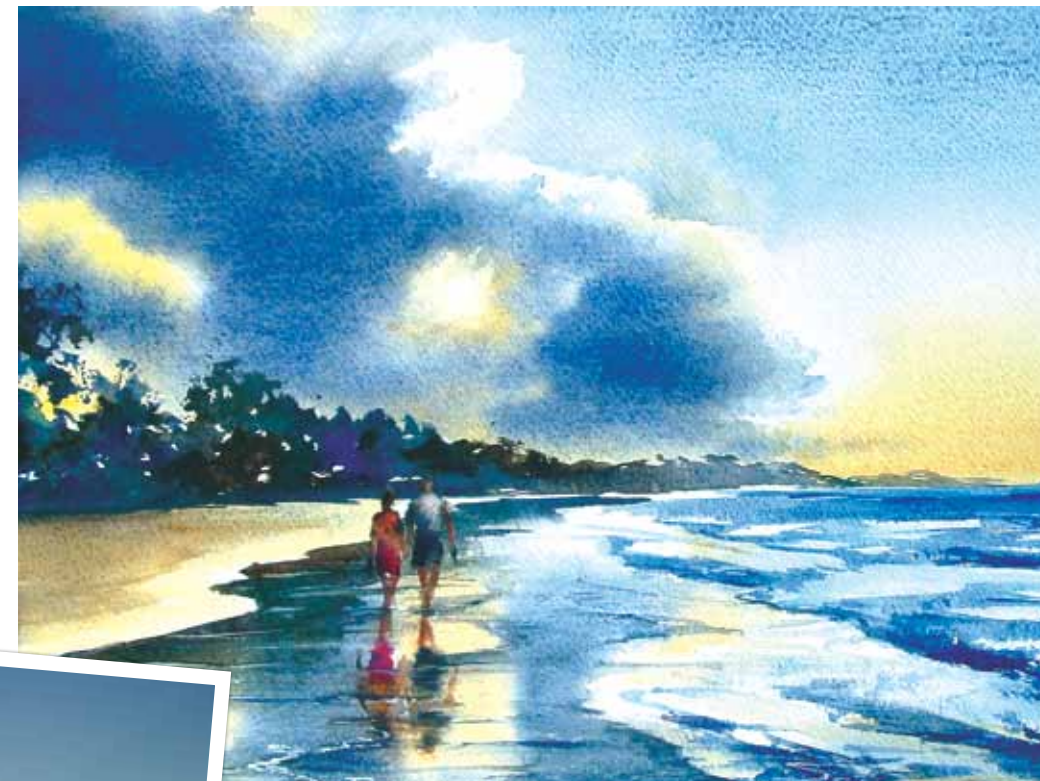
Hervey Bay, 37 x 27cm
Adding people for life

The obvious star of this show is that beautiful sky. The reflections in the water help to mirror this, but it needed a little life in it, so I added a happy couple enjoying the moment. Notice again the mix of warm/cool colours, soft/hard edges, light/dark contrast and mix of brushstrokes for variety.

about the artist

Maria Field is a self-taught Brisbane artist and mother of two, born in Brisbane in 1963. Her love of art began at the age of 5 when she received a 36 colour paint box, which became her most treasured possession.

Maria enjoys sharing her love of art by teaching weekly art classes at Scattered Arts Gallery. Since commencing competing in shows in 2003, Maria has won over 41 awards, including 14 Firsts, "Champion of Show" Samford Show 2007 and "Reserve Champion" Samford 2009. She was commissioned by the Lord Mayor's Office to do a watercolour painting of Brisbane as an international gift and two of her paintings were bought by the Ipswich Art Gallery for their permanent collection.

Maria's work can be viewed at
GALLERY NEWTOWN
176 Brisbane St, Ipswich Queensland

QUEENSLAND WATERCOLOUR SOCIETY, (various venues) Queensland

SCATTERED ARTS
6 Newman Road, Camp Hill Queensland
and by visiting her website at
www.paradox.com.au/ mariafieldart

Her works are held in private and corporate collections throughout Australia and in England, Canada, South Africa, Italy and Japan. If you have any queries or are interested in class information please do not hesitate to contact Maria Field at PO Box 2043, Toowong 4066 or email **mfield@cheerful.com**