



# In the Blink of an Eye

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY Stephen Harby



## MOROCCO

I felt a time constraint when working on **Carpet Bazaar, Fez** (ink and watercolor on paper, 11½x8¼) because I was the only painter amongst a group determined to see as many carpet emporia as possible in an afternoon. As my traveling companions haggled while being served sweet mint tea, I was struck by the vivid colors of the rugs heaped on the floor as the merchants unfurled one after another. The forms of the architecture, distinct at this close range, merited a quick capture. An outline in Micron pen provided an armature for the color.

What watercolor sketcher hasn't seen a fabulous subject come and go before having had time to capture it? While sketching in this medium is a more nimble enterprise than painting in oil, the time needed to set up materials, lay out a sketch and wait for the washes to dry tends to mitigate the impulse to paint on the fly. The dynamics of the subject, vantage point and light—as well as the impatience of a fellow traveler—all impose time pressure.

Over the years, I've developed a technique for quickly and spontaneously capturing colors, shapes and light—forcing myself to look beyond details so as to abstract the subject to its essence. I adopted this approach out of necessity while painting aboard a moving vessel, whether in Venice or along the coast of the Cinque Terre, in Italy. Having an immutable, built-in time constraint imposed by movement, either of the subject or of the artist's vantage point, creates the sense of urgency essential to the quick editing of extraneous detail in order to focus on a few key shapes or colors that most characterize the subject.

Preparation for the moment of visualization is important: Having brushes laid out, colors in place and moistened, pre-cut sheets of paper at hand is essential. I use 8x10- or 5x7-inch sheets and a spring clip to hold them on a rigid board. You could instead use a quality spiral-bound watercolor notebook from which you can tear the sheets and set them aside to dry as the sketches are completed. I find my usual bound watercolor sketchbook is not suitable for this, because that posterity-infused volume doesn't permit the abandon and potential for failure

## CINQUE TERRE

The region of the Cinque Terre (five lands), in northwest Italy, along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, provides abundant opportunities for breathtaking rides aboard the coastal steamers that ply the waters between the towns of Santa Margherita, Portofino and Camogli. Sizable mountains rise steeply from the coast, and picturesque villages of densely packed, brightly colored buildings cling to the slopes. In *Ligurian Coast* (below, top), preliminary applications of clear water suggest the



clouds, into which the distant mountain fades, as well as the white surf bordering the blue sea.

LEFT  
**Ligurian Coast**  
watercolor on paper,  
5¼x7



ABOVE  
**Camogli**  
watercolor on paper,  
4¾x6½



LEFT  
**Camogli Up Close**  
watercolor on paper,  
4¾x6½

As the boat rounded a peninsula, a brightly colored town consisting of closely packed multistory buildings appeared. *Camogli* (above, middle) is the most developed of these quick studies. The warm day allowed the paint to dry fairly quickly, so the layers of receding mountains and details like windows could be added without the colors running together.

Soon, with the onward progress of the boat, we were right next to the town, our destination, and it was time to put everything away and disembark. For *Camogli Up Close* (above, bottom) I had no time for anything more than shapes and colors—the foreground of buildings against a backdrop of the hills, with the darker foliage of trees in the middle ground.

## STUDIO STUDIES



Often, at the start of a day's session in the studio, not knowing where to begin, I'll do a series of quick studies of imaginary cloudy skies, landscapes or sunsets, all on a large sheet of paper that has been subdivided with artist's tape into smaller panels. These spontaneous studies evolve as the vicissitudes of the flowing paint dictate.

**Capriccio of Sky, Clouds and Sunset**  
(watercolor on paper, 20x30)

that's necessary to stay loose; after all, not every sheet is a keeper.

There's no time to lay out a pencil drawing first, so use the initial application of wash to block out key shapes or gestures that you want to represent accurately. A good example is using the sky to frame a dome or other form bathed in light. Use washes infused with pigment—there's no time to build up with glazing. Leave gaps between different colors to prevent them from running together—or blend complementary colors wet-into-wet to get toned-down neutrals.

Working fast enables a vividly fresh impression that distills the essential elements of the subject and discards the less critical details. Such field sketches can also guide a more sustained painting when you return to the studio or, at the very least, can embed the visual experience into your memory forever. ♡

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### VIETNAM

I captured the scene in **Junks on Ha Long Bay, Vietnam** (watercolor on paper, 5½x7) from a moving junk on a hazy day. As two tied-together boats emerged, I painted them wet-into-wet on a partially dried background of the water. I left gaps in the paint, allowing the white of the paper to express highlights and the separation of the two vessels. I stopped the wash for the distant island short of the horizon to indicate haze, making the island seem to float. A boat on the horizon further establishes the sense of distance. For my grays, I used two reliable and frequently used complementary blendings: Ultramarine blue and burnt sienna produced the gray for the boats; cerulean blue with a bit of cadmium red gave me the gray for the sea.