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**10 Commandments of Watercolor
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Four Exercises &

10

Commandments of Watercolor Painting

Californian **Stephen Harby** learned to paint in watercolor as part of his education in architecture, but eventually his passion for painting on location consumed most of his time and creative energy. He now takes students through a series of exercises and gives them clear directions so that they can be successful in exploring the medium. | **by M. Stephen Doherty**

WHEN STEPHEN HARBY was a student of architecture at Yale University in the early 1970s, he was trained to render buildings with graphite, ink, and watercolor rather than with computer software. Among the skills necessary for creating accurate representations of buildings was the ability to add watercolor enhancements to accurate graphite and ink drawings. “I was a student before computer-aided design was introduced, so I studied the history of architecture, ways of making accurate observations, and procedures for drawing and rendering designs in color,” he remembers. “I was also encouraged to keep a sketchbook with me so I could record what I saw or to give form to my ideas.”

Like most architects of his generation, Harby did eventually learn to adapt to the new computer software that transformed the profession, especially when he was project manager on the construction of large buildings designed by the senior architect in his firm, Charles W. Moore, one of the most celebrated architects of the 20th century. But Harby never lost his love of drawing and painting, and in 1995 he earned a sabbatical leave that allowed him to travel on a slow-moving freighter and record views of the passing scenery. That was followed by a grant in 1996—the Gabriel Prize from the Western European Architecture Foundation—that required him to create large-scale watercolor paintings as he studied classical architecture in France. “All of that got me back to communicating the drama of the architectural experience with traditional drawing and painting media,” he explains. “I was also able to become completely immersed in paintings in which I explored the play of water, color, light, and shadow rather than just the precise representation of structures. That exploration became more and more intriguing, and eventually I gave up my full-time job as an architect so that I could treat my art as the focus of my time and attention. I now teach and consult part time, with drawing and painting (along with traveling to artistically inspiring places) being my principal interests.”

**Michigan Avenue
at Dusk**

1996, graphite and
watercolor, 24 x 18.
Collection The Art
Institute of Chicago,
Chicago, Illinois.





LEFT

**Piazza San Marco,
Venice**

2004, graphite and mono-
chrome wash, 12¼ x 9½.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE

**Temple at Pagan,
Burma**

2007, watercolor,
22½ x 16½.
Collection the artist.

Ironically, many of the courses Harby teaches at the Yale School of Architecture, in New Haven, Connecticut, are aimed at reintroducing drawing and painting into the study of architecture. He regularly instructs students at his alma mater and during travel workshops abroad, and he takes students through a series of exercises that help in understanding how to progress toward a successful painting. He isolates the issues associated with evaluating a potential arrangement of shapes; building layers of transparency to match the composition of values; mixing colors to the right hue, intensity, and temperature; and laying colors down so that they accurately capture the sense of light and shadow. "It all has to do with capturing

the sense of light, and there are specific ways one can use paint to accomplish that," Harby explains.

**The First Exercise:
Understanding the Materials**

Painting can be an overwhelming pursuit if students think about all they have to understand and put into practice. That's why Harby starts his classes with a general description of the brushes, paints, and papers and a brief review of how watercolor differs from opaque media. "I want students to have a general idea of what they will be dealing with, so I offer quick demonstrations of how to reserve the white of the paper; how to mask, blot, and scrub the application of paint;

how transparent watercolor compares with gouache; and how the paint can be applied in thin, uniform washes or in thick drybrush applications."

**The Second Exercise:
A Monochromatic Sepia Painting**

After this preliminary review of materials and techniques, Harby asks students to paint with three gradations of sepia made by gradually diluting an increasing amount of sepia-colored watercolor in water. The exercise begins with applying a thin wash everywhere except in places where the white of the paper will establish the brightest highlights, then painting a slightly darker wash for the middle tones, and then finishing with the darkest layer of sepia in the shadows. "This exercise sweeps away the students' concerns about detail because they can only focus on the basic divisions of light and shadow," Harby explains. "Even the least experienced beginner comes up with credible and striking results. I encourage them to avoid biting off the whole thing and to understand the subsets of knowledge about technique. Simplicity and organization will carry them through to the more complicated aspects of watercolor painting."

**The Third Exercise:
A Color Chart & Three Color Strips**

Students taking a class that meets for an extended period of time will make a chart of progressive mixtures of colors, as well as color strips in which two complementary colors are combined. That is, the chart documents the results of intermixing 11 different pan colors, whereas the single strips show what happens when an artist adds increasing amounts of red to green, blue to orange, and yellow to purple. "The exercise is a good one to practice on a regular basis," Harby notes in the literature he distributes to the students. "Choose pairs of complements and in seven steps progress from the pure version of



DEMONSTRATION: **PANTHEON DOME WITH SHAFT OF LIGHT**



Step 1
Reserve the white.



Step 2
Complete the overall armature.



Step 3
Paint the deep shadows.



Step 4
Establish the atmospheric effects.

THE COMPLETED PAINTING:
**Pantheon Dome With
Shaft of Light (based
on previous study)**
2007, monochrome wash,
15 x 12. Collection the artist.



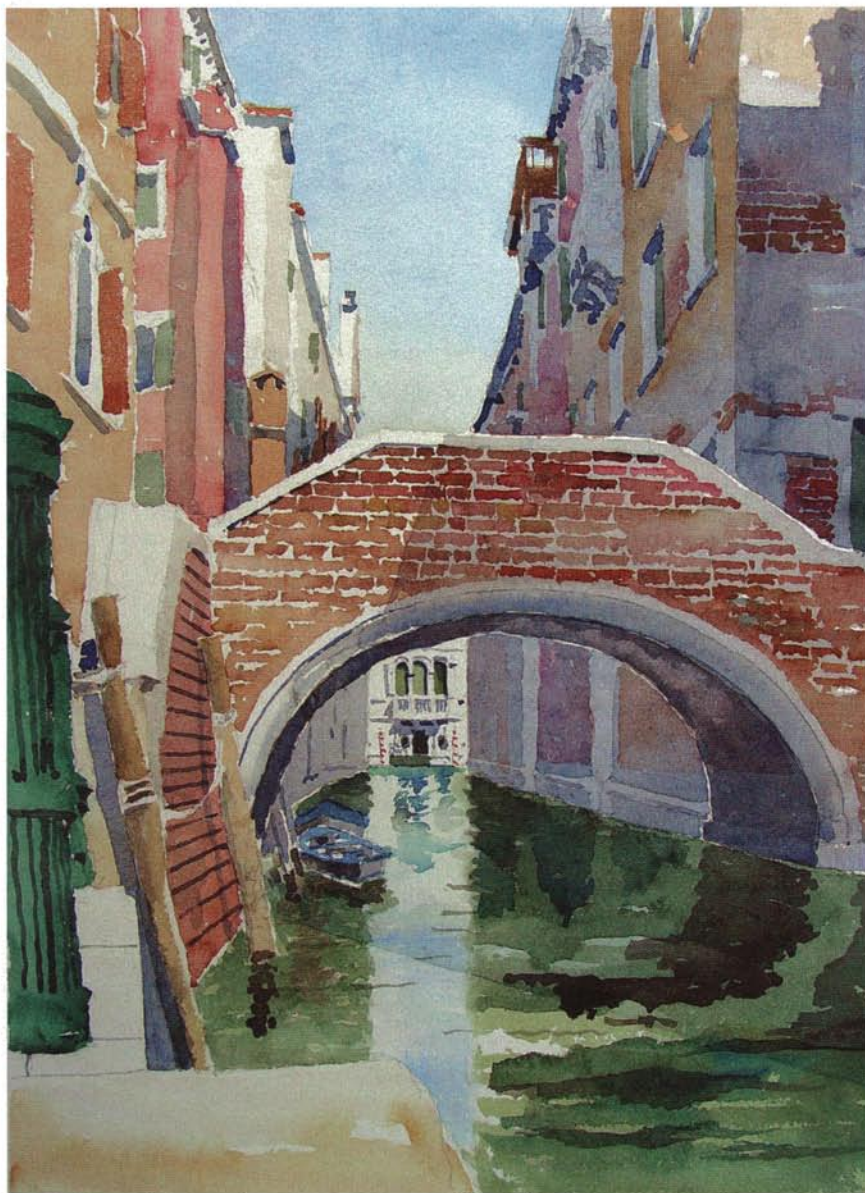
RIGHT

**Canal Study 3,
Venice**

2007, graphite and
watercolor, 17 x 13.
Private collection.

Harby's Palette

- cadmium yellow
- Winsor lemon
- quinacridone gold
- yellow ochre
- burnt sienna
- cadmium red light
- alizarin crimson
- quinacridone violet
- cobalt blue
- ultramarine blue
- Antwerp blue
- Winsor green
- perylene green



one color, gradually mixing until you have the pure version of the opposite. You can start with equal amounts of each, which should produce a completely neutral gray, which would be in the middle of the range. Rearranged, the strips produce the color wheel of the three primary colors with their secondary complements.”

The Fourth Exercise: Mapping a Painting

In some short-term workshops, Harby has students go through another exercise in planning the sequential development of a watercolor painting. They start by mapping out a drawing that emphasizes the most important elements of

the subject and a distinct pattern of light and shadow, and then they make a preliminary monochromatic wash of the image. Using the graphite and sepia drawings as references, students develop a full-color watercolor painting.

Student Practice

After taking students through these basic exercises, Harby allows them time to develop their own watercolor paintings. As he talks to the students individually, his remarks are concerned with the logic of layering progressively darker and more opaque colors, maintaining a balance between cool shadows and warm sunlit areas, and avoiding a tendency to apply thick, dull col-

ors. “The logic of watercolor is completely opposite from oil painting, and some students have to be convinced that colors can remain vibrant and transparent, even when they are describing dark shadows,” he says.

Watching the Instructor

Harby paints alongside the students so that they can actually see how he plans and executes his watercolors. He points out that versatility is the best strategy, and he adjusts his technique depending on the complexity of the subject, the amount of time available for painting, and his own sense of preparedness. “If I’m starting my first painting after getting the workshop underway, I may do a

"The ultimate goal is to paint the way the light is expressed. In most situations, warm colors create a central focus while cool colors imply distance."

series of warm-up exercises on scraps of paper to explore color, light, and the possibilities available at the location," he explains. "If I'm painting a complicated street scene and I want to make sure the perspective is correct, I may also develop a fairly careful drawing before I start painting. But if I focus on a subject I've painted many times before, I'm likely to load a brush with paint and start working directly on a sheet of Arches 300-lb cold-pressed paper.

"Invariably, I'll explain to students that the identity and detail of the subject is less important to me than the pattern of light and shadow," Harby says. "The ultimate goal is to paint the way the light is expressed. In most situations, warm colors create a central focus while cool colors imply distance."

Harby points out that he prefers to

use the rectangular-shaped cakes of dry paint referred to as "full-pan" watercolors rather than tubes or moist paint. "I just find it easier to travel with the pans and wet the paint as I need it," he explains. "All the materials I work with were chosen for their portability because I seldom check luggage when I travel. I work on individual sheets of 140-lb or 300-lb Arches, Winsor & Newton, or Fabriano cold-pressed or rough watercolor paper that I attach to a 12½"-x-20½" board with rounded corners (the maximum size that fits in my carry-on luggage). I have three rounds and one flat brush, all of which have detachable plastic handles that serve as caps to protect the hairs of the brushes.

"Because I prefer to paint on location rather than in a studio, I seldom work on a painting for more than two hours

because the light changes dramatically within that time frame," Harby explains. "The light is always more interesting in the morning or late afternoon, so I paint during those hours and schedule other activities from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. I always take photographs of the subjects in case I want to work on some of the architectural details later on, but I am conscious of the fact that more paintings are ruined by being overworked than are improved by extra details."

The 10 Commandments of Watercolor Technique

This is a synthesis of what I learned from my teachers Lee Buckley and Armin Hofmann, as well as from personal experience and study with Timothy Clark.

1. Work from light to dark.
2. Work from broad definition to defined detail.
3. Choreograph and plan the work to progress from point A to point C (not from A to B to C).
4. Always "audition" your colors first by testing on a scrap of watercolor paper.
5. Be patient. Allow each wash to dry properly, do not despair if the intermediate result looks ugly, and keep moving from one area to another.
6. Be sure to think about and "reserve" the white of the paper.
7. Do not overwork and oversaturate the paper. Pay attention when it says stop.
8. Always work with clean water. (Best to use two receptacles of water.)
9. Control the moisture in the brush and in washes, and have a tissue handy to blot away excess.
10. Know when the work is completed and stop. ■

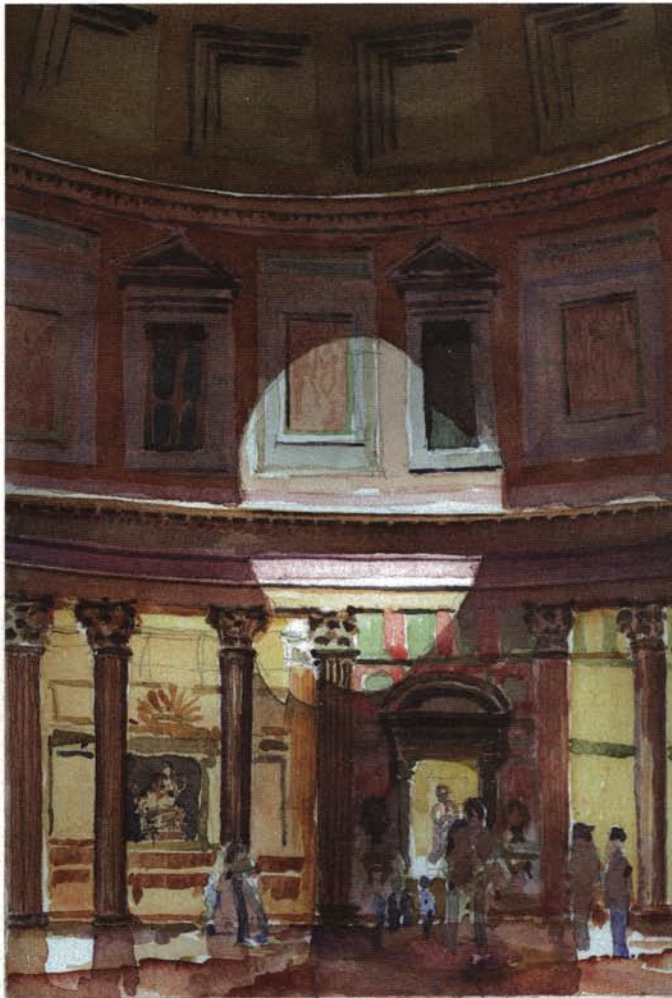
About the Artist

Stephen Harby graduated from Yale College, in New Haven, Connecticut, with a double major in architectural history and architecture and later received a master's degree in architecture from Yale University. He worked in California for the architectural firm of Moore Ruble Yudell and for Charles Moore at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Urban Innovations Group. He received a Rome Prize Fellowship at the American Academy in Rome in architecture and has exhibited his work at The Art Institute of Chicago, the UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture, and the Fine



Arts Building, in Los Angeles. He currently teaches drawing, painting, and architecture at the Yale School of Architecture and watercolor painting during travel workshops. He is a member of the Santa Monica Watercolor Society. For more information, visit his website at www.stephenharby.com.

M. Stephen Doherty is the editor-in-chief of American Artist.



FAR LEFT
Pantheon Interior, Rome
1999, 13½ x 10, graphite and watercolor. Private collection.

LEFT
Harby's painting setup and the suitcase that holds all his traveling supplies.



ABOVE
Villa Cornaro, Piombino Dese, Italy
2007, graphite and monochrome wash, 12 x 20.

LEFT
Rock Garden Inn, Phippsburg, Maine
2007, graphite and watercolor, 18 x 24. Collection the artist.

