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Conquest  
of Space**

**Painting  
Architectural  
Watercolors**



COVER: *METHODS OF CONCEALMENT* (DETAIL), BY GARY FAIGIN

# watercolor

## P A G E

# Intrigued by Architecture

by **Bob Moody**

**L**own a commercial interior and architectural design business in Birmingham, Alabama, where I reside, and

am always doing watercolor renderings for our various projects, which include restaurants, banks, law firms, and schools. In fact, when we're meeting with a potential client, these watercolors often help us clinch the deal. In the past, clients have been sold on a proposed architectural project based on my watercolor interpretation of what their structure might look like.

Although these paintings are often tightly rendered and realistic, I like my own works to look as effortless and unlabored as possible. Three years ago, I had a chance to devote a month to painting in the loose style I prefer. I was at a crossroads in my life, and my wife and I decided to spend a month, with our three-year-old son, in Tuscany. We rented a house (a fourteenth-century gardener's cottage) in the country thirty

miles south of Siena, right in the heart of Tuscany. I would get up early and paint and sketch every day, and we would make day trips to the little hill towns. I probably shouldn't have stayed in Italy so long, because I didn't want to come back.

The hill towns of Tuscany presented me with a never-ending panorama of inspiration. I produced more than sixty paintings on-site and returned to the States with a cache of photographs and sketches from which I have continued to work (I've made more than one hundred fifty paintings so far). Besides the towns, I also painted street scenes. Everywhere I went, I was fascinated by little details, such as a pair of shutters.

When I'm on-site, I make small sketches on whatever's available, usually what I call "trash" paper, such as an old piece of stationery. In these sketches I draw the silhouettes of the lightest and darkest areas of the painting. I also draw in a few perspective lines, and if there's a figure, I pencil it in so I can get a sense of scale. Most of my work is done in the studio, primarily from these sketches but also from photographs. The

camera can be limiting, though. With a sketch, you have the advantage of your peripheral vision; you can see a lot of things that you wouldn't with a camera and bring them into the composition.

So much of watercolor is drawing. A watercolor painting has to have a basic structure so that the vanishing points are accurate. I recommend that people learn to draw before they learn to paint. In painting a scene, it's important to visualize the backdrop, which might be the sky, and then what is in front of it, such as a mountain, and so on—all of the layers facing you. If artists can do that, then they can achieve a sense of depth in their paintings.

I generally use 300- to 400-lb watercolor paper, but for my on-site paintings in Italy, I made my own watercolor block out of half-sheets of 140-lb paper stapled on top of each other. These works would progress rather quickly. After the sketch, I would get to my favorite part—slapping on the

Opposite page:  
*Via di Porrione, San Martino, Siena,*  
1993, watercolor, 21 x 14. Collection  
Mr. and Mrs. Richard Ogle.



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*Typical Hillside Castle*, 1994, watercolor, 4 x 5. Collection the artist.

These are two of my graphite sketches for *Typical Hillside Castle*. In these sketches, which I usually make on what I call "trash paper," I draw the silhouettes of the lightest and darkest areas of the painting.



watercolors. I'd slosh them on with a big brush, usually a 3" one. (Quite often when I lay in big strokes like that, the white texture of the paper shines through the paint nicely and I can work around and preserve it. Sometimes these whites inspire a whole new composition.) Then I'd use red sables—a No. 14 and a No. 12—to put in more detail, and sometimes I'd work back into that with a smaller brush. In all, these paintings took me maybe twenty minutes each, from start to finish.

My current palette was developed in Italy and includes more brownish undertones and more reds and yellows. I don't like to use white gouache or tempera—it seems like cheating to me. I have seen very nice watercolors in which the artist came back and used white gouache, but I just couldn't let myself do that. I try to visualize ahead of time which areas will be white, and sometimes I'll mask them off with liquid frisket or I'll use a razor blade to scrape out a white highlight.

It probably makes sense that I've always been inclined to depict archi-



*Entry to Hill Town Near San Gimignano, 1993, watercolor, 14 x 21. Collection the artist.*

texture, even when painting for myself and not for work. I never had to take a figure-drawing class in architecture school, after all. But I do think that landscapes and buildings provide interesting layers of color and shadow that are much more subtle and difficult to capture in other subjects. My choice of subject matter always relates to the play of light on an object, particularly the way light interacts with the surface of architectural shapes.

Although most of my paintings are done on half-sheets of watercolor paper, I'll often evaluate a completed picture for areas that are particularly strong, and sometimes I'll cut and mat only those areas. I also don't hesitate to discard a painting if it becomes muddy or overworked. In fact, for every acceptable watercolor I've produced there are probably about ten rejects. I'm always striving for that elusive watercolor that looks as if it were done by magic—even though I often laugh at the irony of the effort that such a work requires. ■



*Bob Moody attended the School of Architecture at Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama. After graduation, he worked as a commercial artist for a publishing and advertising firm in Texas, leaving in 1959 to take a job in Huntsville, Alabama, as a conceptual artist and art director for NASA's future projects department. His work for NASA has appeared in Life, Newsweek, Paris Match, and many other national and international publications. After spending five years painting and exhibiting in the Southeast, he returned to architectural design in 1965 and established his own firm in 1974. Moody's paintings are in many private collections.*