

Chasing the Dragon

by Rob Candy

Textures of an Ancient Land

Artists on the Silk Road tour after painting on the Great Wall.



China presents the watercolourist with an amazing opportunity to explore a land rich in diversity, from the ancient cities such as Xian, the home of the terracotta warriors, to the majestic scenery of the Great Wall and the vastness and isolation of the Gobi Desert. Wherever you travel through China, there is a fascination, yet acceptance, of artists in their endeavours to capture the land and culture of China.

There are many reasons why this land of the dragon suits the watercolour artist.

One reason is that for the watercolourist, it is like a homecoming, as China is a land so rich and steeped in the tradition of watercolour painting and calligraphy, dating back thousands of years. This timeless art for centuries has been the core of a rich and colourful artist legacy as scroll upon scroll has been decorated with watercolour scenes of cascading mountains and the romantic, misty atmosphere of Chinese rivers and mountain crags. The ancient art of calligraphy, with its beautiful handmade papers, ground inks and pointed brushes, has been evolved by countless artists. This written form shares much in common with watercolour, from materials

to brush and paint techniques.

For the traveller to China watercolour allows the ability to capture the moment on paper, right before one's eyes. From the bustling market scene crowded with thousands of shoppers, to the heat of the desert area, or the residential lane, the watercolourist can move with ease, capturing a fleeting scene with a sketch and a wash, before escaping in search of the next painting opportunity.

Watercolour, with its portability, has suited the traveller, and for anyone who has been in a watercolour class, they quickly realise that there is a clear relationship between travel and watercolour. Most watercolour lessons are always a source of travel tips, stories or photographs. I have not yet met a watercolourist who is not a keen traveller. Watercolour also encourages the artist to explore the texture of China. The crowded, cluttered market scenes in Kashgar in China's far west, the serenity of the quiet meandering of the Li River near Guilin in Southern China, or the rough hue of the ancient wall, are challenges so readily met in watercolour. □

Hutong Rickshaw



Dragon Sketch

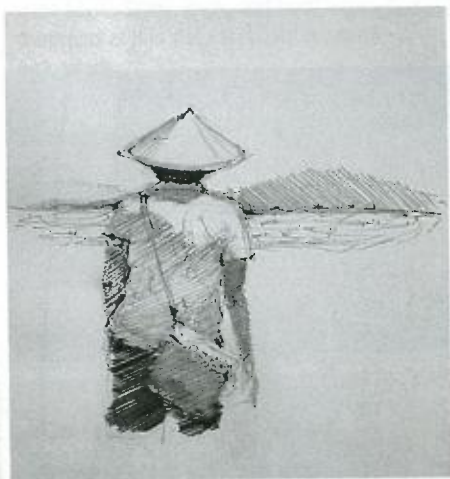
Not so scary, but full of colour and excitement; this typifies travels throughout China.





Planting Padi Rice

These women were planting rice in a small padi. I particularly enjoyed the light on their clothes and this contrasted nicely with the background. This small painting also utilises many watercolour techniques, including the use of salt and wax to achieve the required texture.



Padi Farmer, Longshen, China

These little sketches litter my sketchbook and I often refer to them as you would a library, to add a personal touch to a scene.

Padi Boy

What is amazing about China, which is developing so rapidly, is that so many areas still use traditional ways of farming. This boy was using a wooden plough which had obviously been used for decades. I sketched the boy with the rice padi behind in a loose manner and placed a reflection to indicate the water on the ploughed padi.



Tips for the Travelling Artist

1 Travel Light

The less art materials you travel with, the easier it is to pack and get organised.

2 Early Start

As soon as you arrive at a destination, get your art materials out and get ready to begin painting. If you leave them in your bag, they will stay there!

3 Start Small

Begin with a few small sketches, just to get used to the destination and constraints, leaving time to explore the area.

4 Aim Low

Do not try and finish work in the field. Be happy to bring work back to the studio. Masterpieces may happen, but they usually require time.

5 Position Yourself

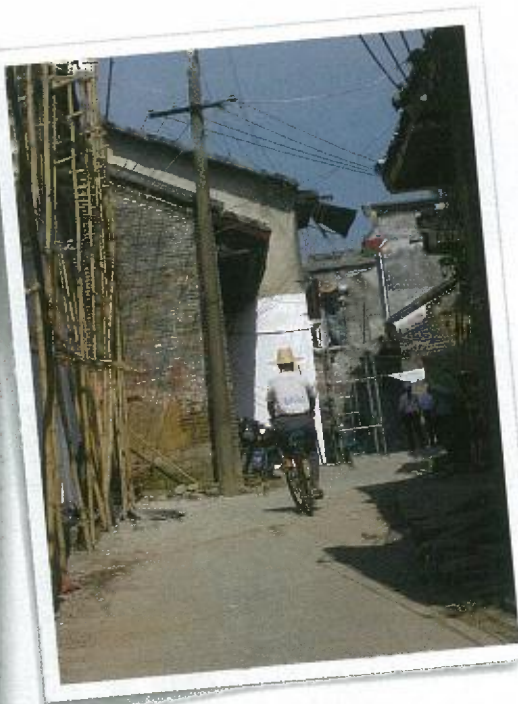
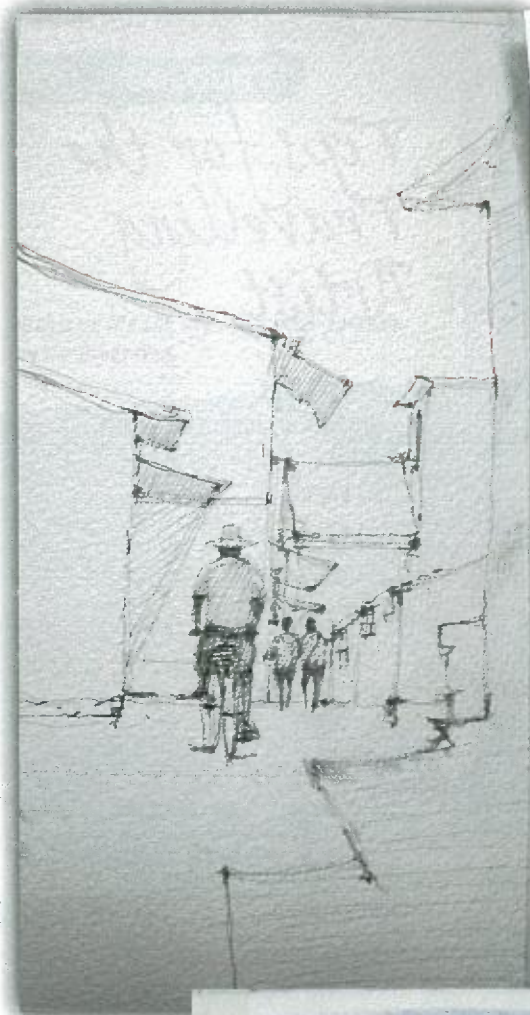
Find a quiet corner to start. Painting can be a confidence game and large audiences can shatter one's endeavours.

6 Search for Painting Locations

Postcards and tourist brochures often have great painting locations which may not be easily found in the regular tourist areas. Even Google image destinations to see what is available before you go.

7 Early Morning Starts

Before crowds and while others sleep, 'make hay while the sunshines!'



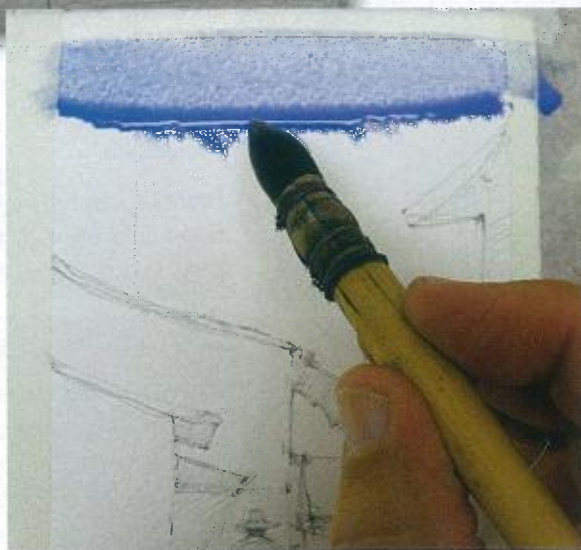
Reference photo

This scene was found in Fuli Town on the River Li, during a watercolour tour along the Silk Road and Southern China in 2010. This was a sleepy rural village on a hot afternoon. Our group painted by the river under the shade of large trees, with a café behind which sold cold drinks – this was an ideal painting location. The following is a simple watercolour demonstration of the scene.

my art in the making China Street Scene

STAGE 1 The Drawing

Drawn onto the rough 300g watercolour paper, the pencil leaves a strong mark. Areas of the drawing are shaded to indicate what is to be left or painted over during the later stages. I rarely use masking fluid, so I need to be well aware what highlights I want left at the end of the washes. At this stage, the composition is checked to ensure rhythm and balance.

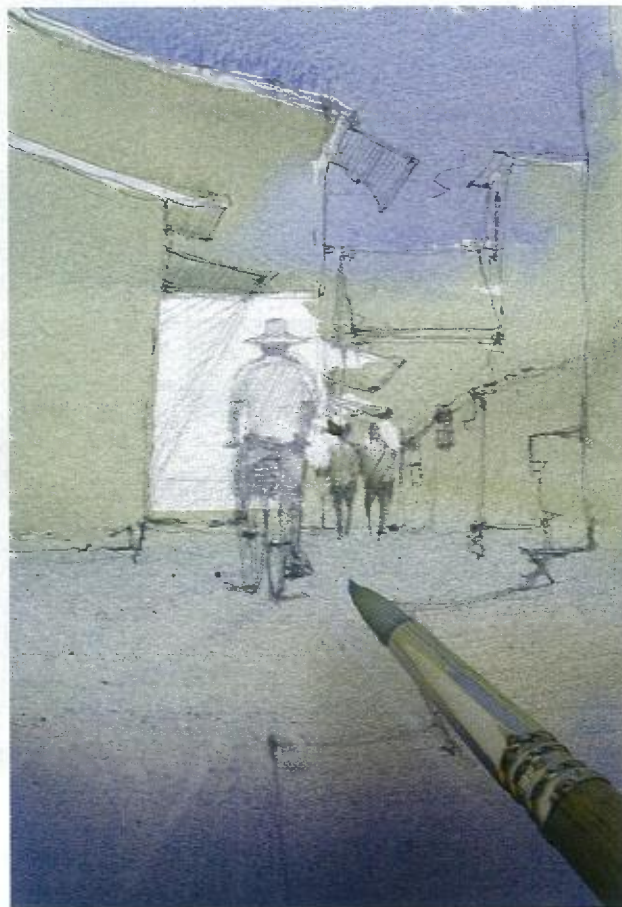


STAGE 2 The First Wash

A strong, grey blue sky wash began the painting process. The addition of Cerulean Blue allows for a slight granulation of the wash, which gives depth to the painting. I use a mop and substantial amounts of water to ensure that the watercolour pigment is evenly distributed and transported down the paper.

STAGE 3 The Colour Mix

The aim of this stage is to lay in the colour mix of the painting and to ensure that the highlights (whites) are preserved. Although much of the painting will be lost with subsequent washes, I try to complete the foreground roadway as much as possible with a strong warm wash.





STAGE 4 The Second Wash

The second major wash once again begins at the top and is carried down the paper with a large pointed brush as a bead of colour. The value sketch is constantly referred to, ensuring that the wash is not too light or dark. The speed of this wash should be fast, as further pigment will be used as the wash begins to dry, giving soft (lost) edges. It is dangerous at this stage to 'fiddle' too much with details.

STAGE 5

Identifying the Shapes

I continue the second wash down the right hand side, identifying the shapes. The shadows cast in the foreground are very important to the painting, directing the viewer's eye into the picture and should be a strong value with a variety of colours to allow the road to shine through the wash.

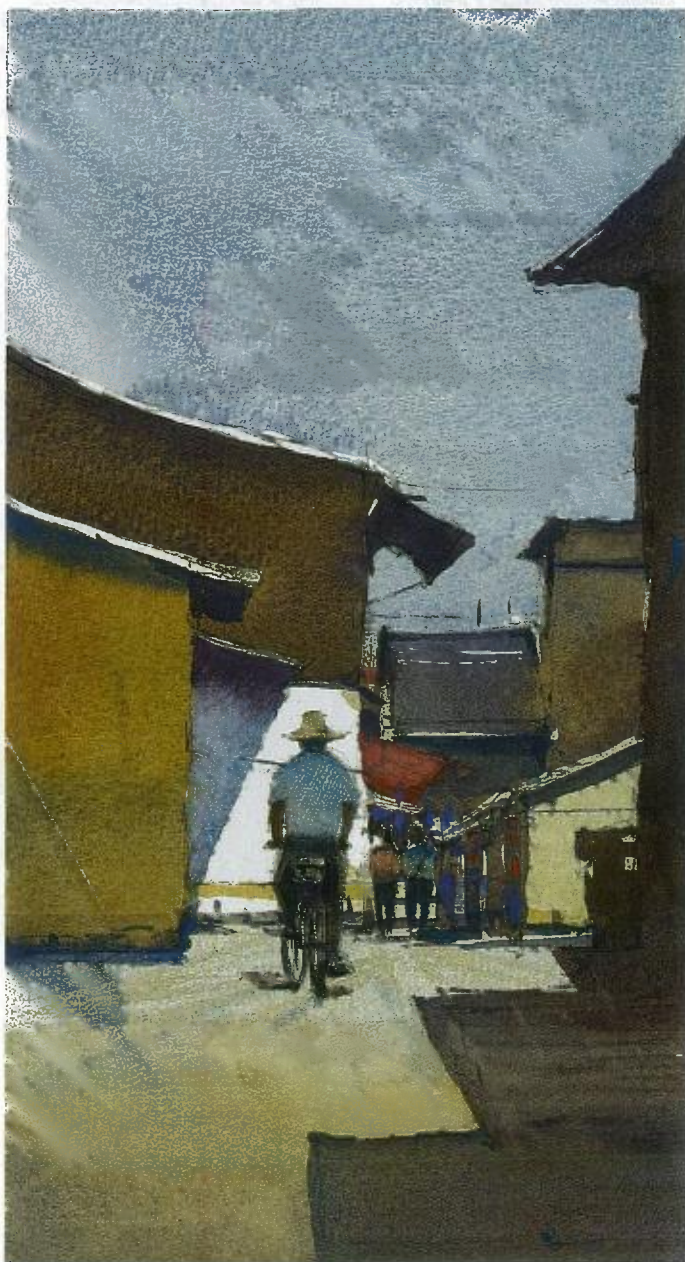


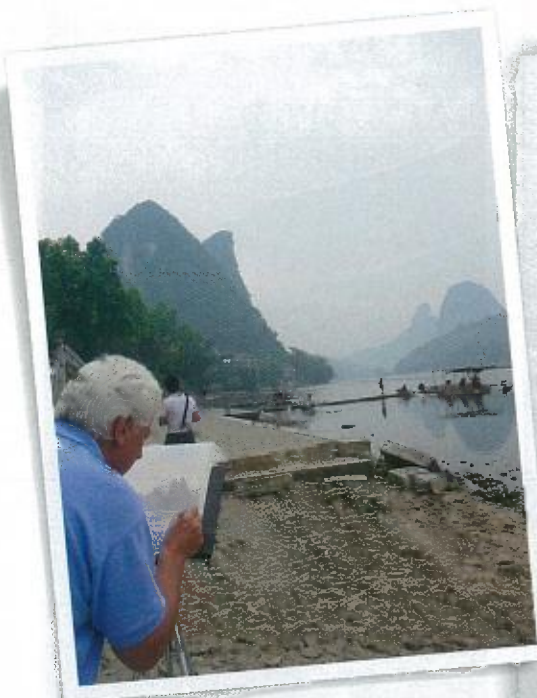
STAGE 6 Details

Once the second wash is dry and I 'set the scene', it is time to begin to complete the details. The main figure is placed against the white wall to emphasise and demand the attention of the viewer. Cerulean Blue is used darkest on the shoulders and lightens up down the back.



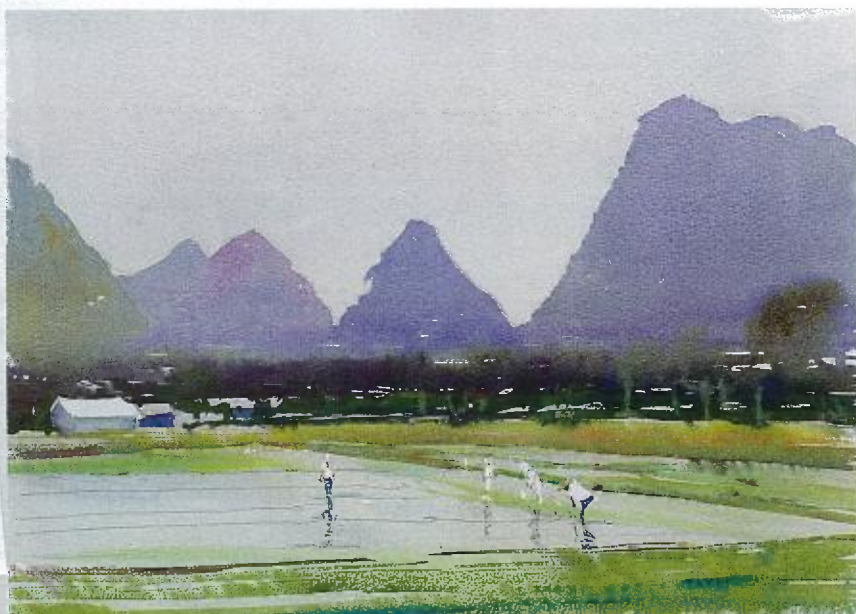
STAGE 7 The finished painting





Painting on the Yangtze River

Doing it tough! Painting watercolours of the various river scenes as they float past your balcony. The first thing, before you go to bed at night on any tour, is get the painting kit ready for the next morning, otherwise it won't happen !



Rice Padi Landscape, Yangshou

This scene is everywhere in southern China. I painted the limestone mountains in the background in a cool blue green, whilst the padi green is a mixture of Cobalt, Turquoise and Cadmium Yellow.



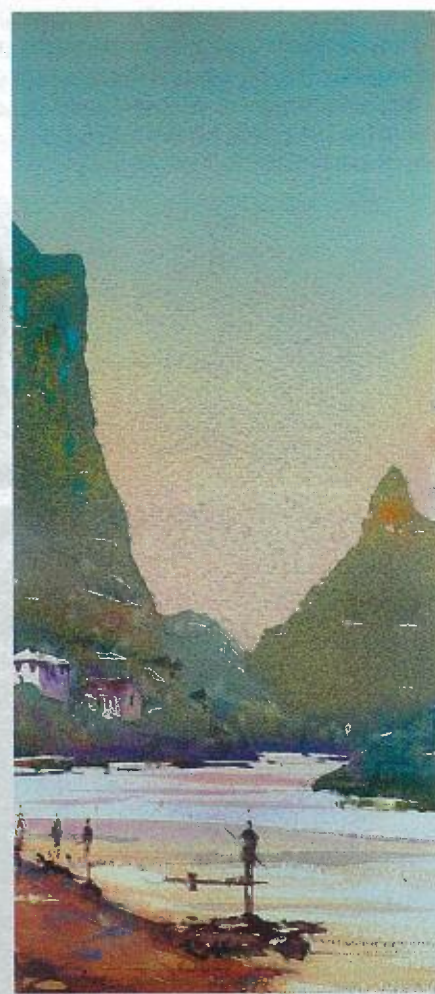
Yangshou Washing

Early mornings are the ideal time for the painter as fewer people are about and scenes such as washing clothes in the local river, are great to paint. Yangshou and Guilin are famous for their limestone mountains, which formed a backdrop to my sketch.

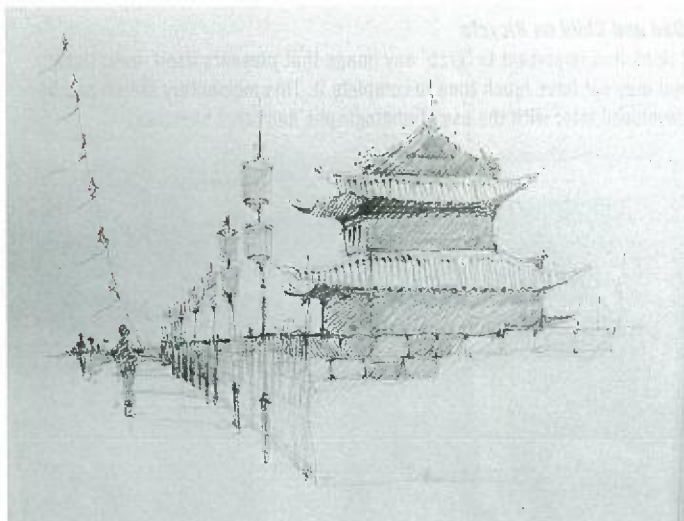


Li River Boatman, Guilin

When sketching people, select those who are not going to take off as soon as you begin to sketch or paint. In this case, this early morning boatman, who was waiting for business, was a 'captive sitter'.



Late Afternoon, Li River, Yangshou

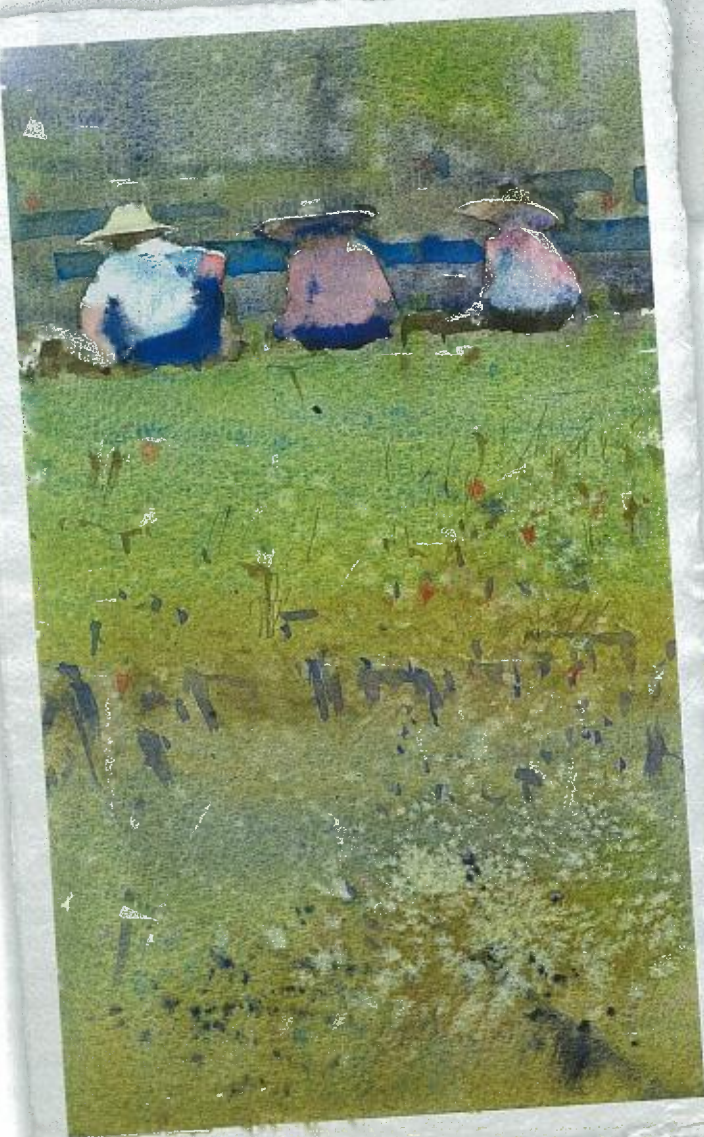


Xian Wall, pencil sketch

When time or weather allows the use of a pencil, which should always be near at hand! This simple sketch can be used later to complete a more comprehensive painting. After I completed this work it was off on a bicycle ride around the wall!



Xian Wall 2



Picking the Cotton, Dunhuang

I was so taken with this scene from Dunhuang in Western China, that I actually drew and painted it on a rocking bus as we drove between towns. I was particularly pleased with the whites of the paper representing the cotton and the light on the woman's clothing.

“

The ancient art of calligraphy shares much in common with watercolour, from materials to brush and paint techniques.

”