

Jeffrey Watts on Gouache

Jeffrey Watts grew up around gouache. "My father did architectural renderings," he says, "so even as a child I knew what it could do." These days Watts sees gouache as an effective training medium and one that he uses to make sketches and try out compositional ideas for larger oil paintings. "It's a great teaching tool," he says, "because artists are forced to put down one area of color next to another, leaving a hard edge, almost as though they are building a mosaic. When you are teaching students how to turn a form by looking at color and temperature as it changes across an area, they discover they can't blend right away with gouache as they can with oil. Instead, students have to really work to get the values right, and then go back and soften edges later. So it's a medium that teaches discipline and control." Gouache does have some negative properties, according to Watts. "You have to get used to the idea that the color isn't always the same when it's dry," he says. "Some pigments get a little lighter and others can get a little darker. It also requires a very delicate touch in handling, especially when overpainting. If you are using a wet layer of light-colored paint over a dark area, it can easily start to pull up the dark and muddy the color. It takes students awhile to learn exactly how much water to mix into the

BELOW
Coastal Lagoon
by Jeffrey Watts, 2005,
gouache, 2 x 5.
Collection the artist.

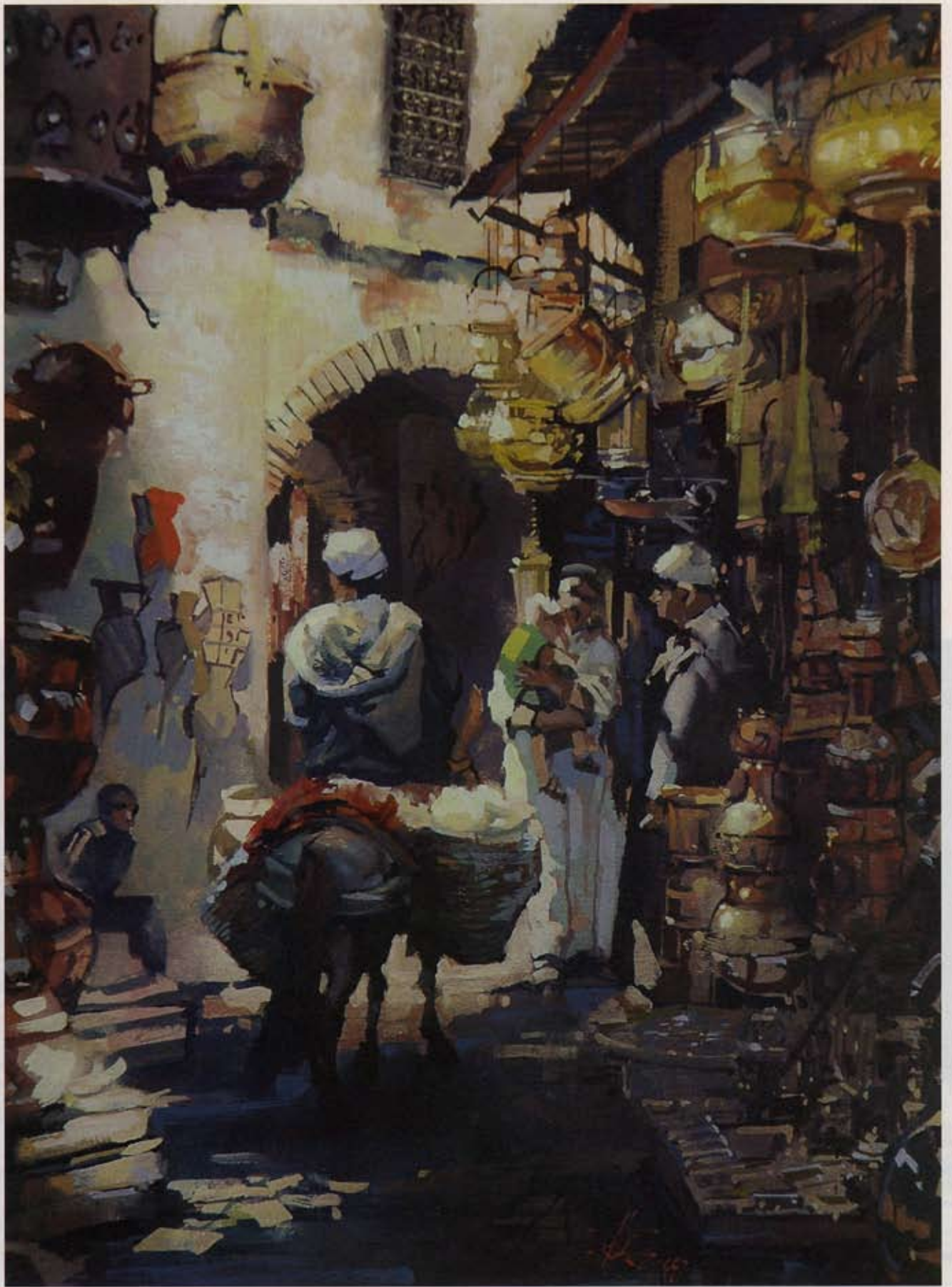
gouache to keep it opaque but not too thick." On the other hand, says Watts, gouache is very quick, and it is much more forgiving than watercolor. "You can soften edges and paint over things, and you can even build to a delicate impasto," he says. Best of all, the brilliant matte quality of gouache color is unparalleled. "Gouache gets used a lot as a commercial medium because it reproduces so well," says Watts.

"Gouache is also a great traveling medium. It's light and clean, and you have the option of working on location easily and getting an opaque painting without having to use oil."

In his own work, Watts says gouache allows him "to do a complete small color study and actually create a neat little painting so I get an immediate feel for the balance and look of the proposed picture." Other sketches he makes in gouache are often just thumbnail-size, quick compositional ideas that the gouache brings to life with just a few strokes. Watts says that he feels gouache works best on a fairly small scale. Used large it can feel a little flat and stretched, but on a modest scale, its vibrant color can give a brilliant and gem-like intensity to the work. "It's an unsung medium," he says. "Illustrators and designers seem to know about it more than fine artists. I'm often surprised that I don't see it used more."

OPPOSITE PAGE
Entering the Souk
by Jeffrey Watts, 2004,
gouache, 8 x 6.
Collection the artist.





RIGHT
Church Interior, Italy
by Jeffrey Watts,
2005, gouache,
4 1/2 x 6. Collection
the artist.

BELOW
High Sierras Winter
by Jeffrey Watts,
2005, gouache,
2 x 3 1/2. Collection
the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE
The Farrier
by Jeffrey Watts,
2005, gouache,
16 x 11. Private
collection.





Gouache

The word gouache comes from the Italian word *guazzo*, which means a splash of paint. Gouache is an opaque medium consisting of pigment and finely ground chalk, bound with gum arabic. The pigment sits on the chalk carrier to give a very brilliant, clean matte finish. Variations on the medium have been used since the 12th century and, in modern times, it was used by such artists as Van Gogh, Klee, and Picasso. It is highly prized by designers and illustrators, both for its speed of use and the fact that it reproduces so well. It can be rewetted after it has dried to soften edges. Because it is opaque, gouache allows for overpainting, although great care in application is required because new layers will rewet and loosen layers underneath. It is generally used on paper and is more effective on smoother papers than traditional watercolor because it is designed to sit on the surface rather than soak into the fibers of the paper. Gouache is sold in tubes in a wide variety of colors. For fine art, attention should be paid to the permanence of each pigment, as many of the colors sold to designers are fugitive and will fade. Most manufacturers provide a permanence scale for their products. Use of UV glass in framing is probably a good idea. ■

Comparative Table of Water-Based Media

Egg Tempera

Pros: Very delicate handling, clear color, sharp edges, great layering possibilities. Very permanent. Can be varnished for protection.

Cons: Cannot paint wet-in-wet very well. Cannot build a heavy impasto. Requires careful preparation.

Casein

Pros: Clean, clear color, especially in the lights. Sharp edges and clean glazes yet it still allows for a modest amount of wet-in-wet painting. Very permanent. Commercial casein paint is available in tubes. Can be varnished for protection.

Cons: Cannot be used on a flexible surface such as canvas. Does not allow for heavy impasto painting. Darks are often not very lustrous. Requires careful preparation if you choose to mix your own color.

Gouache

Pros: Brilliant matte color. Can be put down as a perfect flat surface. Provides opacity and can be used as an impasto. Very quick to use. Can be rewetted. Very delicate brushwork shows up well. Edges are sharp and clear. Wide range of colors available.

Cons: Because it can be rewetted, too much overworking will quickly make the paint look soggy. Not good for glazing techniques. Surface is extremely delicate and must be protected. Many of the colors are not very permanent. Cannot be varnished and must be exhibited behind glass.

Acrylic

Pros: Extremely versatile. Can be used in a wide variety of techniques from clear glazes to heavy impastos. Wide availability of mediums, gels, and modeling pastes allows the artist many options. Sta-Wet palettes now allow acrylic to be mixed like oil on the palette where it will stay wet for days. Impervious to water when dry, allowing extremely clean glazing and sharp edges. A retarder, or sprayed water, allows wet-in-wet painting.

Cons: An opaque acrylic surface never quite achieves the depth or luster of oil paint. The surface can often look a little plastic or gummy. Used transparently on paper, it doesn't deliver the beauty of true watercolor. Requires careful and immediate washing of brushes after use.