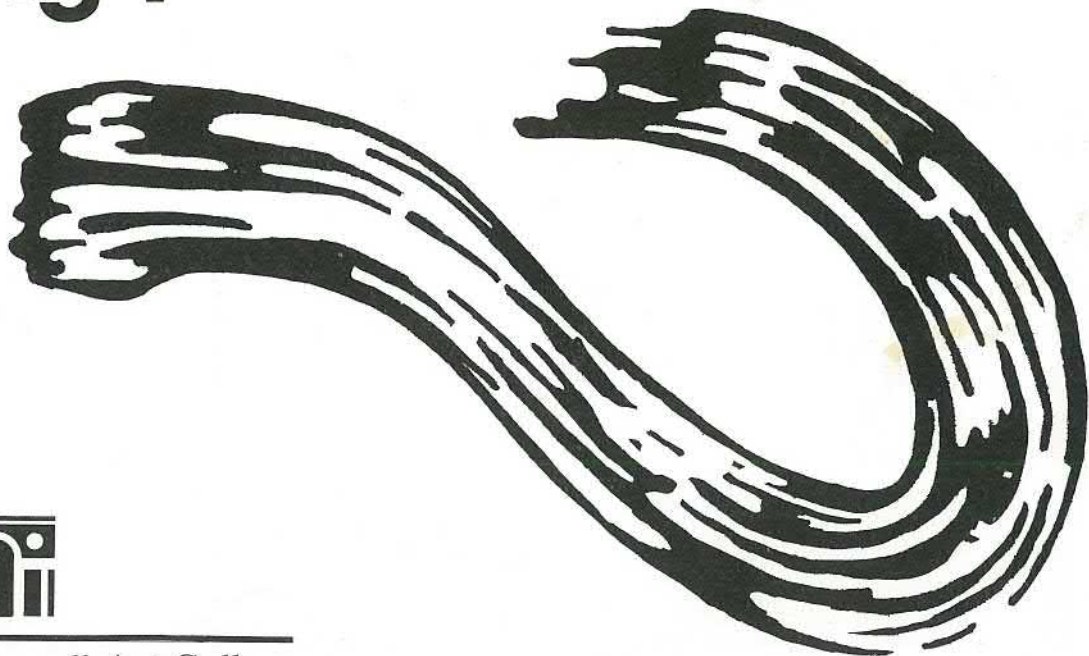


What goes into a Painting ?



The Robert McDougall Art Gallery

Christchurch City Council
New Zealand

What Goes Into a Painting?

..... a number of specialist and deliberate choices by the artist:—

1st Choice — What To Paint With?

..... the careful and deliberate choice of *medium* and the deliberate choice of *technique* .

Basically all paints are made from *pigments* which are light-reflecting powders. What these powders are mixed with in order to make the paint is the *medium* .

Whether to Use Oil Paints?

In oil paints the pigment is mixed with vegetable oil and diluted with turpentine.

This type of paint was used by Flemish and Italian artists as early as the 14th century and has been the major artist's medium for hundreds of years.

The Special Qualities of Oil Paints:—

- * in a paste-like form so it can be applied in thick opaque layers called 'impasto'
- * can also be diluted and used in thin transparent layers known as 'glazes'
- * hardens very slowly by a process of oxidation. A thick layer of oil paint may take several months to harden
- * has a naturally shiny surface
- * with ageing and exposure to strong lights oil paints tend to darken and whites become yellowed.



1. *The Bible Lesson*
Henrietta Browne 1857

The Bible Lesson was painted by a French artist Sophie de Bouteiller who was the daughter of the Comte de Bouteiller and the wife of an important diplomat. Because of her social position she used a nom de plume 'Henrietta Browne' when she painted this double portrait in oils.

Using the traditional 'grisaille' technique where the forms are first painted in a monochrome grey or ochre and then covered with successive thin glazes of colour, Henrietta Browne has created a very polished example of the academic realism so highly esteemed in the 19th century.

The technique she is using with the oil medium is probably most noticeable in the two faces. Here you

will see how the gentle pink flush on the girls' cheeks is subtly altered and imperceptibly blended into the other skin colours, and the brownish shadows under the brows and the greys reflected under the chin are beautifully blended into the face. The colour changes are very carefully smoothed leaving no visible trace of the brushwork.

The muslin head dresses also show how a thin oil glaze can be used to produce a transparent layer of colour. The ear of the girl on the right is seen through a thin white glaze and the lace ruffle at the wrist of her left hand illustrates the 'glaze' quality of oil paint most effectively. With them the artist is able to create most realistic impressions of thin transparent cloth.

The ability of the oil paint to make an opaque or impasto layer is also nicely demonstrated by the thickened edge around the cap and the edge of the white ruffle at the girl's neck and the wilting petals of the white marquerette daisies on the table.

After 130 years *The Bible Lesson* also demonstrates some of the inevitable ravages of time. The slow darkening of the oils almost obscures the folds and fashion details carefully recorded in black tones on the girls' dresses. Also as the fibres age the canvas support is slowly losing its tension. As it sags it is creating minute cracks across what would initially have been a taut and immaculately smooth painted surface.



2. *Ena Te Papatahi* A Ngapuhi Chieftainess
Charles Goldie

Painted in 1912 by the N.Z. artist Charles Goldie, this oil portrait also demonstrates the translucent characteristics of oil glazes. With a succession of glazes and painstaking work with tiny brushes Goldie has modelled the fine details of the ageing skin. Impasto paint also applied with infinite care is used for the hair and the yellow scarf. Notice too how the opaque white mark of the silver ring on the pipe stem and the minute touch of red in the bowl of the pipe, convince us so easily that they represent the light reflecting from the metal or the faintly glowing tobacco embers.

While enjoying for its own sake Goldie's amazing realism with oils it is also interesting to notice his

unusual 'ground'. The ground is the priming or undercoat layer often painted in white or earth tints. Usually the 'ground' layer is smooth, as in *The Bible Lesson* for instance, and is normally a virtually invisible component of the painting. Looking closely at the background to *Ena Te Papatahi* however you will see how the dark green is painted on top of a strongly textured surface. A succession of short parallel marks made by deliberately visible brush strokes form an all-over pattern across the surface of the painting. On this deliberately textured under surface Goldie has laid his immaculate and infinitely precise glazes. The textured ground obviously plays an important part in the visual realism of the skin, hair and cloth surfaces and enlivens the background space, forming a quite unique element in Goldie's work.



3. *Self Portrait*
Olivia Spencer-Bower

This self portrait, painted almost 50 years later than *Ena Te Papatahi* illustrates a distinctly different use of the oil paint medium. Major changes in attitudes

towards painting techniques began in the late 19th century and have accelerated throughout this century. One of these was an affirmation of the nature and qualities of paint itself. Instead of being merely the vehicle for a painted illusion of the surface qualities of skin, cloth and hair, the paint and the action of the painter, were now made visible. Paint and brush mark became an important visual statement in the image.

These qualities are clearly evident in *Self Portrait* by Olivia Spencer Bower. Here the paint has been applied with thick impasto strokes. The tonal shading that builds up the structure of the face is achieved by laying side by side a series of carefully modulated distinct strokes of colour. Unlike the technique used in *The Bible lesson* the paint strokes are not merged or blended together. As we move back from *Self Portrait* however the separate blocks of colour are merged by our eye. They assume a realistic blend and with it have an air of freshness and vitality. We get the feeling that we are receiving a glimpse of an alive and constantly altering surface.

You will notice too the rhythmic patterns of the brushstrokes especially in the ochres and yellows of the jacket and dress. The visible brushwork helps to convey a special sense of texture and the white ground, occasionally left uncovered by the brush, creates a fresh and lively sensation. Sometimes the paint is applied very thinly with an almost empty brush allowing the white ground to work in with the paint.

Three artists then choosing to use oil paint and most successfully employing the special characteristics of this medium.

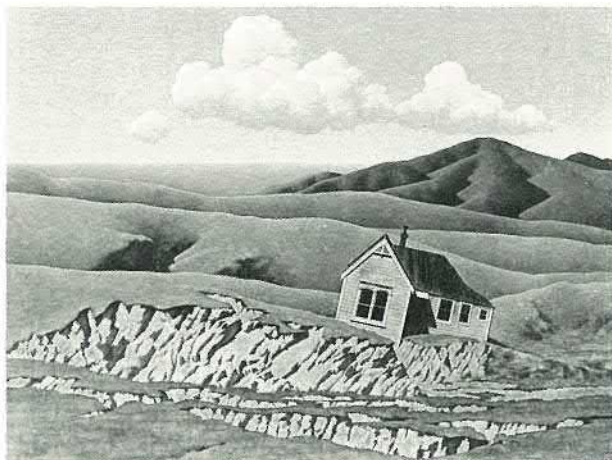
Whether to use Acrylic Paints?

In acrylic paints the pigment is mixed with a synthetic resin or polyvinyl acetate and diluted with water.

These paints were developed in the late 19th century and early 20th century and pioneered by Mexican mural painters seeking a medium which would dry quickly and remain stable under all weather conditions. Acrylics were further developed in the United States where continuing experiments with polymer or '*synthetic*' paints are still underway.

The Special Qualities of Acrylic Paints:—

- * like oil paints acrylics can be used as thick opaque 'impasto' or diluted to thin transparent 'glazes'.
- * can be built up into very thickly-textured surfaces and be used to form an almost limitless number of successive layers without cracking or flaking.
- * will accept 'bulking' or special thickening agents to increase the volume and thickness of the paint.
- * hardens quickly by means of releasing the water from the solution.
- * dries to a naturally matt surface.
- * as the drying or hardening process does not involve a chemical change the paint colours and surfaces are expected to remain very stable over long periods of time.



4. *Saga*
Brent Wong

In *Saga* we see how acrylic paints can look very similar to oils or tempera and how they can be used in similar ways. Brent Wong, like Henrietta Browne and Charles Goldie is interested in the painted illusion of objects from the visible world.

To these ends he has in this work frequently used the acrylic paint in successive thin glazes. This can probably be most clearly picked out on the margins of the clouds. The thin layer of white does not completely obscure the strong blue of the sky beneath capturing quite dramatically the illusion of wispy ethereal cloud. A similar technique has been employed to mark the rust and weather staining on the walls.

The roof, weatherboards and main structures of the

house however have first been meticulously worked in impasto or opaque paint layers. The technique here, as on the surrounding grasslands, is to build up the structures with a succession of tiny brushstrokes which together represent the intricate details of the surfaces. It is interesting to compare this technique with the tempera work in *Charlie's Tank* by Grahame Sydney. *Saga* which was painted in the 1970's has been varnished which explains the glossy surface normally uncharacteristic of acrylics, but in all its other features it well illustrates how acrylics can be used in techniques also seen in other mediums.



5. *Southerly Stormclouds*
Quentin MacFarlane

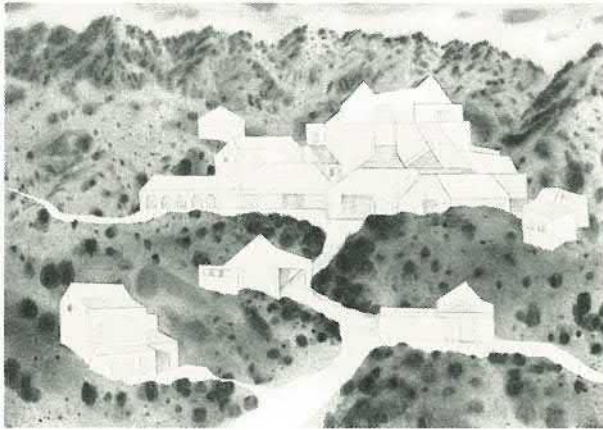
This painting by Quentin MacFarlane titled *Southerly Stormclouds* was painted in the late 1960's in acrylic paints. This time the acrylics are used in an abstract work where line shape and colour are used in their own right without direct reference to objects in the visible world. Instead bands and swirls of colour display the physical and visual characteristics of the paint itself.

This means that here the opaque impasto qualities of the paint is of paramount importance. Used in thick layers it retains the rhythm of each brushstroke making them deliberately visible in the sweeping bands and swirls of colour. In this painting Quentin MacFarlane has added a clear gel to the acrylics increasing the bulk of the paint and thus boosting its thickness and texture. To be able to accept additives like this without losing luminosity of colour or the stability of the painted surface is a special feature of acrylic paints.

Where the paint has been applied more thinly, and dragged or as we call it 'scumbled' over a dry area, you will notice how the underlayer shows hesitantly through. Where wet paint layers have been overlaid or overlapped, as for instance in the left of the lighter horizontal central band, you will see how the colours are actually mixed or blended on the surface of the painting.

Sometimes too we notice a rounded trail of paint appearing as a raised line across the surface. Here the paint has probably been squeezed directly from the tube. This particular ability of acrylic paints to be deeply overlaid with successive thick layers or to be enriched with special bulking additives without the problems of flaking or cracking as they harden, makes them particularly suitable for abstract works such as this.

Here Quentin MacFarlane is using the paint surface to communicate directly with the thoughtful observer about the immediate sensations of paint, colour, line and texture. The title "Southerly Stormclouds" gives us a clue. Through it we are invited to consider stormclouds and then, via the physical qualities of the paint, to experience the metaphysical elements, the swirling movement of atmospheric mass against mass and if you like to recreate the "essence" of the subject.



6. *Imagined Projects II Limeworks*
Doris Lusk

Imagined Projects II "Limeworks" painted by Doris Lusk in 1984 introduces the stained canvas techniques which can also be achieved with acrylic paints. Concentrating on the soluble water-based qualities of the paint and using it directly into an absorbant cotton surface produces this diffused or stain-like effect. You will notice how the naturalism and soft haziness of the hillsides contrasts sharply with the contained angular facets of the limeworks buildings. This effect has been dramatically heightened by literally superimposing them with layers of opaque paint directly onto an already painted empty landscape. Thus while the walls and roof tops faintly tinted with very pale pastel paint and delicately shaded with coloured pencil are kept within the drawn outlines of the building

planes, the landscape elements have no such constraint. Here the paint has been diluted to liquid washes and applied directly to the dampened but unpainted canvas surface with the result that it soaks and spreads in this soft-edged natural way.

The particular effect is one of space and distance. There is a sense of the hazy irregularity of landscape seen through the shimmering vibrating heat haze of the hot dry hillside.

In several ways this staining effect with acrylics is similar to the fluid translucent qualities of watercolours but unlike watercolourists the artist using acrylics is not restricted to paper sizes.

Three artists then choosing to paint with acrylic paints and employing the special features of that medium within their work.

Whether to Use Watercolour Paints?

In watercolour paint the finely ground pigment is mixed with water soluble gum arabic and diluted or dissolved with water.

Although the illustrators of many medieval manuscripts used water colour paint, it was not extensively used as an artists' medium before the 16th century.

The Special Qualities of Watercolour Paints:—

- * have a transparency, which allows the light from the paper beneath to shine through. This gives them a luminous quality.
- * used in thin watery washes of paint
- * colour washes can be floated together and fuse almost imperceptibly on the paper
- * cannot be easily reworked or retouched on the paper without spoiling the freshness and luminosity of the colour.



7. *The White Horse*, Dawes Point
Maud Sherwood

The *White Horse* was painted in watercolour by Maud Sherwood in 1918 and presented to the Robert McDougall Art Gallery in 1932. It displays very well some of the special qualities of the translucent watercolour washes used in a free flowing or 'painterly' fashion.

Looking carefully at the ground surface in the foreground of this scene, or at the belly and flanks of the horse, you will notice how the small areas of quite distinct tones mingle and fuse together on the painted surface. The technique she has used to get this effect is basically to apply wet to wet. In other words

the paint is applied to already dampened paper with one fluid wash deliberately added into the wet margins of its neighbour. Thus the two colours mingle and in the margins fuse together.

Because colour changes are created in this way there is no need for hard margins or for successive overlays of colour washes. The paint therefore has one or at the most two layers. This means that the transparent paint is sufficiently thin to allow light to reflect back from the white paper and thus add to the luminosity of the colours. A close examination of the surface of *The White Horse* will show how Maud Sherwood has been very careful to mix on her palette exactly the tone she wants for each wash thus avoiding the need to build up or adjust the colours by overlapping the paint layer.

She has also been concerned to cover virtually the entire surface of the paper apart from very small areas in the sky. This as you will see makes *The White Horse* an interesting comparison with *Grindstones*, *Queenstown* by Olivia Spencer Bower. The use of a pencil or ink outline is also an interesting feature in most watercolour works and in *The White Horse* although we sense an initial pencil outline marking out the position of units in the composition, we see very little trace of these in the finished painting. Instead we become aware how with a well-loaded brushful of paint, Maud Sherwood has drawn the shadow areas under the belly of the horse and around the saddle on the ground directly with the paint.

The fluidity and translucence of watercolour paint makes this a very demanding and very distinctive medium and highlights its special visual characteristics.



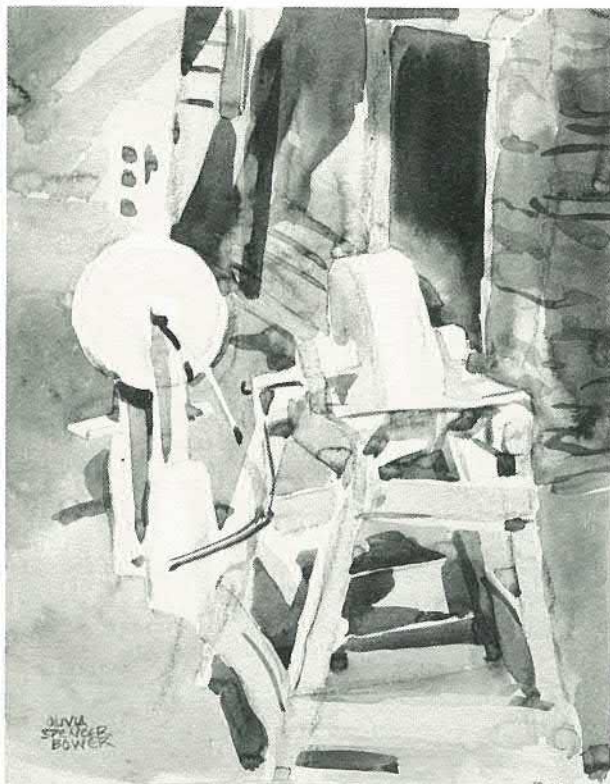
8. *Rooftops of Gerona, Spain*
James Cook

Again in *Rooftops of Gerona, Spain* by James Cook we are aware of the transparent and translucent qualities of water colour paints. However, compared with the fluidly merging washes in Maud Sherwood's work, this painting illustrates how watercolours can be used in quite a different way.

This time the shapes and forms of the rooftops are carefully defined and quite clearly marked out by precisely drawn pencil outlines. These lines are crucial to the work and very visible in the painting. It is the line which defines where colours change and which marks the boundaries between the washes. Using meticulous care and close concentration on small details

the artist has applied the washes within the drawn outlines.

A sense of space and a sense of distinctiveness amid the close and jumbled patterns of the roof tops and walls is however achieved principally through a finely adjusted sense of colour. Subtly varied tan washes define each new slope or form and via the lightness and translucence of the coloured wash capture extremely well the atmosphere of the warm, sun-drenched rooftops of Gerona.



9. *Grindstones, Queenstown*,
Olivia Spencer Bower

The two watercolours already studied have well illustrated the translucent and transparent qualities of

water colour paint. This time we are made aware of the paper beneath the paint. In *Grindstones, Queenstown* Olivia Spencer Bower includes unpainted paper surfaces as important elements within the painting.

She is also using a much freer drawing and painting technique than that used by Cook in *Rooftops, Gerona* and addressing a much closer and more intimate area of space. You will see through the transparent washes the casual charcoal outlines used initially to mark out the composition and establish on paper the relative placing of each object. Then, using these charcoal outlines Olivia Spencer Bower has virtually redrawn the shapes with her paintbrush. Broad strokes of colour define the forms and deliberately leave quite large areas of paper untouched. Thus the paper surface itself becomes an intrinsic part of the painting and is used to represent the sunlit faces on the grindstones and the wooden stand.

It is interesting also to note on this painting how the watercolour artist can abut abruptly or merge almost imperceptively the coloured washes. The artist has complete control as to whether a well defined margin or a merged transitional zone is produced between two colours. For instance in the two doorways note how, by laying a wash alongside a dried zone, a clear edge is produced. The softer margin on the left between the pinkish path and the grass is, by contrast made by fusing two wet colours together.

This subtle blending of colour and paper is an intrinsic and highly significant feature of watercolours and gives them their distinctive vitality and freshness.

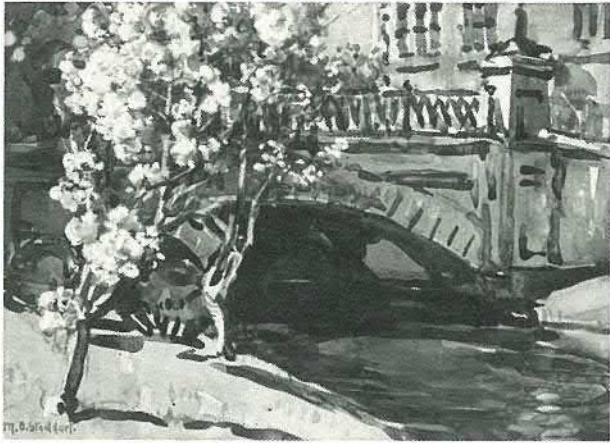
Three artists in watercolour displaying the versatility and range of that medium.

Whether to use Gouache?

Gouache is only one of a group of water-based paints that include fresco and distemper. We are probably more familiar with gouache as 'poster paint'. The actual composition and even the definition of the medium differs widely among experts but at least one definition is universally agreed upon — that is that gouache is an opaque watercolour.

The Special Qualities of Gouache.

- * opaque and will therefore cover completely the dry colours beneath
- * dissolves in water and can therefore be used as washes or in opaque over-painting techniques like oils and acrylics
- * dries quickly and much lighter in tone
- * has a matt powdery surface
- * frequently used in combination with water colour, ink and pastels.

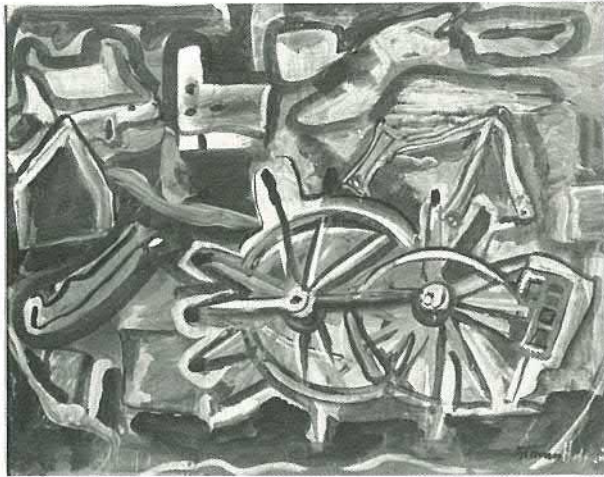


10. *Blossom, Worcester Street Bridge*
Margaret Stoddart

In this painting by Margaret Stoddart the artist has used gouache in a watercolour work employing the gouache particularly for its opaque and therefore covering properties.

The gouache is not in fact the major medium in this painting and is found only in the pink blossoms of the tree in the foreground. Looking carefully at the blossoms though you will see how the opaque pink which has been applied later completely covers the underlying watercolour washes. This makes the fragile pastel blooms stand out from the greys in the background and avoids the technical problems of trying to paint around such small and irregular shapes. The gouache however is clearly distinguishable from the surrounding watercolour because of its opaque and matt surface.

Unfortunately the gouache adheres less firmly to the paper and so great care must be taken with a painting such as this or the gouache layers are inclined to crack or flake away.



11. *The Farmyard*
Frances Hodgkins

The Farmyard an abstract work by Frances Hodgkins is painted completely in gouache. Why the artist chooses any particular medium is of course a matter of individual preferences and styles, but looking at the magnificent colour harmonies and interplay of shape and rhythm that Frances Hodgkins has achieved here we can perhaps understand how quick-drying fluid and opaque gouache paints were in fact the most appropriate medium for a composition such as this.

While buildings, spaces, cartwheels and stones were the beginning points for the composition, the artist was not concerned with their precise visual form but with their combined colour masses and rhythms and plane. With this fluid yet rapidly drying medium she

could work quickly, moving and adjusting one shape or tone against another with repeatedly overlapping colours. Precise lines, outlines and deliberate brush marks are used to build up the desired patterns and rhythms. One brush stroke has followed another obscuring or contributing to an intricate layered web of colour which is in fact what the painting is 'all about'. Frances Hodgkins was a master painter and this gouache painted around 1935 is a fine example of her mastery of the fluidity and opacity of the gouache medium.



12. *The Road Past the Chapel Locmaria Hent, Brittany*
Sydney L. Thompson

Here is a third example of an artist using gouache and this time in what we could call an “impressionist style” somewhat similar to the technique used by Olivia Spencer Bower in *Self Portrait*. Painted in a system of what appears to be immediate or sketch-like brush strokes, *The Road Past the Chapel* by Sydney L. Thompson depicts a small Brittany church and its crumbling stone wall.

You will see how the opaque ‘covering’ qualities of the gouache suits this painting technique with its overlaid brush strokes of clearly distinct colours or shades. Sometimes much lighter tones are laid over darks. Note also how, apart from the background trees

and the clouds, Sydney Thompson has not been particularly interested in using liquid washes of colour. Instead he uses separate brushstrokes to both build with blocks of colour the varied surface of the stonework and to mark out the structure and planes of the building.

Like Olivia Spencer Bower’s oil *Self Portrait* this gouache employs the rhythms and angles of the brush work in the finished image. The brush mark is therefore very important — a strong point of contrast for example with the deliberate invisibility of the brushwork in Henrietta Browne’s *The Bible Lesson* or Goldie’s portraits.

Other interesting comparisons can be made with Olivia Spencer Bower’s oil painting *Self Portrait* and her watercolour *Grindstones Queenstown*. In both those works, and here in *The Road Past the Chapel*, we are immediately aware of considerable areas left unpainted. Sydney Thompson has painted his gouache onto a tan coloured paper and used zones of unpainted paper within the composition with considerable effect. From these comparisons of technique and medium we can begin to develop an understanding of just how wide the artists options are in the field of medium and technique alone. Their initial choice then of what paint to use that paint’s range of individual characteristic is central to this ‘business of painting’ and of vital importance in what goes into a painting.

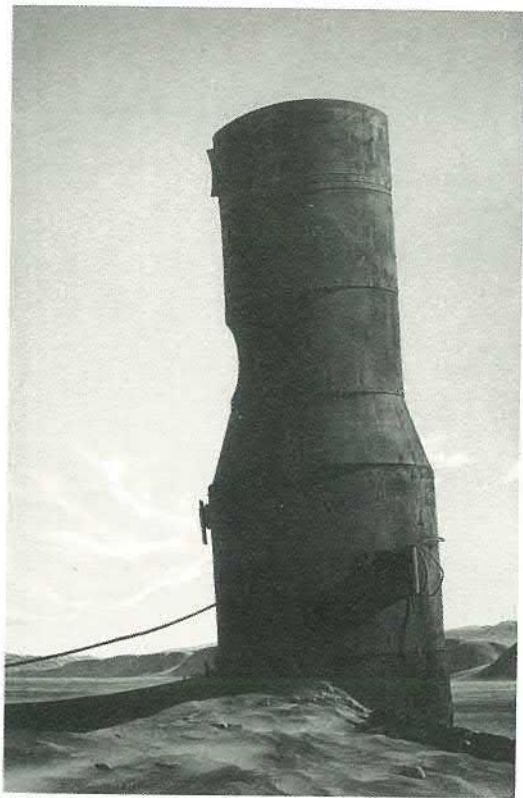
Whether to use Tempera Paint?

In tempera paints the pigment is mixed with egg yolk and distilled water. The egg yolk contains albumen a sticky protein that sets hard when exposed to air, a non-drying oil, and lecithin a fatty substance that helps liquids combine in a stable mixture.

Although not widely used today tempera painting has been known since ancient times and was used in Babylonia, Mycenaen Greece, Egypt and ancient China.

The Special Qualities of Tempera Paint:—

- * dries extremely quickly so colours cannot be blended on the painting surface
- * opaque
- * forms a very tough surface
- * has a fairly limited range of colours and tones but clear and vivid colours are achievable.



13. *Charlie's Tank*
Grahame Sydney

Charlie's Tank by Grahame Sydney provides us with a good illustration of the egg tempera medium. The

tempera which mixes to an emulsion-like paste cannot, for obvious reasons, be purchased in a tube or jar but is made freshly from the pigment and egg yolk for each painting session. For good results it also needs to be applied to a very smoothly sanded and polished gesso ground.

Onto this type of smooth surface and with a very fine brush Grahame Sydney has painted *Charlie's Tank*. He has used a series of slow and meticulous very short, angled brush strokes. With one short stroke after another the paint surface is slowly built up. This of course, means that the minute details of the dry grasslands and the rich patina of the rusty tank can be depicted with amazing realism. Infinitely small and subtle changes in colour are created, and in a slow and painstaking manner each rivet and blade of grass recorded.

Probably the clearest area to see the typical small brush stroke surface of this tempera work is in the clear expanse of blue sky. The small brush strokes are also fairly visible on a close examination of the wispy patch of cloud. Unlike Brent Wong who used thin acrylic glazes for the cloud margins in *Saga*, you will see how Grahame Sydney has here built up the surface with the succession of minute brush strokes typical of tempera painting.

It is with the fine details that Grahame Sydney convinces us of the realism of this scene and presents us the rocket-like boiler dominating the vast depopulated Maniototo plain.

So what goes into a painting is firstly this specialist and deliberate choice of medium. What type of material will carry the coloured pigment and related to this, how to use its distinctive characteristics.

2nd Choice — What to Paint On?

..... **the careful and deliberate choice of grounds and supports**

The surface on which the paint is applied is known as the *support*

Basically an artist can paint on any surface — the pavement, a wall, or even his or her face — but one of the important decisions an artist making a painting makes is selecting the right type of *support* or surface for the work.

Typical Supports are:—

- * canvas — the most common support for oil or acrylic paints. The woven canvas cloth is stretched over a wooden frame 'stretcher'
- * can also use hessian, cotton etc
- * solid panels of wood, particle boards, or metal can be used for oils, acrylics, tempera or gouache
- * paper — the usual support for watercolours and gouaches.

Preparing the 'ground'

The undercoat or primer on which the artist's paint is directly applied is known as the 'ground'. This provides a smoother, less porous surface on which to paint and protects the support from the chemicals in the artist's medium.

Grounds have varied widely with time and fashion and today many artists buy prepared canvases with grounds already prepared and applied industrially.

Typical Grounds are:—

- * A canvas for oil paint is usually prepared first with a size made from casein glue and then a white primer or ground coat made from turpentine, oil and flake white paint or a gesso made from whiting and glue size and oil.
- * Acrylic paint can be painted directly on any surface although an acrylic primer coat is usually used.
- * Watercolour papers are not painted with a ground but many are saturated with water and left to dry stretched out on a board before use to prevent the paper fibres later expanding and buckling as they receive the water-laden paint.

So before even beginning the painting the artist has a number of fundamentally important choices to make.....

the choice from a wide range of painting materials or 'mediums'

the choice of which characteristics in each medium are most useful to the artist's intended image

how to use them by selecting from an almost limitless range of painting 'techniques'

the choice of what to paint on being aware that the support and ground will influence the type of painted surface that can be achieved.

Therefore even before the considerations of scale, composition, colour, line shape etc etc there are a **number of specialist and deliberate choices made by the artist.**

**THESE ARE WHAT GOES INTO A
PAINTING.**



