

TONE in Watercolour

Simply put the word **TONE** in art refers to how light or dark something is. How black or white and all the grey tones in between..... Or how light or dark a colour, appears.

"Tone" is often thought of as one of the key characteristics of good painting. You may also hear artists talking about "Tonal Value" or just "Value" These terms both mean the same thing as **TONE**

TONE

In "real" life Tone is created by the way light falls upon an object, or a scene, or in fact any subject matter.

HIGHLIGHTS are the part of the subject on which light is the strongest.

SHADOW is the the part of the subject on which light has the least impact.

TONES are important for the range of effects we desire to achieve when rendering a subject in watercolour, or in fact any type of artistic medium.

To create a particular atmosphere / To create contrast / To focus attention on particular areas / To create the illusion of form, distance or depth.

THE CONTRAST IN TONES CREATES THE VISUAL EFFECTS WE SEEK AS ARTISTS.

Balances, Moods, Atmospheres. In short the understanding and use of tones goes to the very core of our work.

Working on a **VALUE scale** can help enhance our perception, and act as a resource for, our judgement of Tonal values.

It is also a useful exercise in applying watercolour washes and demonstrating the transparency of watercolour pigments.

Here is an example of two painted scales, one of white to black and the other of layers of French Ultramarine.

Such a scale demonstrates the effectiveness of layering "glazes"

(A "glaze" in watercolour is simply a name for a layer of paint)

The layers present 9 values. A Value refers to how light or dark a tone is.

Dark tones are said to have

LOW VALUE

Light tones are said to have

HIGH VALUE

Each of the nine levels of the value scale has it's own name:

White.

High light.

Light.

Low light.

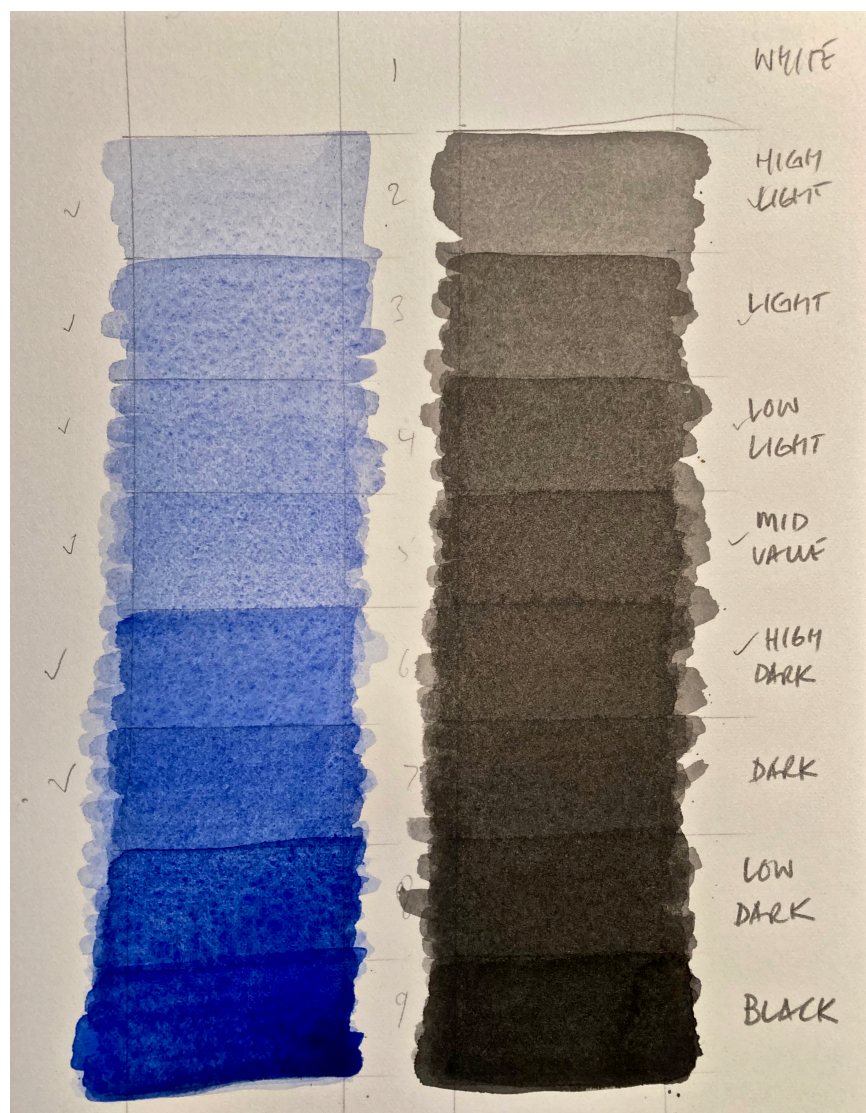
Mid value.

High dark.

Dark.

Low dark.

Black.



So to recap.....Value and Tone are the fundamentals of a good watercolour painting

Do **NOT** get confused into combining the relative lightness or darkness of a colour with the quality we call “**HUE**”

“**HUE**” is the appearance of the colour i.e blue, green, red.

Blue and Red can have the same **tonal value even though their hue is different**

Judging the tone and value of a subject you are about to render is one of the first steps you must make in assessing it's qualities.



If your assessment of tones is correct relative to one another, you can be more confident you will produce a work with a believable sense of ***space, form, and light.***

In fact, it can be argued that Tone and Value are more important than colour to the success of a watercolour. We understand our world not by colour, but more by perceiving objects and their shape, by seeing how light or dark they are and their interaction with one another.

In watercolour tonal values are the essential building blocks of the successful rendering of any landscape, seascape, or object study.

Adding darkness to a watercolour is easy BUT you cannot add lightness !!

You must make evaluations of tone at the start of the process. In watercolour particularly because the white of the paper is reserved for the lightest tones (the high values). Often known as “highlights”. We work from light to dark adding glazes/layers and building up our work to the point that the dark tones are applied.

Contrast.

Is the difference between tones in a picture.

A small amount of contrast between the lightest and darkest areas of a picture will result in an image that is perhaps less distinct but one with more atmosphere, subtlety and calmness.

Turner was of course famous for his atmospheric works where relied a great deal on the use of subtle tones and graded washes. If there is a great contrast in the tones of a work there is likely to be a more dramatic quality about it. **Henry Fuseli** was famous for his works which used great contrasts between the



lightest and darkest areas of the painting.

Chiaroscuro is a phrase used to describe such works where there is a high and dramatic contrast between the shadows and lights. The words itself coming from two Italian words: *chiaro* meaning light and *scuro* meaning dark.



Whilst not a watercolour, the painting fondly known as "Whistler's Mother" is a great example of the use of tones to achieve a dramatic image and it is very pertinent to consider the real title of the picture in this context which is "*Arrangement in grey and black.*"



Putting this into practice In "*traditional*" watercolour paintings painters start by laying down the lightest washes first leaving the white of the paper untouched. They then lay in successively darker washes over the top to create the detail.

One of the best ways to practice this skill is to paint a tonal picture using one colour only. Ideally use a dark colour such as Sepia, Paynes Grey, Indigo or

Cobalt Blue. These colours are easy to glaze over and provide a good range of tones to work with.

You will need to choose a black and white photograph for this exercise.

Newspapers are an excellent source of photographs to work with as long as you are not reproducing them to sell which will infringe on the photographer's copyright. If your photograph is in colour choose one with good tonal ranges and then get a good quality black and white photocopy of it.

Very often a monochrome study of a colour picture you wish to copy can provide you with a great insight into the balances and tones you should adopt when rendering the same subject in colour.

