



*Quattro Canti, Palermo,*  
watercolour, 15×22in.  
(38×56cm)

**Clive Wilson**  
describes how  
his camera has  
been useful to  
him as an  
additional  
sketchbook on  
his painting  
holidays

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## A holiday companion

There is no substitute for working on the spot, observing, remembering, recording, sketching, catching the light. But one difficulty, if you want to catch sunlight and shadows evocatively, is that the sun moves round, so that within 90 minutes, or sometimes much sooner depending on your subject, and at most two hours, you are looking at a completely different picture. You then risk changing the light effects that you caught beautifully at the start, and turning the whole picture into a wishy-washy amalgam of many different pictures. So you have to stop

painting, and call it a day.

But can you count on the same light at the same time the next day? Will you be able to return to the subject and recapture the effect that caught your eye and gave you that first buzz?

Another problem, if you enjoy working on the spot and aim to complete paintings in front of the subject, is that you can become confused by too much information. Or maybe you do not get the composition quite right, and afterwards think: "If only I'd left that out"; "That boat is too far over to the left"; "I really ought to have changed that

angle..."

Have you then got the information you need to re-jig the picture in the studio, treating what you did on the spot as a sketch? Constable clearly had this problem, but he spent years getting to know the surroundings of Flatford Mill, and on Hampstead Heath produced hundreds of sketches of clouds. Many painters today simply do not have so much time at their disposal.

Anyone who saw last year's Constable exhibition at Tate Britain will have seen sketching taken to extremes in his huge 'six footer' oil sketches. These were actually done in the studio, and the artist was working from much smaller oil and pencil sketches of whole views and individual details of boats, trees, birds and people. The large 'sketches' he used in order to assemble different picture elements and work out optimal compositions. It was fascinating (and encouraging) to see what difficulties even he had.

### Recording local colour

Like Constable, you may feel your picture comes to life with some added figures. But people (and animals) do not necessarily sit or stand still in

one place in the same position for long enough for you to catch more than the sketchiest impression that is frequently lacking in detail, gesture and the play of light. And as I found in Rajasthan where, fortunately, jeans have not yet become ubiquitous, what people wear varies enormously: the way they wear their rugs, their saris. If you are interested in credible local colour, you do need to record differences.

Sometimes, too, the light is not in your favour: you see a subject that would make an interesting picture, but skies are grey, and shadows lacking or simply featureless. Do you forget the idea, or make a sketch and take a few photographs to help your recall and give you some 'stimulus material' to work from? There is a tendency to criticise the use of photographs as reference material, but in today's hurried times using a camera as an additional sketchbook can be very helpful.

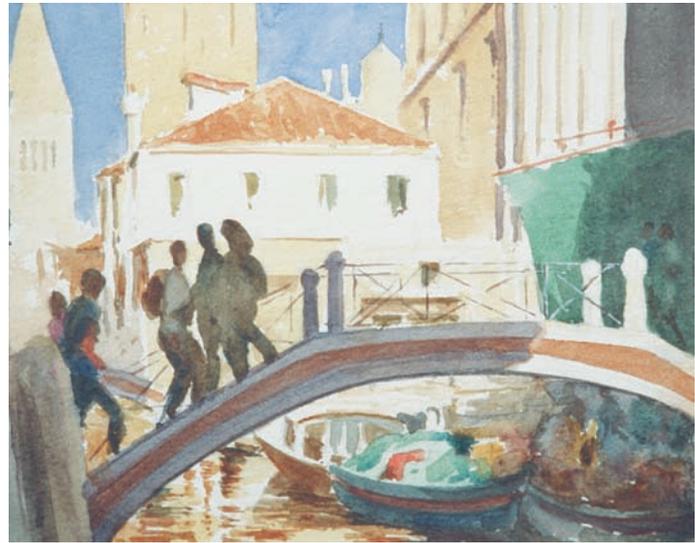
*Quattro Canti, Palermo*, above left, was an exciting and challenging subject — essentially a busy city-centre crossroads in the form of a Baroque 'circus' with very tall, concave corner façades. What gave me a buzz was the late-



*Palermo*, watercolour sketch



**Ponte dei Pugni, Venice**, watercolour, 7×11in. (17.7×28cm)



A close view of Ponte dei Pugni makes a strong composition

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afternoon sun catching one corner and leaving the other in deep shadow, lit only by reflected sunlight; this was an effect that lasted about 20 minutes.

I was in Palermo for only four days and spent a couple of afternoons sketching: first a single corner, then a rough idea of the whole ensemble (page 17), inevitably with very sketchy details, but deciding that the only way to handle the height of the concave façades and achieve the effect of the tight dimensions of the circus was to use a wide-angle perspective (with the façades apparently leaning in). With my camera I caught the sun at different stages as the afternoon progressed into evening. When I got back home, I was able to start afresh and produce several large watercolours, drawing on what I had observed and recorded in my sketches, and using a few essential architectural details from my photographs.

#### Camera as viewfinder

A favourite subject in Venice is the vegetable barge with a green awning by the Ponte dei Pugni, above. I have painted that view from many angles, but there is so much going on in what you are looking at, that it is hard to know what to concentrate on and what to leave out — how to compose an interesting picture that does not merely record everything that's there. A camera used as a viewfinder can help in focusing on details that make strong compositions (top right).

Figures can be included in a

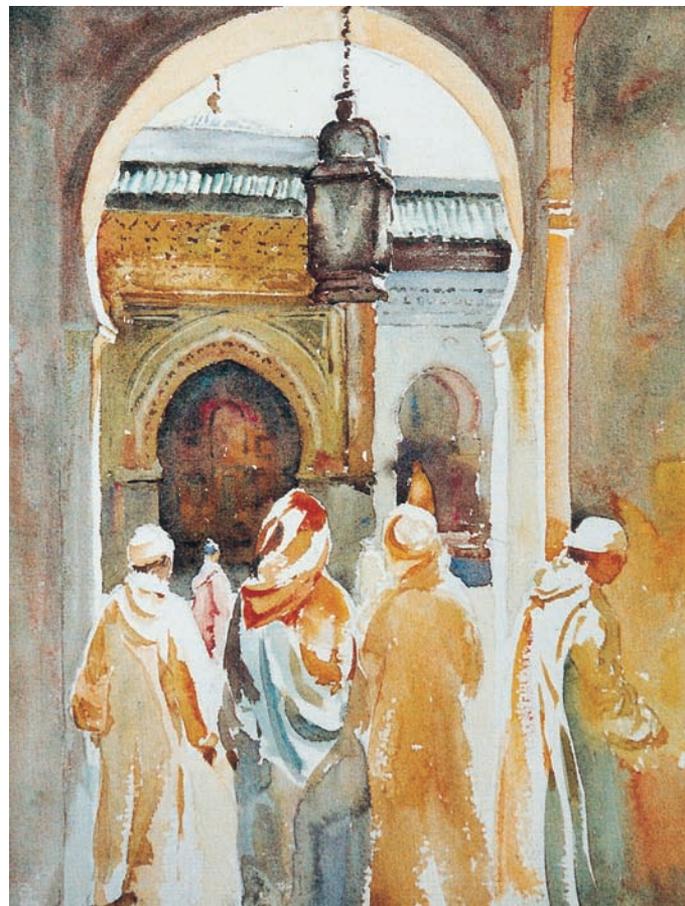
painting simply as gestural notations; just an indication of figures in a critical place in the picture, without detail. I prefer figures with a bit more substance, so that you can see what they are doing, and perhaps with clothing details that make them more true to life.

Anyone who has been to Fez in Morocco will recall the maze

**Into the Karaouiyne Mosque**, watercolour, 16×12¼in. (40.7×31cm)



Reference photograph for watercolour below



of narrow alleyways, and the jostling donkeys laden with wet sheepskins pushing their way through the crowds to get to the picturesque dye-baths. Finding a corner to pitch your easel in Fez is virtually impossible, particularly just outside the Karaouiyne Mosque.

Entry to the mosque is forbidden, but the view into it through the side gate was a subject that captivated me. It was difficult even to find room to do pencil sketches and a few clicks with the camera were easier, but the resulting snaps no way caught the atmosphere and light I recalled (above left).

Furthermore, the people going in needed to be grouped to make an interesting, lively composition, taken from different photographs; see *Into the Karaouiyne Mosque*, left. In fact, the subject was so absorbing that I did several watercolours and an oil when back at base.

#### Figures in Sri Lanka

For *The Short Cut*, right, I noticed people in the morning filing up a narrow path through the stepped paddy fields of Sri Lanka, the women carrying brightly coloured umbrellas. I found out that they were going to a funeral, and would be descending again by about 2.30pm — by which time they, and the paddy fields, would be brilliantly back lit. So I made a start on painting the mountainous jungle behind, and the paddy fields and banana trees in the right foreground (top right), and was in time to photograph them as they filed back down again.

■ Clive Wilson



First stage of *The Short Cut*



One of several photographs of figures as reference for their inclusion in *The Short Cut*, below

But there was such a procession that I could not make up my mind quickly enough which figures to include, and I hesitated about their scale, as they were getting closer. So I took several photographs (top right) and decided which figures to include back at home.

Drawing a credible pair of foreshortened camels as they approached down the road in *Off to Work*, below right, was, to say the least, challenging! I was attracted by the flat, early-morning sunlight glowing on the walls of the old fort city of



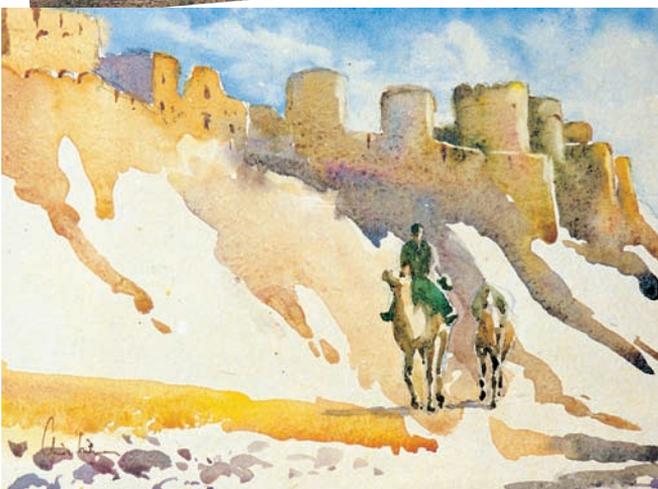
*The Short Cut*, watercolour, 10½×15in. (26.5×38cm)



Reference photograph for *Off to Work*

Jaisalmer (left) and had two small watercolour sketches on the go at the same time. Suddenly the camels hove into sight and I used one of the sketches to try putting in the camels (below left). I also took several photographs as they approached for later use.

Photographs can be used to supplement your sketches and also to invent completely new pictures. Simply copying your photographs is not what it is about, but using photographs as supplementary sketches can be helpful and rewarding. □



Preliminary watercolour for *Off to Work*



*Off to Work*, watercolour, 9½×13in. (24×33cm)