

THE MYSTERY OF WATER-COLOUR

by Catherine van Alphen

We live in a wonderful world of colour. Some people are open and sensitive to it, while others live quite unaware of its magic and mystery. A few turn to painting, desiring to capture the experience of the moment on paper. That artist lies within each one of us, but how to find the "Open Sesame" that will release our hidden creativity and even genius, is an eternal question. Are the secrets of art the property of the lucky few or are there laws to be discovered and followed?

Look at the sunrise with its change from dull shadowy greyness to the abundance of colour. See the dramatic leap into brilliant gold as the sun surges over the dark battlements of earth and cloud. Though every day is different, our soul still lifts in joy, taking breath as in a new birth. In the tension between dark and light, in the movement of the colours we experience e-motion, a release of feeling. Can we recreate this colour experience using water colours on wet paper. ?

The key lies in the movement of the colours. If we try to create movement by using lines flowing in various directions, our picture becomes very lively, even agitated and we experience much energy or will. If we create many forms in different colours, the picture becomes quite static and "thought-out." By dabbing and spreading colour over the surface of the paper, allowing it to flow and meet and blend with other colours, we experience the realm of our feelings. This is the movement we are looking for. Now we have to develop our skill in controlling the flow of the paint, the balance between wet and dry.

It is very possible to have a painting with pretty colours where yellow, blue, red and green all have the same tones. But each colour has an individual quality to be expressed. Yellow must be full of light so that it radiates joy, while blue needs the depth of quietness or a sweep of sadness. Red must be direct and intense to express its energy and power, while green must be restful and soothing. Here nature is our teacher and if we observe her closely and follow her faithfully, she will show us the way. But nature lies within us as well as without, so we must learn to observe and trust our feelings to develop our aesthetic judgement as well as our eye. We must learn to paint out of a true feeling of each colour that will guide us into the appropriate movement and deeper into the discovery of its essence.

How do we create movement in colour? By learning to take away and lighten colour at the edges, it begins to glow and shine. By also intensifying the depth and darkness in the colour we build up the tension or movement between light and dark that makes it come alive. Then we can develop more and more subtlety of tone by blending in other colours so that we have a myriad of rich and beautiful qualities of colour on our page.

But every painting as a whole must move between light and dark with a focus of light that leads us towards the most important area or object of our picture. We must constantly ask ourselves questions. Where must the painting become darker? Where must it become

light? Where are the colours flat and boring? Where are they alive? Do they express the mood we want to create? What mood is being created? We are building up a dialogue between the painting and ourselves because the paint flows freely as if it has a will of its own. We can direct and control it to a certain extent, depending on our skill, but in fact the painting can develop a quality of "being" far beyond our conscious contriving if we learn to work in this way. We are learning to draw on the faculties of imagination and inspiration to guide us. In the beginning we may need a teacher to ask and even answer these questions, but eventually we must become self-reliant and answer them ourselves. By painting studies in one, two or three colours only, we can consciously develop the skills for painting in this way. Our understanding and sensitivity for the colours will also be strengthened and we will feel the door opening into this magical world.

When we look at a picture that is alive and beautiful, we will discover a balance in three areas –

- ❖ The first lies in the mood of the painting, created by the choice of colours. Even if many colours are used, some will predominate e.g.. purples and yellows. This mood may also be seen in the delicacy of the background or the lighter colours in a painting. This is the spiritual aspect of the painting.
- ❖ The second aspect is the soul or feeling quality, where the colours and contrasts intensify and the movement must develop a gesture to bring out the character, and drama of the painting. Most of the activity develops in this area.
- ❖ The third aspect is of the form, created by strong contrasts where the light falls on the physical shape, lighting up certain areas and casting shadows in others. Here specific observations, details and ideas are expressed. We do not need outlines here, merely a fine emphasis of dot and line to bring out the essential characteristics. In each area the interplay of light and dark must be explored in a different way.

Whether painting for oneself or teaching children, we need to mentally prepare the stages of working on our painting. If we begin with the mood of the spiritual aspect, we choose our colours and imaginatively plan the format of our picture: where our light focus lies and what order of colours to use that will create a natural build up of the mood we wish to suggest.

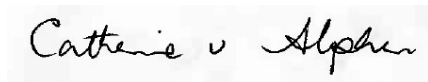
Then we move on to the feeling or soul aspect and decide what brush strokes will bring out the character of our painting. If we want to paint fire, the movement is vertical with a short flickering or dancing gesture. But strokes may be dabs or sweeps, horizontal or diagonal, flowing or straight, whatever the theme requires. Many people rush into this form of movement too soon, so we must know how to dab the colour on to the page until the basic mood has been created first. At the same time, we need to know where we are heading. This movement develops the gesture of the painting. We need to decide whether

the colour needs to be taken away to create the contrasts of light and dark and how we will move through to developing the form out of the colour.

Learning to take away colour begins very simply when we use water on our brush to lighten and spread the colour. But it can be used quite specifically to highlight certain areas, to develop the light focus and to create sharp contrasts that bring out the shape and essence of the form. It is a tricky technique to develop successfully, but it brings out great beauty in a painting. By taking away the colour around a flower, we give a sense of the etheric life forces flowing round it.

To take away colour, one needs a clean brush with the water carefully squeezed out so that the brush hairs lie flat and together. By applying the brush quite firmly to the edge of the form, we pull away so that the light blends softly into the surrounding colour, taking care not to leave a hard white stripe like an outline. Then the brush must be cleaned for the next stroke or we will put colour where we do not want it. This technique allows space for the spiritual beings to emerge on our page, as well as helping us to develop a three- dimensional solidity to our forms. By working out of an awareness of the threefold aspects of a painting we will create a harmonious painting, full of meaning. We may even be amazed at the richness of what is expressed on the paper.

But in every painting there is one underlying theme – the quality of light that illuminates the darkness in a radiance of colour. The aim of the artist is to reveal this mystery.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Catherine v Alphen". The script is fluid and cursive, with a small 'v' used as a connector between the first and last names.