

David Rankin Worldwide Watercolor Training / Spring 2010

# Gray Studies



Learning how to paint better Color Values by developing  
Watercolor Vision with Gray Studies

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## Gray Studies

### Why only Gray?

I've been using this technique ever since I was 17 years old. That's when I began working with Ted Kautzky's unique watercolor technique. And over the year's I've refined his approach into a dynamic new way to refine & upgrade watercolor painter's techniques quickly.

And the most effective way to do this is to first of all... learn how to execute this procedure... and then... put it into practice with any potential painting subject.

And the way this is done is to severely limited yourself top using only one color... in this case... Paynes Gray.

By limiting yourself to using only Paynes Gray you simplify the observation & evaluation process greatly. And in so doing it makes it much easier to learn how to see & evaluate the relative color values in any subject.

And remember my basic rule of thumb... It's not so much the intensity of a color. And it's not so much about a color's coolness or hotness. It's about the actual value of any color.

And once you actually understand how & why I refer to this so often... you'll also realize that by controlling color values... you can use virtually any colors... anywhere you like!

David Rankin's

### Gray Study Recipe

Like everything I do in training watercolor painters, I like to create actual Painting Recipes, that will allow you to learn correct procedure much faster than a mere step-by-step set of illustrations.

Recipes are unique & precise sets of painting procedures that... if followed correctly... in proper sequence... produce reproducible results... every time!

It's not about luck or happy accidents... it's about learning a precise skill-set and then practic-

ing it until you own it.

And you don't own a particular set of skills until you can execute or demonstrate a particular skill-set on command... when you need it to create a specific visual effect.

And in my procedure I have created a precise and effective Recipe for Gray Studies that consists of 4 essential stages of brushwork:

- 1** One Step Darker than White
- 2** Add the Near Darkest Darks
- 3** Now Place the Darkest Darks
- 4** Take One Step Back



**1** Using a gray that is slightly darker than white... paint over every part of the painting that is not a whitest, lightest, brightest area.



**2** Using a near-darkest dark... paint dark areas.



**3** Add darkest darks.

- 4** The 4th stage of brushwork is to allow you to make any value adjustments... either way. You can use a gray that is not quite so dark in areas that need a deeper gray. Or you can strengthen the dark areas as needed.



## Gray Studies

# Watercolor Vision

As many of you know, the basic working strategy that governs how I train artists who want to upgrade their transparent watercolor skills... centers on what I refer to as Watercolor Vision.

Watercolor Vision is the term I use to describe & define a whole set of skills that are unique to transparent watercolor. And they mostly center around the ability to see, evaluate, prepare, and paint correct color values into any potential subject.

### Too Fast

Watercolor as an artistic medium is very easy to get started. For less than \$100 an artist can purchase a basic set of pigments, paper, and brushes. And then with a little water... they're on their way.

In one way this is good as it allows artists to start experimenting very quickly and relatively inexpensively. And it is the primary reason that Watercolor is the world's most widely used artistic medium.

### The 1st Problem

But just as it is very easy to get started in transparent watercolor... it soon becomes self-evident that it requires a new set of skills that are unique to the medium.

In training many hundreds of artists over the years I have gradually evolved a whole set of training procedures designed to drastically streamline the learning pro-

cess. And although the actual skill-set surrounding brush handling is intrinsically necessary, I have found that it is not the most essential skill for learning or upgrading transparent watercolor skills.

The proof of this is seen every day, in every watercolor workshop that is conducted by every watercolor teacher in the world. For many decades now, the average watercolor teacher focuses on trying valiantly to demonstrate & instill correct watercolor technique through a myriad of basic exercises.

In my watercolor workshops what has puzzled me for years is how artists with such determination & zeal can continue for so long and still not possess a definitive set of watercolor skills that are rock solid and available on command?

In my training programs it is simply not good enough that you refer to yourself as a watercolor painter. For hops is it that you have been painting with transparent watercolor for 5... 10... 20 years or longer... and still cannot demonstrate a solid set of skills on command?

Invariably in my classes & workshops... one of the first things I do is to ask you to show me that in fact you know how to run a few basic washes. And invariably I am amazed to watch as artists who have been painting for 10-20 years still have trouble with an Even Wash, a Graded Wash, or a Two-Color Blend.

The first lesson in my training methods is that you have to Show Me! If you say you are an artist... if you profess to be a Watercolor Painter... that's simply not good enough unless you can show me... right here... right now... in front of everyone!

**And thus we come to the very first problem watercolor painters seem to**

**share... they simply do not own a set of watercolor skills.**

And the fault here is not their's... it is the fault of the watercolor teachers all over the world that are not actually training artists. If they had... these less experienced artists would demonstrate a more viable set of skills after say 5 years!

For far too long watercolor teachers have been content if artists simply make a little progress. And they virtually never actually test an artist's skills! Tests are part of education. We test children in penmanship and the alphabet. We test high school & college students all the time. And we are tested to get a driver's license.

Tests are meant to demonstrate that we have actually learned something. If you drive up over the curb or hit a car during your driver's test do you think you'll get a license? Of course not!

And Watercolor Teachers all over the world have worked year after year with all manner of artists, trying to be liked and friendly. But seldom do they ever actually test their students. Why not? How is it that I could have an artist come into one of my workshops professing that they have been painting for 25 years. Yet the simply cannot show me that they can run a beautiful graded wash without streaks! It's because they have never actually been taught correct technique. Their watercolor teachers have themselves worked on the belief that watercolor is such a free & spontaneous medium that it requires that unlimited freedom to experiment is the way to go.

And what this basic & common strategy has created is the largest group of mediocre artists in history. While **Watercolor has become the world's most widely used medium... it has also resulted in the larg-**

**est group of artists still struggling with mediocrity in the history of Art.**

So let me re-orient you to the proper & correct way to progress in Watercolor. In order for you to be able to refer to yourself as a Watercolor Painter, you must actually be able to demonstrate your skills effectively and clearly.

You do not **own** your watercolor skills until you can demonstrate them accurately. If you cannot demonstrate certain skills to me... how will you actually use these skills in the privacy of your own home & studio as you work on a painting.

### The Test of the Intermediates

The most basic description that identifies Intermediate Level Painters is that they possess an uncertain set of skills.

#### Intermediate Artists:

- **Have an abundance of zeal**
- **Own lots of Watercolor Gear**
- **Have been in numerous Workshops**
- **Own lots of books & tapes**
- **Have lots of Creativity, Passion, & Ideas**
- **And actually do Win Awards!**

### What's the Problem?

The biggest problem they all possess is that even though they often win awards... and even though they occasionally produce magnificent works of art... they don't really know how they did it?

Even when studying their own work hanging in an exhibition with an award ribbon on it... they really can't tell you or themselves how they created the most charming features of their own paintings!

**And that's because they still do not own their watercolor skills!**

## Gray Studies

### Watercolor Vision cont.

For years... while training artists at all levels of accomplishment... I have focused on rapidly upgrading what I refer to as their Imaging Skills. But in recent years, while working with a wonderful group of painters here in Cleveland, many of whom I have trained for years... I have evolved a new strategy.

And this new strategy is what I now believe to be the single most crucial skill that artists need to develop... Watercolor Vision.

Even more crucial than correct brush-handling skills, is this ability to see & evaluate any potential subject. It is the key to fast success and easily perceived superior results.

And it is this central and most vital Artistic Skill that I believe is essential to all painters no matter what their medium.

Watercolor Vision is the term I use to describe my own way of looking at the world. It is how most master Watercolor Painters actually see the world around them. And it is seen clearly in their work when you notice how fluid and exquisite their color values are!

Master Watercolor Painters all

exhibit on clearly superior skill-set, a magical control of values in their works of art.

And it is this one Skill-Set above all others that sets them off. It is not the subjects that they paint, nor is it the paper or brushes that they use. And it is not that they paint flowers, birds, or landscapes, for in reality the very best watercolor painters in the world tend to paint an assortment of subjects rather than just one.

This has been traditional in Watercolor Painters since the 1700's, the best example of which is John Singer Sargent, who excelled at Portraits of people, Architectural Cityscapes, Landscapes, and the Canals of Venice.

Watercolor painters tend to find enormous inspiration virtually anywhere they travel. And I think I know why. I think the reason Master Watercolor Painters all tend to paint a variety of subjects is not that they are undecided or unwilling to devote themselves to one subject... but rather because their most innate and powerful skill-set is not based on any one subject but rather it is centered deep into their own innate process of visual perception itself.

And because of this skill-set... unique to Watercolor Painters using transparent watercolor, the skills

themselves find inspiration everywhere they look.

#### **If I can see it... I can Paint It!**

This basic premise powers my own creative efforts. And I can clearly demonstrate it working with any subject, in any place, at any time!

I think this is why John Singer Sargeant is well known as an artist who worked freely in open air or in studio. He is own for walking out into a landscape and setting up his gear almost in a simplistic manner that was not dependent upon having a picturesque view or subject at all. And when you read about his working methods from those close to him you then realize that there was something else that was catching his eye. It wasn't so much the subject... but his powers of perception that were being worked.

I have dear artist friends who paint only birds. I have others who paint only cityscapes... not landscapes out in the country but rather right in the middle of thye chaos of cities. I have friends who paint mostly children whiles others never like to paint children but focus on adults instead.

I have artist friends who paint only wildlife while others paint flowers or still lifes. It's amazing the diversity & variety of subjects artists devote themselves to.

But my basic premise is that I simply don't care what your favorite subjects are. I am primarily a Wildlife Artist. But I seldom train artists in this field. My training is not for any specific subject range but rather for our Artistic Perception and it's unique properties.

And what I am most concerned about is how you see & study any subject as a potential painting waiting for your attention

to bring it into existence.

#### **Learn it. Test it. Perfect it. Own it!**

In developing your abilities to see, evaluate, and use this precious skill I call Watercolor Vision, I call upon you to simply refocus your attention... not on a particular subject... rather rather onto the very process of seeing & evaluating any subject.

This is the most crucial thing you'll need to remember. It's not about the subject... it's about your ability to see!

I believe that artists possess a unique and intrinsic ability that may be common to all humanity, yet for some reason or another is uniquely developed in artists.

Many experts, critics, and writers have referred to this fact that artists simply see the world differently.

This is where I begin. We start with this basic premece that artists do indeed tend to look at the world in different ways than most normal people. We tend to see things that others don't. We tend to see details that blur past others. We see colors better, and we tend recognize inherent design characteristics better. We can not only see how something is right now... but we also somehjow see how it might be if only we moved this there and changed that from bloue to brown.

So staying here... with the basic premece that artists see the world differently... what want you to try to do is to develop a specific skill-set that wioll put that perceptual skill of your s to the test.

And in so doing I'm gpoi ng to teach you a way to actually improve your basic skill-set... and in a way that will directly improve your paionting skills almost over night! And the way we're going to do this is by taking our basic observation skills and

building them into a precisely structured technique for building watercolor studies using only one color coupled with good fast brushwork and an integral feature of Watercolor Vision that I call Cheetah Vision.

### **Cheetah Vision / Focused Observation**

In this method I rely upon one of the most integral and archetypal features of consciousness... the ability to Focus Observation.

### **Gray Study Recipe / 4 Stages**

The basic objective of this recipe is to allow you, the watercolor painter, to gradually upgrade your abilities to study any potential painting subject in a time-honored tradition that will allow you to paint any subject.

### ***If I can see it... I can paint it!***©

This is the simple yet profound axiom that has been central to my own painting career for many decades. And it is proven accurate to me 10,000 times over the years. Simply put it means that if you as an artist can see your subject clearly & effectively... you stand a much better chance of painting it. And I don't just mean the simple act of visually seeing a subject... but rather... seeing it with Watercolor Vision.

This skill has 4 distinct stages... each one following in the precise order described here.

### **First Brushwork / Define the Whites**

The first stage in my process is not a painting stage so much as an observation stage where you study your subject with only one objective in mind.

The mother cheetah charges into the herd of stampeding zebras with their visu-

ally confusing & moving kaleidoscopic array of black & white stripes. However... she has 3 Nature-given skills that provide her with some measure of success against such an overwhelming visual display meant to confuse her. She has tremendous speed & maneuverability, the greatest of any mammal species on earth. But this is not enough. For Nature also provided the zebras with their striped designs which in a stampeding herd act provide this amazing power to confuse the cheetah.

The magic ingredient which is in fact the reason cheetahs survive, is her ability to focus her visual attention on only one member of the herd. If her attention wavers even for a millisecond... the zebras get away. If however, her visual focus is not disrupted by the extreme visual display... her chances of success improve dramatically.

And even though you may think this to be an overly creative use of natural symbolism in describing watercolor techniques, I assure you there is a strong measure of direct similarity to this example.

Our natural abilities as artists, can actually be greatly enhanced, refined, and tuned to a much higher degree. And this one skill... this ability to voluntarily focus ones visual attention on a selected object, or in our case... singular visual features in Nature, is our objective.

And this initial skill begins with our visual observation & evaluation of any subject... looking for the Whitest... Lightest... Brightest parts of the subject. Using this innate Cheetah Vision built into every living creature including us humans... we study our subject quickly. We are looking only for those parts of the subject that are White... very Light... or very Bright.

We are doing this for one singular rea-

son that is central to painting in transparent watercolor. We do this because these in fact are the areas of this subject that will have to be Painted Around... leaving them as unpainted bare white paper.

And it is this single valuable skill which many watercolor teachers fail to train artists in. And thusly those artists tend to paint right over these areas in the first 15 minutes of a painting.

We however, now learning a correct method, look for and identify these areas first. And in this very first painting stage we quickly and accurately paint around these areas with our first brushwork.

### ***How do we know how dark this initial gray brushwork should be?***

This is the first actual Painting Procedure in this recipe.



Study the Whitest, Lightest, Brightest parts of your subject. You are now going to choose a gray value that is just slightly darker than the whitest whites in your subject. We'll use this value to actually **paint around** all of these lightest areas... and **right over** everything else.

Be careful not to select a gray that is a lot darker. It only has to be dark enough to define these light areas of the subject.

This begins the precise process of learning how to evaluate gray values in colors. And from the very beginning we as transparent watercolor painters will now begin to make 1,000 assessments of values by studying & determining which elements of a subject are **darker than... or lighter than** those areas that are adjacent to it.

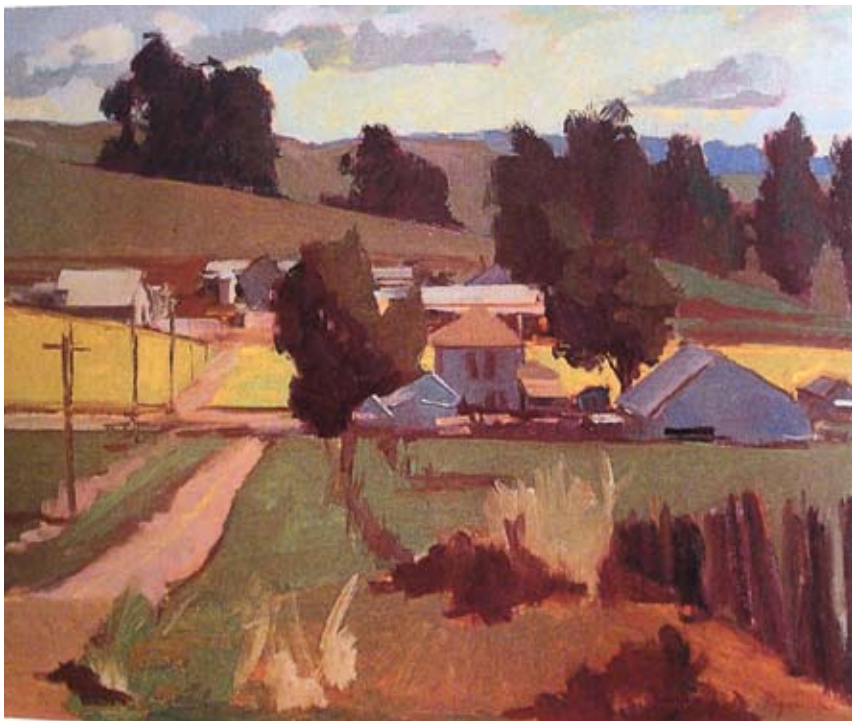
By practicing this process with real subjects and then following through with actual painting of these areas you will quickly begin to enhance your ability to see, evaluate, and apply a correct set of values into any subject.

This recipe is quite enjoyable once you see it emerge on your paper a few times. And even in this very first stage where you are only using this light value to define the whitest, lightest, brightest areas, you will be amazed as the image's depth illusion begins to take shape.

The reason this recipe practice is so important is for you to have a working experience of being able to look at and evaluate any subject with far greater accuracy than ever before. As soon as you finish each first stage of any subject you'll see why this is so effective. And by practicing the recipe over & over with various subjects, you'll rapidly build confidence in your own abilities.

Remember... I Train Artists! I am not interested in having you just watch as I paint. I am trying to give you a very effective and practical way for you to quickly upgrade your own painting skills. And this process will give you the very fastest way to improve in a very visual way that becomes predictable and useful under all circumstances, both in plein air and studio, and it's remarkably easy to develop.

So let's begin right now...

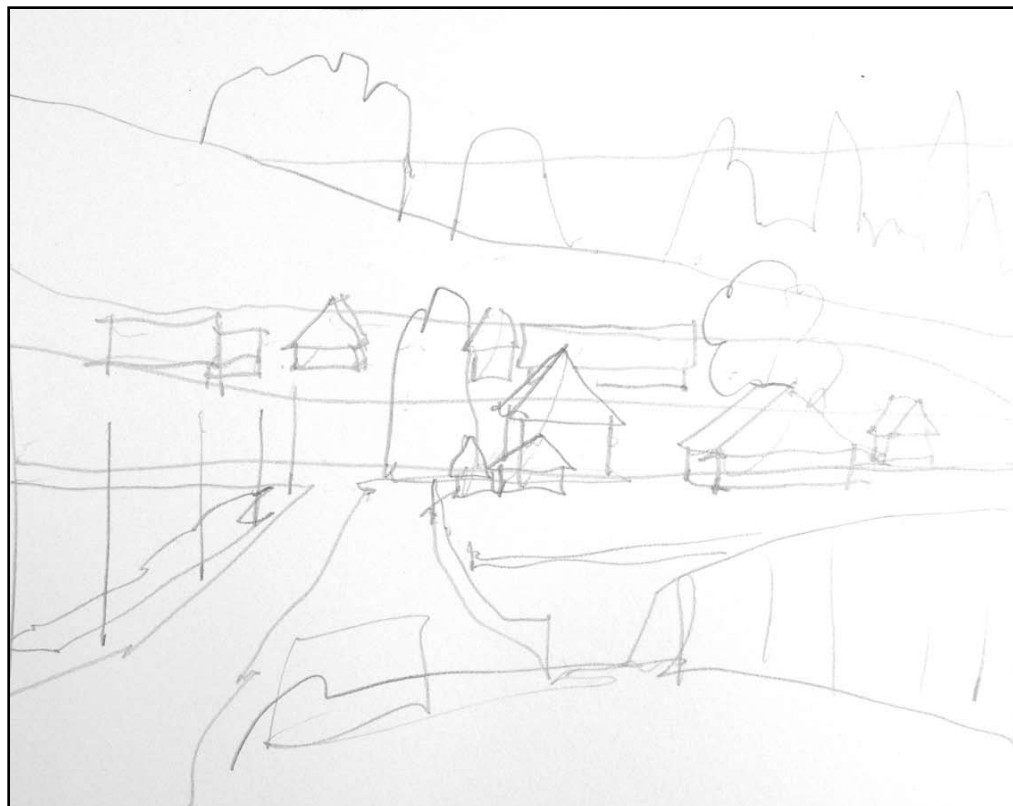


### **Gray Studies First Test Recipe**

Here is our first test of this procedure. It's a rather nice acrylic painting I saw in a copy of Watercolor Magazine. It's a landscape by Carol Baskin. And I selected it because it will allow us to test a value structure that uses a full range of color values.

You will notice however... that her painting has No Whites at all. Thusly it clearly demonstrates one of my fundamental difference between the way many watercolor teachers teach.

Too many times I've heard students talk about "reserving the whites" in a watercolor painting. But in point of fact this is inaccurate. We need to reserve not only those areas that are actually white... we'll need to paint around anything that is very light or very bright. The yellow in this painting must be put in on clean white paper or it will shift to something other than yellow.

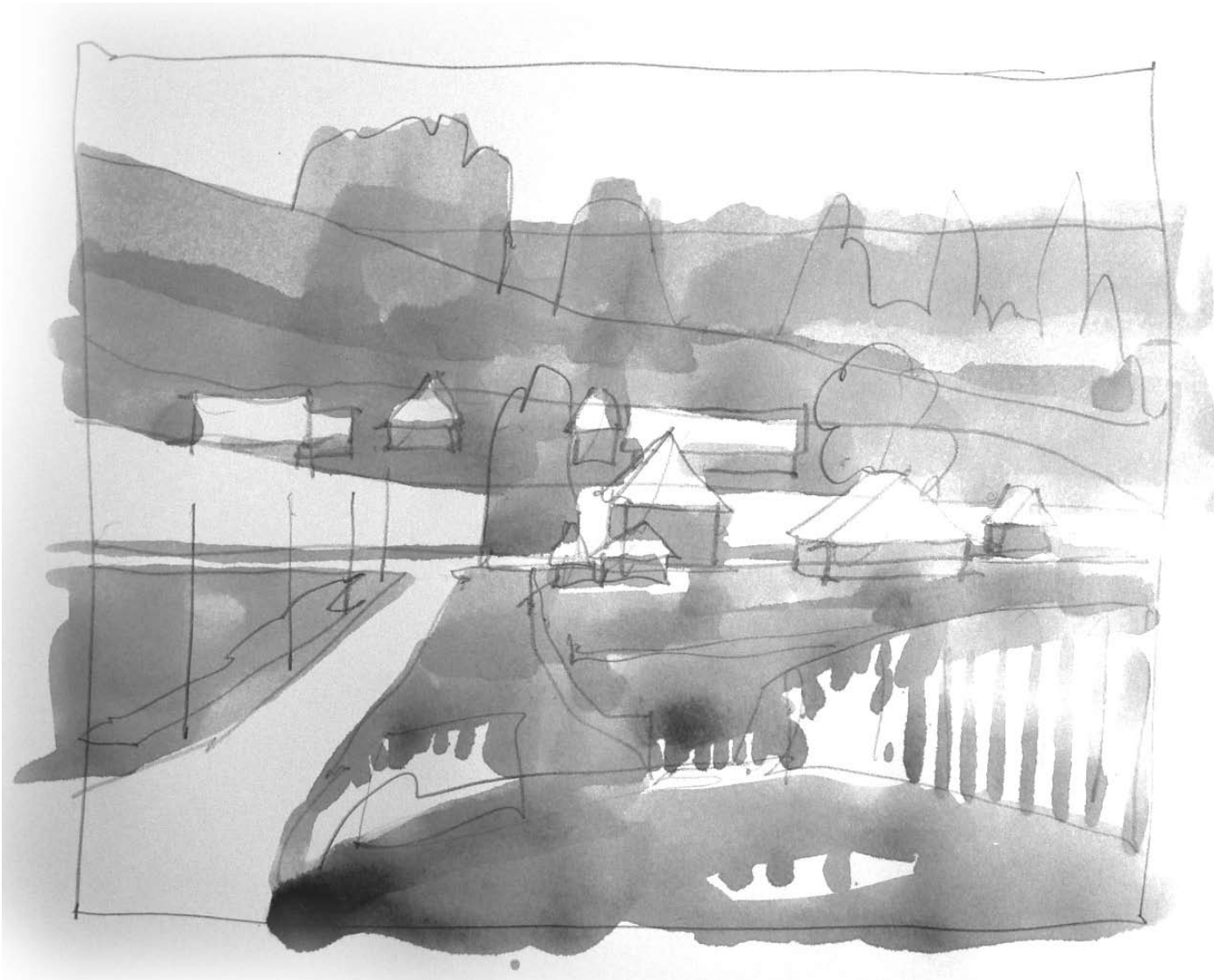


### **Gray Studies The Drawing**

For our tests I'd like you to develop a quick loose style. Do not over-labor your drawing in these initial Gray Studies. It is simply Wrong Procedure and Poor Working Method. These studies need to be done quickly or else you'll simply not do them. They have a definite purpose. And you must not put too much effort or time into them.

That being said... I want you to develop this skill in such a way that these Gray Studies themselves are worth something. Yes, they should be done quickly. But that is because I want you to be able to toss one if it doesn't look right... and do another quickly.

At the same time... these small working Gray Studies can take on a charm all their own if you develop your skills correctly. Good brushwork begins right here... right now. So don't develop Sloppy Skills... develop Artful Skills.



## Gray Studies **First Grays**

Look at the original painting and then this first brushwork. Notice that my initial effort was to merely cover over everything other than the lightest, brightest, whitest areas of this subject. And in this case... since there are No Whites... I've defined everything that is to be light or bright.

Notice how quick this brushwork looks. I'm working quickly using every part of my 1" Wash Brush. And I am paying no concern for texture in anything. I'm working on cheap smooth paper. And I'm using mostly Deep Strokes and Cutting Strokes to quickly define these areas into what I will now refer to as my White Design.

The White Design is what you get as you complete this very first stage of any painting idea. Your grays should be dark enough to define the lightest areas but not so dark that you have nowhere to go as you build your values.

This stage takes practice to develop an eye for the initial gray values. And it also takes practice to learn how to paint over everything else. All too often you'll find yourself cutting around a part of the painting that you should be painting over.



**The wonderful part of this method now emerges right before your eyes. Can you see how the “light” in the painting begins to emerge as soon as we add some of the darker shapes? That’s because we already have a fairly full range of values. And**

**if you squint your eyes a bit... it already looks correct! In fact, once you get really good at this technique you will find that by executing just these couple stages you can get a tangible feel for your light source and White Design.**

## **Gray Studies** **Near Darkest Darks**

Now look closely. I’ve mixed a darker value of Paynes Gray. And I’ve used it to begin to work into the landscape with what I refer to as Near-Darkest Darks. This is an important skill that is also used in the final full color painting. And it is a modification I have made to Ted Kautzky’s marvelous Darkest First Method.

I learned how to paint watercolors using Kautzky’s method of working in the darkest darks right off the bat. But over the years I have found that for most artists this is simply too difficult to do as it requires really expert visual acuity in regards to correct color values. So I’ve modified his technique to give you a near flawless method for building correct values.

So just as we select an initial color value for our initial brushwork that is just a notch or two darker than the lightest light areas... now we select a color value that is just a little lighter than what we determine the darkest darks to be.

And we begin to work these Near-Darkest Darks into the subject based on the darker areas in the subject.





**4th Stage Adjustment to the Road:** Look carefully between this stage and the previous one. You'll notice how I merely added darker ruts in the dirt road in the previous brushwork. But here I've added a slightly lighter gray over this road and brushwork. And this addition helps to define the lightsource. I've defined the highlighted edge of the ruts facing the bright

sunlight coming from the far right.

In this 4th stage I can make subtle adjustments like this to either go back and add darks that are not as dark as the Darkest Darks. Or I can develop darks that are just a bit darker than these initial grays I used in the first stage.

## Gray Studies Darkest Darks

Then... once you have the Near-Darkest Darks added... it's time to go all the way to your Darkest Darks. Do not be shy about this stage. Use a nice dark rich value of Paynes Gray and work it into the painting carefully and with an artist's touch... not sloppy!

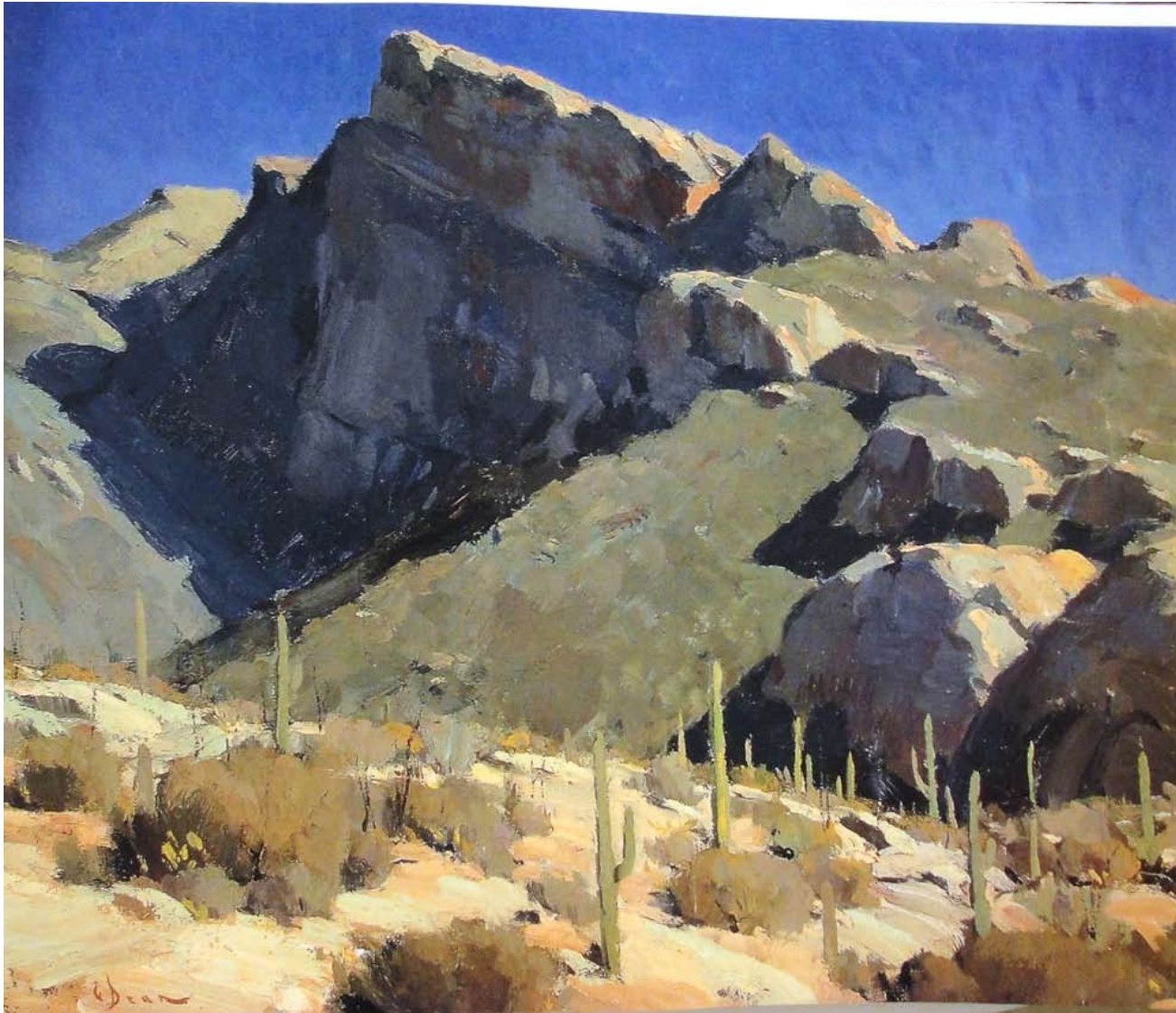
You will notice that I chose not to darken the roofs as they are in the original subject. I left them light as though they were those very common bright metal roofs you see here in Ohio on farms of all kinds.

Look at how little I've actually done to this subject. But it now works.

This 3rd stage is meant for you to establish the full value range for any subject. And this Recipe can often be left at this stage.

However... I've designed this recipe with one more stage... a 4th stage where you can then make subtle adjustments and additions to values .

And this is best seen in what I did to the road coming forward.

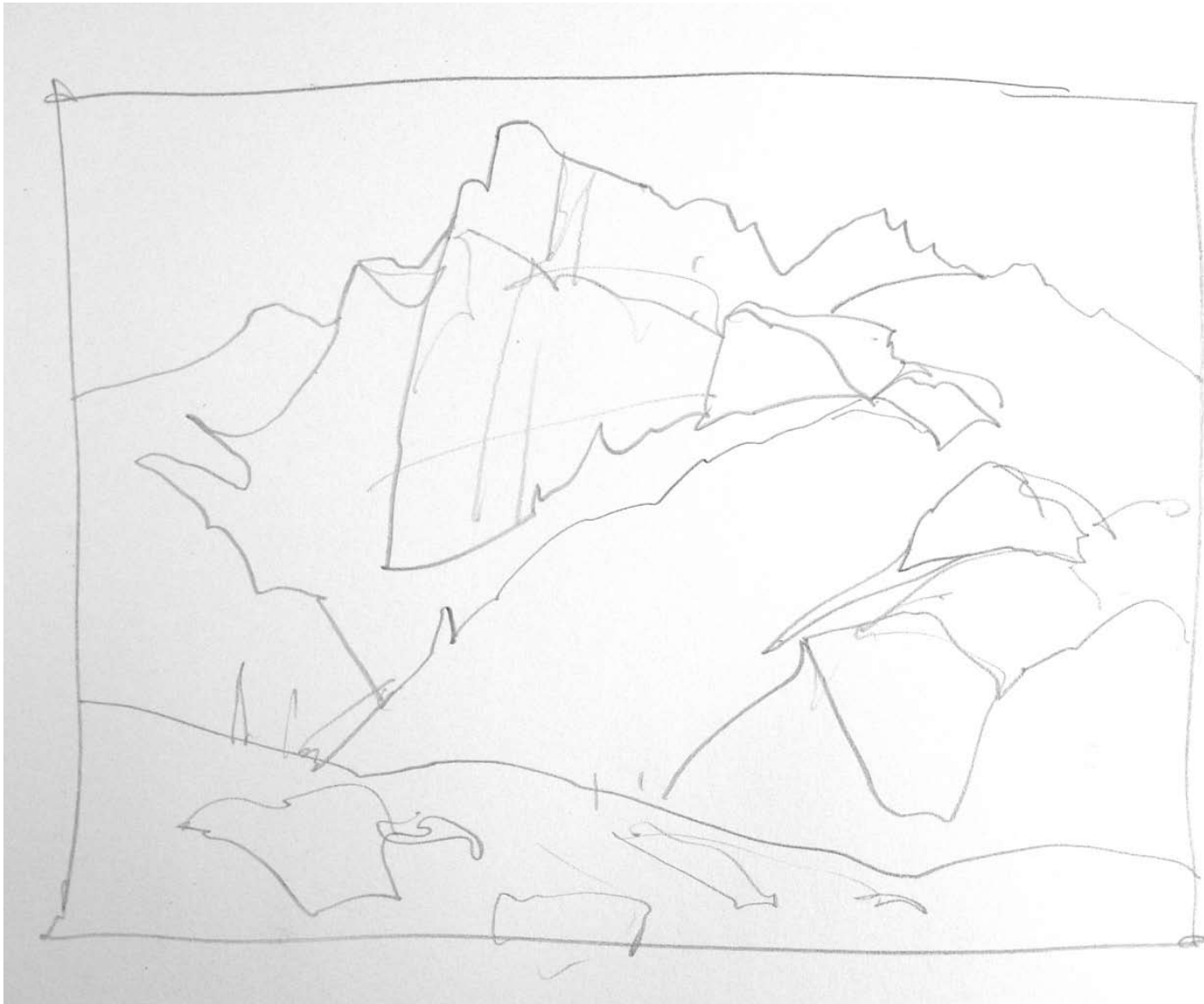


## **Gray Studies** **2nd Test Recipe**

Here is another subject to try our technique on. This is yet another painting from a magazine article. I want you to realize that you can use virtually anything as test subjects. And in fact... I've painted this same subject... from this same angle in Tucson, Arizona.

Here's mine below. It's always interesting to see how different artists work with the same subject.





## **Gray Studies** **Preparation Drawing**

Again... take care to develop your initial drawing of this subject quickly with a deft touch. Do not overdo this drawing. It is meant to provide you with only the most elemental features of the subject. This is Correct Method. You must develop a Correct Working Method that allows you the freedom to make mistakes & start over.

If you get to feeling too precious about one of these... that will impede your progress. This is a precise Skill-Set designed to allow you to work quickly with any subject.

The process is designed to give you something. It's designed to allow you to test out your values in a quick little study. So don't get over-invested in it. Use it to do your thinking... before you start a more finished full color watercolor.



## **Gray Studies** **Defining the White Design**

Once again... I've purposefully chosen a subject that has No Whites at all! I'm doing this to help you learn that it's not about just looking for Whites in a subject. It's about identifying and painting around every part of any subject that you determine to be either Whitest... Lightest... or Brightest.

In this case I determined that the Lightest Brightest areas were in fact these sandy areas in the foreground as well as the highlighted surfaces of the upper cliffs and rocks that are catching the full intensity of the morning sunlight.

So I've used a value taken from these large expanses of middle value gray greens that cover the hillsides. And I've covered everything... including the bright blue sky with this same value.



### **Gray Studies** **3rd & 4th Stages**

Once I had the White Design established... I went to a Near Darkest Dark and established the Shadow Design throughout the subject. And once it was dry... I added some Darkest Dark brushwork to provide some of the rock designs with my rigger brush.

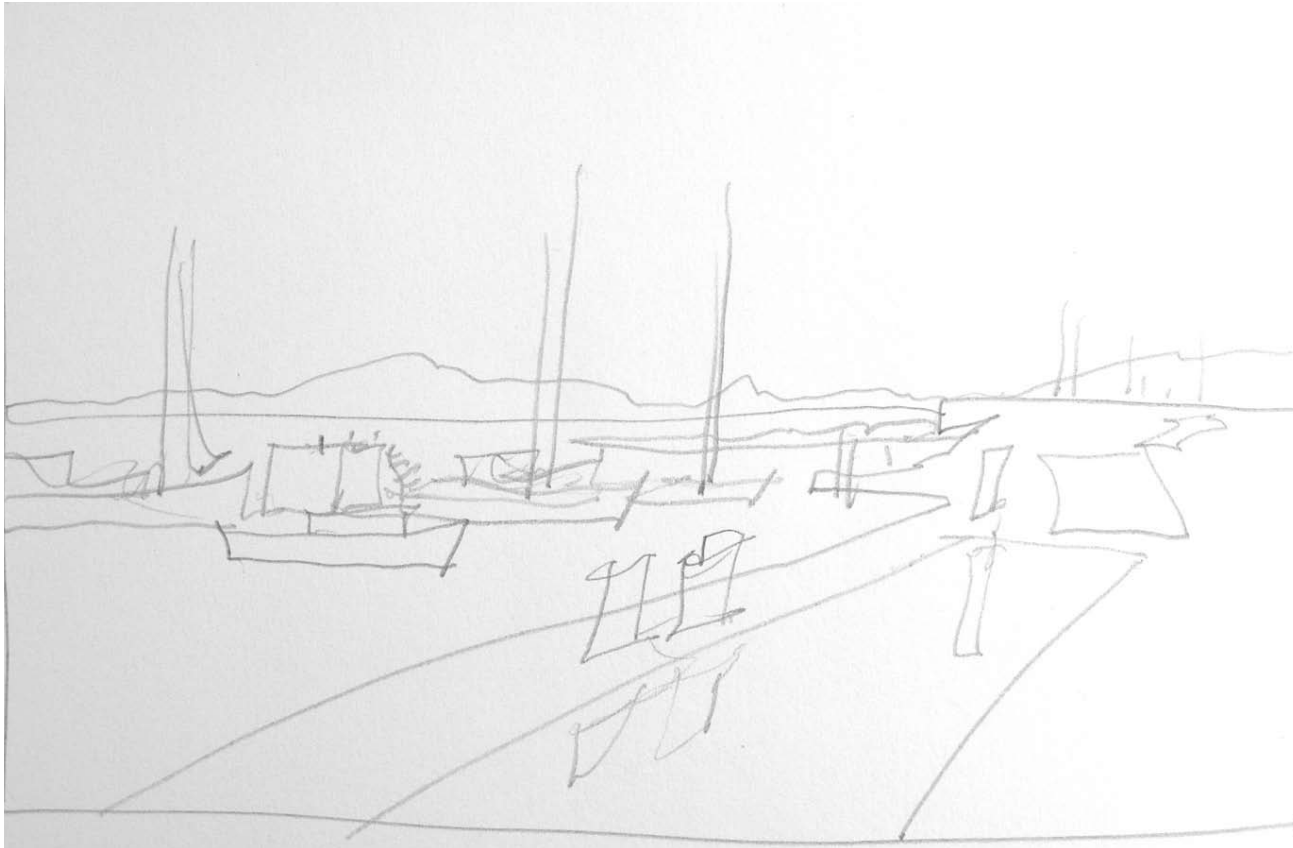
But this Gray Study only took about 10 minutes. So If I wanted... I could try several more variations with different light before making my final choice of how to paint the full color version. And by working like this I'm already trying out my brushwork for the final.



### **Gray Studies** **3rd Recipe Test**

Now we're cooking! And hopefully you're seeing the process emerge through this recipe. Here's yet another nicely done watercolor from a recent magazine.

And it has a nice value arrangement. But this one now has an area that looks to be fairly white with that bright sunlight on the water.



**Gray Studies**  
**Simplify all the shapes**

Again... look at how simplistic I indicated all of these major shapes. This also is a valuable skill in this overall Skill-Set. All too often watercolor painters tend to over-draw. And in these Gray Studies... the objective is to learn how to effectively simplify any subject into very basic shapes.



## **Gray Studies** **1st & 2nd Stages**

Here is an example of where I developed this test with only 2 stages... the initial stage where I used only this light gray value to define everything. You can see it in the clouds and the lighter grays in the landscape features.

But then... I came back in a developed a darker mix into the design trying to bring out the qualities of bright light on water as seen in the original watercolor I'm using as reference.

But once this was done I added a slightly lighter graded wash over the water on the lower left side to drive your eye up into the brighter distant part of the painting.





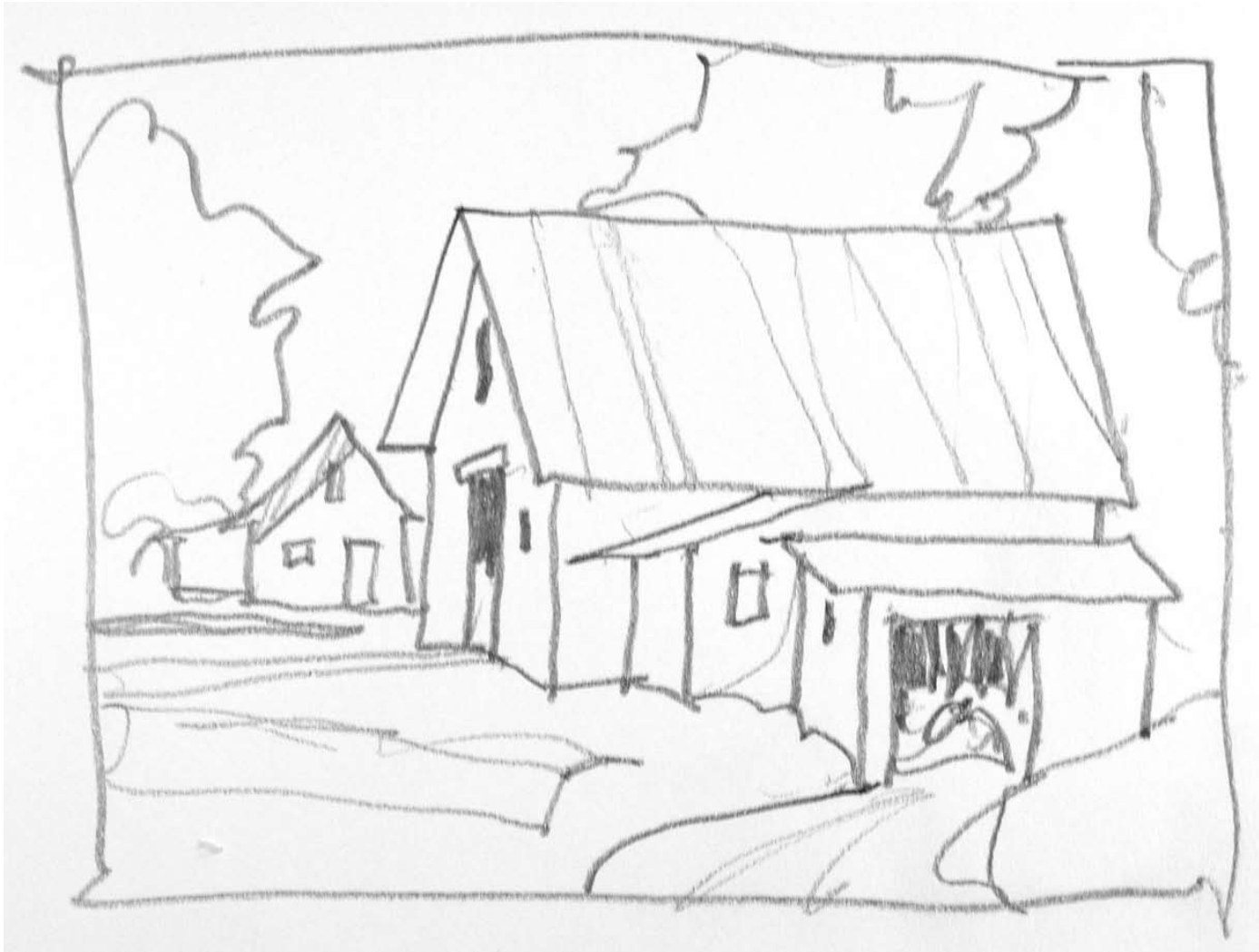
## **Gray Studies Even Darker**

As I mentioned before... by working this way you end up with an enormous amount of creative flexibility regarding your overall impact of your subject.

Here I could have easily ended at the previous Near-Darkest Dark stage. But I wanted to show you an example of how to take it one step more if you want to sharpen up it's mood and impact.

And it's done simply by adding darker brushwork to the subject.

The joy of this comes in your ability try out painting ideas this fast.



### **Gray Studies** **4th Test Recipe**

Now let's try my most basic test recipe. Draw out your subject as shown here. Keep it simple. It's just a few structures in bright light. But now here's a chance to try this technique out with a reproducible subject that you can do over & over to get a feel for the procedure.



### Gray Studies **Define the Light**

And now quickly cover over everything but the lightest areas shown here.

Work quickly but carefully to cut around these shapes with a light gray.



## **Gray Studies** **Defining the White Design**

And then quickly add a first stage of darker grays as seen in the trees on the left... followed by a Darkest Dark brushwork as seen in the trees around the barn.

Remember... I used the Near-Darkest Darks to develop all of these darker areas. Only then did I work over these with my Darkest Darks!

But then... I used the 4th Stage to go back and work a slightly lighter dark into the shady sides of the barn to pop the light areas facing the brightest sunlight.

Go back & Forth to study this additional brushwork.