



A Keen Eye for Observation

Charles Henry Rouse drenches mosaic-style shapes with lively color to add a vibrant feel to his paintings.

BY JOHN A. PARKS

CHARLES HENRY ROUSE
1874-1951





Rouse's value separation technique is taken to extremes in **Road Warriors** (watercolor on paper, 24x33). The road surface features a wealth of grays painted in small separate shapes.

On previous pages:

In **Lost in Paradise** (watercolor on paper, 17½x28¼), Rouse combines delicate blending of the flesh with a value separation approach in the background. This reinforces the somber expression of the face against the setting's lively light and color.

Charles Henry Rouse paints the world as a feast for the eyes and mind, presenting richly colored, brilliantly illuminated scenes that invite us to enjoy the sheer pleasure of observation. His subjects are enormously varied: sunlit streets, busy food markets, exotic locales, throngs of people, groups of schoolchildren and an occasional portrait. Some paintings take in broad urban vistas, signage, crowds and vehicles, while others narrow to a close-up of a solitary figure or a chance still life in the corner of a room.

"I paint what appeals to me, what I find interesting, what excites me and, most of all, what challenges me," Rouse says. "I travel as often as I can, and I take as many pictures as I can. I paint as much as I can and compete whenever I can. Fortunately, I don't need to paint to live, so the decision-making process regarding subject matter or style isn't compromised or influenced by the need to sell. Years of art-for-pay got me here to art-for-art."

From Commercial Art to Watercolor

The vibrancy, energy and wide range of Rouse's work are matched by the enthusiasm of the artist himself, who became a painter after many years as a commercial designer. "I was the second boy of five, and in my early years, my father was studying to be an artist, as well as trying to hold down a job and feed his kids," Rouse recalls. "He used to paint pictures on our basement walls. I probably picked up most of my talent from watching my father do his thing."

After a stint in the Marine Corps, Rouse found work in a sign shop in his Vista, Calif., hometown. "I took to it like a fish to water," he recalls. "In two years, I was running the place." The artist eventually bought the business and spent years building it into a full-fledged commercial art enterprise. He also returned to school to study and later worked as an art instructor at his local community college, where he taught commercial art for 25 years.



Many of the shadow colors in **St. Lucia Cool** (watercolor on paper, 21x29) were established as grays before Rouse washed a layer of the local color over them, achieving a sense of reduced color appropriate to the shadow.

Rouse's love of watercolor came about slowly. "Initially, watercolor was a cog in the machine," he says, "just one of the many things I had to learn to be a good commercial artist and designer. I don't think I ever really thought I'd be a fine artist. Early on, the artists whom I admired were commercial illustrators and graphic designers. Computers weren't part of the landscape yet, so all the traditional methods were in play. Almost everything was illustrated by hand with few mechanical aids. The illustrators I looked up to were people such as Albert Dorne, Fred Ludekens, Norman Rockwell, Ben Stahl and, of course, Alberto Vargas and his beautiful women." Rouse also developed an interest in realist painters, including Andrew Wyeth and Winslow Homer.

"I took a couple of basic watercolor classes in college, but for the most part, it was trial and error—lots of both," says the artist. "It wasn't until after I retired from that business that I took a formal watercolor class. I'm pretty much self-taught. Of course, having a commercial art background and all the learning that goes with it certainly put me in the catbird seat."

Rouse says his approach to watercolor painting is very much a product of his commercial art experience. "For the most part, illustration is a tight, controlled painting style that relies heavily on reference," he says. "Most commercial illustrators kept large morgues of

clippings and photographs to refer back to for accuracy in their work. Some illustrators even hired models and photographers to stage their reference for a particular project. You can see how this would affect the manner in look and feel of a fine art project. Illustrators seldom worked in a plein air style. It was primarily a studio occupation."

Laying the Groundwork

Rouse's recognition of the importance of good reference led him to embrace photography, an activity that he sees as central to his painting. "At one time, I actually considered being a photographer instead of an artist," he says. "A good artist could be a good photographer and vice versa. The principles are the same for both." The artist points out that a quality camera is a prerequisite for getting valuable references. "Cellphones aren't the tool for this," he says. "Nice cameras capture a lot of digital information so you can manipulate photos on your computer without too much degradation."

Once he has decided on an image from which to work, Rouse transfers it to paper using one of three methods: drawing over the projected image, using a grid system or tracing from a print. In *Blue Hat* (on page 00), for example, he traced from a projected image. At this stage, Rouse adopts a novel approach: He not only outlines objects, but also traces



Rouse's value separation technique in **Boatyard Blues** (watercolor on paper, 00x00) is clearly demonstrated in the progression of colors along the hull. As the light changes, the color shifts in a succession of separate shapes.

around different value areas. He essentially uses the tracing to make the first decision about how he'll break up the image into separate value areas.

Lining Up the Values

As Rouse begins painting, he works from dark to light. "Many artists work from light to dark, and I used to do just that," he says. "But, in recent years, I've reversed the process. I find it easier to establish my value system this way. Sometimes I skip around the paper looking for all the darks and inserting them. I use liquid

mask to preserve all the whites and brights. If it's an oversized painting, I sometimes have to work it upside down."

In the demonstration on page 00, Rouse has worked in sections, beginning at the top and finishing at the bottom. The broad gray stripes around objects are liquid mask. He ensures that the areas he's not working on at any one time are covered with paper towels to prevent damage or oil residue from his hands.

In each section of a painting, Rouse applies his darks and then builds up to the lights following the areas that he has laid out in the



artist's toolkit

When it comes to materials, Rouse tends to keep things simple. “The materials and equipment that one needs to paint in watercolor are fairly limited,” he says. “In fact, you can get by with the bare minimum and produce quality watercolors. All one needs is paper, water, paint and a brush. The number of colors required to cover the spectrum are minimal. With less than a dozen paints on your palette, you could probably mix almost any color you want.”

- **Paper:** “I’ve tried just about every brand of paper,” Rouse says, “and each brand has a personality all its own. My personal favorite is Arches 300-lb. rough cold-pressed paper. I normally paint full-sheet paintings and have recently started painting larger. The increased size creates many problems, however, such as costs for shipping, matting and framing, as well as a considerable increase in the expense of the paper itself.”
- **Brushes:** Rouse previously used sable brushes exclusively, but with the improved quality of today’s synthetic brushes, he finds it’s now difficult to tell a difference between them. “Even the inexpensive synthetics are serviceable,” he says. “My personal favorite is the Richeson Stephen Quiller 7000 Series. Cheap Joe’s Dream Catchers and the new Escoda Versatil are also high on my list.”
- **Paints:** Rouse’s choice of paints also has changed over time. “In the beginning, I used nothing but Winsor & Newton,” he says, “but over years of experimentation with various brands of paint, I’ve found little difference, with the exception of student-grade paints, which I avoid. Paints, like people, have a personality all their own, and if you find something you like, go with it. For some time now, I’ve been using Cheap Joe’s American Journey watercolors and Da Vinci watercolors. The large tubes, price and quality make them a best buy.”
- **Palette:** “For years I used an old refrigerator tray,” says Rouse. “Now I use a palette made by Frank Webb. It has little compartments built into the side that allow me to drag the paint into the center of the palette.”

drawing. This procedure gives a somewhat mosaic feel to the work, an approach that has the advantage of keeping the color very much alive. In painting most objects, the artist applies the darks in a fairly deep gray and then washes the local color—the actual color of the object—over the top. He finds this approach helps to re-create the reduced color saturation that’s often visible in shadows. He does a little blending or softening where necessary, which can be seen particularly in areas such as flesh. Rouse stresses, however, that the bulk of the illusion is achieved through lining up the values. “When I look at a room full of paintings and see the ones that aren’t working, it’s always because there’s something amiss with the values,” he says.

The advantages of Rouse’s technique can be seen in *Boatyard Blues* (above), where he shows the section of a sailboat’s blue hull raked by sunlight. As the hull curves into the shadow, we see distinct areas of color at intervals as the shadow deepens. This progression of color and tone remains vibrant, in part because it’s composed of a set of clearly demarcated shapes. The background is also achieved largely with separated color areas. This can be seen in the foliage, too, where Rouse has used three distinct greens. What’s fascinating is that when the values are judged correctly, the viewer’s eye accepts the illusion.

The technique is more complex in *Road Warriors*, in which a pothole filling crew is hard at work on a New

a colorful value proposition

“I wanted to combine my more impressionist technique with some traditional rendering,” Rouse says of *Blue Hat* (watercolor on paper, 29x27). What remains constant in all of his paintings, though, is a dedication to rendering accurate values and lively color.

Step 1: Rouse used a pencil to trace the image onto the paper via a projector. He not only outlined objects, but also demarcated areas of different values, breaking the image into a mosaic of small forms. He calls this a “value/shape technique.”

Step 2: Rouse began painting at the top of the page, moving section by section, placing his darks first. Although he kept most color areas separate, there’s some blending in the sky. While he worked, he covered the white sections with paper towels to prevent any accidents.

Step 3: The gray bands surrounding some areas are liquid mask that the artist used to preserve lights or retain important edges. He was particularly careful to mask out the figures in the foreground so that he’d get clean silhouettes for later painting.





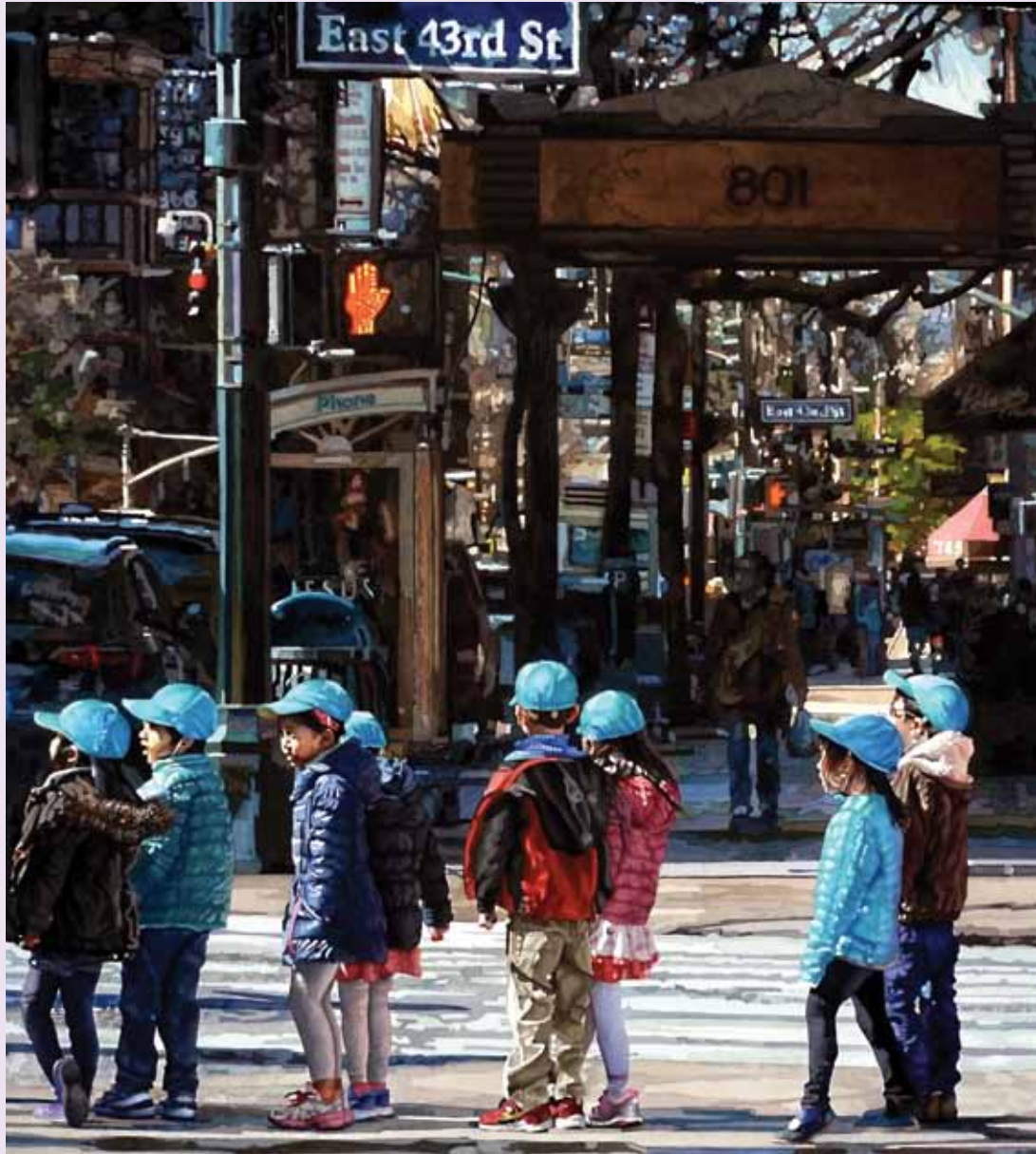
A



B



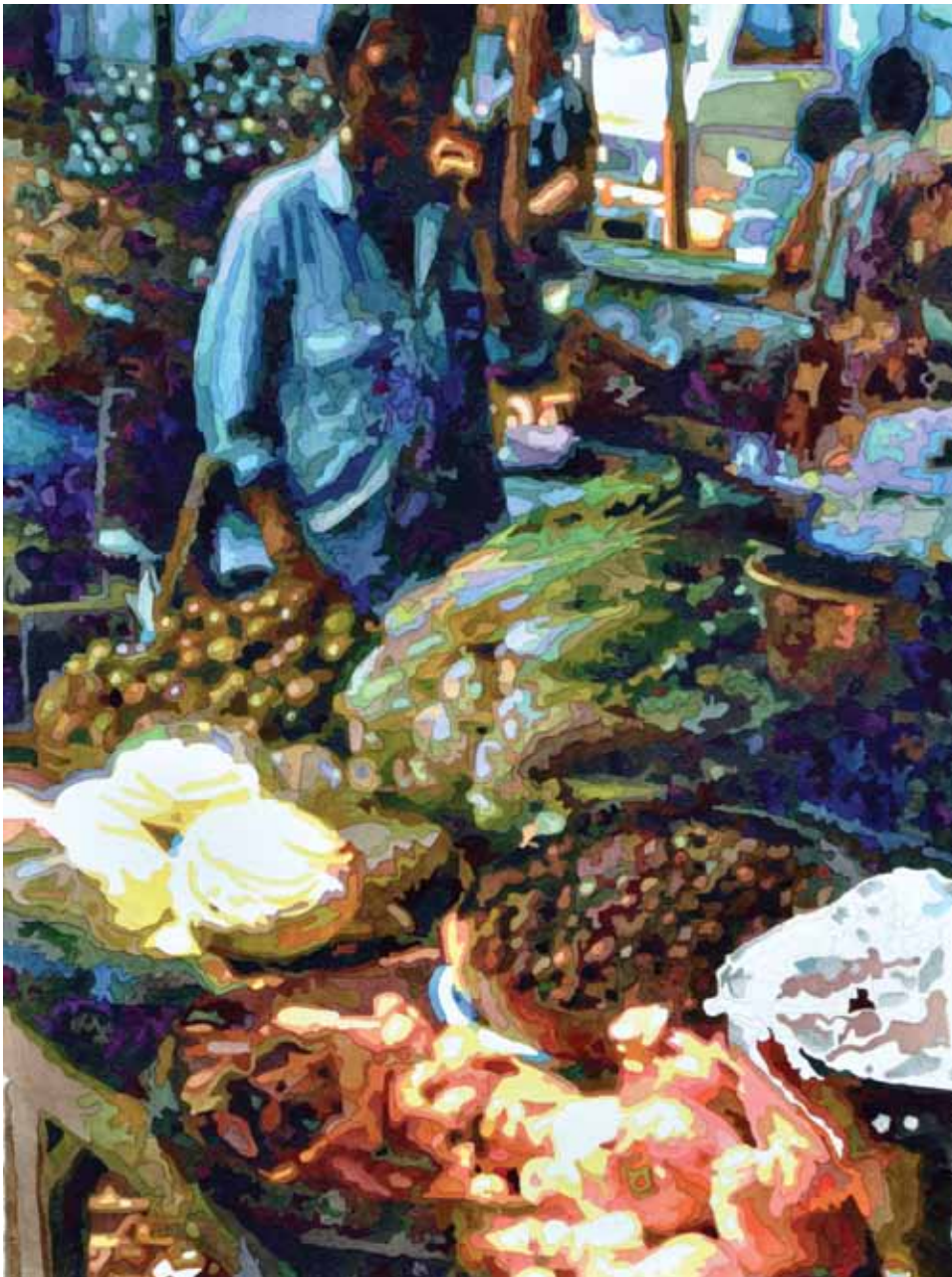
C



Close-ups A, B and C: Rouse placed his darks first—applying a very gray shadow—and then built to the lights. By washing the local color over the top, he re-created the diminished sense of color that often appears in shadows. He then washed a brown over the gray shadows.

Final: The end result shows a careful blending of the children's faces and portions of their clothes. The separation of the tones and colors throughout much of the rest of the cityscape painting gives it an energetic, of-the-moment feel.

See the step-by-step evolution of *Road Warriors* (on page 00) at artistsnetwork.com/articles/art-demo-techniques/charles-rouse-watercolor-value-painting.



Bali Market (watercolor on paper, 29x21) is rendered as an almost mosaic-like set of discrete shapes.

The subtle, restrained colors of the faces in the foreground of **The Shining** (opposite; watercolor on paper, 21x29) contrast with the sharp brilliance of the neon sign behind. The brilliant red light permeates the entire painting.

York City street. The painting is largely achieved with the separation of color shapes and the clear established values in each; however, in sections such as the shadow in the middle distance or the yellow vehicle on the right, the color has been feathered and blended to give a smoother, more photographic transition.

In some works, Rouse avoids blending altogether and adheres to value separation throughout, which yields intriguing results. In **Bali Market** (above), he paints a swath of foodstuffs laid out on a market stall with a background of figures and a distant street. Everything has been edited to groups of flat shapes filled with separate colors.



Sometimes the color has been pushed or exaggerated a little. The highlights on the green-leafed vegetables are bluer than they'd appear in real life. Other colors throughout the work, particularly the pinks and blue-violets, are somewhat saturated. The overall result is a striking wealth of color—an almost decorative, carpet-like feel that greatly adds to the attraction of the piece.

Building Confidence

Asked what artistic advice he might have for novice watercolor painters, Rouse says, "I know how frustrating it can be. We've all been there. Trying to emulate other painters, no matter how good they are or how famous



they are, is usually a fruitless endeavor. Learn all you can about the paint, the paper, the brushes and how they work together with water to create a painting. Once you feel comfortable with the materials, try some small, simple paintings. It's all about control and confidence. When you learn to paint a perfect apple, you might then be ready to paint the branch holding it, and then, who knows—maybe the entire tree.”

In his own career, Rouse notes that he has found that entering competitions gives him a focus and allows him to compare his accomplishments to those of his peers. The friendly rivalry also provides an added impetus. “I’ve been painting watercolors for a considerable

length of time, but as a professional for only a short while,” he says. “I’ve been actively competing for about eight years, and I think this concentrated competitive activity has been responsible for much improvement in my work. Challenge is the driving force. I continue to refine my style of painting and to push the impressionistic boundaries.

“Of course, I’m always experimenting,” he adds, “so who knows? It’s certainly going to be an exciting journey.”

JOHN A. PARKS (johnaparks.com) is the author of *Universal Principles of Art: 100 Key Concepts for Understanding, Analyzing and Practicing Art* (Rockport Publishers, 2014).