

A lifetime spent in the thrall of California's exquisite, clarified light and a respect for watercolor's innate qualities have made **Michael Reardon** a master of the one-sitting landscape.

By Sarah A. Strickley

A love FOR light

California native Michael Reardon is the kind of painter so moved by the combination of elements that comprise the perfect landscape subject—the quality of the light flooding the scene, the proud geometry of the Corinthian column—that he's been known to sit down exactly where he stands and begin painting. "Occasionally, I turn a corner and, wow," he says. "That's it!"

He forgets the crowds packing the busy plaza, ignores the pedestrians peering over his shoulder and slips into the dream of the painting. When he wakes, he may find, as he did once while traveling overseas, that he's been joined by 30-odd observers. "They were totally quiet, just watching everything I did," he says. "I have similar stories all over the world, but that was the largest number."

You might say that the artist, also a seasoned traveler, is on a permanent quest to find the next scene that will take his breath away, send his heart into excited flutters. Fortunately, he finds plenty of inspiration in California, the landscape that serves as his

home and most frequent muse. "The clarity of light in California, and especially northern California, is pretty special," he says. "I find that watercolor just lends itself to it."

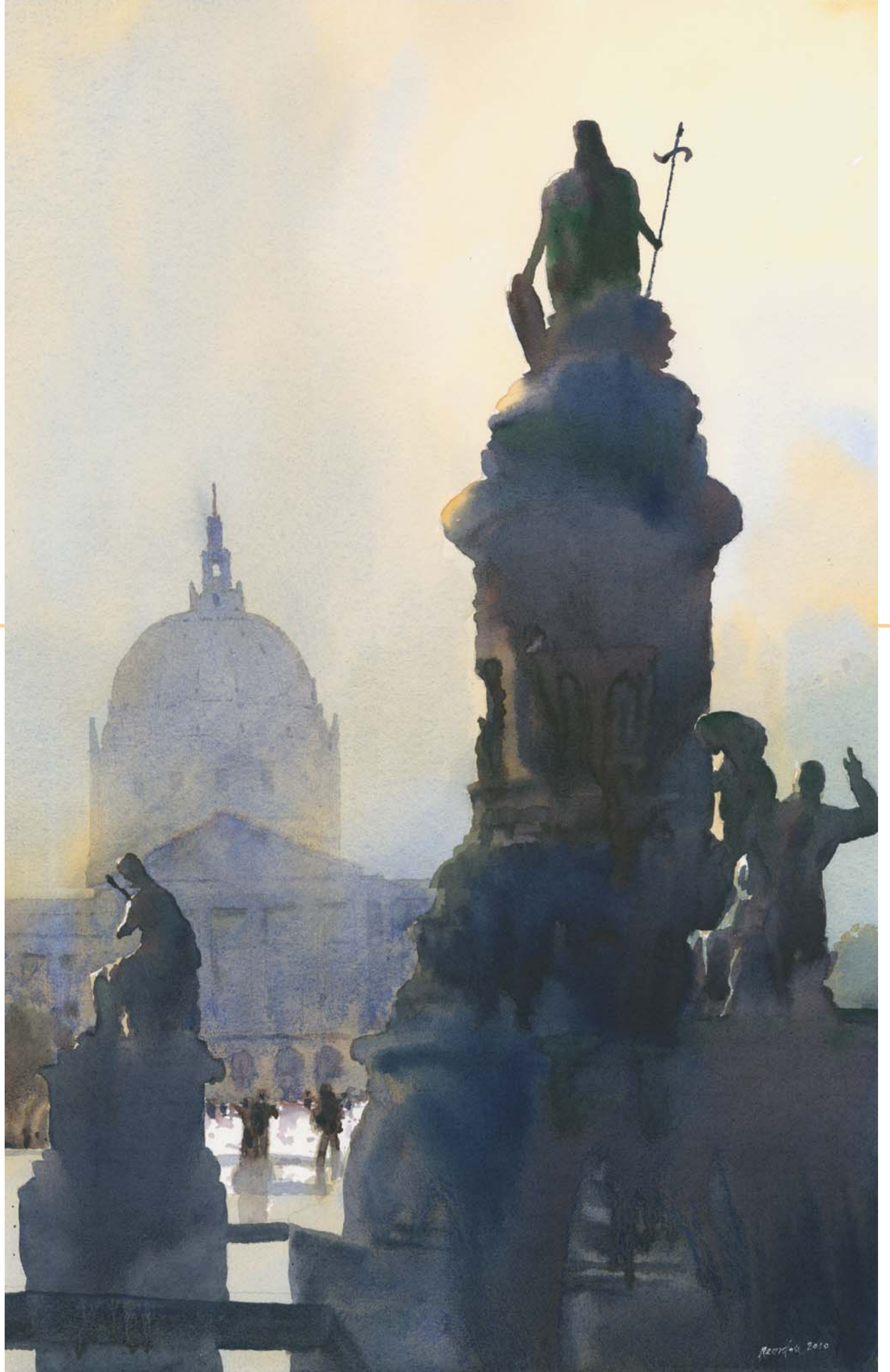
Combining an abiding love of light and a faith in the medium's innate qualities, Reardon brings a vibrant sense of immediacy to his watercolor landscapes, which he paints *en plein air* and in the studio. He paints directly and incredibly quickly, often capturing the essence of a scene in a little more than an hour.

Wellspring of Inspiration

Reardon's early experiences with watercolor were, to phrase it delicately, less than positive. "It was a total disaster," he says. "We were painting in California, in the summer, in 20 percent humidity and I was using cheap paper and paint. I couldn't control it; the washes were drying too fast. I decided that I'd never try watercolor again."

After pursuing a degree in liberal arts, he went on to architecture school, earned a degree and started doing architectural illustrations in pen and ink for a living. Thirty-two years later, he's still completing assignments for clients as far flung as Dubai and Hong Kong.

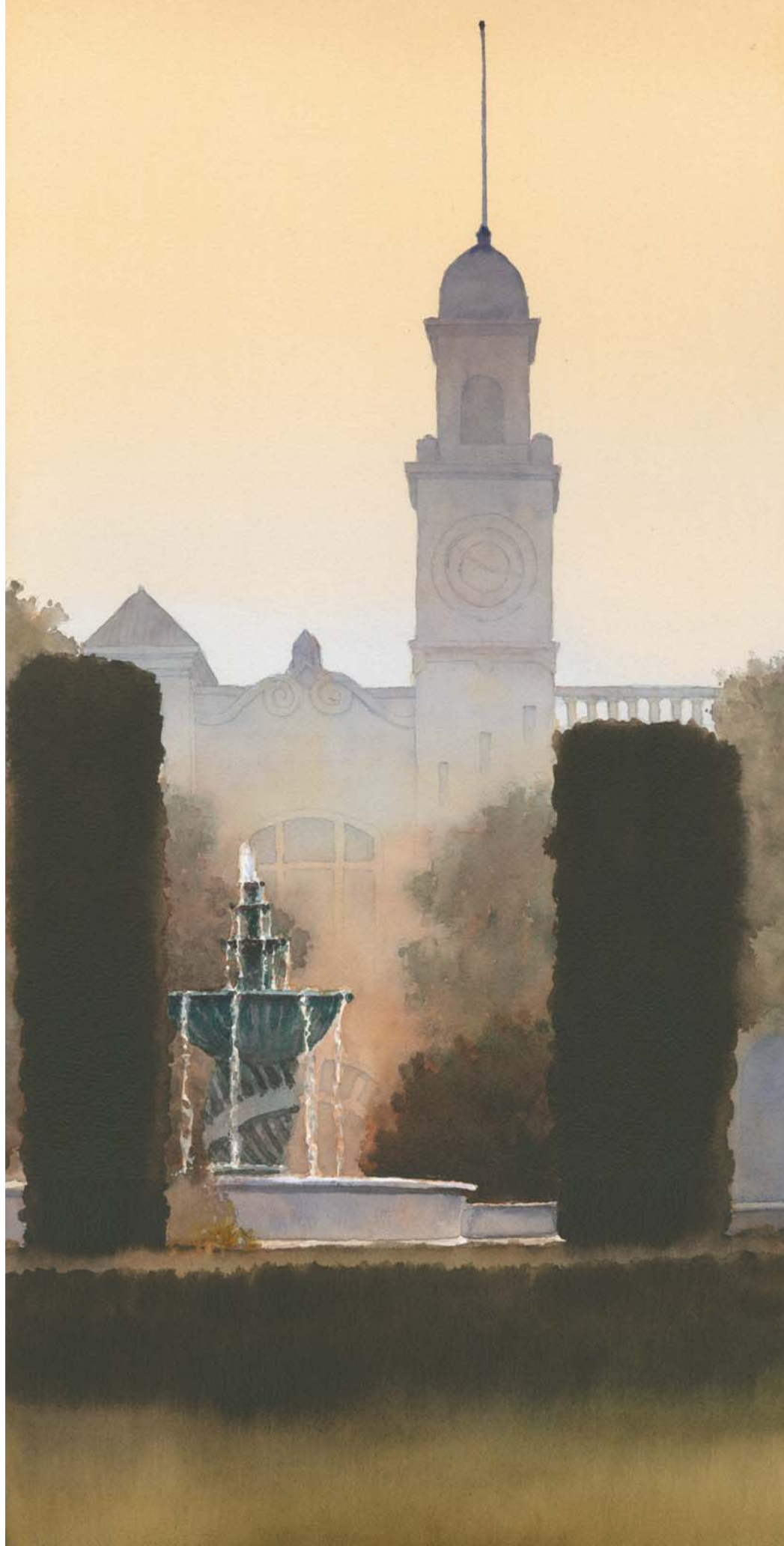
City Center "Using a 'yin and yang' composition of a dark foreground and light background, I created an evocative interaction between San Francisco's City Hall and Pioneer Monument in *San Francisco Civic Center* [watercolor on paper, 25x14]," says Reardon.



Reisig 2010

Close Crop “*Flood Fountain* [opposite; watercolor on paper, 18x11] shows the value of cropping a composition,” says the artist. “By concentrating on only two of the three figures, I emphasized the dynamic tension between them.”

Backlit “*Fountain, Sonoma Plaza* [at right; watercolor on paper, 22x11] shows how back-lighting is key,” says Reardon. “Not only does the dramatic light source make the water droplets sparkle, it allows the background, mid-ground and foreground to inter-mingle, creating a unified composition.”



“They call me up and say they need something and I produce a set of drawings for them,” he says. “I try to find the best vantage point, the best lighting and the best way to portray the spirit of the building.”

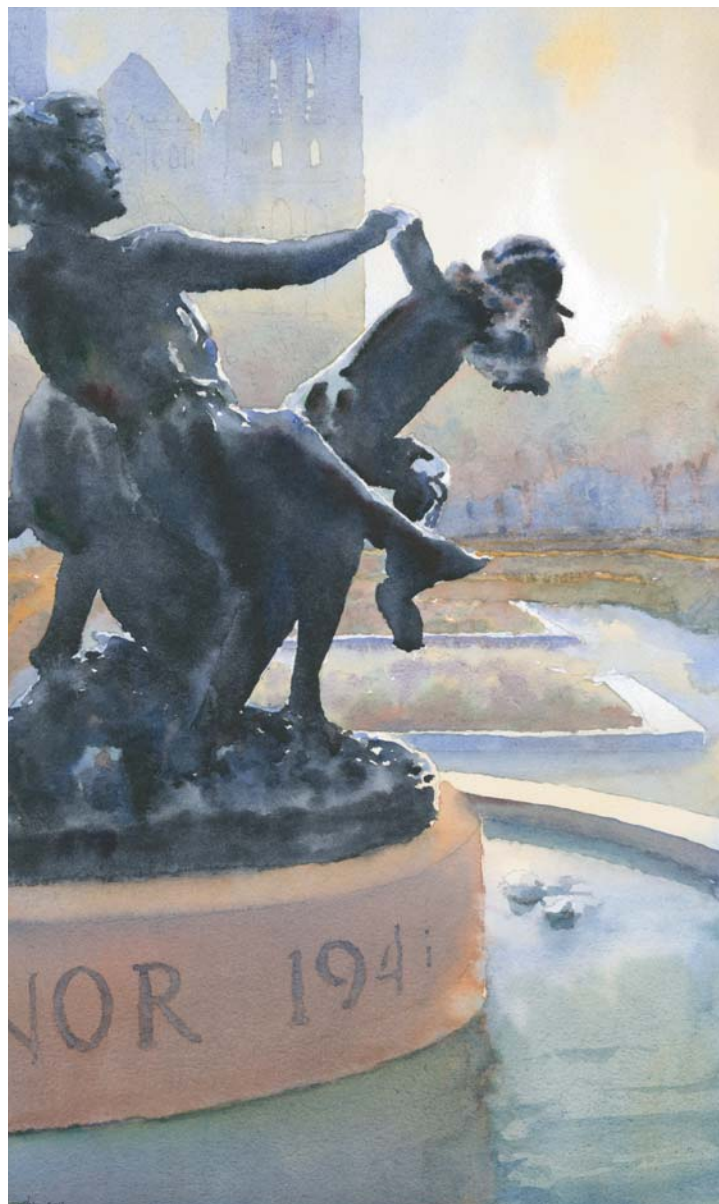
Despite his early struggles with the medium, Reardon found himself drawn to watercolors as though magnetized. “Whenever I saw them, I was just absolutely blown away,” he says. “In 1985, there was an exhibit in San Francisco of John Singer Sargent’s watercolors and I thought, I’ve really got to learn how to do this. That’s where it started.”

Reardon soon discovered a group of architects in the Bay Area who got together to paint once a month and decided to tag along. “I started to learn,” he says. “I didn’t know what I was doing, but I brought all of my paints along and watched how they composed the important elements in the scene and decided what to paint.”

The artist credits the group with teaching him how to become a good viewfinder, how to look at a scene and break it down into basic shapes, how to simplify it. “I travel a lot and my wife will tell you that I wander around for quite a bit while trying to find a scene that I want to paint. I know that there are some things that don’t work no matter how hard you try,” he says. “I look for something that grabs me.”

A quick glance at his body of work reveals that Reardon has been grabbed by scenes up and down the California coastline and all over the world, but there’s one subject in particular that always brings him to a halt: “If I see a fountain, I’ll always stop,” he says. In fact, it was an interest in fountains—the alluring juxtaposition of man-made structure and natural design—that became the theme of the three-month painting trip in Paris that solidified Reardon’s skills as a watercolorist.

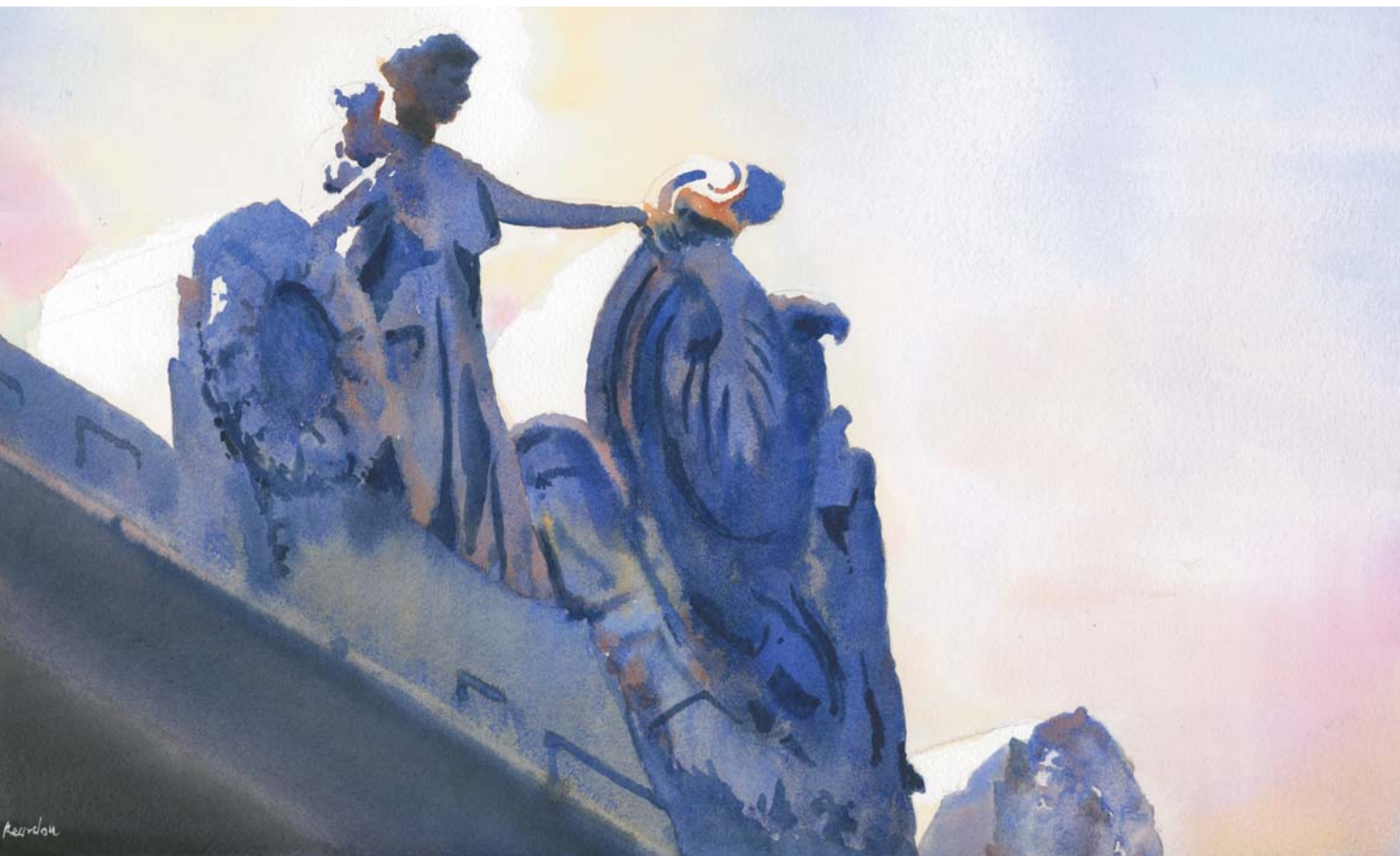
In 2005, the Western European Architecture Foundation awarded Reardon its Gabriel Prize, which annually supports a visual study of an aspect of French architecture. “I’ve always painted fountains, so when



I was trying to think of a theme, it just seemed like a natural fit,” says Reardon.

He challenged himself to do something new and different with every painting, eventually building a substantial body of work. “It’s funny because at the end of three months, I didn’t think I’d learned much,” he says. “Then I came back and was playing around and realized I really knew what I was doing.”

For those interested in sampling the delights of the pre-20th-century fountains dotting the City of Light, Reardon has collected the watercolors resulting from this seminal trip in a book, *Fontaines: The Public Fountains of Paris*. But you’ll also find Reardon’s favorite subject depicted in such works as *Fountain, Sonoma Plaza* (opposite) and *Flood Fountain* (above).



Let the Paint Flow

The search for paintings begins with a bit of semi-aimless wandering. Occasionally, Reardon will turn a corner and know instantly that he's found his subject, as was the case with *Fountain, Sonoma Plaza*. "I thought, this is going to work," he says. "It has the building in the back, which I can simplify; it has the fountain, which I absolutely love; and the quality of light is amazing. It even has the big, vertical cypress trees."

But just as often he settles into a subject by sitting down and drawing or sketching. Whether it's love at first sight or a gradual process of infatuation, Reardon's process always begins with focused study. "So much of *plein air* work is observation, which informs me later when I'm doing studio work," he says. "When I go back inside my studio, I still have that memory." It's all about the sights, the sounds, the scents, the people wandering through scenes—the entire felt experience of the scene and not just its compositional components.

Solid Anchor "Unusual and unpredictable compositions can set paintings apart," says the artist. "In *Customs House* [above; watercolor on paper, 11x18], the use of the negative space on the right sets off the subject, which is anchored solidly on the left."

Early on, the artist was adamant about never using reference photos. "They dictate too much," he says. Recently, though, when the weather turned and he needed new inspiration, he went through his files and found a photo of the Pont Notre-Dame in Paris. "I'd always wanted to paint this bridge and I knew I wouldn't be going to Paris anytime soon, so I did a quick sketch using it as a reference and then I put the photo away," he says. "I did other quick sketches to come up with the composition and design, and then I did my painting."

He has repeated this process with photos of the Himalayas. "Otherwise, I still really resist trying to paint from photos," he says. Instead, he begins with sketches and drawings, spending only about five minutes on each. He often completes finished paintings *en plein air*, but he'll just as often bring a *plein air* painting back to the studio and use it as inspiration for a larger work.

Whether he's painting indoors or out, though, he never goes back into a painting once it's dry. "Fourteen years ago in Venice, I was interrupted while painting and I went back to my hotel, tried to finish the painting and totally ruined it," he says. "I decided

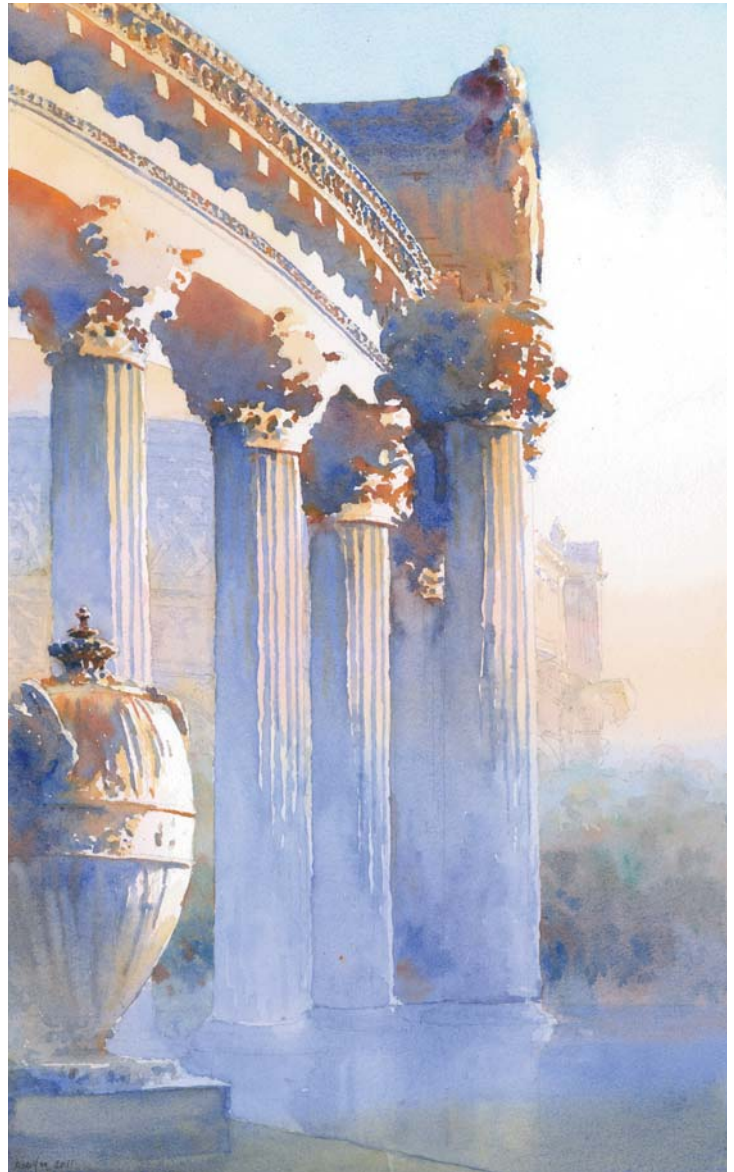


Fresh Take “To find a new approach to an often painted landmark in *South Anchorage, Golden Gate Bridge* [watercolor on paper, 22x11], I manipulated the components of the bridge to create this view, emphasizing the anchorage rather than the bridge itself,” says Reardon.

that from that point on, I would try never to retouch a painting again.”

As you might suspect, then, he starts with a clear plan in mind. “I know where my dark values need to be and I’ve thought about the colors,” he says. “I always have the rough sketch in front of me as I’m painting and I’m always looking back at it, thinking, now that I’ve hit this value, can I move into this area?”

Meanwhile, he lets the paint flow. “I try to make it all happen in one go,” he says. “I start at the top of the painting and go from area to area, keeping them wet and letting them flow into each other.” Unexpected surprises arise out of interesting granulations and effects that he wouldn’t get if he tried to control the paint. “Sometimes I think, this isn’t going to work, but I can keep moving the paint around for as long as it’s wet,” he says. “When I reach the bottom, I put it away for a few days and then decide whether it was successful or not.” (See a step-by-step demo of Reardon’s painting process on page 42.)



Re-Imagine “In *Palace of Fine Arts* [watercolor on paper, 18x11], I flipped the colonnade around, preferring the left-to-right movement of the composition,” says the artist.

Water Works

In most of Reardon’s paintings, you’ll see cobalt blue and permanent orange. “I always do my underpaintings using those two mother colors,” he says. “After that, my most used colors are quinacridone burnt scarlet, which is a Daniel Smith color, and viridian. Those are the four colors I’m always ordering.”

The artist rounds out his oranges with quinacridone gold, quinacridone orange and burnt orange; in the reds, he uses carmine and quinacridone rose; in the greens he uses viridian and phthalo; and his blues are cobalt, ultramarine and cerulean.

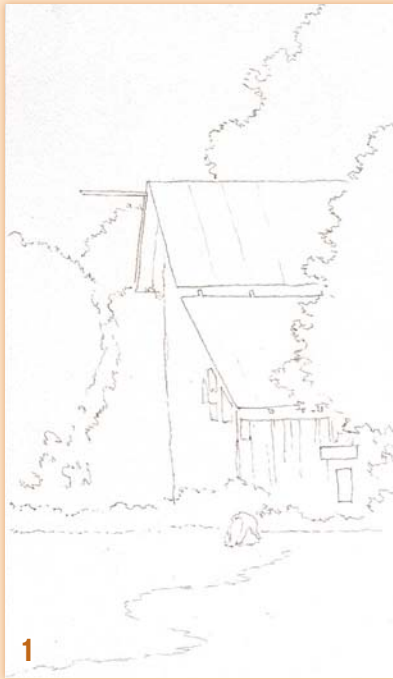
With the exception of the greens, he mixes on his surface (usually Arches 140-lb.



quick mix: instant gratification

Michael Reardon shares the secret to painting direct and fast to create atmospheric effects in a watercolor landscape:

Pencil Study: Before painting, I do a five- to 10-minute pencil sketch to determine and refine the composition and value relationships. In this scene, the sky is just clearing and there are still some passing showers, so the sky is very active and the lighting is very soft.



1 To start, I make a pencil line drawing on the watercolor paper.

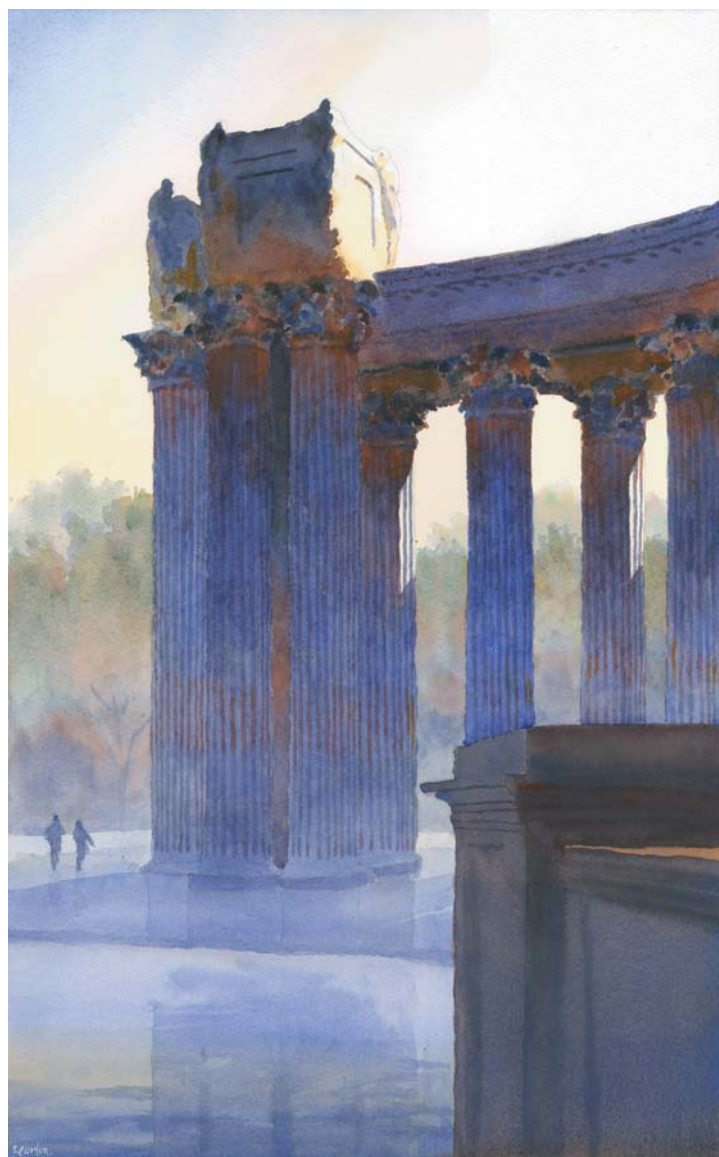
2 Next, I create an underpainting using permanent orange and cobalt blue. These colors are mixed on the paper, not the palette, which holds true for the following steps as well. The sky is completed at this stage and the light value areas are established. I leave areas that will remain white in the finished piece unpainted.

3 While the paper is still moist, I drop in the background hills with slightly heavier washes of viridian, cerulean blue and quinacridone burnt scarlet.

4 While the background is still wet, I add the darker mid-ground trees, starting with the tree on the right (I work from right to left since I'm left-handed). I bring some of the background color into the tree and then drop in heavier washes of quinacridone burnt scarlet and phthalo green yellow shade. I do the same on the left side and use carmine with the phthalo green to paint the darkest areas. I bring some of these washes into the barn to integrate them with the other mid-ground areas. A touch of cobalt blue on the roof indicates the shadow cast by the right-hand side tree.

5 Before these tree washes dry, I complete the barn, sometimes dragging some of the dark washes into the new washes. I use mostly cobalt blue and quinacridone burnt scarlet to indicate the shade side of the barn. I use these same colors with some permanent orange on the lighted side. The final darks are a mixture of carmine and phthalo green.

6 Finally, using quinacridone gold and permanent orange, I pick up some of the still-wet tree washes and drag the wash down the page. I also introduce some viridian to indicate the foreground grass. When this area is still barely moist, I drop in the tree shadows with cobalt blue and cerulean blue.

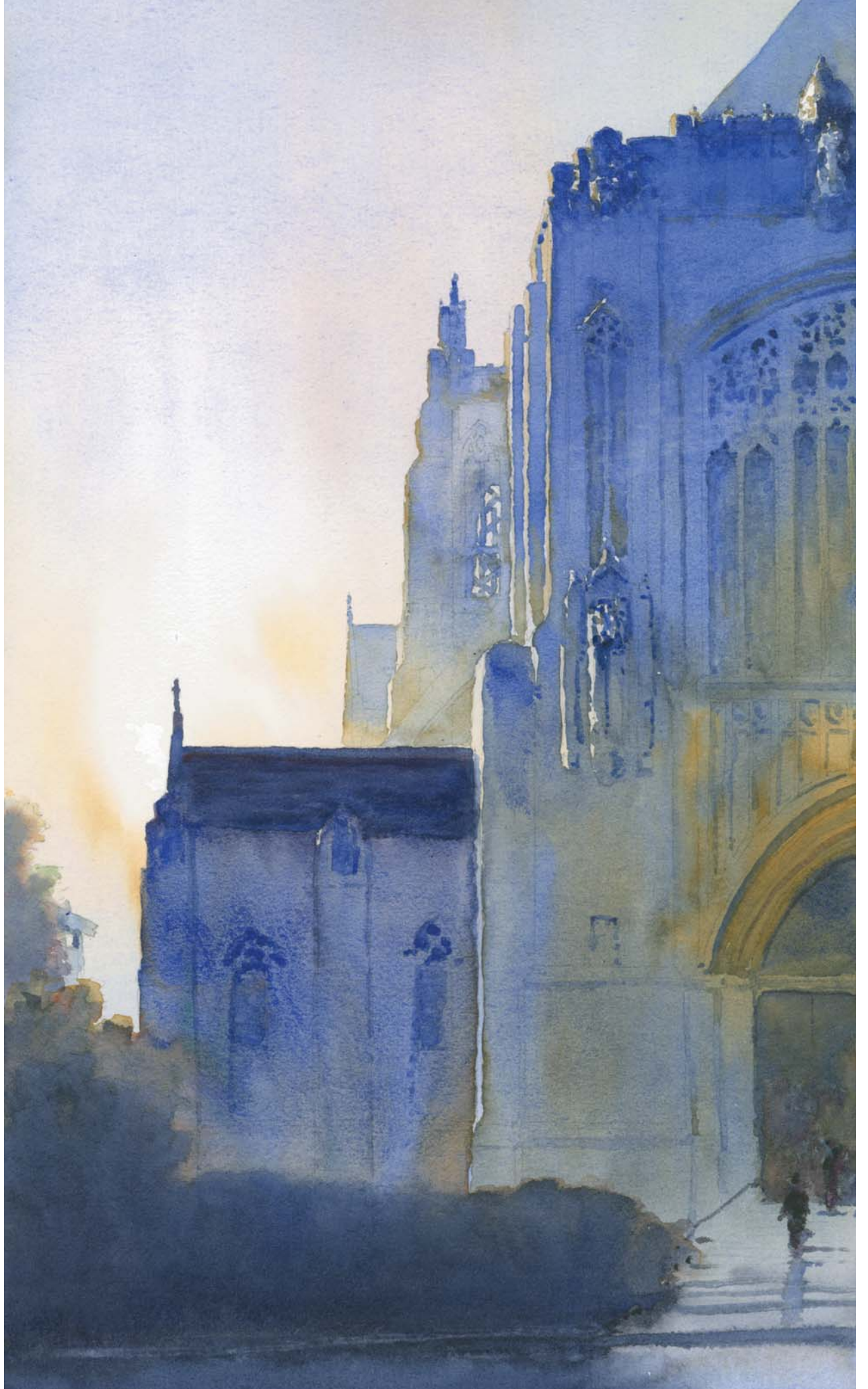


Simple and Strong “The simplification of the elements in a composition strengthens a painting,” says Reardon. “In reality there is a cluster of small houses behind the colonnade in *Palace of Fine Arts Colonnade* [watercolor on paper, 22x11].”

cold-pressed paper), which he uses as a palette. “I’m mixing to get the effect that I want on the paper,” he says. “So, if I want a gray, I’ll put down the orange first and then put the cobalt blue on top while it’s still wet.”

Reardon doesn’t have time to layer while painting *en plein air*, so he paints as directly and quickly as possible. This technique crosses over into his studio work, as well. He admits that viewers are often surprised to learn that he’s able to achieve such subtle, nuanced results with such an accelerated method. “To me, it’s just so natural,” he says. “You get effects that you really can’t get any other way.”

When it comes to painting water, one of the most challenging and alluring subjects for



watercolorists, Reardon likes to break it down into two distinct categories: “There’s water that’s still and there’s water that’s moving and they’re entirely different things,” he says. “Still water is basically about reflecting the sky and adjacent elements into the water, but when I’m doing moving water, I’m really concentrating on slight color variations within the water.”

Again, observation is key. “Little droplets might look white, but if you look closely, you’ll see they’re reflecting all of the colors around them,” he says. “When painting water, it’s mostly a matter of sitting and concentrating and trying to figure out the patterns and subtle changes in color. There’s never anything past a value one, two or three; it’s always a bit of rose, a bit of green and a bit of blue if it’s reflecting the sky.”

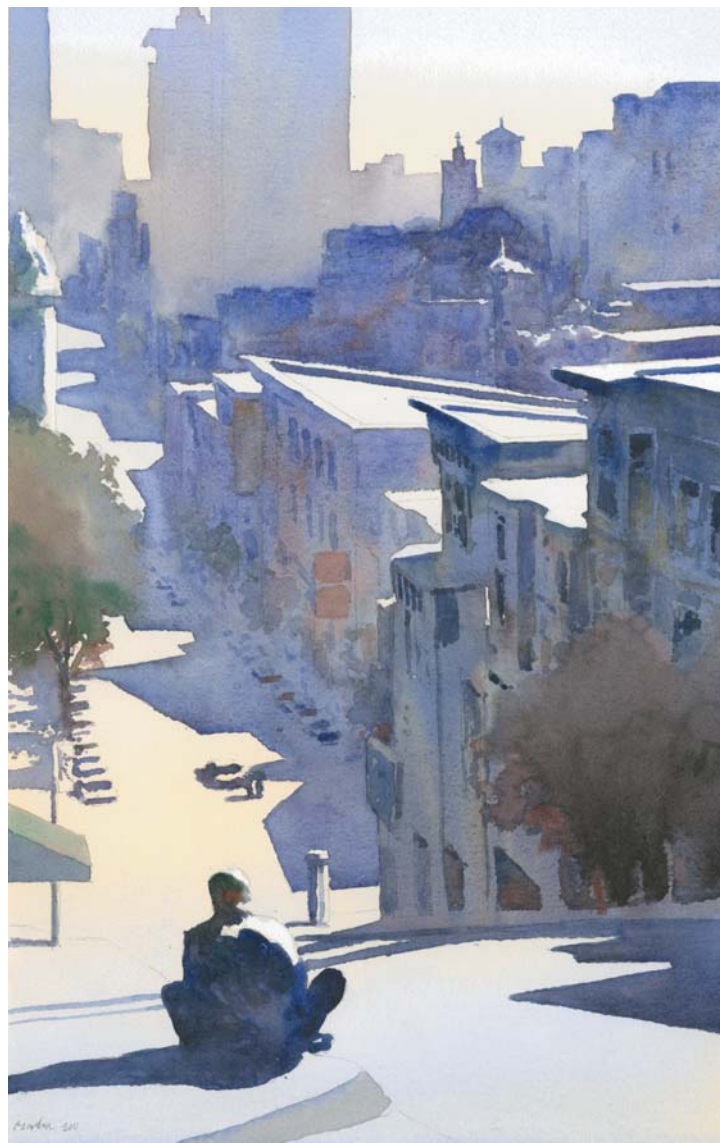
Spirit of the City

For the past 25 years, Reardon has been painting with a group that calls itself the Sunday Afternoon Watercolor Society (SAWS). Over the years, the composition of the group has changed but it’s still committed to capturing the spirit of the Bay Area, a mission close to Reardon’s heart. After all, he’s interested in telling a story with his paintings. “I think my work expresses the feeling of a place,” he says. “It’s not just a simple depiction.”

He likes to leave out as much as he includes in his paintings, offering viewers an opportunity to bring their own imaginations into the process. “Every painting tells a story whether or not it’s the story you wanted to tell,” he says. “I think that’s what people respond to.”

To keep things fresh and interesting, the artist has been experimenting with vertical orientation. “It’s a reaction to horizontal work, but, like with my *plein air* work, it’s also a way of taking a slice of life rather than trying to paint everything,” he says. He’s also been trying to do paintings that don’t have a strong source of light. “This goes along with letting the paint flow into itself,” he says.

Despite the technical skill and emotional portent that his landscapes demonstrate,



Powerful Palette “The use of a limited palette and backlighting in *Kearny Street Painter* [above; watercolor on paper, 18x11] helps to create a unified and harmonious composition,” says the artist. “Cobalt blue, permanent orange, quinacridone burnt scarlet and a touch of viridian are the only hues employed in the painting.”

Trinity “In *Saint Dominics* [opposite; watercolor on paper, 18x11], I showed only half of the church, creating a strong compositional triangle,” says Reardon.

Reardon still feels he has more to learn and more to see. “No matter how long you’ve done watercolor or how good at it you are, it’s always a challenge,” he says. “I’m always trying to let watercolor express its innate qualities.”

SARAH A. STRICKLEY is features editor of *Watercolor Artist*.



See paintings from the artist’s most recent trip to Italy at www.artistsnetwork.com/medium/watercolor/michael-reardon-gallery.