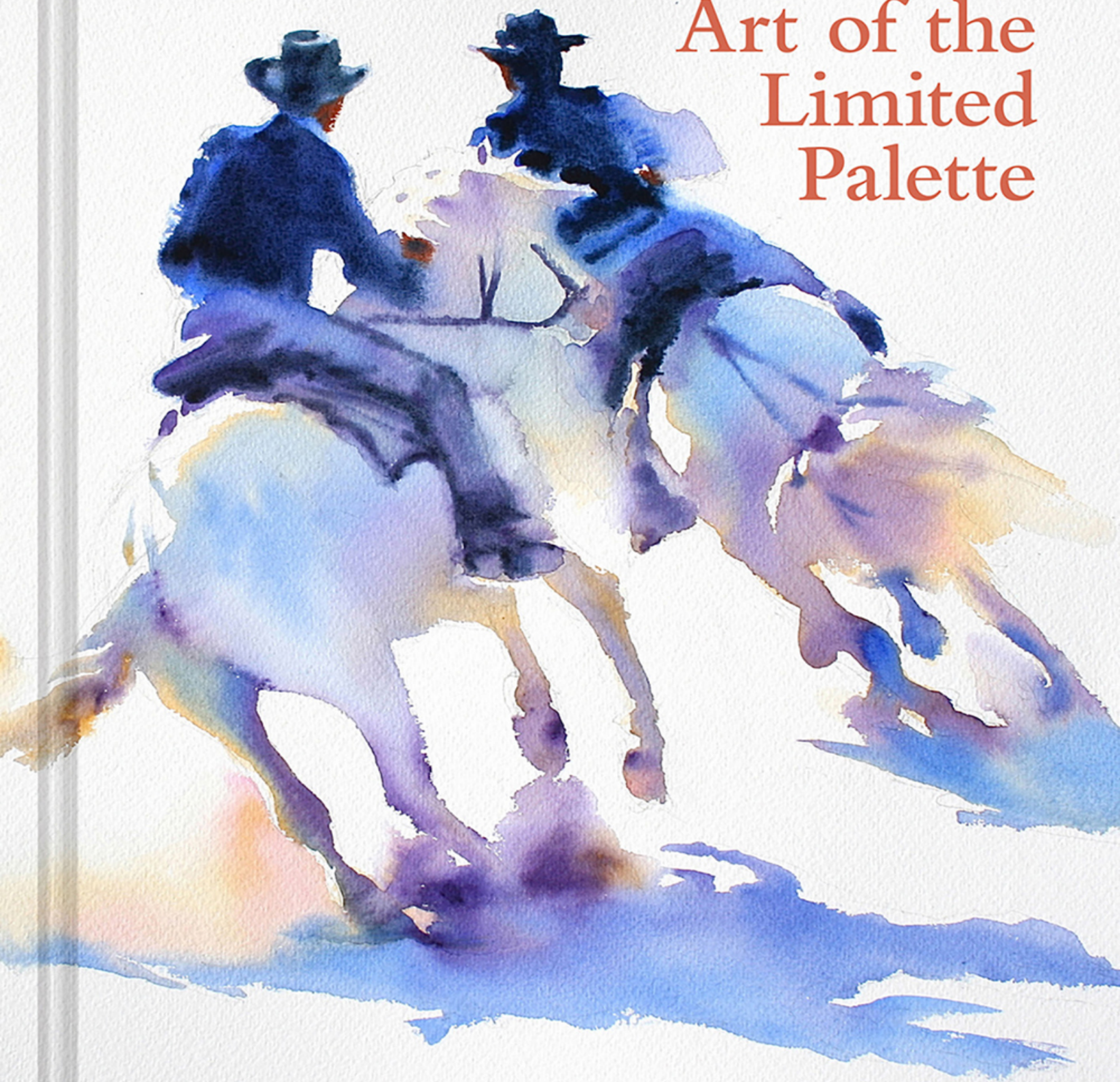


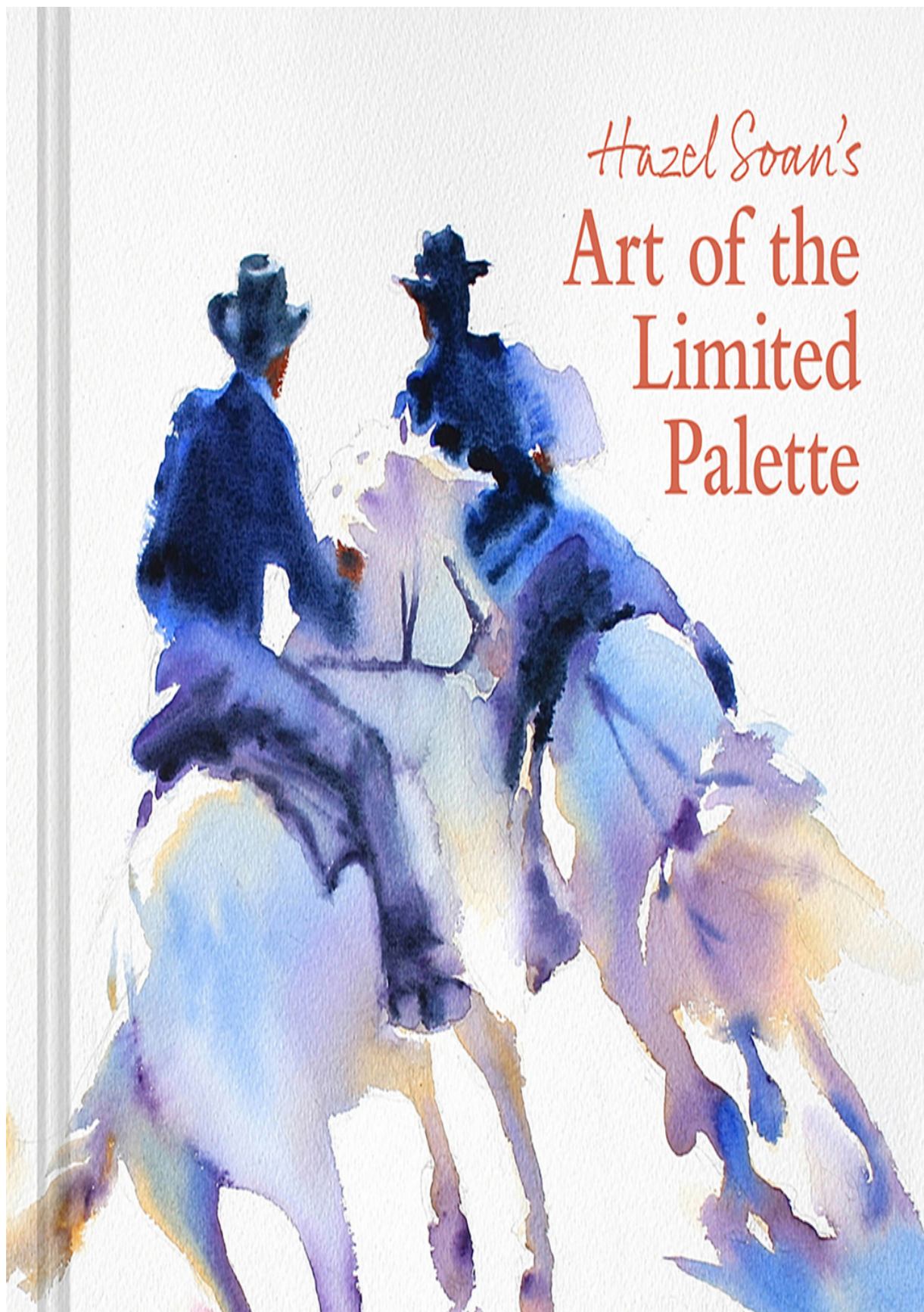
Hazel Soan's
**Art of the
Limited
Palette**



A step-by-step practical watercolour guide

BATSFORD

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Introduction

If you picked up this book, you have probably heard watercolourists referring to painting ‘with a limited palette’ but never truly understood what this means, why it works or why it is so useful in watercolour painting. How does painting with fewer colours make paintings look more colourful than using more colours? And how many colours is ‘a few’ colours anyway?

This book explains all of the above and offers numerous examples. It is meant as a practical guide for you to take with you into the field. Very soon you will see how painting with a limited palette is not only beneficial to watercolour painting, it is also extremely efficient (see [here](#)).

This book is divided into two parts; the information outlined in general in the first half is shown in relation to individual paintings in the second half.



You will see how yellow, red and blue mix to make a colourful grey, as seen in this young elephant.



Wall Street, 38 x 28cm (15 x 11in)

Three colours – Indian Yellow. Alizarin Crimson and Ultramarine Blue – are blended on paper and mixed in the palette to quickly record the ever-changing action of this New York street scene.

PART I

Understanding the Limited Palette



What is a Limited Palette?

What I mean in this book by a limited palette is the means by which a painter uses the least number of colours possible to achieve a wide range of colouring in a painting. The aim is to exclude unnecessary colours to the benefit of the painting.

The plan is to find a small number of colours that will mix together to make all the colours required for the painting. Far from being 'limiting', I have found the limited palette a route to freedom: it makes the mixing experience exciting and enables me to concentrate on composition, shape and tone. For me, it starts from the basic principle that the three primary colours – blue, yellow and red – mix to make all other colours. I call this 'three-colour thinking', and it has helped me choose colour selections efficiently for any subject and circumstance throughout my watercolour journey.



San Giorgio at Dawn, Venice, 20 x 25.5cm (8 x 10in)

A limited palette can be as few as two colours, if that is all that is needed: here Light Red and Ultramarine Blue satisfy the colours of dawn as the sun rises above the Church of San Giorgio Maggiore and the Venice lagoon.



Gravetye Poppies, 76 x 56cm (30 x 22in)

By limiting the number of colours at the outset, I can ensure harmony between the rich purples and paler greens, and explore the variety of colours displayed on the white petals freely and safely.

Two-, Three- and Four-colour Paintings

This book will primarily concentrate on two-, three- and four-colour paintings to show the wide scope, harmony and efficiency such a few colours can offer. While three can mix to make every colour, this may or may not be to your advantage, as we shall see on the following pages. There are occasions when more colours are needed and times when two colours are quite enough. Painting is an art but what happens on the paper is science, and painting should never accept compromise. The limited palette is a thrilling key that opens the door to 'less is more'; it is a journey I think you will enjoy.



Looking Down From Above, 56 x 76cm (22 x 30in)

The threesome, Prussian Blue, Yellow Ochre and Burnt Sienna, come together here to provide all the colours needed to paint the giraffe.

The Efficiency Advantage

A great advantage of the limited palette is its efficiency. Watercolour paintings are mostly painted from life and often need to be painted swiftly to effectively record light and shade in ever-changing light. A limited palette is efficient because having a limited number of colours lessens the variables in palette mixing, making it more straightforward and painting more efficient. When you are chasing light effects, grasping moving subjects, or trying to drop colour into washes before they dry, decisive mixing is invaluable.



Arty Conversation, 30.5 x 40.5cm (12 x 16in)

The choice of a limited number of colours speeds up the mixing time because it determines the range of colour mixes possible and serves to reduce doubt and hesitancy in the mixing equation.

How the Limited Palette Works

As well as being decisive and efficient, the limited palette enhances the colouring of a painting by guaranteeing harmony, maximizing colour interaction within the painting, and lessening the chance of muddy mixes and muddy colours. It may sound odd, but the fewer the colours, the more colourful a watercolour appears.

PIGMENT MIXING

The physical nature of pigments comes into play in watercolour more than in any other painting medium. The colours laid on the paper are made from many different pigments. When pigments are mixed together the resulting mix gets darker (and/or muddier) as different pigment colours are added to the mix – witness any painter's rinsing pot! The aim of the watercolourist is to create fresh, lively colours, but when too many colours are mixed together, either on the palette or on the paper, the trend of pigment mixing to lead towards darkness tends to dull mixes and can cause muddy colouring. When fewer pigments are mixed this tendency is averted.



Prussian Blue



Aureolin



Alizarin Crimson



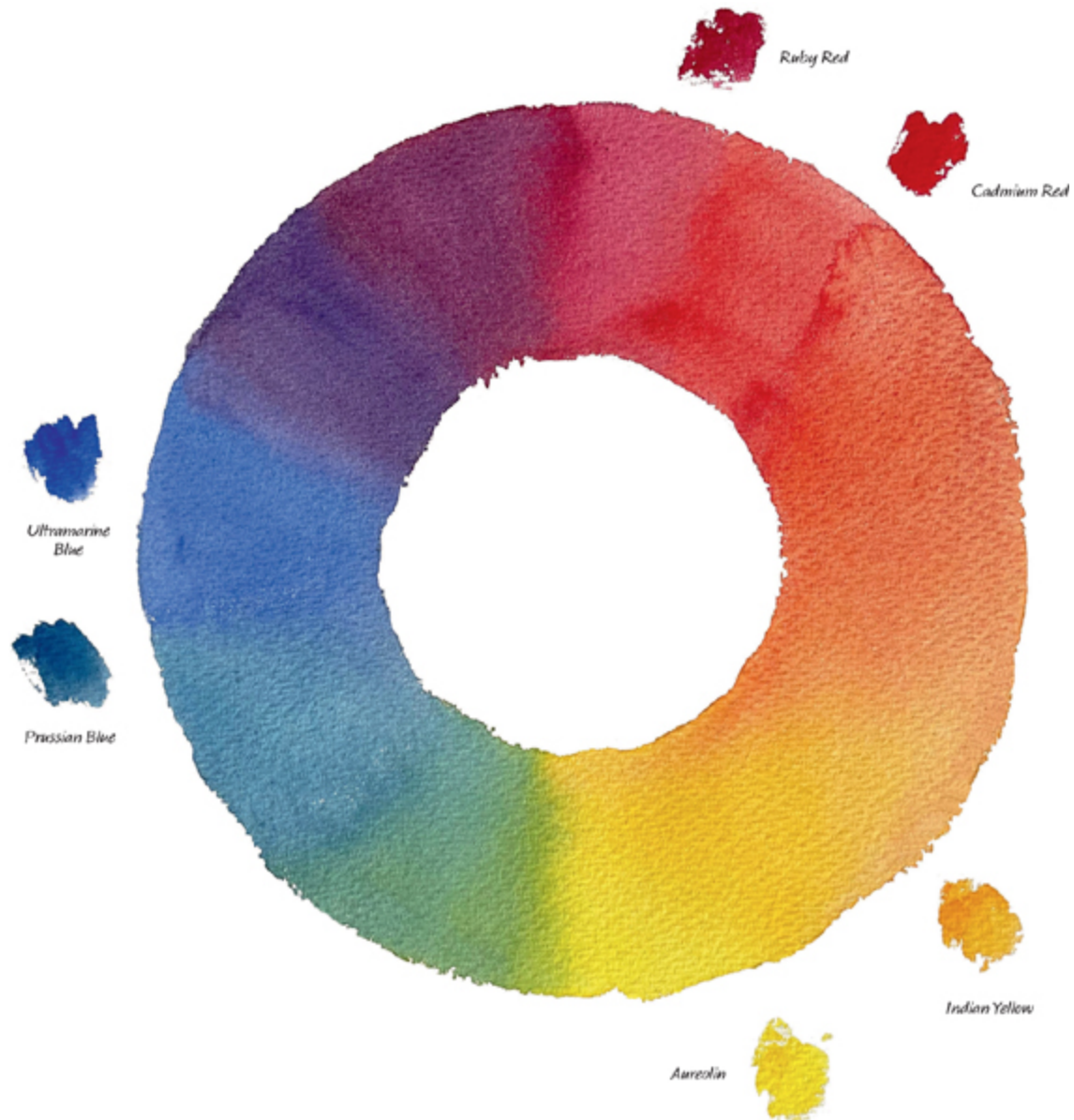
Colours of Africa, 28 x 38cm (11 x 15in)

Within a painting, colours are not seen in isolation but viewed relative to each other. Three cool versions of blue, red and yellow, shown above, are used here, yet the painting exudes warmth: the orange appears warm and vibrant in contrast to the cooler violet, which in turn becomes brighter in contrast to the yellowy green.

The Precious Colour Circle in your Head

Since colour is relative, and colours interact with each other, a wide range of colouring becomes possible from just a few colours and the mixes they can make.

You have probably seen a colour circle like the one opposite in every painting book you have picked up – it is indispensable to understanding how colour works. In this case, it is valuable in understanding the limited palette. Try to keep the colour circle in your mind, or keep referring to this page, and it will help you envision more quickly what mix or interaction might occur from a particular colour choice and pairing.



The colour circle is the painter's guide to colour mixing, quickly viewing opposite colours, and an instant reminder of temperature bias. If you have never painted one, I highly recommend it as a satisfying and worthwhile exercise. This one is painted with the six colours I use regularly – a cool and a warm version of each primary hue.

Primary Thinking

Before I start laying paint on the paper, I choose my basic set of one, two and then three colours and, because I am familiar with how each mixes with another, I can quickly ascertain whether three will be sufficient. I admit this takes practice (that is why I am writing this book to help give you a shortcut for the process!). My pre-painting thinking is based on the three colours, blue, yellow and red, mostly in that order, and in the broadest range in terms of hue. This trio is the cornerstone upon which all colour mixing is based because, as you probably already know, the three primaries, red, yellow and blue, mix to make all the colours. Thinking about colour mixing in this triplicate fashion avoids the chasing of matching individual colours and ensures the colours work together and are seen, not in isolation, but as a whole. By choosing three initial colours it will be possible to see quickly whether three colours are enough and, if not, which extra(s) are needed.



The colours of the sky after the sun has gone down often show the three primary colours, and mixed together they paint the silhouette of the landscape – the sum of all colours, black.

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Acknowledgements

This has been the book I was destined to write at some time! 'Less is more' is my motto in watercolour and the limited palette is my *modus operandi*. I am therefore extremely grateful to Tina Persaud at Batsford for suggesting I write the book and equally thankful to my calm and encouraging editor, Kristy Richardson, for bringing it forth into print.

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