



TACKLING TONE

Anyone who has ever watched a black and white movie will know that wonderful feeling of sunlight being portrayed without a hint of colour. Just black through to white and the sunshine is there on the screen.

Getting the tone right in paintings is much more important than colour itself.

In Nature there might be nine or ten tones on any object in the light but if we can see and paint just THREE, we have a good chance of depicting sunlight. Of course, painting those three tones is a lot easier than training the eye to SEE them in the first place. But once we do, we are on our way. If we half close our eyes and squint at a tree for instance, we can see the masses of tone easily divided into three groups....Dark, Medium and Light. And this applies to EVERY subject and every object out in the sunlight.

The stronger the light, the clearer the differences between the tones. Test it by shining a strong spotlight onto any object. The contrasts are obvious. Then see the more subtle shifts between tones when the light is softer. A bright summer day will provide the light to make obvious differences but an overcast or misty day will produce closer tones.

Try using a black and white photograph to paint from. It's a great lesson in 'getting the tones right'. Mix three puddles of black, the first without white, the second with a little white and the third with a lot of white. Look at the subject through half closed eyes and decide which are the three main areas of tone. Lightly draw the outline of the subject onto the board. Then look for all the areas of darkest tone and paint them in. Look for and paint all the areas of the medium tones and paint them in with your second paint mixture. And lastly, use the third puddle of paint to take care of the lightest tone. Now, this is a pretty rough and brutal exercise but it is a start and certainly with some subjects, they appear to have many more than three areas of tone.

The photograph at the top of the page is a beautiful example of sunlight being depicted WITHOUT any COLOUR. Just beautiful tone. Black and white and all the shades of grey in between.

In the photograph, the lightest light in the photograph is the two sunlit roses at the top of the picture and the base area of the ink bottle. The darkest tone in the subject is the area at the top of the photo (the background around the flowers) and a smaller area under the flowers lying on the table surface. Now, that leaves us with the middle tone. We could 'push' everything else into the mid tone range, but there some slight differences. We can see that in some parts, the mid is a little darker and in others, a bit lighter. So, within that medium range of tone, there are some little differences. If you see them..... paint them!

Its always a very good idea to turn your photograph UPSIDE DOWN to judge tones. Suddenly, the subject doesn't confuse us, all we see are the clear blocks of dark, medium and light.

Test your eye and train it to SEE AND UNDERSTAND the tonal changes in every subject.

Once you can do this, getting the paint onto the canvas is as easy as falling off a log. A three tone log!