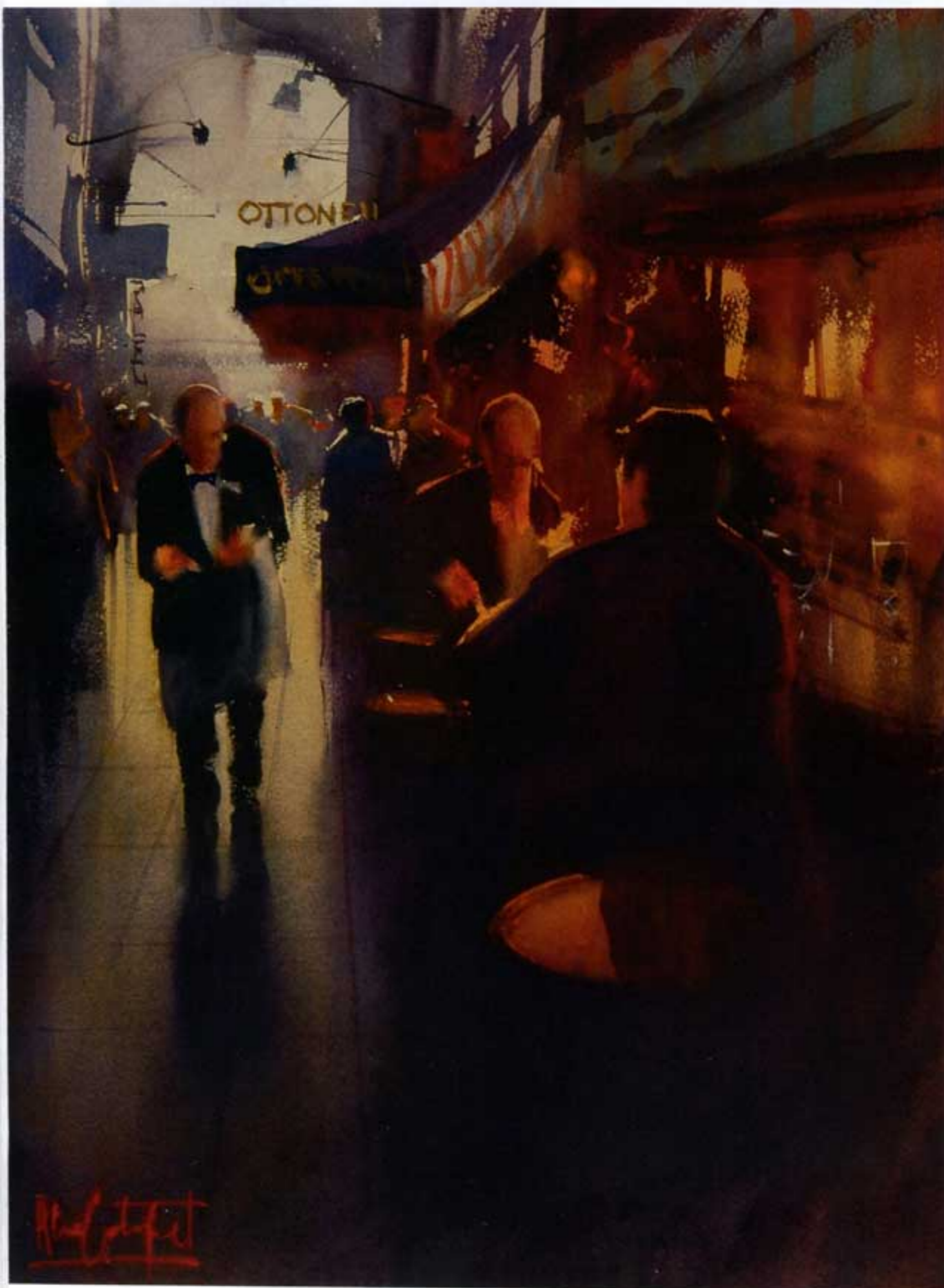


Brilliant brushstrokes

The secret of **Alvaro Castagnet's** glowing watercolours is in his brushwork. Here he reveals his secrets



Mercado del Puerto 1, watercolour, 48×23½in (122×60cm).

The strong focal point against a clear background provides maximum impact. Again, this was achieved using the in-and-out technique, and by having a good understanding of tonal values

Painting is the great passion in my life. In my attempt to produce paintings that are more than just beautiful pictures I search for mood, balance, the sensation of crisp, light, rich colour and bold values. It is important to produce a spontaneous-looking painting, and for that you need to have confidence in your technique.

In order to make a good painting you need to be passionate about the subject, and have a clear vision at the beginning. A crucial aspect of manifesting the passion and energy of the subject is to manage brushstrokes with freedom and authority. A successful painting induces an emotional reaction; it expresses mood and atmosphere with elegance and unique brushwork.

In this article I hope to express the importance of good brushstrokes. The way in which we execute brushstrokes enables us to express mood, mystery and atmosphere in a painting. If colour, values and brushstrokes are handled with flair and authority, any subject can be turned into a work of art. That is why it is important that brushstrokes are expressed in a flamboyant fashion.

Rhythm

Brushstrokes need to have rhythm in order to provide texture, express volume and convey what the painting is all about. When rhythm is achieved diversity, versatility and asymmetry of application will be apparent in your brushwork. Use long, as opposed to short strokes, wet-in-wet, with the odd unpredictable dry stroke that simultaneously touches wet paper and dry paper, to create great rhythm and excitement.

Support

To create texture you need to take into consideration the type and quality of the paper you will use. Rough-textured paper suits me best; it has the ability, when doing wet-in-wet washes, to deliver a grainy-looking wash and encourages flamboyant dry brushstrokes – those that hit the 'hills' of the paper and avoid the 'valleys'. Such strokes are, in my view, wonderfully expressive.

It is of fundamental importance that you choose the kind of paper that suits you and stick to it. If you develop a good knowledge of the paper you will



Paris, watercolour, 22×29½in (56×75cm). In this painting, the contrast between the dark values of the figures in the foreground, which were done with an exuberant dry technique, and the clarity of the wash behind, developed a beautiful sense of light

BELOW

Plaza Matriz, watercolour, 29½×22in (75×56cm).

This is a good example of working into the light. Most of the painting was done wet-in-wet to develop the silhouette of the cathedral. Notice the combination of different values, lighter on the top, heavier at the bottom, which enhances the light. The leaves and branches of the trees against the clear sky were achieved using the in-and-out dry technique, which hit wet paper at the bottom of the picture and drier paper above as I worked

‘Brushes must function like an extended finger’

be able to maximize the benefits of its handling quality.

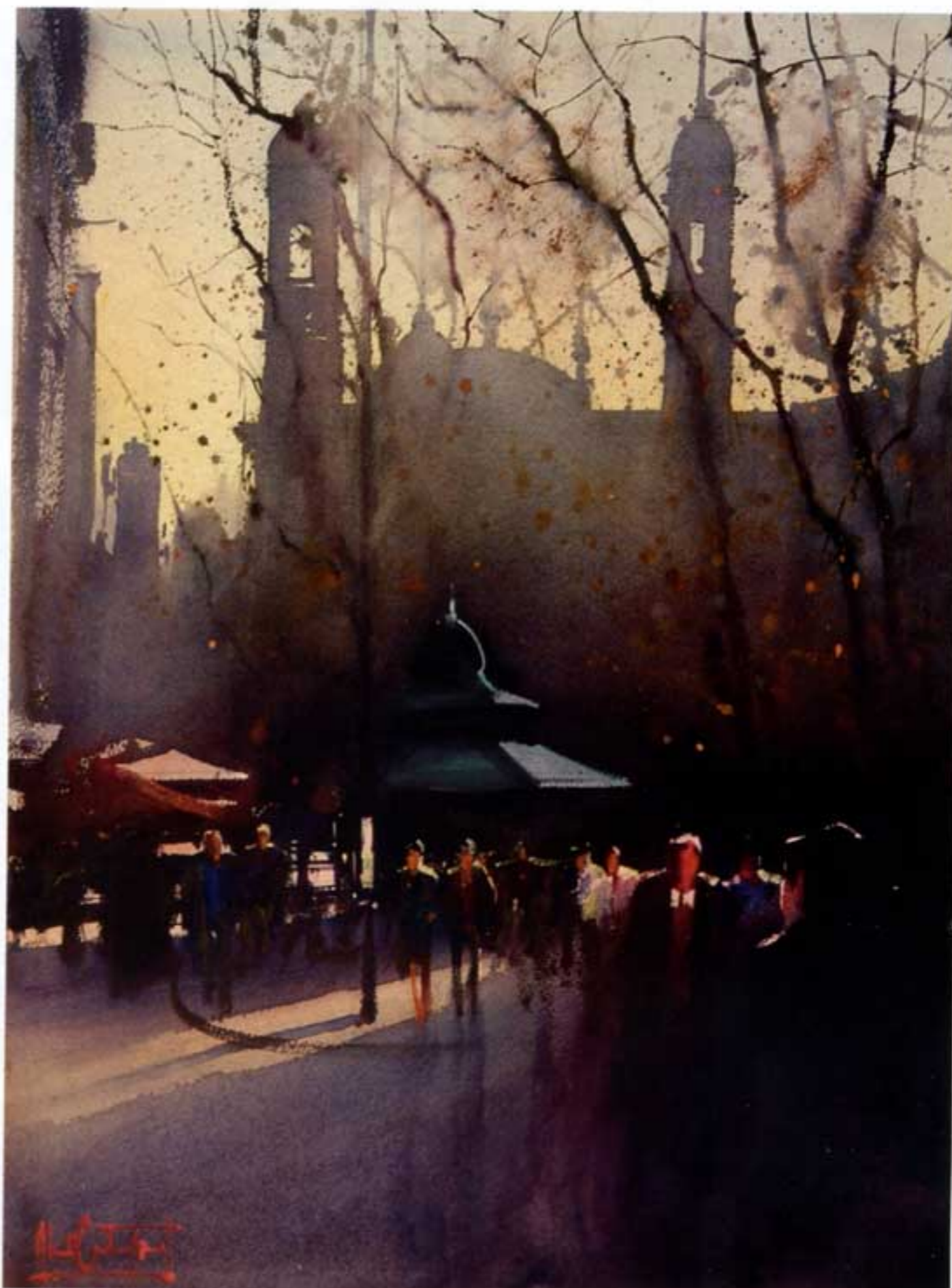
One piece of advice you may find useful is to have a small piece of the paper that you are using as a support next to you when working, so that you can try out brushstrokes before applying them to the painting. I also keep a simple sponge next to me; I find it helps me measure how much water I need, or how dry my brush is, just before I apply the stroke to the paper. It also enables me to sense the density of my mixture.

Brushes

The selection of your set of brushes is important and it is a personal choice. Brushes must function like an extended finger so you must feel very comfortable when working with them. My mop-shaped brushes are inspired by the original Japanese Mop brush but have longer handles and more hair. The length of the handle is important: the amount of control you have is determined by how far you hold it from the tip, and less control will translate into more freedom in your painting.

Also, because it has lots of hair, a mop brush can carry more water and pigment and so your wash will go further. This in turn means making fewer strokes, which simplifies your work. I am a great believer in large watercolour brushes; 90 per cent of the time I use the biggest mop I can handle. Small brushes are used only for details; in this case I use No. 2, No. 6 and No. 10 brushes.

With the aim of developing brushstrokes and getting to know your brushes, it is essential that you practise





Cooks, watercolour, 22×29½in (56×75cm).
This is an example of how hidden brushstrokes create a very mysterious flow of light. It demonstrates how water and wetness are what the medium is all about

Roma, Italy, watercolour, 29½×22in (75×56cm).

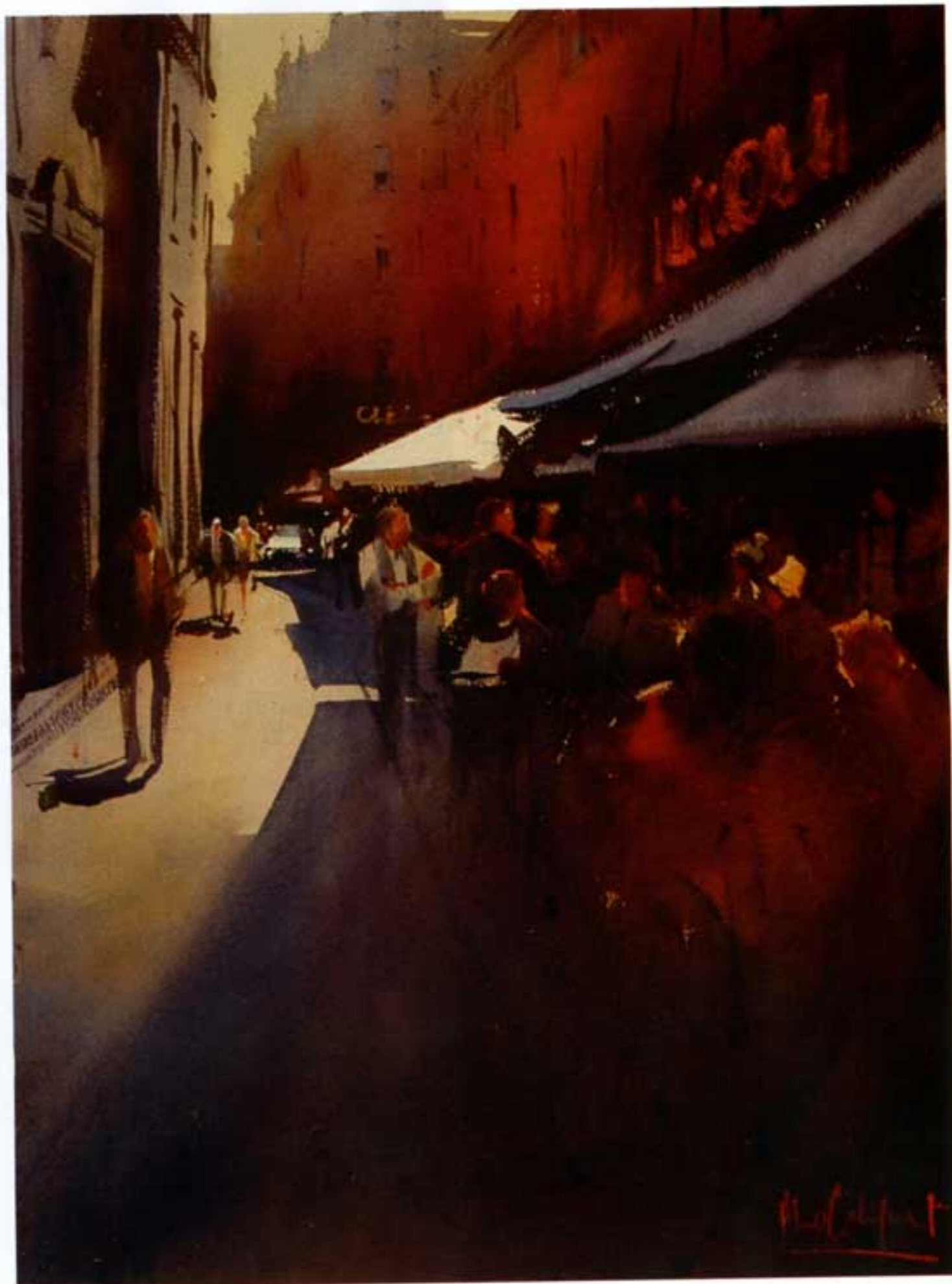
Here the challenge was to achieve fluidity in a continuation of washes. Observe how it looks like I haven't picked up the brush from the paper – from the sharp edges on the shadows to the soft blending wash in the foreground. I was working in-and-out and varying the values as I went along, all across the painting!

by making small paintings with the largest brush you can comfortably hold. It is also essential to use the same brushes all the time – so get to know them by putting in lots of practice.

One of the key issues for developing good brushstrokes is a precise knowledge of values. The right combination of values in any painting will capture light, and this can be achieved with good brushstrokes.

Pay careful attention to the amount of water you use, whether working wet-in-wet or wet-on-dry. The correct ratio of water to pigment is one of the hardest mountains to conquer but it has to be right for the purpose of the brushstrokes. Remember that spontaneity, uniqueness and elegance are the hallmarks of a fine watercolour painting.

If you learn to control a bit of the uncontrollable, the in and out strokes that exploit the beauty of the medium, you will achieve a sophisticated watercolour painting. □



ALVARO CASTAGNET'S TIPS FOR BRILLIANT RESULTS:

- Usually a good painting starts when you are excited about the subject.
- An essential technique in watercolour is to have few washes. This helps to simplify the painting and enables clarity in the tonal values and shapes.
- The challenge for me is in the quality of my brushstrokes; they hit the paper in one go, a sort of touch-and-go technique, or *alla prima*, if you like.
- One of the keys to confident brushwork is doing the groundwork first.
- Plan slowly and paint quickly.
- Forget details: think big!
- Brushstrokes mark the rhythm in a painting.
- Special strokes make a difference.
- A good brushstroke is the one that exploits the texture of the paper.

Alvaro Castagnet

was born in Montevideo, Uruguay, where he studied at the National School of Art and the Fine Arts University. He migrated to Australia in 1983 and was appointed Art Director of Melbourne's Latin American Festival. Alvaro teaches watercolour to all levels of student, from beginner to advanced, and holds workshops all over the world as well as painting, demonstrating, lecturing, judging art competitions and attending exhibitions of his work. His paintings are in private and corporate collections worldwide, and he has been holding solo exhibitions in Australia since 1985. Among the prizes he has won are: First Prize Alice Bale Award, twice First Prize St. Kevin's College, both in Australia, and in New York the American Watercolor Society High Winds award and medal, 2003. Alvaro is a member of Old Watercolor Society and The Victorian Artist Society, and was recently elected to the AWS in New York.

Alvaro Castagnet is the author of several books. He is currently working on his next book and a new series of watercolour videos; his DVD, *Inspired Watercolour with Alvaro Castagnet*, has just been released worldwide by APV Films, £27.95 inc p&p; Tel: 01608 641798; artworks@apvfilms.co.uk; www.apvfilms.com. He now lives in Montevideo, where he conducts painting holidays with his wife, Ana Maria. Contact him at alvarocastagnet@adinet.com.uy; www.alvarocastagnet.net



Tango, watercolour, 29½×22in (75×56cm).

This is an example of great rhythm, which was achieved in the long and watery brushstrokes in the lower half of the painting. The washes above, done with more pigment and less water, are sharper. This contrast creates a sense of dynamics and movement



Café, San Telmo, watercolour, 22×29½in (56×75cm).

I wanted to capture the mood and magic of those old cafés in the city of Buenos Aires. The focal point, the two figures talking at the table, was done wet-on-dry. A splash of clean water on the tables in the foreground created reflections and a greater sense of light, providing a sharper sense of light around the focal point