

How I Sketch a Place

By Janet Selby

When I am out and about and I see a landscape that catches my attention, I don't take a photo with a camera. Neither do I make an illustration. I try to capture its story.

When I am in a place I get a feel for its character and essence. I highlight this feeling by drawing its shape, colour, texture etc, trying to evoke the atmosphere. The first lines on the page begin the story. It is this composition from which the story emerges on the page.

I never think twice about how such a vast vision before me could fit onto a tiny piece of blank paper. The inbuilt viewfinder can edit the scene immediately. I find it easier in a drawing than a camera to edit and exaggerate as you go. The essential elements of the story emerge instantly. For example, the placement of a figure evokes a lonely path. The small size of a cloud evokes the vast proportions of a grand scale, giving a sense of history and perspective both temporal and physical.

As I am drawing I am fully engaged in the place and the process. I consciously choose the limits of the composition to fit the page. This is the opening paragraph of my chapter. Then I choose the method which would relate to the character of the place, which make the details of the story. Small fine lines indicate lots of delicate detail, perhaps showing fragility, or broad sweeps of watercolour might show the loose freedom of the wind. Rugged pastels are for rocks and bark that might tell me of the solid core of the place.

I am interpreting and relating to the spirit of the place. This is my role, to point out aspects that might be superficially passed over by other observers. So when I am walking with a group, I am not engaged in idle chit chat. I am seeking out the feeling through my eyes, ears, feet - all my senses, including my instinct. This requires a sharp sense of awareness and a quick eye-hand response, enlivened by the heart.

The first quick sketch is with a watercolour pencil, which may be left uncoloured, or washed lightly with water. If I want to continue, I may use watercolours. I have a tiny travelling kit. But I might need to use oil pastels before the watercolours, if I the scene offers me a more rugged response. Then, the wax of the pastels will resist the water, giving a sense of depth and texture. There are endless combinations I am still discovering with these simple methods.

I keep a small jar of water with me. I don't throw it out or replace it with fresh clear water once it has been used for my watercolours until the stain is too dominating, when I will replace most of the water, but keep a part of the original in the fresh batch. As I dip the brush into this water it leaves traces of paint and colour from each painting which charges the water with the colour and character of each place that has been painted. The water becomes charged with its essential energy like a homeopathic remedy. Each site I have painted is remembered into this subtly deposited mix, and when the brush is dipped into it again at a new site, it is linked to all other sites ever painted.

So the story that I find in a place is the story that has been observed and interpreted by my deep inner self, in the hope that the images I evoke on paper will be a new story to inspire others to pick up a finer sense of awareness.

Janet Selby June 2010