

Body building

Practise drawing then painting simple figures to help you include them confidently in your landscapes, by Rachael Grimm

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Learn basic elements of proportion that will assist in painting convincing small figures
- Confidently paint natural-looking and lively small figures in watercolour

I love to include small, gestural figures in my watercolour landscapes and cityscapes. As well as giving a sense of scale to a painting, they add an element of life and drama and are often just what a composition needs in order to feel well balanced and complete. Painting figures in watercolour can seem daunting, but in this article I will show you how to simplify the process so that you can paint believable little figures with just a few brushstrokes.

Proportion

In order to paint figures, it is important to have a sense of the proportions of an average human body. *Figure 1* (below) shows you key points on the body and where they are in relation to one another. Here, I am using the head as the unit of comparison for the length of the body. An average adult body is seven-and-a-half heads in length (a child is about four

heads in length at age two and six heads at age seven) although this varies from person to person. Since our figures will be clothed, I am only concerned here with some key points on the body: the placement of the shoulders, hip bones, hands, knees, and feet. Notice where these points are, using the head as a measurement. The shoulders, for example, are about halfway down the second head and the hip bones are about three quarters of the way down the fourth head. Knowing where the hip bones are

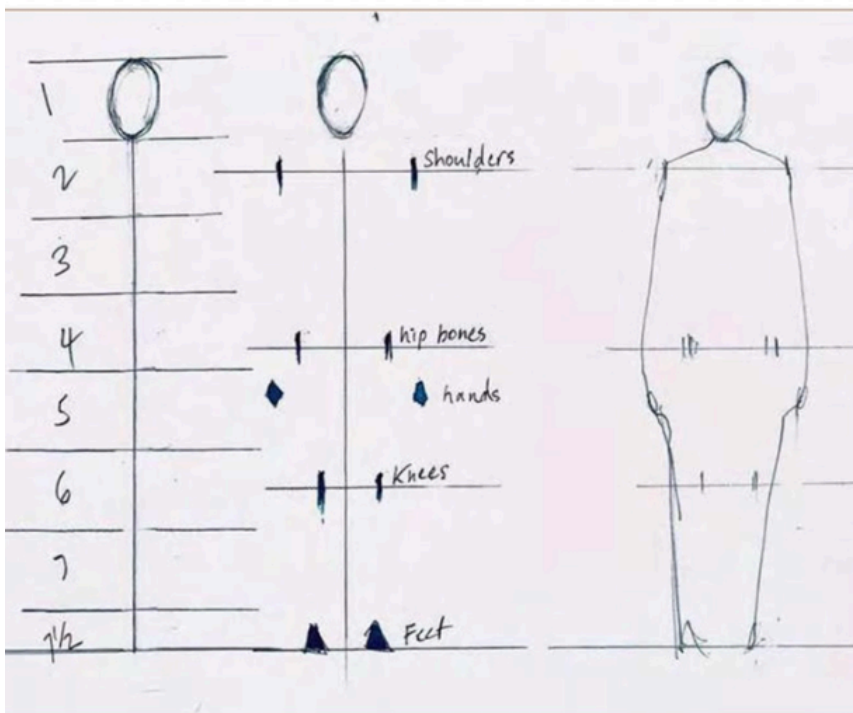
is helpful, because it is important to have a sense of where the legs begin.

These key points give enough information to create a simple outline of a standing clothed figure. In my example, notice the slope of the shoulders, small neck, and placement of the hands, halfway down the thigh.

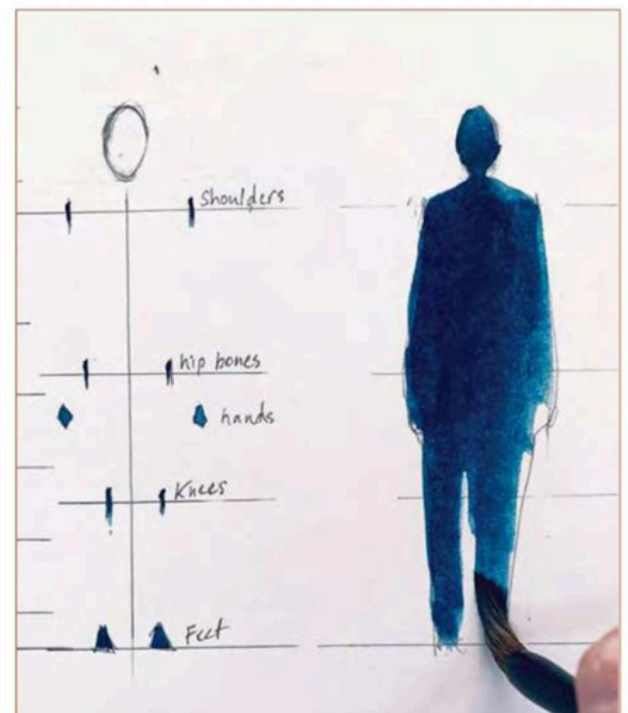
After completing the outline, I used a single wash of Prussian blue paint to quickly fill in the drawing (*Figure 2*, below). Two brushstrokes were all that was needed to convey two legs. ☐

You will need

- **Surface**
 - A few sheets of watercolour paper in any size
 - I use 140lb Arches Bright White Cold-pressed (NOT) paper
- **Winsor & Newton Cotman watercolour (tubes)**
 - Cadmium yellow
 - Yellow ochre
 - Burnt sienna
 - Cadmium red
 - Alizarin crimson
 - Ultramarine blue
 - Prussian blue
 - Cerulean blue
 - Viridian
 - Burnt umber
- **Miscellaneous**
 - Round watercolour brush (medium)
 - Watercolour palette with a large enough space for mixing
 - 2 × small containers for holding water
 - Board to lean on and tape paper to
 - Paper towels
 - A soft pencil and an eraser



▲ Figure 1 The basic proportions of an average-sized human being



▲ Figure 2 Quick brushstrokes of Prussian blue complete the simple figure



▲ *Late Afternoon at the Beach*, watercolour on Arches paper, 18×25in. (45.5×63.5cm). Figures at the beach are a little trickier to paint because more attention has to be paid to anatomy. Paint the skin first and let it dry before adding clothing so that the arms and legs remain distinct

EXERCISE 1

Paint simple figures ▶

Use the diagram (left) to create your own simple standing figures. Here are examples of other simple standing figures using the same process.

1 Tape up a piece of watercolour paper to a board and prop up the board at a roughly 30-degree angle by putting a roll of paper towels underneath

2 Sketch several small figures of different heights using the head as your unit of comparison.

3 Take a single colour – I used Prussian blue here because of its intense pigment – and mix a puddle of paint and water on your palette into a tea-like consistency. Use plenty of water and plenty of paint in your puddle and charge your brush with enough paint and water to fill in your outlined figure in one wash.

4 Use the whole of your brush from tip to base and try to work quickly but with control. Practising this will help you to have more confidence as you move onto step two.



EXERCISE 2

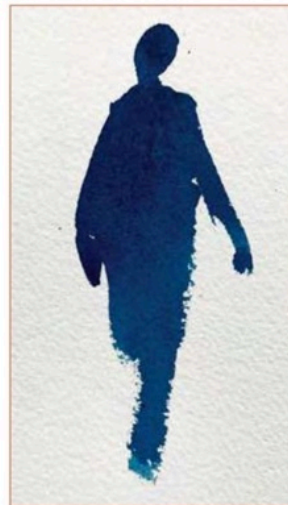
Add movement ▶

Bearing in mind the lessons you learned while thinking about proportion, you will now paint sketchier, more gestural figures with a sense of movement. Typically, in a landscape or a cityscape, figures are in motion, walking towards the viewer or away from us. In my own work, unless I want a figure to be a focal point of the composition, I like my figures to be sketchy and a harmonious part of the composition rather than a distraction. I often find that my most successful figures are painted with minimal detail.

1 Mix your paint to the same consistency as in your first exercise. Put away your pencil and get ready to paint lots of small figures of various shapes and sizes

2 With a fully charged brush, paint an oval shape for the head. Use the size of the head to gauge the length of the figure. As you paint more figures, vary the angle of the head – this one thing can really add to the gesture of a figure

3 Working down from the head with your brush, paint the neck, shoulders and arms. Add a sense of movement by varying the placement of the arms. You can even ignore



an arm entirely since we often cannot see both arms when a figure is in motion.

4 Move down to the torso and vary the width and shape to convey a range of body-types and clothing.

5 Move down to the legs and notice in my examples that in each figure, one leg is shorter than the other, even cut off at the knee. This gives the impression that the figure is walking. Angle the longer leg inwards towards the midline of the body for a more

natural gesture.

6 To convey the impression of a figure from behind bundled up in winter clothing, add a blob of paint on top of the head to suggest the pom-pom of a hat and start the slope of the shoulders from the middle of the back of the head.

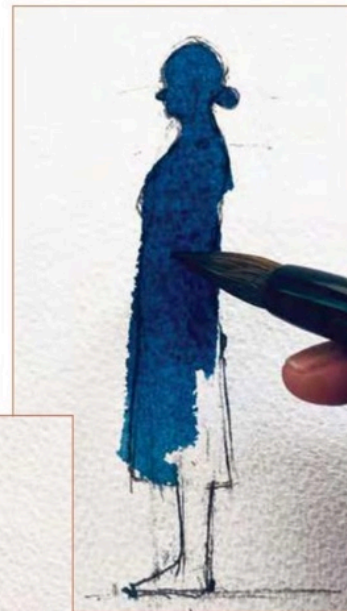
7 Notice how there are areas of dry-brush in my examples – this occurs when the brush moves quickly with a single charge of paint and adds dynamism and texture.



▲ *Bubbles in Piazza di Santa Maria, Rome*, watercolour on Arches paper, 10×15in. (25.5×38cm). In this painting, notice how the figures become more sketchy as they recede into the background. The shadows underneath the figures are long and only vaguely represent the gestures of the figures – try not to overwork or overthink!

EXERCISE 3 *Paint figures in profile*

Next, try painting small figures in profile. Look at the example below to see how some additional points of the body have to be considered. See, for example, how the bridge of the nose is placed halfway down the head and the heel of the foot lines up with the shoulder blade.



▲ Step 1

Using this example as a guide, draw a simple outline of a clothed figure in profile.

◀ Step 2

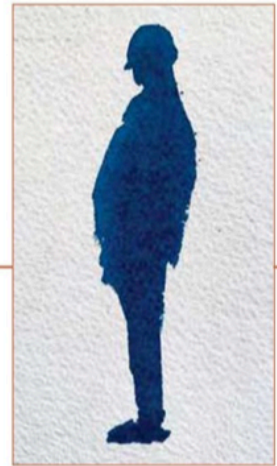
Fill in with paint starting at the head and moving down to the feet using a fully charged brush.



▲ *Winter Walk, Greenwich Beach*, watercolour on Arches paper, 11×23in. (28×58.5cm). The gestures of small figures can really reflect the mood of a painting. Here the figures are still and are in harmony with the quiet atmosphere of the painting.

Step 3 Paint without a pencil sketch ▶

When you are confident that you understand the proportions of a figure in profile, without sketching first, try some quick gestural figures of various shapes and sizes and clothing



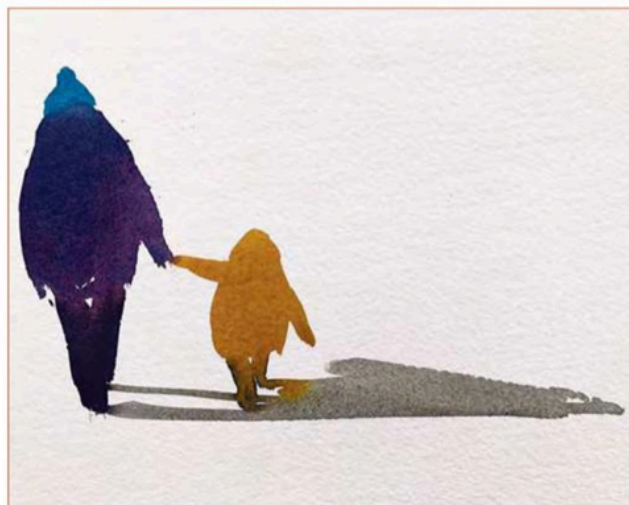
Step 4 Add colour! ▼▶

You are now ready to paint figures in colour! The colour notes of brightly painted figures can have a big impact in a painting and harmonise the whole. As with the gestural figures you have already painted, try to be quick and sketchy here and allow the colours of the clothing to flow into each other. Have fun using bright colours and let watercolour do its thing! Here are some things to bear in mind as you go:
 1 Allow the oval of the head to dry before adding clothing below or hair on top of the head then the face and hair will be distinct from the clothing.

2 Try grouping your figures and even sometimes allowing the colours to flow between them.

3 Arrange your figures on a page in a way that suggests perspective; large figures at the bottom of the page getting increasingly smaller as you go up the page.

4 A way to integrate small figures naturally into a larger composition is to add a shadow beneath them. Mix a cool, neutral grey, for example burnt sienna and ultramarine blue, use fast brushstrokes and let the colour from the figures merge into the shadow a little. Make sure that all the shadows lie in the same direction



Rachael Grimm

For more information about Rachael and to see how she uses small figures in her own work, please visit her website: rachaelgrimm.com