Ireland Revisited

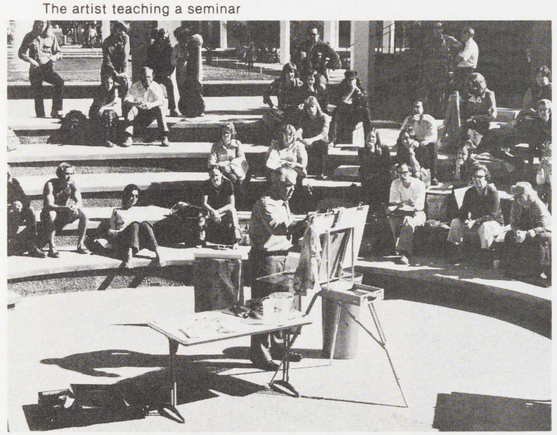
by William Lawrence Ryan

I have been asked so many times at seminars — where do you begin a painting? How do you proceed? What's the story behind the painting?

To show it visually on these pages, I have reconstructed my on-location procedures. It can't all be told in this brief article, but thinking ahead and planning are parts of the procedure. This continues through all stages, but is particularly vital at the beginning. I recall all the old design principles I learned in high school — they're still vital. Dominance, balance, thrust, color, values (the relative light or dark of one color adjoining another). I get it all together in my head. Then I start, using the best art materials I can possibly buy. (One last thought — it's not what I put into a watercolor — it's what I leave out.)

It's an aquarelle (pure transparent watercolor) because no opaque white paint is used. The textured surface of the paper is used to obtain

The artist teaching a seminar



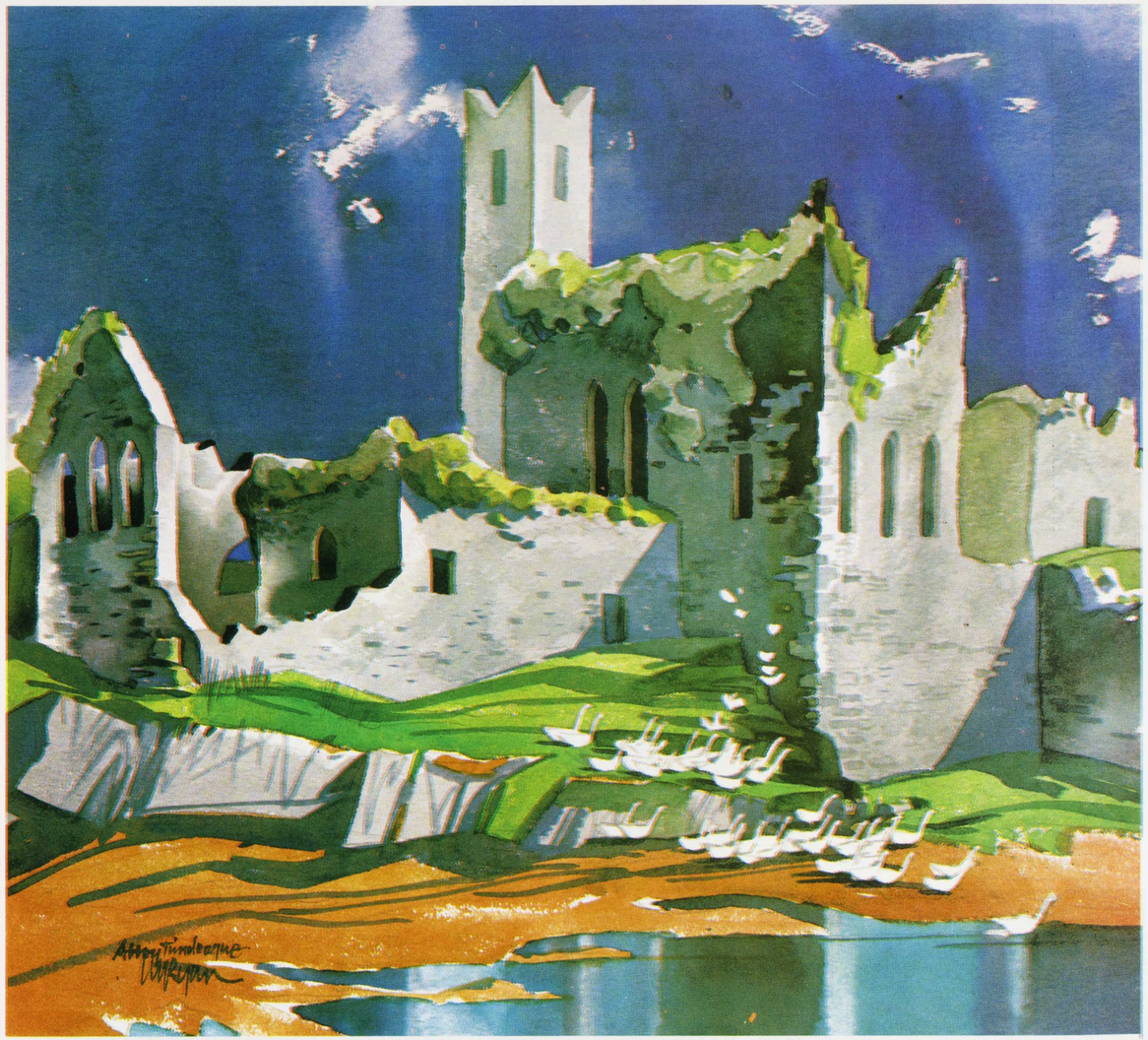
"natural" whites. This lends sparkle and spontaneity obtainable in no other way. No blacks are used either — this gives all color maximum brilliant exposure without contamination or dullness.

I painted this watercolor in Ireland on a peninsula south of Cork City. The subject is an abbey. When I started the painting, I was anxious to draw in a donkey wandering through the ruins. But he disappeared into the depths. As I finished the drawing (Step I), and composed my painting,

STEP I

STEP II

STEP III



"Abbey Timoleague, Cork, Ireland. Aquarelle watercolor, 22"x28" on 300 lb. Capri paper. ©1976 William Lawrence Ryan. All rights reserved.

a gaggle of geese poured out from the heart of the old abbey, obviously evicted by the donkey. Some were flying, some aground, all were noisy and cackling. I started to draw them in furiously with a brush and a thin wash of ultramarine and burnt sienna. They all appeared to be moving in the same direction — water-bound. It was an exciting possibility to use the natural white of the paper and also the thrust of the mass as a design element. No detail was put in the birds.

STEP I: The simplified drawing in pencil.

STEP II: The first color applied is the reference "black," in the darkest part of the composition.

Now for the sky. I need strong contrast for the soft gray/green of the old keep. I started the sky by wetting the paper with fresh water (from the river) and charging in color in a very direct manner. It's a big wet passage and the most dangerous phase of the painting.

STEP III: Complete the foreground and the reflections of the buildings in the water. Define the whiteness of the geese with color around them. Lock it all in with contour delineation and cast shadows. Keep it simple. Except for the pencil drawing and the reference black, the buildings are stark paper white with full color below and above.

Now a brief waiting period for all color to dry. A look at the angry sky. A silent prayer for no rain.

The buildings are the final phase. Light sides first, dark sides next with painted textures. The final strokes — sign it. And quickly now — it's starting to rain. □