How to **hand colour**

In the days of high-tech colour why would you spend time hand colouring a monochrome print? The answer, says **Andrew Sanderson**, is in the unique flavour this age-old method can give to an image – and you can use anything from dedicated dyes to felt tip pens to achieve the effect

Hand colouring is as old as photography and has evolved alongside it. For the photographer working today, adding colour by hand is an aesthetic consideration, but back in the very early days of photography it was the only way to get a colour image.

Photographers of the late 19th and early 20th century were striving for realism, though few managed to achieve it. This was largely due to the fact that they had only the traditions of painting as a reference, whereas the contemporary photographer has the considerable advantage of knowing what a correct colour print looks like.

Nowadays however, realism is rarely the aim of hand colouring. Why bother trying to fool people into thinking that they are viewing a colour print? It's much easier these days to shoot colour film or digital. Today, hand colouring can be used purely for visual effect.

Colourists usually want people to see evidence of their hard work, so they prefer to leave some clue to inform the viewer that they are looking at a hand coloured print. Some prefer pale, muted colours, some choose false colours, and some may choose stronger, more accurate colouring, but with areas uncoloured.

The popularity of hand colouring has had a fluctuating past, from the early days of photography in the 19th century, through the postcard boom of the first quarter of the 20th century and the cheesy posters of the eighties. At other times it has fallen out of favour and become unfashionable, or even 'naff'. I used to do quite a bit of colouring years ago, before other techniques became more enticing to me.

There are various colouring methods available today, from dyes, photo oils and pencils, through to felt tipped pens and even food colouring. In fact, anything goes, providing that it achieves the desired effect. I will explain the advantages and disadvantages of each method as I see them. I have also been trying out hand colouring inkjet prints, but so far I have found them too absorbent, which makes even colouring extremely difficult, though the matt papers and the rough art papers take pencil well.

I first began hand colouring black & white prints in the late 1970s, as I was dissatisfied with the 'fluffy' quality of colour prints I was getting at that time. Also, the rich, deep blacks of a fibre based print were far more evocative and moody than the blueish black of a colour RC print. I wanted depth, detail and accurate colour, so adding the colour to a well printed black & white fibre based print from a medium or large format negative seemed like the ideal solution.

My first pictures were understandably heavy handed, but I soon worked out that I needed to build up the colour gradually and to be slow, careful and methodical. Many who try hand colouring for the first time are put off by their first results, usually because they have the colour too strong. Using the dyes as they come from the bottle gives a very intense colour, which will stain the print before it can be spread over the desired area.

See how it's done
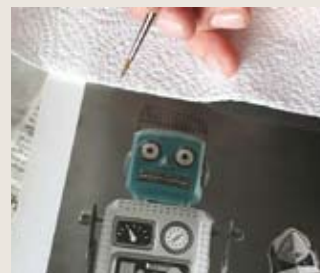
The technique is simple enough – the key is to take care in carrying it out. Be slow, careful and methodical

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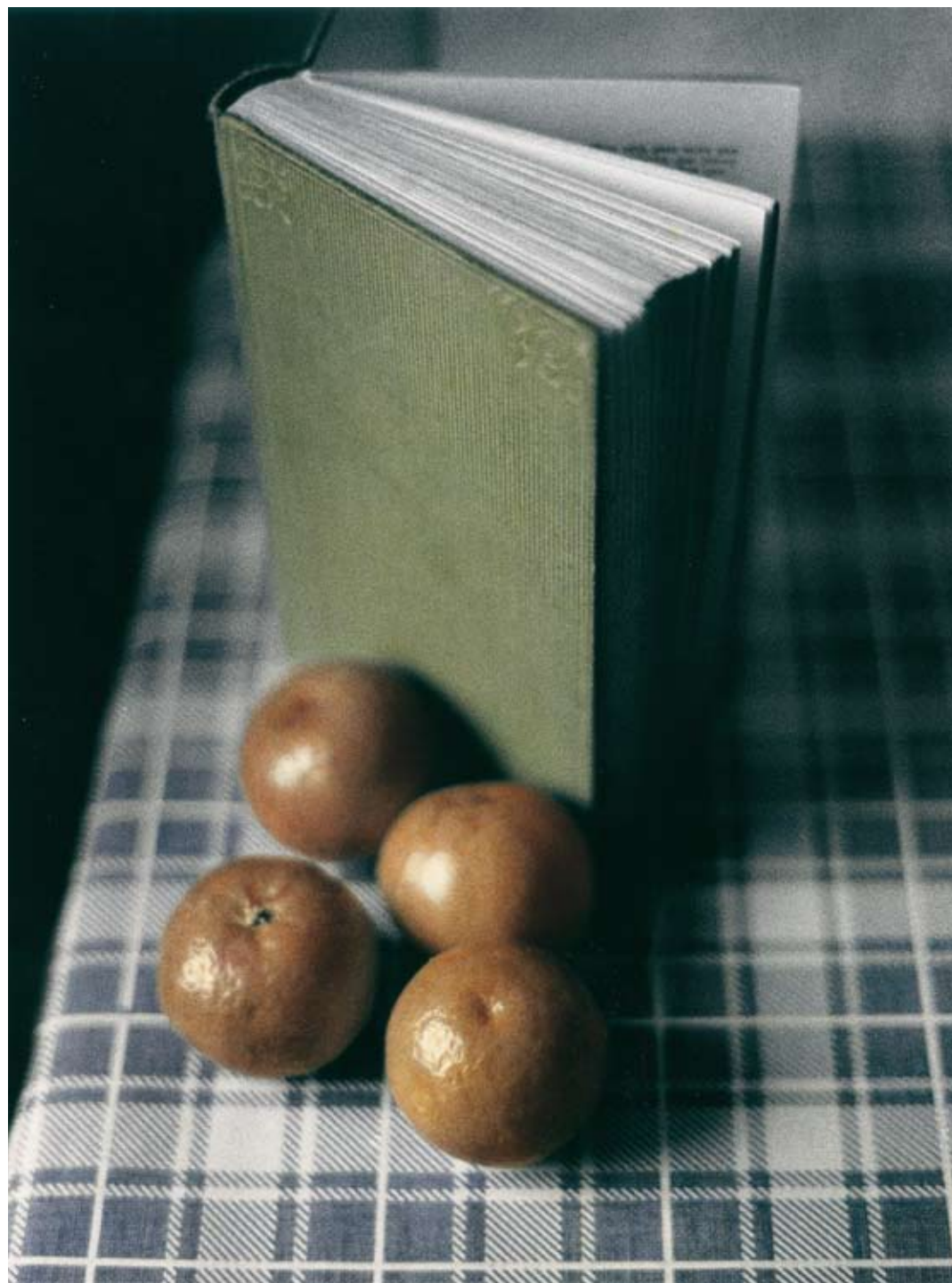
This image was coloured with a mix of concentrated hand colouring dyes – dyes are the easiest to control but are not colourfast

METHODS

DYES

Traditionally, dyes were most frequently used for colouring photographs and it is easy to see why. Of the various colouring methods, dyes are the most easily controlled and because they are absorbed by the print, they allow the silver image to show through and do not impair its luminosity.

Properly applied colour can increase the impression of depth and impart a three dimensional quality. However, while colour added does not necessarily have to be true to the original hues in the scene, it does need to have a similar depth and intensity.

The only drawback to dyes is the poor lightfastness of the colours. I have had prints framed and on the wall and lost most of the colour in three years! If the prints are stored in the dark and kept dry, they should last many years, though it is a shame to spend so much time on a picture and then to have to hide it away.

OILS

Oil paint is a colouring method that is rather more popular in the USA than here in the UK. The effect it gives is quite different from dyes, since the paint lies on the surface of the print instead of being absorbed. If too much paint is applied it can obscure detail in the print. On the plus side though, oil paints are extremely long lasting and resistant to fading.

Fine detail is much harder to achieve with this method, as it is usually applied with cotton wool swabs or cotton buds.

PENCILS

Coloured pencils will only work with semi matt or matt papers, glossy prints cannot be used. Colour added by pencils also lies on the surface of the print and so can obscure detail, but sometimes this can look quite interesting and can bring a particular effect, which cannot be achieved by any other means, especially with rough papers, such as the old Kentmere art document.

Pencils are very easy to apply and are the least messy of the methods described here. If you don't feel confident about handling a brush, then start with this technique. Another advantage of using pencils is that the colour can be applied over a period of time and there will be no colour discrepancy.

FELT PENS

Unless you can source pens with pale colours, this will only give garish, strong, graphic colours. I have used felt pens before, but never for anything more serious than a home made birthday card. If you like strong, streaky results then this is perhaps the technique for you!

There used to be a range of 'brush' pens made by Staedtler, which had soft, rubbery tips, and they came in a range of pale and strong colours. These were great for colouring and I still use mine, but I dilute them and use a brush for greater control.

TECHNIQUE

My preferred colouring method is dyes, with pencil as a close second. I begin by having my colour in a mixing dish diluted with water, with a paper towel close by for mopping up excess or splashes. I also have a paper towel on the part of the print where my hand will rest, this prevents greasy marks from my skin leaving marks on the paper – and I have something absorbent to move quickly into place, should there be an accidental blob of colour from the brush. Before I apply any dye, I try it out on a scrap print with a similar tone to my intended picture, this way I can prevent staining from having the colour mixed too strong.

I apply the colour to the print, making sure it is just strong enough to affect the midtones with one stroke of the brush. Applying the colour gradually in this way allows much greater control. The precise colour to water ratio varies from colour to colour and obviously depends on what type of dyes you are using.

When I bring the brush to the print, I never touch a light area first if I can help it. I put the dye in a dark area and drag it to a lighter patch, or apply it in an unimportant part and then drag it over; this avoids any nasty surprises with colour streaking.

The second layer of colour can be applied immediately; no need to wait for it to dry completely, the dyes will sink into the paper and will not be shifted by another application of watered down colour. I sometimes allow it to partially dry between coats as it allows me to see which area the colour is spreading to. The hardest areas to colour are large flat areas of even or subtle colour, such as skin, or large expanses of sky.

Hand colouring with felt tip pens can be pretty garish but this image was made with some Staedtler brush pens that I had – but they are no longer made. You couldn't achieve this soft effect with felt tip pens unless you can find some made in pale colours

Tinting tips

● *To colour a large area, wet it first with water containing a tiny amount of wetting agent (soap solution) and keep the whole area wet for a while. Dab off the excess water, leaving a damp patch and then apply the dilute colour to the area, keeping it moving all the time. When the required depth of colour has been achieved, dab off the remaining colour solution.*

● *If accurate colour is your goal, then do your colouring in daylight. Your eyes will adapt to whatever colour temperature you happen to be working under and if you work by artificial light the colours on your print will look completely different in daylight.*

● *Grass and foliage often look better if the shade of green is not constant across the whole area. Do two separate layers of colour, with slightly different shades to give a little variation.*

● *Always add less colour to highlights and more to shadows. This will impart a sense of depth and improve the 3D effect.*

● *Tree foliage in the latter part of the summer often shows darker on a monochrome print than the eye perceives it and adding colour only makes it worse. Photographing on Ilford SFX semi infrared film, using a yellow or orange filter to brighten the leaves, can counteract this.*

● *Reds are difficult to use, and when laid over a grey tone, never as vibrant as in reality. Red is also the colour most likely to give streaky results.*

Exhibition

The Brunei Gallery at The School of Oriental and Asian Studies, in London, is currently holding an exhibition of painted photographs that hail from late 19th century India. The bright, slightly surreal portraits of rulers, members of court and families from Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Gujarat are given an unusual dimension with this method. While the effect is more painterly in these antique photos, with our guide to hand tinting, you could add something similar to your own images!

○ *For full details see In the Frame, p24-25.*

For this image I used coloured pencils – the least messy of the methods
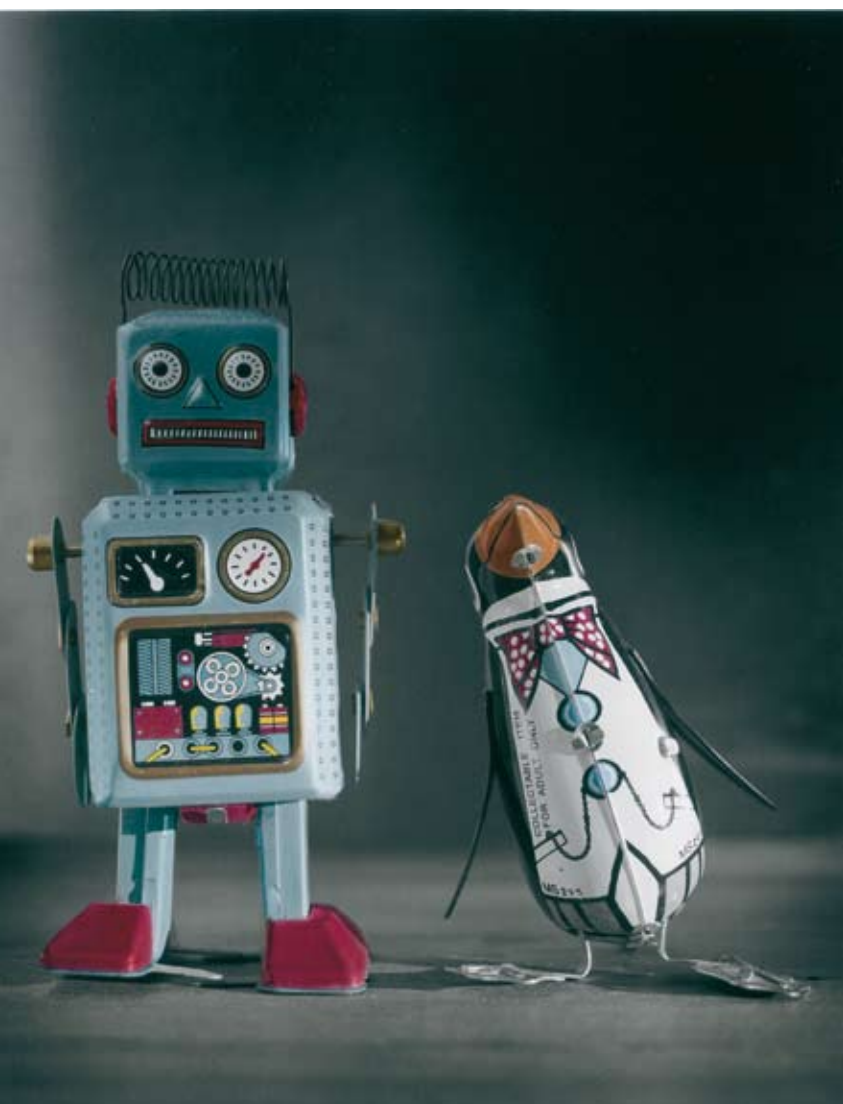
Hand coloured using diluted dyes from Staedtler brush pens

Suppliers of dyes

○ **SILVERPRINT**
www.silverprint.co.uk / 020 7620 0844

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○ **RETRO PHOTOGRAPHIC**
www.retrophotographic.com / 08452 262647

Inspired?

When we at *Black & White* read this feature, we couldn't wait to have a go ourselves – and if you feel similarly inspired, turn to page 96 and take up our Reader Assignment. And remember, you could win £100!

Demonstration online

For those of you interested in seeing the technique demonstrated, Andrew has put a short clip on www.youtube.com titled: *Hand Colouring a Black & White Print*.

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