



AURONZO VALLEY, MISURINA.

Water-colour by Cecil A. Hunt, R.W.S.

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SKETCHING IN THE ALPS

By CECIL A. HUNT, R.W.S.

ISAIAH'S command to the bringer of good tidings, 'Get thee up into the high mountain,' is one, I imagine, that would be welcomed by every member of the Alpine Club, and by none more readily than by those of us who delight in lifting our eyes to the hills, and in trying to record with pencil and brush some of the particular beauties which only mountain scenery can provide; though no doubt there are times and occasions when in Biblical diction a great and strong wind rends the mountains, breaks in pieces the rocks, and melts them like wax—then indeed calmer sketching grounds are more profitable.

So, at the prophet's behest, to the mountains we go, armed with sketch books and fortified by hope. Hope may become despair—it is the common lot of the sketcher. But none the less, though the iron enters into our soul, we do gain something of lasting value. We learn to use our eyes. The more we draw, the more we observe, and the more we remember of the vision splendid. Gradually it becomes part of our inner consciousness, and we store up memories to be enjoyed ever afterwards by the 'inward eye.'

In these days, when most of the old standards of art seem to have vanished, and work which twenty years ago would have disgraced the pavement now graces the line, one is chary of laying down any rules on how to choose a subject, sketch or paint. Fashions change, tastes vary, and vision after all is a personal matter. But as the Editor of the ALPINE JOURNAL bids me contribute an article 'which will make us wish to sketch and tell us how to set about it,' I have attempted in the following pages to write something that may enable the reader to avoid sundry pitfalls that lie about the path of the mountain painter.

The saying *Quot homines, tot sententiae* applies universally, and

not least in the realms of art. Every artist must tell his own story, in the hope that it may appeal to somebody, if not to all. But the appeal will have little force if he sees nature through the eyes of other men and fetters his vision by their methods. Nor will it carry conviction if he has not acquired some mastery of his medium. 'Art itself,' wrote a well-known American art master, 'cannot be taught. If a student has good taste in color and an instinct for design, he may hope to become a painter. If his taste is bad . . . then he can only be taught rules and formulæ, and his work will be imitative and conventional. In either case he can be taught the technical part of painting. . . .' But technique is only a means to an end. It is one thing to preach, quite another to practise, and I am well aware how often my own work shows failure to follow my ideals. Who was it said, 'I always do, always did, and always hope I shan't'? Most of us feel like that at times.

Well, to begin with, what is a sketch from nature, what is its purpose?

It may be made for a variety of reasons—as an exercise of draughtsmanship, as a study of some particular effect or detail for future use when composing a picture in the studio, or as a topographical note, a reminder of some pleasant scene; or it may even be an attempt to make a complete picture, the hardest task of all, with the light and effect liable to change at any moment.

Some painters of mountain scenery have managed to do complete works out of doors: Sargent, for example, Adrian Stokes, Alfred East and Russell Flint, to name only a few. Personally, I have never done much good in that way. Even in the comfort of the studio the flow of water-colour pigment is not easy to control. Out of doors, wind, heat, cold, dust, flies and glare add to one's troubles. Moreover one is so occupied with the vast array of visible facts that it is most perplexing to determine which give the essential character of the scene.

Which interest us most? That decision made, we know what for us are the fundamentals to be painted with special emphasis. But even so one's interest may wander. The facts are generally so fascinating that we are apt to go on adding detail to detail, and the final result may make us realise sadly that elaboration does not create beauty. But sketch from nature we must, and seek inspiration from the same source, in spite of repeated failures, otherwise we shall never acquire the knowledge necessary for building up a picture at home.

The past masters of landscape were in the habit of making at least two sketches of a subject, one of the more or less permanent

details, and another of the general disposition of light and shade and the combination of masses, often due to a transient effect. It is well worth while following their example.

Turner, the greatest Alpine sketcher of all time, is said seldom, when at the height of his powers, to have made a complete water-colour on the spot. He filled many sketch books with pencil drawings and suggestions of colour, and finished them at home from his well-stored memory and from his imagination. But he did not run before he could walk, and so we find his early works marked by precision. He mastered the science of representation, and learned to define before he attained the breadth and emphasis of his later manner.

There is no easy way of becoming a good painter, and some drudgery, and the constant exercise of hand and eye, cannot be avoided by those who endeavour to express their ideas and emotions in paint. Exact imitation of nature is of course impossible. We realise that the moment we begin to sketch. The whitest paper cannot approach the brilliance of a sunlit snow slope, the purest of blue pigments cannot imitate the blue of a sunny sky. We can but suggest and hint, and by so doing hope to create a thing of beauty—a piece of paper covered with harmonious colours disposed in agreeable shapes. Look sometimes at a Samarkand rug, or at some ancient Persian pottery : no imitation of nature there, but the most wonderful arrangement of colour and form resulting in perfect works of art. So, by suggestion and symbol, we hope to interpret nature, and sooner or later to acquire that judgment which can instinctively separate the pictorial from the non-pictorial. A sketch which expresses or suggests many facts in a few strokes demands even more skill than a complete drawing. It should look spontaneous, but there is little virtue in mere spontaneity if it suggests nothing but carelessness or incompetence. But there is virtue and vitality in what I may call ordered carelessness, where the general effect of a number of touches, all apparently like nothing in nature, gives a sense of reality. This quality is exemplified in many sketches by Brangwyn, Steer, and Brabazon.

As regards the difficulty of drawing mountain forms, I recently came across an illuminating passage in Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, which I venture to quote :

‘Of all the various impossibilities,’ he says, ‘which torment and humiliate the painter, none are more vexatious than that of drawing a mountain form. . . . Chance will not help us with the mountain. Its fine and faintly organised edge seems to be definitely traced against the sky ; yet let us set ourselves honestly to follow it, and we find, on

the instant, it has disappeared : and that for two reasons. The first, that if the mountain be lofty and in light, it is so faint in colour that the eye literally cannot trace its separation from the hues next to it. . . . The second, that if the contour be observed from a nearer point, or looked at when it is dark against the sky, it will be found composed of millions of minor angles, crags, points, fissures, which no human sight or hand can draw finely enough, yet all of which have effect on the mind.'

Even the simplest mountain face or ridge a mile or two away is full of exquisite details, all apparently well defined. But when you try to draw one of these details, you cannot discover where it begins or ends or runs into another. You cannot copy these intricacies accurately, even if you wish to. There the camera beats the pencil and brush every time. So waste no time in attempting to do so. The registering of innumerable facts and details is neither possible nor desirable. The task of the sketcher is to note the salient features of his subject, and to impress upon himself—to say nothing of those who see the results of his labours—that he is not a mere copyist, but a translator or interpreter of nature in terms of art. It is his privilege to reveal hidden beauties which may escape the eye of the casual observer—and how much the casual observer misses, especially in scenery not commonly acknowledged to be beautiful ! It took a Brangwyn to reveal to us the beauty of factory chimneys, slag heaps, and the general equipment of industry. Velasquez and Rembrandt, too, created masterpieces of art by perceiving the beauty that lay beneath the outward semblance of misshapen dwarfs and wrinkled crones. Like alchemists they were, converting base metal into gold.

The problem of the Alpine painter is not quite the same. The gold, the actual beauty of his subject, is there before him, overwhelmingly obvious, impossible to imitate. All he can hope to do is to give a faithful impression of the emotion aroused in him by the scene. And so one arrives at the conclusion that in the creation of a work of art, the subject itself is of less importance than the way the artist looks at it and treats it.

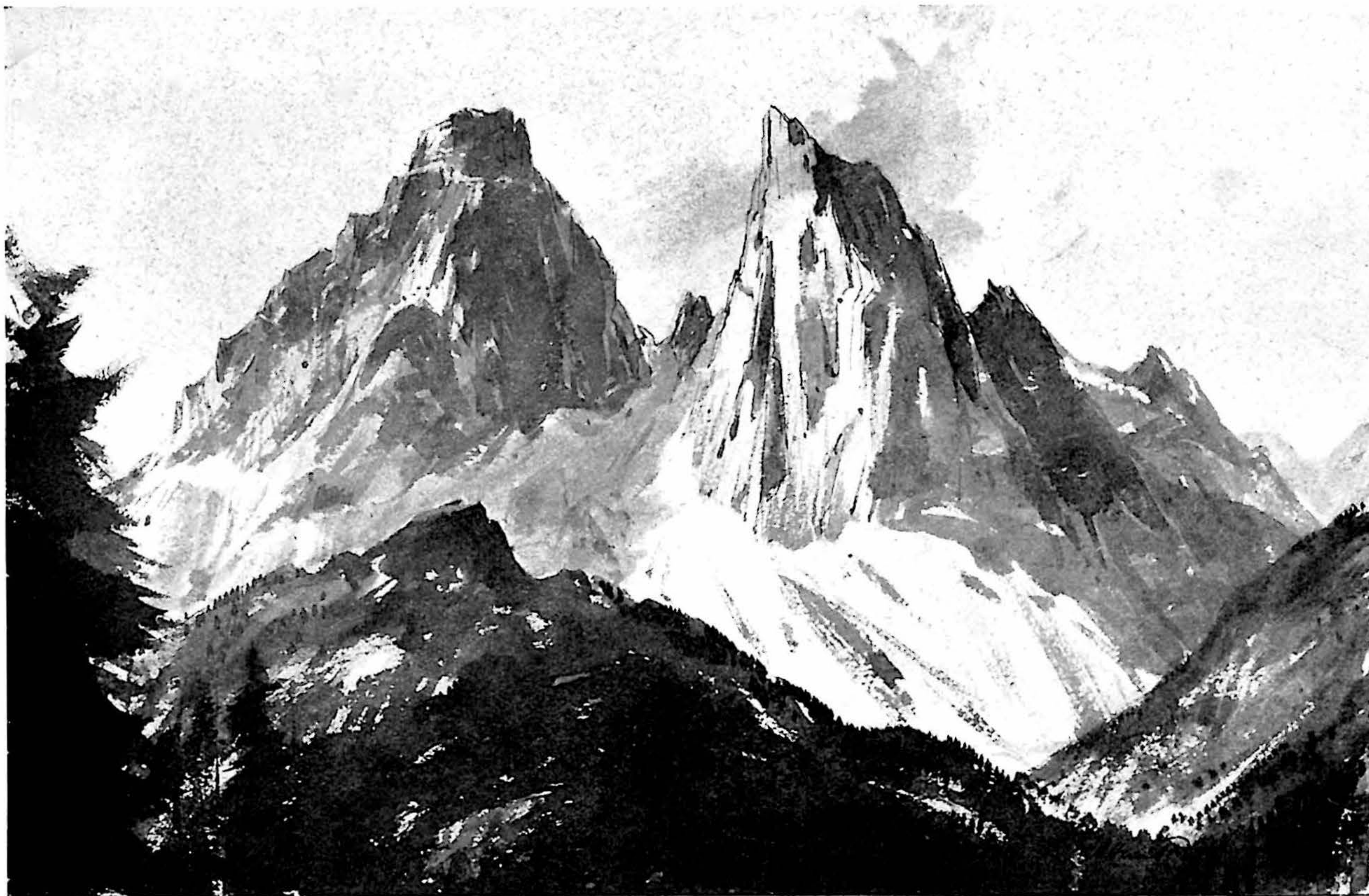
'Manners makyth man,' as all good Wykehamists know. So 'manner,' as distinguished from 'mannerism,' makes the artist. His personality, his vision, count far more than his technical accomplishment. Let us be thankful then for the wide differences of personality. How tedious picture exhibitions would be if our vision did not vary !

This fortunate diversity of individual vision is made manifest when two or three painters sit down to sketch the same subject. One of them may be specially attracted by the distant range of



NEAR OBERAMMERGAU.
Monochrome drawing by Cecil A. Hunt, R.W.S. 1934.

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MONTE CRISTALLO, FROM ABOVE TRE CROCI.
Monochrome drawing by Cecil A. Hunt, R.W.S. 1934.

mountains, and naturally he will make it the dominant note of his picture. He will emphasise that feature of the landscape and lead you there directly, without distracting your attention by inserting much detail in the foreground or middle distance. Another may be more interested in the colour or form of the middle distance and will concentrate on that, while the third painter may have eyes only for the richly coloured chalet in the foreground, and will sacrifice the rest of the landscape in so far as it competes in interest with his main motif. Well and good. These three artists will each have used nature's material according to their personal tastes, and that is at least going some way towards producing a work of art. We cannot put everything into one picture, and we certainly shall achieve nothing of importance if we merely plaster our paper with facts, so lavishly supplied by nature.

The way an artist selects his facts varies according to his artistic capacity. 'Nature,' said Whistler, 'contains the elements in colour and form of all pictures, as the keyboard contains the notes of all music. But the artist is born to pick and choose those elements that the result may be beautiful—as the musician gathers his notes and forms his chords, until he brings forth from chaos glorious harmony. To say to the painter that Nature is to be taken as she is, is to say to the player that he may sit on the piano.'

So we must learn, by trial and error, to discriminate and eliminate, to steer a course between the Scylla of emptiness and the Charybdis of overcrowding. Eliminate detail if irrelevant, but eliminate colour too, if inharmonious to the general scheme. And play for safety, at any rate in your early stages as a sketcher, by limiting your palette. The aesthetic value of a drawing does not depend in the slightest degree on the variety and number of the colours used.

But do not cling to the same set of colours for each picture. There are many blues, yellows, reds and greens provided by the colourman. Cobalt, yellow ochre, light red and vandyke brown may be your favourite pigments. But sometimes experiment with a different set, say cyanine blue, cadmium, indian red and umber. A mild adventure, perhaps, but there is nothing like adventure to stimulate the brush. It is useful too to treat every picture as a definite colour scheme, and to secure balance of effect and unity by carrying each colour in a greater or less degree through the composition.

Find a subject which excites you, or you will never paint it well, and go for the big forms and sweeping lines. Emphasise

one feature, not ten. For instance, if a mountain has two peaks of nearly equal height and importance—for the moment I have in mind Sorapis as seen from Misurina and Sgurr nan Gillean as seen from Sligachan in Skye, involving in each case a conflict of interest—there are several ways of concentrating attention on one more than on the other, by arranging the light and shade, the sky and cloud forms, or by concealing one peak in a veil of mist.

Scenery which excites and thrills is not always paintable. Take for example the stupendous panorama from the top of the Gornergrat. Lovely to look at in whatever direction one's eye may turn, but practically hopeless for the sketcher, so complex are the shapes and details. But descend a few hundred feet and hide some of the bewildering complexity with a simple middle distance of alp and rock, and many possible subjects appear. There is the Matterhorn, I recollect, partly reflected in a pool, and with much of its intricacy concealed by snow and rocks near by. And lower down, I remember a fine subject of which the principal feature is the mighty ridge of the Rothorn, and perhaps a chalet or two in the foreground.

So choose as simple a subject as you can, and then simplify it still more in your treatment, as regards composition, masses of light and shade, details and colour. It is hopeless to try to copy the countless variations of rock and snow and ice on a mountain face. It is sufficient to indicate the main ones and suggest others. Arrange and compose the material provided by nature. Shift trees, transpose foregrounds, take advantage of cloud shadows according to your taste, while preserving the essential character of the subject. Truth to nature in reality depends on the painter being able to see and depict the significant points.

Imitation of form and detail is up to a certain point comparatively easy. It is only half the battle. We must aim, as Ruskin declared, 'to give the far higher and deeper truth of mental vision, rather than that of physical facts, and to reach a representation, which though it may be totally useless to engineers or geographers, and when tried by rule and measure, totally unlike the place, shall yet be capable of producing on the far-away beholder's mind precisely the impression which the reality would have produced.' This impression on the mind is not formed entirely by the mere piece of scenery within the limits of one's sketch. It may depend on the general character of the landscape.

All great art must be to a large extent creative and inventive,

not imitative. It must be influenced by the imagination of the artist. Turner's mountain pictures are outstanding examples of invention and imagination. We cannot expect to have Turner's vision and it would be pure affectation for a painter possessed in a small degree of the imaginative gift to set out deliberately 'to do a Turner.' We must paint what we see and feel, not what someone else saw and felt. If we see only the commonly visible facts, we can paint no other, until our creative faculties are aroused. Be a plain topographer then until you are forced to be an imaginative painter. But the topographer is not debarred from omitting unsightly details which interfere with the impressiveness of his subject. What is or is not unsightly depends on his vision. Lago d'Iseo, for instance, in Northern Italy is flanked by beautiful mountains, but into the lake there runs a promontory, on which several factories have been built, with tall chimneys pouring forth smoke. Some people might exclaim in horror against this apparent desecration of the scenery. As I passed by, I saw no desecration. I was so much impressed by the slender towers, the cranes, the jetties and the curves and colour of the smoke, when contrasted with the more obvious beauty of the natural scenery.

Sketching in the Alps, or anywhere else for that matter, is so difficult, that it is no crime to avail ourselves of any means which may conduce to good results—the camera for instance. But we must recognise the limitations of the photographer. He can represent infinity of detail, the most delicate variations of tone, surface quality of ice, snow and rock, in a manner quite beyond the brush or pencil of the most skilful painter. In short, he can imitate some aspects of nature almost to perfection. But he cannot rival the sketcher in arrangement of his material, or in emphasis of the fundamentals. He is bound, within narrow limits, to copy indiscriminately all that his lens can see. Used in conjunction with the sketch book, as the servant not the master of the sketcher, the camera may be a great help. It may serve to remind us of details omitted from a sketch, which later on we may desire to include when planning a complete picture. Especially in the High Alps a camera is a valuable adjunct, when we have to contend with cold, intense light, an insecure foothold, and the natural impatience of one's companions on the rope.

As regards materials, equipment, methods and outlook, sketching in the Alps is subject to much the same rules and principles as sketching anywhere else. There is no best way, no best brush, pencil, paper, set of colours or outfit. Everyone must experiment for himself and find out what suits him best.

Some of the excellent manuals on sketching, which go fully into questions of technique, may save trouble, but on the other hand it is great fun finding out things for oneself, and there is always the hope that one may discover a fresh way of handling water-colours. It is one of the joys of painting in water-colour that there are so many ways of manipulating the medium. Look at an exhibition like that of the Royal Society of Painters in Water-colours. There we have some sixty or more artists, and every one with an individual style or language of his own, some with more than one style—proof enough, as I have just remarked, that there is no best way.

My own way is more or less as follows : if time is no object, I make several sketches of the same subject, one in outline to familiarise my mind with the characteristic forms independent of colour, or I may make several little trial trips in outline, varying the composition to suit my fancy, and several little notes in monochrome to get the general values of the tones and to plot out the masses of light and shade. The last note would be in colour, showing the prevailing tints of foreground, middle distance and distance. Sometimes, too, I make a note of a fugitive effect. Such sketches are not of course designed for exhibition, but as material for working out a picture in the studio.

But if time presses, a small notebook, $8\frac{1}{2}$ " by $5\frac{1}{2}$ ", of white paper made by Rowney & Co. is very serviceable. It takes pencil, pen and ink, and coloured crayons as well as water-colour, and is most suitable for rapid impressions. And I find the occasional assistance of a snapshot of the subject can be invoked to supply further details. As an aid to composition I look through a matchbox held close to the eye. It acts as a frame. When the light is overpowering I sketch in tinted spectacles.

Now let me shortly recapitulate some of the points the sketcher should bear in mind.

Choose a simple subject, and treat it simply. Most complex subjects can be simplified by noting only the dominant lines and masses, and omitting details which are not essential to the character.

Concentrate on one main point of interest, one principal light, and one deepest dark.

Use few colours, but plenty of colour.

Paint freshly. Avoid niggling. Any fault of colour can be corrected in the next picture.

Most colours become colder when dry. It is easier to cool a colour by a second wash than to warm it.

If a happy accident happens in your work, let well alone and go on your way rejoicing.

Draw sometimes from memory.

Make your picture carry across a room.

Paint your own impressions.

Anyone can learn to draw, just as anyone can learn grammar. The value of what you draw, or write, depends on what you have to say. So tell us in your work how you loved that blue shadow on the snow, that gleam of sunshine on the cornice, that dark thundercloud enveloping the ridge, and how you enjoyed drawing 'the pine tree's withered branch,' and tell us by suggestion as well as definition—but not too much information, please, in a single picture.

Study nature, but study also the work of great men, and see how they have attacked problems that have baffled you.

Lastly, be a severe critic of your own work, and welcome the candid criticism of other painters. Our friends and relations may wax enthusiastic over our efforts. It is pleasanter to praise than to find fault, but as we all know

'Tis an old maxim in the schools,
That flattery's the food of fools.