Creating and Regaining Whites & Lights

In traditional watercolor painting, white is obtained from the white of the watercolor paper rather than from using a white opaque pigment like Titanium White or Chinese White. You don't have to be a traditionalist, but if you want to be, here are some ways to get white/light areas in your painting.

PAINTING AROUND the white areas
This approach requires pre-planning...a light pencil sketch will do...so that you know where the white areas are. Then you simply and carefully paint around those areas, leaving the white paper showing. If the paper is dry, you will have hard, sharply defined edges (as shown here). If the paper is damp, the pigment will spread more, giving you soft edges. Practice will help you anticipate how far the paint will spread on damp paper, so that you will still have white left even after the paint expands. In this example, the tree trunk, grass and part of the fence were left unpainted, allowing the white of the paper to show and to create the shapes.

SCRAPING OUT the white areas
In this technique, you use the angled end of a plastic-handled aquarelle brush, a piece of an old plastic credit card, or even a stiff piece of matboard to scrape your whites out of a damp passage of paint. This approach requires perfect timing. If the paint is too dry you will not be able to scrape back to the white paper, and if the paint is too wet, it will run back into your scraped areas. Practice this until you get the feel of how damp the paint passage needs to be. Here, the tree trunk, grass and part of the fence were scraped out while the paint was still damp but not running wet.

LIFTING OUT the white areas
Sometimes you just need a white (or light) area that you haven't planned for in advance. All is not lost! Use clean water and a clean brush to wet the pigment where you want to regain a white or light area. Let the clean water sit on the paint for 30 seconds or so until it can soften the paint. Then blot firmly with a tissue or paper towel. You can repeat this procedure to further lighten an area. If you have used a non-staining pigment, you can usually get a near white using this method. Lifting out whites is possible, as shown here, but a true white can only be gained if you've used a non-staining pigment.

PROTECTING the white areas with liquid mask

Step 1 - Use liquid masking fluid to paint the areas you want to keep white. Here they show as gray areas in the tree trunk, and part of the fence and ground area. Use a synthetic brush dipped in a soapy solution and blotted to apply the masking fluid. Be sure to wash the brush with soap after you're finished.
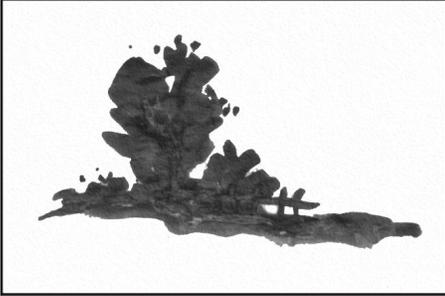
Step 2 - When the masking fluid is dry, paint over it with the color(s) you wish to use. Let these washes completely dry. Don't use a hair dryer on masking fluid - it will bake it onto the paper, and you may not be able to get it off. Masking fluid should always be removed as soon as possible after the paint is dry around/over it. Let your washes dry thoroughly though, or you may smudge damp paint into the white areas you are trying to protect as you remove the mask.
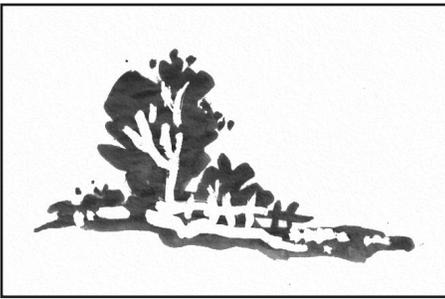
Step 3 - When the watercolor is completely dry, use your finger or a rubber cement pickup to remove all the masking fluid, revealing the white paper you protected. You can use a clean damp brush to soften edges of masked areas after removing the masking fluid if you wish, or paint the white areas with other colors if you don't want to leave them unpainted.

Finally, it is possible to sand, erase and otherwise rough up paint areas to lighten them.You can even cut a stencil using mylar or acetate if you need to sand or erase and want a precise shape. Using an ink eraser will take off even staining pigments, but you can only do this on a good grade of watercolor paper (140 lb or heavier). Otherwise you may get holes in your painting!