

WATERCOLOR PAINTING by Gainor Roberts

Pictured to the right are several types of watercolor palettes, brushes and tube paints. Watercolors come in tubes or in pans that are little squares of solid watercolor that are easily reconstituted with a spritz of water. Many watercolor painters like to use the palette that is shown in the photo to hold their paint, squeezing out enough to fill the wells. Even when dry, watercolors do not go bad like oils and acrylics, so they are an economical medium to use. The small set of colors is great for travel and will fit in a backpack or purse, along with a small brush that fits inside the set. Complete the traveling set with a small watercolor block, or several sheets of paper and you have all the supplies you need to create a watercolor painting on location.



Watercolors are not the easiest of mediums to master; they run when they are supposed to stay put, they get muddy when they are supposed to remain beautiful and pure, they have a tendency to dry a different color than what you wanted, and working wet paint over dry paint creates hard dry areas of paint that are impossible to fix. But watercolors are beloved for these reasons by many watercolorists who use these quirks to great advantage.

Paintings are generally done on heavy, acid free watercolor papers, although there are all kinds of new ideas about painting on boards, plastic and canvas that are specially prepared for watercolor, most of us like to use traditional fine papers for our watercolors. One of the leaders in the field of fine papers is Arches which comes in several weights, 90, 140 and 300 pounds and can be completely smooth, bumpy or rough. The 300lb paper is completely stiff. One surface I like to use is called Multimedia Art-board, which is an epoxy impregnated paper that accepts watercolor very well. Some paper companies sell their papers as a watercolor block, which is a pad of paper that is glued all around, and prevents the paper from buckling when it is wet, or at least it is supposed to do that, but experience differs occasionally. Very runny washes of paint on wet paper require that the paper be “stretched” which is a process of soaking the paper in a bath, and then taping it to a board.

Watercolor is pigment mixed with several different binders, but gum arabic is the most common; others are honey, glycerin, and gelatin. The main additive to watercolors is, of course, water, and it is used to thin the paint to a wash, or to make a color lighter in value. Adding white paint to watercolor is disappointing as it tends to make colors muddy and not light and pure like other mediums. A kind of watercolor paint is called gouache, which is the same paint, but has white added to it by the paint manufacturer, and because of the added white the paint is opaque instead of transparent like traditional watercolors. Many artists use a combination of both transparent and opaque watercolors in their work. Some traditionalists shun the use of opaque paint, feeling that a “true” watercolor should be completely transparent, and adding anything ruins the subtle look that a well worked watercolor can have. Many magazine illustrators use gouache for their artwork because it dries to a matte finish that looks good to the camera when it is photographed.

There are an infinite number of ways that watercolor can be applied to the paper. Best known is the wet wash, where the artist applies a thin veil of color to large areas of the paper, most often worked into wet paper using a large brush that is designed for washes, sometimes called a mop. The paint dries in minutes, and less if a small fan is used to speed up the drying and a second application of paint can be applied over the first quite quickly. However, I have found that it is safer to wet the paper again where a second layer will be added, making sure that it is not soaking wet, but damp. The paper fibers will take

up the wash beautifully and you will not create ridges of dry paint doing it this way.

Paint is applied in any number of ways; solid flat areas of unbroken color, broken color patches of complimentary colors, sponged, splattered, or even sprayed. Watercolorists prize the “sparkle” of paint that has been done on a rough paper, where it gathers thickly in the pits and stays light on the bumps. Some watercolorists hate that look and like to have more control over their paint on a smooth paper. Fine watercolor brushes are every expensive and are made from sable hairs, but acceptable substitutes are various synthetic hairs that work fairly well. Watercolor brushes are short handled, and most watercolorist work on a board on a tilted easel, drafting table, or on a flat table.

The white of the paper is used to great advantage in watercolors, as it will represent the highest value in the painting, and should remain white paper until the end. Some watercolor painters like to use a mask, also called a frisket. Generally this is a rubberized liquid that can be applied with a pen or small brush and will cover the paper so no paint goes there. It is removed from the paper after the painting is dry and the white areas can either stay bright white or be slightly altered to bring those areas into value. Masks are sometimes difficult to lift and in some cases pull up the top layer of the paper so it is hard to paint over areas that have been masked. It is best to try out your mask on the paper you are using before ruining a beautiful painting.

Painters have learned that their colors will become muddy when several colors are mixed together. The old rule of thumb was never to mix more than 3 colors together, but all rules are made to be broken and this is one of them that you can break, sometimes. I often keep a scrap paper nearby to try out my color before applying it, as it will look totally different on the paper, and even more so when it is dry.

Most painters use a pencil to sketch out their painting before applying the paint. Stray lines usually can be picked up with an eraser at the end and I make sure to use an 8H pencil that leaves a very faint line. Some painters put down an incredibly detailed drawing before they paint then fill in areas as they go, usually starting from the lightest and working to the darkest part of the painting, although many painters use the reverse method, leaving the white of the paper to direct the values in the painting and starting with the darks. Many painters work the background first, and paint their foreground over the paler tones of the background.

Mistakes can be fixed in some cases by wetting the paint and blotting it up with a tissue or sponge. Some pigments will stain the paper and no amount of wetting can erase some colors. Some mistakes can be scraped out with a razor blade or X-acto knife and some watercolor painters use the scraping technique to add white areas where a mask would be impossible. You have to do this carefully to avoid making holes in your paper! Other mistakes can be fixed by gently applying white gouache, gesso, or white watercolor paint to an unwanted small area of tone or color. Huge mistakes can be successfully fixed by cropping out the painting and creating a second unplanned painting that often is more attractive than the original.

Watercolors are matted and framed under glass, and should be kept from UV light. Today frame shops and online frame websites will sell you UV glass or plastic which is a great idea for paintings that will be hung on a wall. Even incandescent and fluorescent light will damage a delicate watercolor so it is a good idea to preserve it properly.

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