

Watercolour techniques

Atmospheric Backgrounds in Watercolour

These should be done only on stretched paper. They can be done either before painting the main foreground subject or afterwards, with different approaches to bear in mind:

Before main subject (you need a clear vision of the finished painting to choose this method)

If the subject is comprised of small scale/narrow forms, use masking fluid to protect all these areas from the subsequent washes. If the subject forms are large scale/wide, then you may only need to mask the edges. Remember you can coat your brush in soap to protect it from the masking fluid. A ruling pen can also be used for masking fine line structures. This method does enable an easier wash application because structures are protected. When the background is dry you can then paint in the foreground subject matter.

After the main subject (gives you time to develop a vision of the finished painting and visually balance colours)

You work around the painted subject matter in sections (in the negative areas), avoiding drying marks where these sections meet by gentle blotting/soft focus blending away of the wet paint edge. When sections meet, a wet section should be meeting a dry one, so the wet paint can be gently overlapped onto the dry section. If you do accidentally go over the edges of your main subject, it is best to wait until the painting is almost dry, then these areas can be moistened and the wash colour lifted off. This problem is not so troublesome with light background colours.

Preparation

Make sure you have a large brush for main application and a smaller brush for pushing paint into small areas. Prepare a good range of colour wash mixes, as many as you think you might need or like to try. Think about how they will blend together wet into wet creating additional colours - you might want to exploit this, or avoid certain combinations which produce muddy greys through the complementary colour relationship eg yellow and purple. Make sure these are fairly concentrated mixes (tube paints are excellent for this), as the wetting of the paper will dilute the colour, and you can easily dilute the colour by adding water both to your mix and to the paper. Any dark colours need to be concentrated to work properly. Remember YOU HAVE TO BE BOLD ABOUT THIS, as the effects will dry out a good degree lighter.

Consider the use of salt sprinkle, water sprayer or droplets, or built up spattered paint effects(with a toothbrush and a flicking action) or even blown ink runs to finish off your background. You may have to protect the main subject with cut out stencils of thin paper, especially when choosing paint spatter. You can also spatter the ground with masking fluid in advance to hold back tiny white flecks. They can be tinted in afterwards to soften.

Lighting

Before commencing with any painting, decide on the lighting, so there will be continuity through the subject and background. So if you want the lighting coming from the left, darken the right sides of subject structures and reflect this (and any cast shadows) in the background washes. So for eg. ,do not give the top left dark heavy washes in this case. Try to retain some bright light somewhere in your painting to draw the eye to the dark areas, as very uniform lighting lacks interest.

Working practice

Work wet into wet, pre-moistening larger areas with clear water. It is very much personal choice where in your composition to start the background painting, but working from the central areas to the perimeter and from the bottom to the top works quite well. Make sure that there are more dense 'shadow' areas right next to sections of your subject, as this gives the subject depth and body. Consider having some light and dark areas next to each other for visual accent. Tilting the paper (or board support) can help disperse the paint, as can drops of water. Keep the paper wet while you are working until you are happy with the effects. Backruns are best avoided as they can dominate visually - these are caused by working wet paint into an almost dry section, or by two very different concentrations of paint combining. Sometimes backruns can work to suggest background structures, but more by happy accident than design.

TWO EXERCISES TO TRY:-

A LIGHT SOFT TREATMENT ON PLAIN PAPER (for flower painting).

Pale yellow over the whole area to start, then working nearer the bottom, add yellow greens, then darker greens wet into wet. Try tilting the paper slightly. At the top keep the yellow very thin and drop in some coeruleum/cobalt blue to disperse slightly, this will appear to be blue sky in and around clouds. These colours will provide a growing environmental feel for your flower study. You can then review the over all effect and if the paper is still moist you could add salt (a thin sprinkle only) or water spray if you want to suggest some atmospheric textures.

A RICH BOLD TREATMENT AROUND SOME PRE-DRAWN SHAPES (for flower painting, a few flower stems or a multi-lobed leaf). Dark greens, blues, with some hot reds, crimsons to suggest background flowers/other structures. Here you can practice a background in sections. Try incorporating a mixed black (crimson and viridian) to see just how dark you can go! If you try salt or water sprinkle here, the results will probably be very much more marked than in the experiment above, due to more intense contrasts resulting.

'Negative painting'/'cutting out' can be done after the wet into wet ground is complete

After your wet into wet ground is dry, to develop the painting further, you could lightly draw some additional structures in soft pencil (eg. Stems, flowers, leaves) - sometimes abstract shapes in your first washes can suggest structures in themselves. Then you can paint around these (in the negative areas) to bring them into the positive, blending away the wet edges of your wash. The washes you use could be the same as previously (this will significantly intensify existing colours) or you could grey them slightly for more muted effects, or try glazing with very different colours to more radically modify your first set of background colours. Once this layer is totally dry, remove any obvious pencil markings and try 'cutting out' more shapes using negative painting again, to suggest even more structural depth. This can be repeated again and again to personal taste, producing multiple layers receding visually.

Preventing cockling (uneven surface) of your paper

Always stretch your paper. Wait until your painting is totally dry before removing it from the board. If there is still some cockling, you could try this method: moisten the reverse side of your paper and place it under some heavy books to weight it down, leave overnight to dry out flat. Make sure it is totally dry before removing it for storage.