Painting Trees and Bushes

Useful materials

Stipple brush, flat brush, fan brush, all of varied sizes, in hogs hair or equivalent bristle fibre (for trees closer to the viewer) Round brushes and flat watercolour brushes (for distant trees, softer in appearance)
Rigger brush for fine lines (use with a flicking action for upper branches of trees)
You could try out Terry Harrison's golden foliage brush and his stippling fan brush (available from SAA mail order art materials)
Small sponges with a good texture, a hard blunt point/edge for scraping into paint; masking fluid
Photographic reference material of trees

Starting Tips

Use reference material to render the forms of your trees, BUT GENERALLY SPEAKING, DON'T TRY TO PAINT THEM TOO REALISTICALLY, simplify the forms. If you look at most painted examples this is what has been done – you can also see a build up of layers of colour creating an impressionistic effect, this is what you need to do.

Composition: allow for foreground trees to be of larger scale, working back to trees smaller in the mid ground, and smallest on the horizon.

For the foreground trees you can sketch in part of the trunk or larger branches which are not going to be obscured by foliage. If trees are the main subject and there are foreground branches of foliage nearest the viewer, you can draw layers of individual leaves for more detailed painting (you would then work back impressionistically from here).

Masking fluid can be used to protect highlighted edges of trunks, or very pale coloured trunks eg birch, beech, OR foreground foliage crossing over tree trunks

When painting the foliage you can achieve a 'lost and found' effect in the upper branches, using wet into wet – then dry texturing. Paint the smaller branches after the foliage. Use a rigger brush in a flicking action for uppermost thin twiggy branches, extending them into leafy areas.

Mix colours in advance, at least 3 colours for any subject – light, medium, dark – warm and glowing to dark blue greens, to ensure texture and depth.
Spring/summer trees – try mixes of cobalt blue, cadmium yellow, burnt sienna
Autumn trees – try mixes of cadmium yellow, burnt sienna, crimson, browns
For shadow versions of these, add Paynes Grey

Close-up foreground trees

For highly detailed foreground foliage - you can paint in detail. Pick your method according to your reference material/photo – **so think about which method from below would suit best.**
 MARK MAKING WITH YOUR BRUSHES AND TOOLS IS CRUCIAL TO PAINTING TREES MORE IMPRESSIONISTICALLY, HERE ARE A FEW DIFFERENT ONES TO TRY OUT. BEAR IN MIND THE TYPES OF TREES YOU ARE PAINTING:-
(Don't forget to leave some trunk/branch areas exposed for painting in later)

Wet into wet first washes: following the shapes in your particular types of trees or shrubs using round brushes, with shadow areas between trees or shrubs observed, then build on top wet on dry with subsequent darker tones to render more texture.

Stipple: use the bristle fibre brushes, starting with the lightest colour first and building on top with the darker colours, working wet onto dry in layers. Put more physical pressure from the brush nearer the centre of the tree and less pressure on the perimeter for softer margins. You could experiment by allowing a little wet into wet for a softer effect if desired.

Sponge: Mix up a good supply of paint as sponges absorb so much moisture. Pat the paint on gently building from light to dark – this can be done wet on dry, or wet into wet a little here and there for softer effects. As above, put more pressure in the centre and ease off around the margins.

Horizontal layering (such as for firs, conifers) Use a flat brush, of a suitable width for the scale you are working at, to build up layers to create an impression of heavy strata of branches. Work thinner towards the extremities and wider towards the centre area, adding deep shadow colour underneath these horizontal layers to create depth – this will be in the central areas or where trees overlap each other. Again, wet into wet and wet on dry seems to work well. You can refine the textures achieved with a small pointed brush to reproduce the feathered branches.

Round brush work, mark-making textures: You can build up a more substantial effect if you use blots of different shapes from your brush on top of stipple and sponge, or on its own building up layers for added texture

Hazy impression of trees on the horizon and mid-ground areas:

Landscape watercolours are generally worked from the top downwards, so sky to horizon, to mid ground to foreground. You need to plan ahead with this.

For trees **on the horizon**, the sky area should be painted first, then the banks of trees overlaid wet into wet for softer emphasis. Try laying in a warm glow tint, such as pale ochre/orange on the horizon, then drop in some tree colours of your choice, wet into wet, adding a deeper colour for underneath shadows. Try scraping into the wet paint with a fine blunt tip for the effect of tree trunks, or wait until dry, and lift them out with a moist brush for paler trunks and branches. You can also get a soft effect for distant trees with light sponging.

For **mid-ground areas**, the trees should be of a larger scale than those on the horizon, and therefore can be painted with more texture and more concentrated paint. They can overlap the trees on the horizon, and each other. Sponging/stippling wet on dry, added on top of the softer effect technique above, may work well.

Field boundaries/hedges:

Make these narrower and more blue as they recede into the distance in the composition.
A useful and very quick technique is to use a curved cut edge of a piece of sturdy card as a stencil/mask edge. Place the curve where you want to paint a hedge boundary and stipple paint along and above the card edge with even and uneven areas - with some larger features to represent trees breaking up the hedge line. Then remove the card, lifting it upwards (not dragging it downwards), to be left with an impression of a hedge. Repeat this at other angles, making the areas smaller and narrower towards the horizon. When dry, you can fill in the fields with soft flat washes of yellow greens, adding blue for those on the horizon.

How to render bark for close-up trees:

This should be done from observation and relate to the tree type you are painting. Is is rugged or smooth?, Is there a highlighted edge? Is there any moss, lichen or climbing ivy you would like to represent? Do you need to mask off some leafy branches that are overlapping the trunk?
Silver birch: some texture can be created by stippling and patting on dark horizontal colour bands to break up the white - wet on dry dragging is best, utilising the bumpy texture of the paper. You can also scratch some markings into the wet paint with a fine hard card edge.
Pine trees: a build up of more vertical layering impressions, with scratched/painted in bark patterns for detail.