Painting water – river, lake and ocean

Use reference material/photographs/observe from the landscape itself for the best results. Reflections particularly need to be naturalistically observed. Paint the sky and other areas before the water. Then have all your colour washes ready before you begin. Backruns are to be avoided at all costs (weak wash running into a strong wash).
For large expanses of water (sea and lake), use some aerial perspective in your colours e.g. using more ultramarine tints for near the horizon with more cobalt blue in the foreground, remembering that distant blues will appear colder and paler.

Water ripples, bubbles, foam and surf are generally white. These can be achieved in various ways:-
They can be masked off using masking fluid for precise shapes, or wax crayon/candle for distant rough sparkle (both applied prior to painting). Or they can be lifted out of moist or dry paint – the edge of a flat brush is very effective. They can also be applied afterwards with opaque white acrylic or gouache paint. The effect of white shimmer can be achieved by dry-brush dragging of paint over the bumpy textured surface of watercolour paper (good for water horizon areas). You must plan before you begin which of the above methods you are going to use.

Reflections

These are crisper edged and more detailed in still water. The colours and shapes of clouds and sky, and bank side tree trunks, foliage and buildings can all form reflections which make up the surface shapes and colours of the water. They will be mirror imaged in the water. Structures leaning towards you appear longer, structures leaning away appear shorter. Dark structures can appear lighter, light structures, darker. A broken moving water surface breaks up, thereby lengthening, reflections.

Still water

Mix up colours for the reflections and water. These could be browns, dark greens, yellow-greens, blues, greys
Pre-wet the water area. Put in wet into wet areas of colour first (leaving some white gives the effect of reflected clouds, or if a regular shape, it could be a building). Use horizontal strokes for the water- perhaps in the foreground, and broad vertical strokes of the brush from top to bottom for the reflection areas. You need to be bold doing this. The vertical strokes are very effective.
Gum Arabic added to the washes may help you control their spread.
You can now try lifting out some soft, curving foreground ripples with the edge of a flat brush., either from the still moist paint or when dry.
When the first wash stage is fully dry, you now need to paint on your reflections more distinctly (broken or continuous depending on how smooth the water is). Don't draw them in first, just be bold and paint them in wet onto dry, in smooth continuous strokes. Small broken reflections can be painted using left to right strokes, long unbroken reflections from top to bottom. Then leave them alone, fiddling wrecks them!

Moving water

Put on faint wet into wet washes to represent the lightest areas or the water and any coloured reflections – leave to dry. Then work wet onto dry to apply ripples using darker versions of the first wash colours. For characteristic ripple shapes and changing directions - see visuals in hand out from SAA tutor, Trudy Friend.

For a shimmering lake, try a flat wash near the horizon coming down with horizontal strokes (some dry brush dragging can be effective near the horizon), then start leaving some areas of the paper white, leaving fine white lines of varying length – these will be hard edges. Then in the foreground paint smaller horizontal ripples- the key here is not to be too regular in your strokes.

Sea and waves (masked off crests of waves and foam)

Try a graduated wash – horizontal strokes coming down from the horizon, from a greyed ultramarine to a slightly greyed coeruleum blue. Allow to dry. Then, wet on dry, add darker versions of these colours to the undersides of your waves and elsewhere - for waves just forming. You could also try dry brush dragging of these darker colours for additional texture. If your waves are large, model the white of them a little (like the technique for clouds) with a selected grey blue. If appropriate, you could also try lifting out softer waves with the edge of a flat brush.

Alternatively you could use no masking at all for big waves – try using controlled wet into wet instead for a softer effect

Foamy surf on beach

Carefully draw and mask off the swirling patterns of the foam on the beach with masking fluid before painting. To mask, use a brush coated in soap to protect your brush fibres.
For distant spot sparkles near rocks, you could try using a large hogs hair brush in a dry brush manner in an up and down stencil action, with masking fluid. Rotate the brush over the surface to prevent the same marks being made – the result should be a scatter of random tiny dots (this will take practice). After painting, you can also flick in white gouache for extra surf texture (flicked from the edge of a tooth brush).

Big wave with directional foam (such as kicking up against a large rock)

Mask the wave and foam with masking fluid, and use flicked splatter around the edges – directing it where you want the movement to be. After painting, texture the big wave with shades of blue/grey.

Or as above, try just using wet into wet flaring for a softer more abstract effect.

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