

Atmospheric Backgrounds in Watercolour: Creativity and Control

These should be done 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 or cover them with pieces of paper. Remember you can coat your brush in soap to protect it from the masking fluid, or use a masking brush. 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 and change your vision of the finished painting)

You work around the painted subject matter in sections (in the negative areas), avoiding drying marks where these sections meet by gentle blotting or 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 dry, then these areas can be moistened and the colour lifted off. This problem is not so troublesome with light background colours.

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.

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, try them out as an experiment to see how they combine to create other mixes. You may like the effects and want to exploit them, or you may want to 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.

Working practice

Work wet into wet, pre-moistening larger areas with clean water. It is very much personal choice where to start the background painting in your composition, but working from the central areas to the perimeter is essential. Apply the paint next to the subject and work outwards from there. 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 - though they are excellent when used within more abstract work.

CREATIVE EFFECTS TO TRY OUT:-

So what can you do to add more texture and depth to a simple wet into wet background?

Here are a few ideas, some quite safe, others less predictable, but exciting! You can layer these effects one on top of the other or overlap them. Experiment with them on a stretched piece of watercolour paper, starting with wet into wet washes - try tilting the paper to disperse the paint.

Old Faithfuls

Table salt sprinkled into paint that is just losing its sheen - more dramatic effects with mid-dark tone colours. The effect can look like moss, stars, fairy-like ethereal atmospheres. It takes a good ten minutes to fully develop. Best used in the first washes. (Also worth a try with sea salt to compare).

You could also try adding salt first to your paint mix (but not dissolving the salt), then applying - gives a different texture.

Water drops, or spray, into moist paint washes - this helps to disperse the paint and can convey misty movement to the ground.

Spattering into moist paint from a toothbrush (with a downward flicking action of your fingers against the coated bristles) or onto dry paint, for random flares or dry stipple respectively. You can build these textures up with different colours.

You can also spatter the ground with masking fluid, before applying any washes, to hold back tiny white flecks. They can be glazed over afterwards to soften.

Blown ink runs on a dry ground - using a straw, overlapping the runs and colours here and there (use plenty of paint, and keep the straw end very close to the paint as you are blowing. You could try the same with masking fluid - the stark white shaping can be glazed over later. Generally good for spiky grasses, twig-like and spidery effects, marbled patterns and excellent for abstract suggestive shaping. You can also try paint runs by simply tilting your paper.

Scraping into wet paint, perhaps across a band of different colours with a scrap of mountboard or ruler edge etc, or scratching into wet or dry paint with a needle or stylus. Scraping and scratching into wet paint intensifies the paint in the 'indented' areas, so you could try out a wood grain pattern.

Wax resist using a candle or oil pastel.

Inks used wet into wet with watercolour eg acrylic ink, iridescent inks. Windsor and Newton do a watercolour iridescent medium to add to washes or use on top of dry.

Granulation medium, dribbled or flicked into wet into wet washes - works best with strong colours, acrylic inks, Indian ink.

Watercolour texture medium (by Windsor and Newton) thickens up and granulates colour mixes

**NEW IDEAS for lifted off or 'left in' mark-making, patterned textures in a WET GROUND:

Wetted or dry Clingfilm laid down into wet paint. Pull it into creases for the desired effect and leave it to fully dry in situ, pressed or weighted down. You can do this in small areas as well as large expansive ones. For small areas, use dry small sections of Clingfilm: lay down a wet into wet range of tones in the area you're working on, apply the clingfilm and pull into creases. You can fold over the edges of clingfilm to stop the paint creeping into adjacent areas. Leave in position to dry.

Creases in the clingfilm produce varied thickness edges and shapes, flattened areas produce a fine stippled grainy texture. (This is a form of surrealist decalcomania)

Paper doily sections (use the non-waxed absorbent side) pressed into wet paint, weighted down, left for a while, then lifted off. Anything absorbent with a raised surface pattern would be worth trying eg kitchen roll.

Thread laid down into wet paint, then weighted down and left to dry.

Sponge lifting off - use a moistened, then tightly squeezed out sponge.

Creased up tissue pressed down into wet wash, then lifted off.

Bubble wrap pressed down onto a semi-wet wash, weighted and left to dry before removing

**NEW IDEAS for positive mark-making/ patterned textures onto a DRY GROUND:

Reusable plastic lace patterns, sections of paper doilies (or actual lace/scrap of net curtain) used as stencils using a stipple action with a hogs hair brush on your prepped dry ground. Change the angle of the pattern and the paint colour to layer the patterns one on top of the other or overlap them.

You can also paint the 'lace' on the reverse then press down for the opposite effect. Woven fabrics might be also be worth trying.

Leaves painted on reverse side, pressed down and rubbed over onto your ground then lifted away.

Sponges with a very open structure, dipped in paint and gently pressed down.

Bubble wrap painted and pressed down - leave to dry weighted down for best effect.

Thread coated in paint in a saucer then arranged on your dry ground, weighted down and left to dry. (Might be worth trying out the effect achieved by pulling on the thread a little)

Using a small spray bottle filled with paint - spray around a shape you've laid down eg a leaf, so you're using the leaf as a kind of stencil. You can build on this by altering the angle of the leaf and repeating. This can be done also done with a simple stippling action instead of the spray, carefully holding your shape down as you stipple.

*Once you get into the swing of using these textures, you may well spot household object patterns that could be very interesting

*If you like an effect, but the contrasts are too strong, then you can glaze over the area to soften. You can also paint into it by hand to develop the pattern further and suggest other structures.

Note: when you've chosen some of these effects to use in practice around your subject, you may have to protect the subject with cut out shapes of thin paper. You can also apply the effects to positive shapes within your painting eg pebbles, using a traced stencil cut-out of the form to contain the creative effect within the shape.)

Certain effects will hopefully suggest a texture that you can select to use in the background of a future subject or be used within an abstract painting.

Choosing to do 'Negative painting'/'cutting out' techniques.

After your first wet into wet ground is dry, to develop the painting further, you could lightly draw some additional structures in soft pencil to echo your main subject (eg. Stems, flowers, leaves). Sometimes abstract shapes in your first washes can suggest structures in themselves. Then you can paint around these forms (in the negative areas) to bring them into the positive, blending away the wet edges of your washes. The washes you use could be the same as

previously (this will significantly intensify existing colours) or you could grey and thin them a little 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 try to properly stretch your paper and 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 painting, cover it with pieces of kitchen roll, then place a board on top, weighted down with books. Leave for a couple of days to dry out thoroughly before putting it into storage.

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