Yosemite Watercolor Series: Techniques

This is the third lesson of a four-part watercolor series with Yosemite Conservancy's Lora Spielman. The other lessons in the series cover value, color mixing, and a step-by-step guide to painting Yosemite Falls.

Materials

- Watercolor paints (pans or tubes)
- Watercolor brushes
- Watercolor paper (to prevent buckling, use paper with a weight of at least 140 lb.)
- Water
- Spray bottle
- Paper towels or a rag

In this lesson, we'll go over a few key watercolor tips and techniques, including how to use water effectively, wet-on-dry and wet-on-wet painting, creating gradients, and lifting.

Working with Water

As you probably guessed, an essential part of successful watercolor painting is … water! If your water gets contaminated with too much paint, though, your colors will be muddled. Here are two tips for making sure your water is ready to go:

1. **Wipe your brush.** When you're ready to switch colors, use a paper towel to wipe as much paint as possible off your brush. Dip your brush in the water, and then use the paper towel again to wipe off excess paint. Repeat the process of wiping and wetting your brush until it leaves no paint on the paper towel.

2. **Use a spray bottle.** By using a spray bottle filled with clear water, you can easily moisten your paint without accidentally using contaminated water.
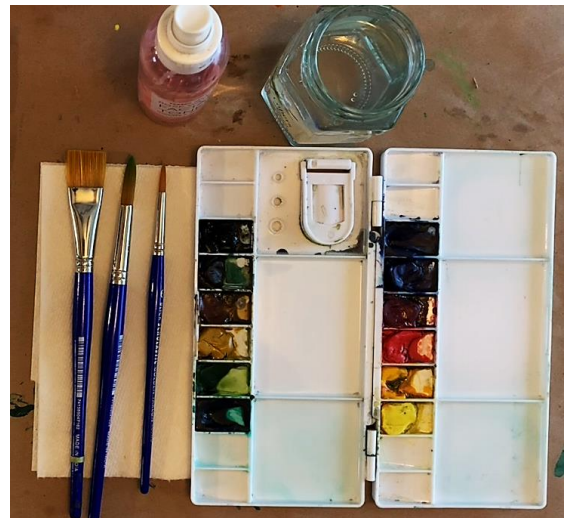
Before you paint, grab a container of clean water, a small spray bottle and paper towels or a reusable cloth rag.

Painting Techniques

These watercolor techniques will help you capture a variety of scenes and shapes on paper, from sharp lines to soft skies.

1. **Wet-on-dry painting.** Use a wet brush on dry paper to create precise, well-defined shapes.

   - Start with dry paper. Pick up some moistened paint with a large brush, and practice painting some lines and shapes.
   - The opacity of your paint will depend on how much water you mix in. More water will create a more transparent color. (See the "Values" and "Color Mixing" lessons in this series for more details on creating colors!)
   - Try using drier paint, by starting with less water. Notice how drier paint creates a sketch-like texture.
   - As the paint dries, see how the colors change. Do they fade? If you want them to be more vibrant, how can you adjust your painting to achieve that?

2. **Wet-on-wet painting.** Use a wet brush on wet paper to create softer shapes and scenes. This technique is often used to paint landscapes and skies.

   - Start by wetting your brush with clean water and "painting" the water across a section of your paper.
   - Use your brush to pick up some moistened paint from your palette and add color to the wet paper.
   - Notice that when you use the wet-on-wet technique, you don't have much control over how your paint reacts. Embrace the beauty of this — watercolor dries in mysterious ways!
   - Once the paint dries, see how the colors and textures have changed. It's normal for colors to appear less vibrant as they dry. You might also see interesting textures emerge.

Test out wet-on-dry and wet-on-wet techniques by painting some trees like the ones pictured at right. The tree on the left was painted wet-on-dry, the one on the right was painted wet-on-wet.

3. **Making gradients.** Use single color or multicolor gradients to create colorful scenes, such as a dynamic skyscape. For gradients, you'll use *wet-on-wet* technique, so start by painting a section of your paper with water.

Gradients using a single color (right) and analogous colors (left).

- **Single color gradient** (one color, dark to light):
    - o Use a flat brush to pick up a single color from your palette.
    - o Paint strokes on the wet section of your paper, working from top to bottom. The color will get lighter as you move down the paper.

- **Analogous colors gradient** (colors that are neighbors on a color wheel)
    - o Pick two colors: You could use red and red-orange, yellow and yellow-green, or any other combination of color wheel neighbors.
    - o Use a flat brush to pick up the darker color from your palette.
    - o Paint strokes on the wet section of your paper, working from top to bottom. Stop about halfway down the paper.
    - o Switch colors: Clean off your brush, and then pick up the lighter color from your palette.
    - o Continue painting strokes on the remainder of the wet paper. Where the two colors meet, try painting some of the lighter color on top of the darker color, to blend them together.

4. **Lifting paint.** Think of *lifting* as the watercolor version of erasing. Some colors will lift more easily and completely than others.
    - **Lift with a brush:** Wet your brush with clean water, and then brush it carefully over a painted section of your paper. Repeat several times to lift the color out of the paper.

Paint lifted with a paper towel (left) and with a brush (right).

    - **Lift with a paper towel:** Crumple a paper towel and dab it on a painted area to lift out color. This technique is useful for creating cloud-like shapes.

Thanks for making art with us! Follow us online (@yosemiteconservancy) for more fun ideas and learn more about Yosemite Conservancy at yosemite.org.