

# Watercolor on Gesso

*This may be one of the few ways to make watercolor a “forgiving” medium. Here’s how to go about it.*

BY DON GETZ

One of the most intriguing things about watercolor is that there’s no set way to use it. While most artists apply it to watercolor paper—an unforgiving surface demanding precision from every stroke—I prefer to paint on acrylic-gessoed surfaces, which provide a second, or even a third chance to capture your vision.

The most exciting watercolors have a fresh, spontaneous look. With an acrylic-gesso surface, areas of a painting lacking this directness can be changed without disturbing adjoining portions, without giving the finished piece an “overworked” look. At any time, color can be lifted out (except for “staining” pigments) to reveal the original white surface. It’s easier to apply clean, fresh washes without a loss in color intensity when dry. This means you can labor over a fresh effect without your efforts showing.

Most of my transparent watercolors on gesso are done on Strathmore’s Aquarius II paper, a manmade paper fabric that accepts acrylic gesso without curling or buckling (because of its tendency to buckle, regular watercolor paper is not recommended). I apply Liquitex acrylic gesso to the paper’s smooth side, or to fine woven linen canvas for works larger than 20x30 inches. The gesso can be applied directly from the container without thinning and with minimum stirring. In my experience, watercolor pigments react most favorably on its brilliant white matte surface. One coat of undiluted gesso will suffice on paper, but two or three coats are recommended on canvas since it absorbs most of the first coating. I prepare several sheets or canvases at the same time, leaving them to dry for several days before use. Any edge curl on the paper can be eliminated by stacking the dry sheets face-to-face and weighting them down with a wood panel or heavy books.

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Professional-grade Winsor & Newton transparent watercolors are the only pigments I use; from my experience I’ve found that they react favorably on gesso and can be lifted off very effectively. Winsor & Newton pigments also tend to “fisheye” when applied in a wash; that is, they create interesting textures not easily achieved with a brush on regular watercolor paper.

My palette has a “cool” and a “warm” side. The “cool” side includes French ultramarine blue, cerulean blue, cobalt blue, Davy’s gray, olive green, viridian, ivory black and Chinese white. The “warm” side has cadmium yellow, Naples yellow, yellow ochre, raw umber, burnt sienna, vermilion, cadmium red, brown madder and alizarin crimson. Alizarin is the only staining color on my palette.

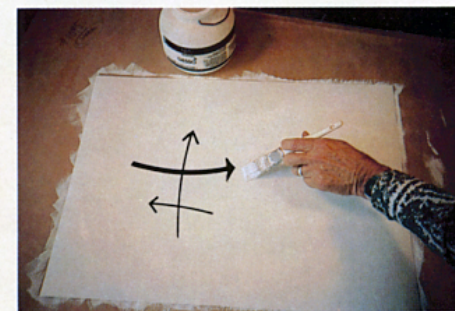
I prefer a Robert E. Wood palette, which has large, deep recesses for pigment and is relatively airtight, allowing pigments to retain proper wetness for long periods of time. Pigments should be kept flat and occasionally sprayed with clean water to maintain their moisture. When pigments are lumped up, they can’t be covered with a thin layer of water, and they quickly dry out.

Inexpensive white nylon brushes are my mainstay, since I often scrub pigment on, pushing the brush ferrule against the bristles. Fine sable brushes are out of the question for this technique, which even takes its toll on durable nylon brushes. I do most of my painting with the largest flats possi-



## Surface Color

Loading the brush with plenty of water and pigment created a variety of textures in Appalachia Ridge (18x24). Unlike regular watercolor paper, colors on gesso retain their intensity when dry. Therefore, I can get the proper value the first time, eliminating overworked and muddy color.



## Preparing Paper

Pour a puddle of gesso (three inches in diameter) in the middle of an 18x24-inch paper. With a one-inch nylon household brush, spread the gesso, working it out in all directions and leaving a texture of fine, overlapping brushstrokes. Let dry one hour.



## Step 1

I sketched the forms with a rigger brush loaded with a warm-gray mix of watercolor. Then, I painted in the large dark mass from the top right to the lower right with olive green, ultramarine blue and Davy's gray, varying the density and color temperature. The top is cooler, while the warm greens are more obvious near the ground.



## All Wash

The loose, washy effects of watercolor on gesso are seen clearly in this detail. Washes of cadmium red, vermillion and brown madder comprise the geranium. For foliage texture I let washes of yellow ochre, cadmium yellow (or new gamboge) and olive green dry; after spraying with water, I then blotted with a paper towel.

## Step 2

Negative painting (in the background and bucket areas) shapes the foliage and some of the geraniums. The positive shapes of vines are developed on the left side with yellow ochre, olive green and French ultramarine blue. I painted the tub with mixtures of Davy's gray, cerulean blue and burnt sienna, working in the cast shadows from the vines.



## Step 3

The crevices of the tree stump were painted with raw umber, Davy's gray and French ultramarine blue. Working vertically in the direction of the bark, I developed the warm (sunny) and cool (shadowed) sides of the trunk. I created texture by spraying water over dried paint and lifting out spots of pigment, then adding a warm or cool wash.



ble, up to two inches. I also use round brushes for detailing and stiff, flat acrylic brushes for lifting off color. A spray bottle that sprays rather than mists water is another mainstay; the tiny spots of water allow you to lift fine texture, but not all the pigment.

## LOOSENING UP

Before painting, I refer to a thumbnail sketch of the subject. This simple, undetailed drawing helps me to rate design, values and color—in that order. I strongly emphasize design, accentuating it with a strong play of values and a limited color range, all of which I determine from my thumbnail reference. Then, as the painting evolves, I'm free to alter these elements.

The textures, patterns and moods of nature fascinate

me, and I strive to depict them elegantly and clearly in my paintings. First, I draw the subject and related shapes on my gesso surface with a No. 4 or No. 6 "rigger" brush loaded with watercolor. My sketching color is one that'll blend into the finished painting; a winter scene, for instance, would probably be sketched with Davy's gray. Sketching in watercolor allows you to easily adjust the subject as it develops on paper. Changes are made by simply washing out the portion of the sketch you wished altered with a brush partially loaded with clean water. Dry the area with a paper towel and then redraw.

Another advantage to drawing with the "rigger" brush is you tend to loosen up and not be quite as tight as you would with a pencil. As the

## Step 4

I applied warm washes of yellow ochre, cadmium yellow, new gamboge and olive green to the grassy area on the right, the stump and the geranium leaves. A cool wash of cerulean blue and Davy's gray formed the mass of distant trees. The sky is a light wash of the same colors. Finally a wash of new gamboge extending from the lower right up into the shadows unified the two masses, completing Summer Breeze (48x36).



painting progresses, details can be added to any degree. Eliminating much irrelevant detailing makes for a stronger, more direct visual statement. Too often, artists shrug off the importance of drawing and design to their paintings, hoping technique and color will somehow bring it all together. Unfortunately, this makes for a lot of throw-aways and only a few "happy accidents."

Unlike the traditional watercolor technique of laying on the lightest washes first, I begin by establishing important dark areas, laying in heavy washes of pigment. One advantage of working dark-to-light is that when pigment is laid over existing washes, the initial layer's edges are softened. This gives variety to the edges, which is important in watercolor painting. Another advantage

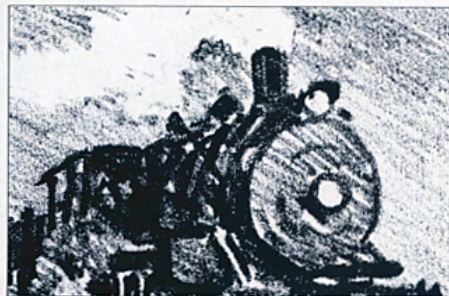
is that painting dark-to-light stresses design through strong contrasts, as in *Summer Breeze* (above), where dark, negative areas of the background painted in first defined the shapes of the plant leaves, the tree stump, and the metal tub. Laying washes over existing washes can only be done after the initial wash is completely dry. I apply additional washes in one or two strokes, since more than that will simply lift out the original washes. If this occurs, blot the area dry and start over.

An obvious benefit of painting on gesso is that color washes dry at the same intensity they're applied. No color soaks into the paper as with regular watercolor paper, which causes pigment to decrease in value by up to twenty percent as it dries. Color lays



## A Wash Out

Changes are easy to make on gesso. For 0-4-0 Switcher (18x24), I scrubbed in a gray sky and then lifted out a trail of smoke while the sky was wet. This resulted in softer edges than spraying a dry area with water. However, the trailing smoke gave the appearance of rapid movement (see sketch below), not true of old switchers. So, following a second sketch (bottom), I washed in a new sky and lifted the smoke pattern towards the front, which gave it a more believable pace.



## Underlying White

In *Study for Fresh Berries* (12x16) the challenge was getting the look of fresh moist berries. I started with a warm, painted background, followed by the drawing. I used pencil because I wanted to retain lines in the finished study. The white highlights on the berries and jug were all lifted out from dried paint, revealing the original gesso surface.



on the surface, much like a film of colored acetate. I try to lay down the proper value the first time so there's no need to go back later and strengthen washes. This also helps eliminate the chances of creating "mud."

While I generally work with a dry gessoed surface, I'll sometimes wet sections of the paper and allow pigment to flow into these areas. It's essential to experiment by properly loading the brush with plenty of water and pigment to get interesting textures. One stroke of a properly loaded brush will allow pigment to "fisheye" on the gesso, creating mottled patterns. Less watery strokes will leave a smooth flow of color. I find blending textures brings a fresh sparkle to my painting.

After the dark areas are established, I lay in lighter and lighter washes, usually saving the larger white areas for last. Once the values are complete, I'll go back and establish highlights by washing them out with a small brush or lightly scraping them out with the edge of a razor blade. Soft-edged highlights can be lifted out simply by applying a damp paper towel and rubbing the surface lightly.

Additional texture is created by spraying appropriate areas with water and lifting off a desired amount of pigment. To anticipate results, however, you must experiment. In *0-4-0 Switcher* (above, left), the texture of the pitted, rusty boiler and the effect of dust coming up from the wheels came from spraying these areas and then carefully removing a portion of the wash. I also lifted the trail of smoke out while the sky was still wet, which gave me a softer edge than spraying a dry area and lifting.

## About the Artist



After working as a commercial artist for twenty-six years, Don Getz began a second career as a professional painter in 1977. Since then, he has taught several watercolor workshops and founded the Ohio Watercolor Society, of which he is the current president.

Getz's work has received awards in numerous regional and national shows, including the American Watercolor Society, the Bluegrass Biennial (Kentucky) and the Midwest Watercolor Society. In addition, he has juried a number of regional and national watercolor exhibits, and his paintings have been exhibited in various museums and galleries (including the Canton Art Institute, the Pittsburgh Center for Arts, the National Arts Club and the Palm Beach Polo Club). He is a signature member of the American Watercolor Society.

An Ohio native, Getz studied at Ohio State University and with many fine artists. His work is part of the corporate collections of Goodyear Tire & Rubber, Quaker Oats and the Miller Brewing Company, among others.

Some of my most successful results have sprung from work I felt was almost beyond hope. By washing out entire sections, I was able to save satisfactory portions and develop the painting to my liking.

When a painting is complete, I lay it flat and spray generously with a matte acrylic medium (Krylon No. 1311) for protection. This permanent coating won't yellow with age and is all that's necessary if the painting is to be matted and put under glass. I protect large canvases the same way, followed by a coat of Liquitex medium once the Krylon completely dries. Using matte and

gloss medium, mixed half-and-half for a slight sheen, gives the canvas a durable finish so it can be framed without glass. Be cautious brushing on the medium, however; it will dissolve the spray coating, therefore excessive strokes may mar your painting.

Painting watercolors on gesso is certainly a fine technique for the effects I'm after. But using this method doesn't mean you need to change your style of painting. The technique lends itself to finely tuned realism as well as more abstract interpretations. It can be a means to whatever end you're after. ■



## Artists who work on Gessoed Paper

### Alexis Lavine

I am a passionate “plein air” painter, and I take tremendous pleasure from doing my painting outdoors, on location. I set my easel up on sidewalks, in parks or gardens, wherever I am inspired by the landscape or the architecture. While outdoor painting may not be physically as comfortable as painting in the controlled environment of the studio, I believe that the total sensory experience of being literally inside one’s subject, leads to far more expressive and exciting works of art.

Recently I have been experimenting with nontraditional surfaces for my watercolors, such as gessoed paper, clayboard, and canvas, varnishing them, and framing them without glass. The process and the results have been most exciting and satisfying to me. While the paintings on these surfaces may lose some of the typical transparency of traditional watercolors, they have a greater depth, solidity, and strength, which appeal to me.

**Alexis Lavine** has devoted the last two decades to watercolor and oil painting. Her award winning paintings have been included in numerous juried and gallery exhibitions, and they hang in private and corporate collections throughout the country, as well as overseas. Alexis does much of her painting in her studio, but prefers to paint outdoors on location, whenever possible.

Alexis is an enthusiastic art instructor, who teaches painting and drawing classes and workshops. She gives her students a sound background in technique and esthetics, encourages them to express their individuality through their art, and helps them to relax and enjoy their artistic pursuits.

### Education

B.A. in Studio Art, University of Maryland

M.A. in Medical Illustration - Johns Hopkins University

### Professional Affiliations

[National Association of Women Artists](#), signature member

[Baltimore Watercolor Society](#), life and signature member

[Associated Artists of Winston-Salem](#), exhibiting member

[Piedmont Outdoor Painting Society](#), signature member



**Sanit Khewhok** was born in Thailand in 1944. He studied painting, sculpture and printmaking at Silpakorn University in Bangkok and later traveled to Rome to study painting and restoration techniques at the Academy of Fine Arts. In Bangkok, he served as Assistant Director of the National Gallery. He has lived in Honolulu since 1986 and currently works as both Collections Manager at The Contemporary Museum and Curator at the Hawai'i Pacific University Art Gallery. He has exhibited at numerous galleries in Honolulu and at the Bhirasri Institute of Modern Art and the Alliance Française Gallery in Bangkok. At the age of 40, Khewhok lived as a monk for 100 days. This experience proved pivotal to his life and art, teaching him to look inward and become more aware of his emotional and physical being.

This current body of work consists of subtle watercolors on gessoed paper. The images, drawn from Khewhok's memory, depict ethereal abstract landscapes. Each work utilizes a horizon line. At times architectural images appear, buildings inspired predominantly by Tuscan landscapes, where villas and churches dot the country sides. Some works do not contain these structures; rather, a body of water or a mountain range may appear. In these delicate works, Khewhok is able to capture a sense of both mystery and beauty.