

# KEEPING OUT OF THE MUD

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## Nothing strikes fear in the heart of a watercolorist more than the mere mention of MUD —

that gray, opaque, neutral color that looks like a mixture of calamine lotion and something you scraped out of the bottom of your disposal. You may not be sure of where it comes from or even what it is, but you do know it should be avoided at all costs. Watercolor is supposed to be light, transparent and airy — not thick, dirty and gray. To avoid any possibility of mixing the dreaded stuff, you may even limit yourself to a few transparent, pure colors and apply them only in thin tints. The paintings you produce might seem weak and airy, lacking any expressive depth, but one thing they are not is muddy.

**You can safely add light, opaque pigments to a light mixture, middle-value opaques to a middle-value mixture and so on**

If your goal in painting is never to mix anything gray or opaque, you are certainly limiting the expressive range of your work. Great watercolorists of the past, such as Turner, Whistler and Homer, effectively used neutral, opaque passages in their paintings, often as a complement to lighter, transparent areas. The biggest difference between their mud and your was theirs had variety.

There's nothing wrong with using neutral, opaque passages in a painting; they add great subtlety and provide contrast to the more transparent areas. The trick is how to mix them, how to apply them and where to employ them.

### Mixing Neutrals That Aren't Muddy

The pigments you use in a mixture obviously affect its transparency. But you do not have to abandon all opaque pigments to avoid mud if you carefully select opaque pigments you add according to their value. You most often produce the unattractive quality we call mud when you add a light, opaque pigment to a dark mixture. For example, adding yellow ochre or cadmium lemon to a mixture of alizarin and thalo blue will produce a thick, dirty gray. You can safely add light, opaque pigments to a light mixture, middle-value opaques to a middle-value mixture and so on. Here I've listed some of the more common opaque pigments in the value areas that they work best.

### Mixing Techniques To Avoid Mud

Even if you're new to watercolor, you still probably have no trouble mixing neutrals — you just combine two or more pigments (you can include one or more opaque pigments) that are fairly distant from each other on the color wheel. The result is a grayed or muted color that can appear either interesting and varied or dull and muddy depending on how you mixed them. Most beginning painters overmix their colors, stirring pigments together on their palette until they have achieved a flat, dull gray. Or they stir them together on their paper using a repeated, heavy brush stroke that produces a solid, muddy color.

### The Trick

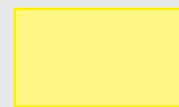
To create variety in surface quality and hue, you should mix an opaque neutral on the paper, not on your palette. Try this: support your board at a 45 degree angle and paint a shape (it can represent rocks, or a barn or a field) with clear water. Drop into this wet shape a diluted mixture of permanent rose and let it spread throughout the shape. Then, with the tip of your brush, introduce a diluted yellow ochre and let it intermingle with the red. Now do the same thing with cerulean blue, but DON'T STROKE IT. Just drop it in. You can tip and turn the paper a little to allow the pigments to mix. The result will be an interesting and varied opaque neutral. You can try the same procedure with gamboge hue, cadmium red or cadmium scarlet and French ultramarine to make a darker but still varied neutral.

**Get the value of the opaque neutral passage right while it is still wet. Don't overmix!**

### The Big Trick

The big trick is to get the value of the opaque neutral passage right while it is still wet. If you try to go back into an opaque neutral mixture when it's dry (or just slightly moist) you'll stir all those varied and subtle colors back into a flat, opaque, uniform gray, and you'll be up to your elbows in mud!

#### Matching Opaque Pigments to Value



cadmium lemon  
cadmium yellows  
yellow ochre

Very Light



yellow ochre  
cerulean blue  
cadmium orange

Light



light, Venetian or  
Indian red  
cadmium scarlet  
cadmium reds

Middle



French ultramarine  
cadmium red deep  
(maybe)

Middle Dark

