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### Getting Started in Watercolor: Basic Supplies for Beginners

I've had a lot of email asking about what minimal basic supplies one needs to get started in watercolor, and telling me how confusing it can be for a beginner in an art supply store when confronted with the hundreds of choices of paints, brushes, paper and other tools.

First a general comment on materials. Buy the best materials you can afford. You may think you are saving money buying the cheapest paper, but low-quality papers cut costs by eliminating/reducing/altering sizing, weight or manufacturing processes. The result is that paint can soak in to the point where you can't get anything but pastel color, and you won't be happy. Or, when the paper rips or balls up at the least little scrubbing of your brush, your painting will be ruined. You may think you are saving money to buy the least expensive paints, but they generally have less or inferior quality pigment and more fillers (things other than pigment) in them than the more expensive brands, so you end up using more of them to get a good, rich saturated color that behaves as it should on paper. You may think a camel's hair brush (the kind that comes in the childrens' paint box sets) is good enough, but it won't spring back into shape after a stroke, or hold a sharp point, or carry much color, and those are qualities you need to have in a watercolor brush. So, that having been said, here are my recommendations for the supplies you can get by with as a beginning painter.

#### BASIC BRUSHES

You will need at least one watercolor "round" brush. I suggest a size 10, and if you plan to do larger paintings, a size 16 or larger. I recommend a blend of natural sable or squirrel and synthetic hair. - there are many good brands of these blended brushes. If price is no object, get a good 100% sable-hair brush. Nothing matches their ability to spring back into shape, hold a point, and hold a quantity of pigment and water before running dry. However, be aware that a natural hair brush will wear out faster than a synthetic one. Yes, your brushes do wear out and will eventually have to be replaced!

You will also need a flat wash brush, 1/2" or larger. I have three different sizes from 1/2" to 1". They are a synthetic fiber brush, with a plastic handle that has an angled end for scraping, burnishing, scratching



and other watercolor techniques. However, if you prefer, you can get an all-sable brush or a blended hair brush in this flat shape.

You will also need an "oval wash" or "mop" brush for getting large amounts of water and/or paint onto your paper surface quickly. An alternative to the oval wash or mop is the very large flat brush that looks like a house painter's brush. Don't expect to do detail work or paint around little shapes with this brush. It's a big "floppy" brush good for pre-wetting or washing in a large area. If you primarily paint small (less than

half sheet), then you can probably skip this brush. Some people use an inexpensive "hake" brush for this, but I dislike them because they tend to shed hair.

Caring for and storing your brushes: Your brushes will last longer if cared for properly. Always wash them when you are finished painting for the day. I use a mild soap (ivory) and warm water and make a little soapy suds in the palm of my hand. I gently massage the bristles of my brushes into this soapy suds and rinse thoroughly. It's especially important to get the paint out of the heel of the brush (the part next to the metal ferrule). When the brush is clean use your fingers to gently (don't tug or pull) reshape it to a point if necessary, then lay it on a flat surface to dry. Usually just giving it a hard shake will reshape it. When it's completely dry, you can store it

resting point up, handle down in a jar or other container. Don't ever store a wet brush resting point down on the bristles. I keep my brushes stored in a canvas brush holder, laying flat, with each brush in its own little slot. The cover has a flap that wraps over the brushes and seals with a velcro fastener. Winsor & Newton made mine (see photo at right)...there are probably others out there by other manufacturers, or if you can sew or know someone who does, you can make your own brush holder from some left over quilted or padded fabric.



### Optional brushes

In addition to the basic round, wash and flat brushes that you need to get started, the following brushes are nice to have for specific tasks, and after you've been painting for awhile, you may want to add them to your collection.



The rigger or liner brush is good for fine lines and small details.



This brush is about 3" wide and looks like a house painting brush (but has much softer bristles). You can get them different widths. If you work large (full sheet or bigger) this is a great brush to have for its ability to put large amounts of paint on the paper in a very short time. This is a good substitute brush for the oval wash or "mop" brush. Some artists use this type of brush for all or nearly all their painting - using the flat side, edge or corner to vary the paint shapes they create.

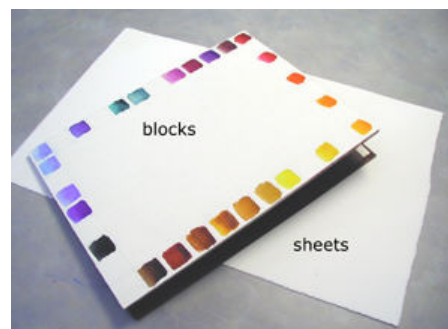
## PAPER

Watercolor paper comes in blocks of various sizes, or in sheets. A "full sheet" is approximately 22" x 30", and may have deckle or straight edges depending on the manufacturer, and what type of paper-making machinery was used to make it. Cylinder mould made papers will always have two deckle edges. Hand-made papers will have deckle edges on all four sides. You can cut or tear these full sheets into smaller size sheets for smaller paintings. You can also buy larger sheets (up to 40" x 60") and even larger watercolor paper in rolls.

The paper will have a specific surface, ranging from very slick and smooth (hot press), to very textured (rough). A surface in between, and one I recommend for beginners, is slightly textured (cold press).

Paper also comes in different weights,

from 90 lb. to 300 lb. generally. A lot of "student grade" paper is 90 lb. This paper is too lightweight to do any scrubbing or surface manipulation without risking damage to the paper surface. I recommend 140 lb. paper, either sheets or blocks.



If you want your paper to stay flat even after applying a really wet wash, you will either need to stretch it, or use watercolor blocks (the sheets are glued at the edges which helps the paper return to a flat state as it dries). If you don't want to use blocks, and you don't want to stretch your paper,

you paint very "wet" and you still want the painting to stay very flat as you work, then you probably need 300 lb. paper.

Strathmore Paper makes a paper called *Aquarius II* that is part synthetic and part cotton fibers, and although only 80 lb, it will stay flat without stretching and take a fair amount of scrubbing as well.

Sizing is gelatin, animal glue and/or starch-based products that are added to the paper at the pulp stage (internal sizing) and sometimes again after the sheet is formed (external sizing). The sizing controls how the paper accepts paint (how far into the surface the paint sinks), and how much you can "abuse" the paper (erase, scrub out paint, rewet and repaint, etc.) before it will no longer accept paint well. The best modern papers are both internally and externally sized.

### Archival Paper Matters!

**You've spent (or will spend) years learning and refining your craft and your ideas. You want your paintings to last. Make sure the paper you buy is acid-free (between 6.5 and 8pH) and buffered with calcium carbonate, which is capable of neutralizing acid...the greatest enemy of paper. When you frame and store your paintings, make sure that the other materials that come in contact with the watercolor paper are also archival.**



Use a household stapler in the tack position (open it up), and staple your wet watercolor paper to your board. Leave the board in a horizontal position to dry, unless you are working wet-into-wet, in which case, dive right into your painting

#### Stretching Paper:

When I use 140 lb. paper, I stretch it, by soaking it first for 5-10 minutes in cool water in the bathtub (make sure your tub is CLEAN - no bath oil/bubble bath residue!), or if it's small enough holding it under running water in the kitchen sink, flipping it so both sides get evenly wet - 2-3 minutes is usually enough. Then I lay it wet on a wood drawing board (you can also use gatorboard or sealed/varnished plywood), and then stapling the wet paper all around the edges at 1" intervals to the board. As it dries, it shrinks and pulls very tight and flat, and remains that way, even when re-wet during the painting process. When the painting is finished and thoroughly dry, I remove the staples with a flat staple remover. When I frame the piece, I can either use the mat to cover the staple holes, or, if I want to "float" the painting, I will hand-tear the edges of the paper back beyond the staple holes to create a new "deckle" type edge.

## TUBE PAINT COLORS - BASIC SIX

Paints for watercolor come in dry form (pans or half pans) and moist form (tubes). I recommend tube color unless you are traveling. You will need just six colors to start with; a warm and a cool version of each "primary" color – red, yellow and blue – so that you can mix the other colors you need and get clean, clear mixtures. I use Daniel Smith and/or Winsor & Newton Artist colors (mostly Daniel Smith), but I am also including the student grade of paints from Grumbacher for those on a very tight budget.

I am including the Color Index Name, so that if you are substituting brands, you can be sure you are getting the same pigment. Color index names are more precise than common names. For example, the Color Index Name of French Ultramarine Blue is Pigment Blue 29, abbreviated to PB29. Color Index Name information should be on the label of any reputable paint, regardless of brand. I prefer single pigment colors; they're easier to mix. The first color listed is my preferred one, but the others are quite acceptable.

#### **Purple-biased Blue: Look for PB29 on the label**

Ultramarine Blue or French Ultramarine, Daniel Smith OR  
French Ultramarine 263, Winsor & Newton Artists' OR  
Ultramarine Blue 219, Grumbacher Academy

#### **Green-biased Blue: Look for PB15 or PB15:3 on the label**

Phthalo Blue (GS), Daniel Smith OR  
Winsor Blue (green shade), Winsor & Newton Artists' OR  
Thalo Blue, Grumbacher Academy

#### **Green-biased Yellow: Look for PY3 on the label**

Hansa Yellow Light, Daniel Smith OR  
Winsor Lemon, Winsor & Newton Artists' OR  
Lemon Yellow, Grumbacher Academy



**Orange-biased Yellow: Look for PY97, PY150 or PY154 on the label**

Hansa Yellow Medium, Daniel Smith OR  
Transparent Yellow, Winsor & Newton Artists' OR  
\*Golden Yellow, Grumbacher Academy

**Purple-biased Red: Look for PR206, PR 176 or PV19 on the label**

Carmine, Daniel Smith, OR  
Quinacridone Red, Daniel Smith OR  
Permanent Alizarin Crimson, Winsor & Newton Artists' OR  
Thalo Crimson, Grumbacher Academy

**Orange-biased Red: Look for PR188, PR253 or PR108 on the label**

Organic Vermilion, Daniel Smith OR  
Scarlet Lake, Winsor & Newton Artists' OR  
\*Vermilion Hue, Grumbacher Academy

**Optional Additional Colors:**

**Cobalt Blue**, Winsor & Newton or Daniel Smith OR Cobalt Blue Hue 049, Grumbacher Academy) OR Cobalt Blue 178, Winsor & Newton Cotman (a mid-value blue). Nearly neutral. Look for PB28 on the label

**Cerulean Blue**, Winsor & Newton or Daniel Smith, or Cerulean Blue 137, Winsor & Newton Cotman (a more opaque, lighter, warmer, greenish blue, but with nice textural qualities) Look for PB35 or PB36 on the label

**Thalo green** 205, Grumbacher Academy (a cool green) or Winsor green (blue shade) 719, Winsor & Newton Artists' or Daniel Smith's Phthalo Green (BS). Look for PG7 on the label.

**Permanent Magenta** 073, Winsor & Newton Artists', or Daniel Smith's Quinacridone Violet. Look for PV19 on the label. This color plus Winsor Green or Thalo Green will give you very dark neutral mixtures...nearly black if saturated.

**Burnt Sienna** 023, Grumbacher Academy (reddish, transparent brown) This color, mixed with blues, makes beautiful neutral grays/ browns. Same color is also available in artist grade paints from Winsor & Newton and Daniel Smith. Look for PBr7 on the label. I also like Daniel Smith's **Transparent Red Oxide as a substitute for Burnt Sienna**. It is quite transparent.

**Raw Sienna**, Winsor & Newton or Daniel Smith. Look for PBr7 on the label. I also like Daniel Smith's **Transparent Yellow Oxide (PY 42) instead of Raw Sienna**.

If you must have black and white paints:

**Ivory Black**, Winsor & Newton(both grades), or Holbein, Maimeri or Daniel Smith. Look for PBk9 on the label. Other blacks to try include lamp black and lunar black (Daniel Smith).

**Chinese White** 043, Grumbacher [both grades] VERY OPAQUE. A watercolor "purist" does not use white paint...they use the white of their paper for their whites. Look for PW6 on the label. This is actually Titanium white pigment.

\*Colors marked with an asterisk are not completely lightfast

For the CLEANEST color mixtures, mix any two colors that have the same bias (like an orange-biased red and an orange-biased yellow, for example, for the CLEANEST orange mixture). If you want to make duller or less intense hues, mix colors with different biases (like a green-biased yellow and a purple-biased red, for example. The resulting orange mixture will be a duller orange). See my tip on color mixing.

There are many brands of watercolor available. Winsor Newton and Grumbacher are widely available, but if you want to research equivalent colors by other manufacturers, go online to [handprint.com](http://handprint.com) where you will find a wealth of information (and the best information that is not influenced by advertising) about the pigments used in many manufacturer's paints. There are also a couple of book in print that deal with this subject—Michael Wilcox's book, *The Best Watercolor Paints* (revised edition), or Hilary Page's *Guide to Watercolor Paints*, published by Watson-Guption.

I primarily use watercolor paints from Daniel Smith, with some colors from Winsor & Newton. In the list above, the first color listed is my first choice; the other colors listed are alternate choices. You only need six colors to start with. Once you are comfortable with what those six will accomplish, you can add from the optional list, which includes some additional blues, some earth colors, and black and white if you feel you must have them.

## PALETTE

You will need some kind of palette to keep your paint in and to use for mixing colors. If you are an artist that likes to have only freshly squeezed paint, your palette could be as simple as a white china or plastic picnic plate. If you like putting the whole tube in a palette well, and covering it between painting sessions, I recommend the white plastic palettes with lids. I use a Robert E. Woods palette, but there are many different brands available. The lids keep the paint clean and also from drying out between painting sessions, especially if you put a wet piece of thin sponge

in the mixing well before you put the lid on. I squeeze out enough paint to nearly fill each well I am using because I paint often. If you are not going to paint daily, you may only want to squeeze out a quarter of a tube. Don't be skimpy. Nothing is more frustrating than running out of paint half way through a wash!

Note that your paints will still be usable even if they are dry in your palette - just spritz a little distilled water over the surface about five minutes before you want to use the paints - the water will soften up the



surface enough for you to pick up color with your brush. Letting your paints dry in the palette causes more wear on your brushes, as you have to scrub the surface of the paint to pick up color. But the paint is still perfectly usable.



A sponge or a roll of paper towels is good for removing excess paint and/or water from the edges of your paper or work surface. I also use a roll of toilet tissue turned on its side as a "blotter" for my paint brush. As the tissue gets dirty, I unwind the roll to expose cleaner areas. You could use your sponge for this purpose, though, and just rinse it out periodically.

### Optional accessories:

Another handy tool is an x-acto knife in a case, particularly good to have if you are working with block paper, as the knife is great for separating the sheets of paper from the block as you use them. The knife is also good for scratching or scraping out little highlight areas at the very end of a

painting or (in my case especially) for cutting masking materials or stencils.

I also use a spray bottle filled with distilled water (for re-wetting and for forcing paint to spread in a "spatter" pattern), an old toothbrush for spattering paint, a flat staple remover, and of course, a sketchbook, drawing pencil, and a large soft eraser. The latter is also used to clean up stray pencil marks (if desired) after your painting is finished and dry.



## MISCELLANEOUS

The only other thing you have to have is some kind of water container. I use two large recycled plastic containers, one for clean water, and one to use for rinsing.