Painting a Desert Cactus Flower
by Ellen A. Fountain, N.W.S.

Colors used: Transparent Yellow, Permanent Rose, Thalo Green Blue Shade

I started this painting with a photo of a prickly pear cactus in bloom, taken in my yard . I find image editing software programs very helpful in the early stages of planning a painting, because I can crop the photo to make a pleasing composition, and then convert the photo to grayscale so that I can see the values, and manipulate them if I wish.

At left is the photo I started with. I found the rocks in the upper right corner unnecessary and distracting, so I knew I would crop the photo "tighter" to minimize that area. I wanted to focus on the largest open flower.

Below is the cropped, grayscale image I ended up with. This image tells me the values of the colors from black to white,

and shows me where I need to tweak those values in my painting.

Notice that the value of the lowest yellow flower and the cactus that surrounds it are very close to the same value. I'll need to depend on a color change to differentiate the flower (yellow) from the cactus (green).

If you have trouble seeing basic shapes and/or values when looking at your subject, try blurring the photo in your image editing program. That eliminates small details and helps you focus on the larger, simpler shapes and values. (photo at left).

Once I was happy with the basic composition , I did a line drawing on a piece of tracing paper. I then used a sheet of graphite transfer paper under my line drawing and drew over my lines to transfer the drawing to my watercolor paper. This method minimizes erasing on your watercolor paper, which can affect the way the paper accepts the paint. I try not to do much erasing on my watercolor paper until I am completely finished painting, the painting is completely dry, and all I want to do is clean up any stray pencil marks that have not been covered by paint.

Below is my line drawing. Notice my written reminders about areas that are to be very dark.
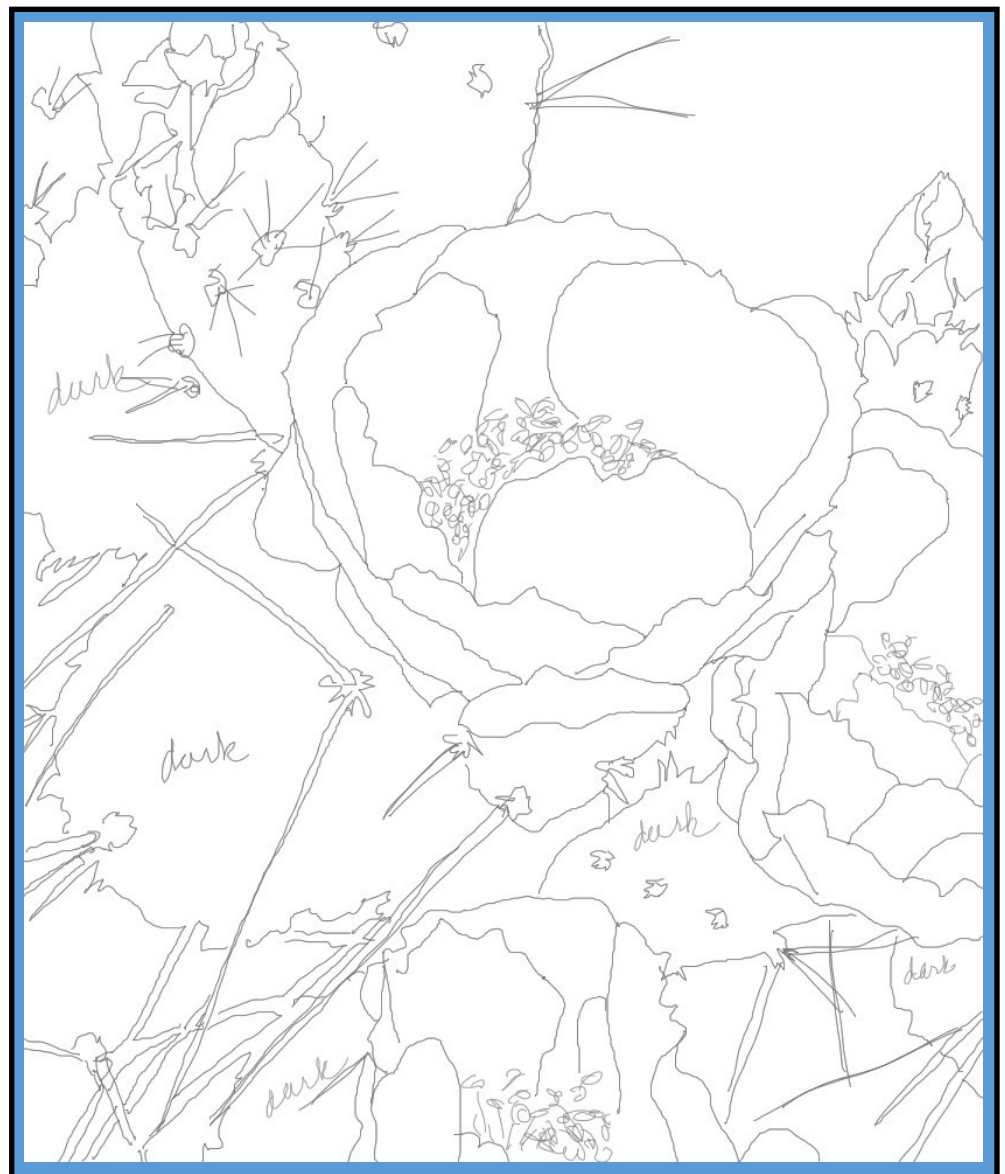
I've begun putting paint to paper, starting with my focal point, the largest flower. The small white stamens in the center of the flower were first protected with liquid masking fluid. I prefer the gray-colored Pebeo brand of liquid mask. It does not stain the paper, and has just enough color so that I know where it is. Masking fluid must be completely dry before you start painting over it, but don't ever use a hair dryer or any heat source to speed drying. It will not come off your paper if exposed to high heat. Once I was satisfied with the saturation of the color around the stamens and the paint was dry, I used my finger (or you can use a rubber cement pick up) to remove the dried masking fluid. Liquid masking should not stay on your watercolor paper any longer than necessary. The longer it remains, the more difficult it is to remove.

I continue to add washes of color, working from general to specific, and from light to dark, layering washes over each other when the first layer is dry. Layering (also called glazing) helps me build richer color and value, and can also create a different hue (color) because of the transparency of watercolor. If I layer a thin permanent rose wash over a dry yellow wash, the new color will be peach to orange, depending on the saturation of each of the washes.
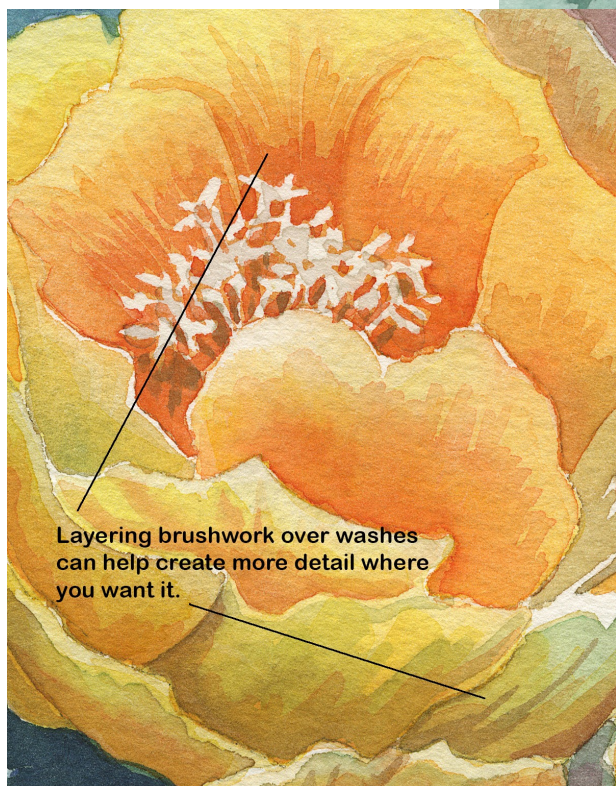
Layering brushwork over washes can help create more detail where you want it.

This is a close up of the brushwork I did in certain places over the flatter dried washes. This helps separate one flower petal from another, and give them a more dimensional form.

I also put a pale warm gray wash over some of the stark white stamens in the flower center so that they didn't look too flat and "cut out".
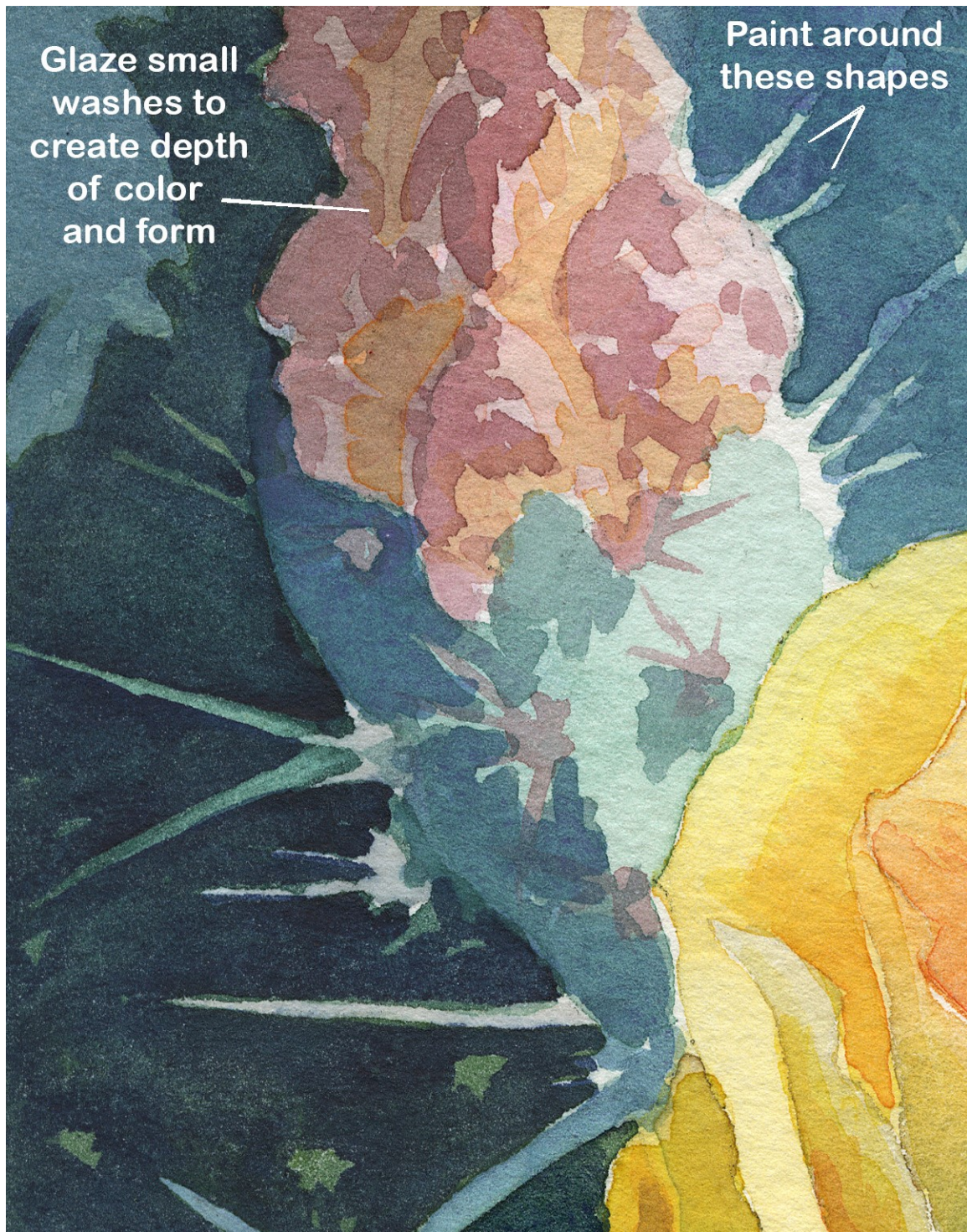
In this detail, you can see where I layered small organic shaped washes on the cactus flower bud to give it more color depth and make it appear more three-dimensional.

The cactus spines have, for the most part, been painted around, but some are scraped out of the second or third dark wash of shadow color. Having some of the spines light, some medium and some dark creates the illusion that they wrap around the form of the flower bud or are in shadow rather than full sun.

Above is the finished painting.

Mellow Yellow, watercolor on 300 lb cold press watercolor paper. Image size 9½ x 8 inches.

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