



Tips & Demos

**Watercolor and Watermedia
painting tips & demonstrations
by Ellen A. Fountain, N.W.S.**

These tips and demos pages are copyrighted. However, please feel free to print/download the PDF for your personal use. They are not to be duplicated in any form or reproduced in quantity without my permission. If you have questions or need more information, please e-mail me: elf@fountainstudio.com

Hard and Soft Edges in Watercolor

Watercolor artists have a great many choices about how to use this versatile medium. One of the decisions that they can make is how to treat their subject matter. Sometimes a subject simply demands a wet-into-wet approach with soft, feathery edges that suggest rather than precisely define objects. Other times, hard precise edges are chosen. Frequently, the most interesting watercolor paintings use both kinds of edges to give depth and focus to their subject matter. Let's look at some examples.



My Mom had a planter box that sat on the floor in front of floor to ceiling windows in her living room. She had an unusual mix of plants in it, including amaryllis and euphorbia.

Here are two little studies I did of the same subject, one using mostly soft edges with just a little linear line work added after the wet in wet was dry (left), and the other with a wet in wet background where I painted around carefully drawn plant and flower shapes (right). The dark areas were glazed (painted over) the dry background.



Fog is a rare sight in the desert, but we do get it now and then, and when we do, it turns our already surreal cactus plants into something other-worldly, as they almost seem to float disembodied in the mist. This is a perfect subject for soft, and "lost" edges.



This little painting at the left, was worked wet-into-wet, but I carefully avoided wetting the white areas. Those white areas are where light was striking wet stone surfaces and seemed quite bright, even as all else was subdued. I charged in some raw umber violet, some greyed purples, and cobalt violet, as the wet area began to lose its shine. The cholla were drawn in with a rigger brush, and spread enough to suggest these prickly cactus. A little salt texture was added, and the whole allowed to dry.

Cholla in the Fog, watercolor, image size 5½x7½ inches
© Ellen Fountain, private collection



Desert Symmetry, (left) is typical of most of the pieces in my Southwest Series, in that the plant and bird forms are stylized shapes, filled in with solid or textured passages of paint, and there are virtually no soft or lost edges anywhere. These works are intended to be very flat and two dimensional, with a shallow “space”.

This hard-edged approach works very well with my intent for this subject matter, which was to let my imagination have full reign instead of treating it representationally.

Now consider a more representational painting, called *Under the Hedge*. What I liked about this subject (besides the cat!) was the stark contrast between the deeply shaded areas and the places where spots of sunlight penetrated the leafy canopy above him and lit up his fur.

The light was so bright that you couldn't tell where the white of the fur stopped and the sunlit areas of the wall and background began. The same thing happened in the deeply shadowed areas and the dark areas of the cat's fur. A perfect opportunity to use both soft and hard edges, and to let some edges be “lost” (undefined). In the detail of the cat's leg (below left), you can see what I mean by lost edges. You see them where the stripes of his leg blend into the dark



value of the ground, and also along the back edge of the leg where it is white. There, the edge is lost where it blends into the sun-lit background.

In the case of the back edge of the leg, it's simply a matter of not painting the paper...either on the cat or the background. In the case of the foreground and the stripes on the cat's leg, this area was done wet into wet, and the colors allowed to blend together so that the hard edge is lost.

There are also lost edges along the bottom of the cat and the dark shadow, some soft wet-in-wet edges along the transition area from his chest to his sun-lit back, and some hard, well-defined edges where the right profile of his body, which is in shadow, starkly contrasts with the sunlit concrete block wall. This area of darks was done on dry paper—the darks pulled into the damp mid-gray area of the cat's fur to the left, where they soften ever so slightly as they get into the damper area.

To practice these concepts, pick any subject you want, and try painting it using all (or primarily) wet-into-wet passages, with soft, undefined and/or lost edges, and then try painting the same subject again, but using hard edges, much like I did with the amaryllis paintings at the top of this tip.

