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Glazing (Layering Color) in Watercolor

What does it mean to glaze in watercolor? How does the watercolor glazing process differ from oil painting or from other opaque mediums? If you've asked yourself this question, then maybe these tips will help.

First, remember that even the most opaque watercolor pigments are not as opaque as gouache, nor as opaque as any pigment mixed with white. So, if you are painting in the traditional watercolor manner (i.e. not using Chinese white, titanium white or any opaque white pigment), then you must always work from your lightest value to your darkest. The nature of watercolor is that it is transparent, so even the pigments that are "opaque" don't ever completely cover up previously painted layers (unless you are putting them on straight out of the tube, which is NOT recommended!).

Second, since watercolor pigments are resoluble, even when dry, care must be taken when glazing not to use a "heavy" hand...in other words, the paint should just flow off the brush, and you should use very little pressure, so as not to disturb the underlying layers of paint. A very soft brush is also a requirement.

Third, use the most transparent pigments for glazing. Opaque pigments do not glaze well, and may look chalky when dry. Also, I try to use staining pigments for the first layer or two, and non-staining ones for the final layers, because (1) the staining pigments tend to stay in place better, and (2) staining pigments will stain all the underlying layers of paint, which may or may not be what you want to have happen. If you don't know which of your tube colors are transparent and/or staining, refer to Michael Wilcox's book, *The Wilcox Guide to the Best Watercolor Paints*, or Hillary Page's *Guide to Watercolor Paints*. You can also conduct your own transparency, staining and sediment tests (see my tips page on this topic).



This sample painting (left) began wet-into-wet. Onto wet paper, I dropped aureolin and lemon yellow, and in places, charged in a little quinacridone red. I tipped the paper a little and blotted some areas to get all soft edges. When this dried, I began to pull out the shapes of the branch and birds by glazing more yellow and red over the first wash. I also began to introduce a little ultramarine blue just under the smaller bird and to pull out the shape of the small branch at the lower center. I also mixed a little blue with the yellow to glaze the area in the lower left corner. I let this dry completely.



Now I added more blue, fairly pure in the sky area, where I added clean water to soften it's edge, and grayed a bit with the yellow and red, to give the branch a little more definition, as well as to define the smaller bird a bit more. The blue was also glazed thinly in the lower right corner (foliage) and in a more saturated mix with yellow for the leaves in the lower left. I used more red to punch up the color around the birds heads, and to add a few more suggestions of foliage.

To finish up, I mixed a green using the ultramarine and aureolin, and glazed it on more or less horizontally in the center of the painting to add more foliage and pop out the birds a little more. I also rewet with clean water and lifted out some color from the smaller bird's chest and tail and down into the lower right corner to lighten it, then glazed a little more pure blue in these areas to help pull the purer blue of the sky into the painting. Since this piece began wet-in-wet, with soft amorphous edges, I want to keep that soft quality, and just "suggest" rather than painting in every little detail. Knowing when to quit is important. Take the time to step back from your work often, and ask yourself if adding more will contribute anything necessary to the painting. If the answer is no, quit!



Using Masking Fluid and Glazing to Create Patterned Fabric

Masking fluid (frisket) put on diamond shapes. When dry, grey shadows added to define form of fabric.

First, lightest wash applied (pale lemon yellow). Note how frisket protects the white shapes.

Frisket applied in a zig-zag line to protect yellow underpainting. Thin wash of cadmium yellow deep applied.

More frisket put on where orange is to be kept. When dry, a wash of Winsor red (not too saturated) is applied.

Frisket applied to protect red areas. When dry, a thin wash of ultramarine blue is applied.

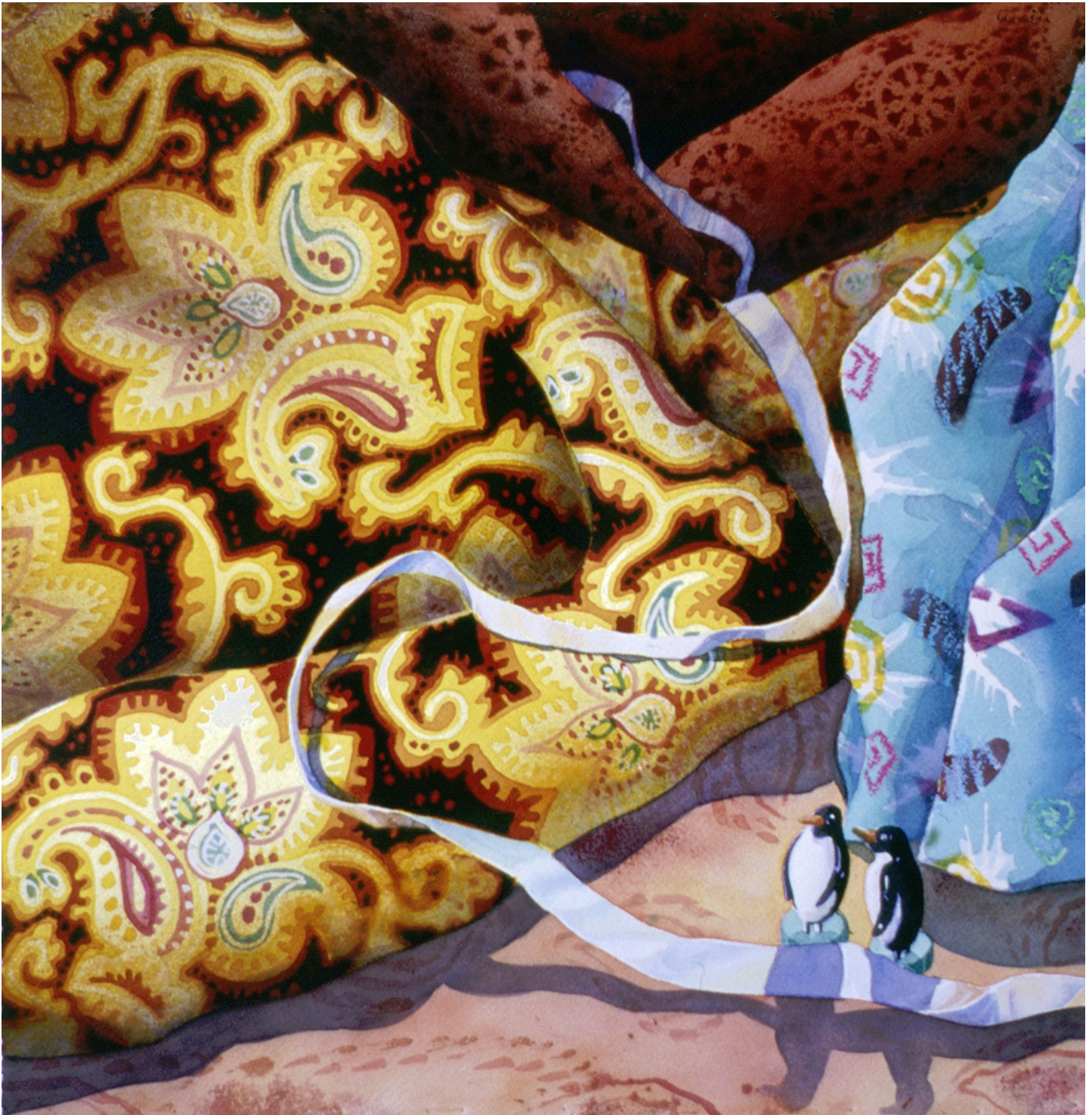
Frisket put on to protect blue-gray areas (circles). A wash of phthalocyanine green (staining) was applied. When dry all frisket removed.

How do I frequently use glazing in my own work?

I use it to create patterns on the fabrics that are part of my still life and fabricscape paintings.

The sequential illustration at the left shows how I built up a complex pattern using masking fluid and five separate glazes of color. In the last panel, all the masking fluid is removed, revealing each layer of protected color in the design. Like many watercolor processes, this requires a careful drawing so that you know where your masking fluid is to be placed to protect each glazed layer of paint.

This is a slow process, but the end result can be quite wonderful. I used it to good effect in my painting, titled *Penguins and Paisley*, shown on the next page.



Penguins and Paisley ©Ellen Fountain
watercolor on paper, image 14½ x 14½ inches

The multi-colored yellow crewel/paisley patterned fabric in this painting is an example of the the masking fluid resist and glazing method shown above. This particular fabric started with light yellow, and then six more glazes of color were added (medium yellow, orange, light red, dark red, green and black), masking some of each glaze and letting it dry, before all the masking fluid was removed after the painting was completed and dry.