

Painting Water in Watercolor

TOPIC: Painting Moving Water

Techniques: Brushwork, Scraping, Scratching

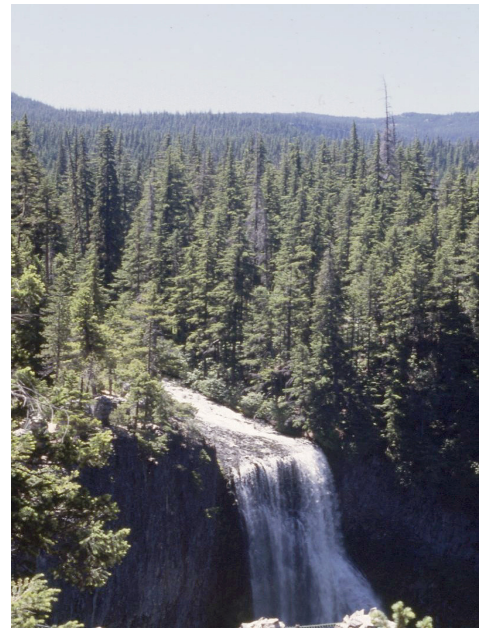
Rapidly moving water presents challenges for watercolor painters, but none that can't be met. While still water utilizes mostly wet-into-wet washes, perhaps on damp paper, overlayed when dry with judicious passages of harder edged shapes, rushing water can be more successfully painted using a variety of brushmarks, along with scraping and scratching on dry paper. In addition, it requires careful observation to determine major movements of the water, and what impediments (rocks, fallen logs, etc.) cause the water to change direction. It also relies heavily on retaining white paper in the water area.

You need to be aware of the planes of the ground over which moving water flows. Where the ground is more level, the water will pick up more sky color, and be generally lighter than where it falls over a precipice. Sometimes you can see through falling water to the dark rock areas behind it. These (because they're wet and deeper in space) will be darker than the rest of the rock that surrounds the falling water.

Generally speaking, the faster the water is moving, the "whiter" it appears. You don't have to be concerned with reflections in fast moving water - if there are any, it may be simply a darkening of tone in the water.

Breaking waves on the ocean provide a different challenge than streams and waterfalls. The foam on the breaking wave needs to make use of white paper, certainly, but you will also need active brushwork to represent the forward edge of the wave where it dissolves into a more ragged, bubbly edge. You'll also need some washes to grade the color from darkest (under the curled edge of foam to lighter as the wave is lit with more light from the sky).

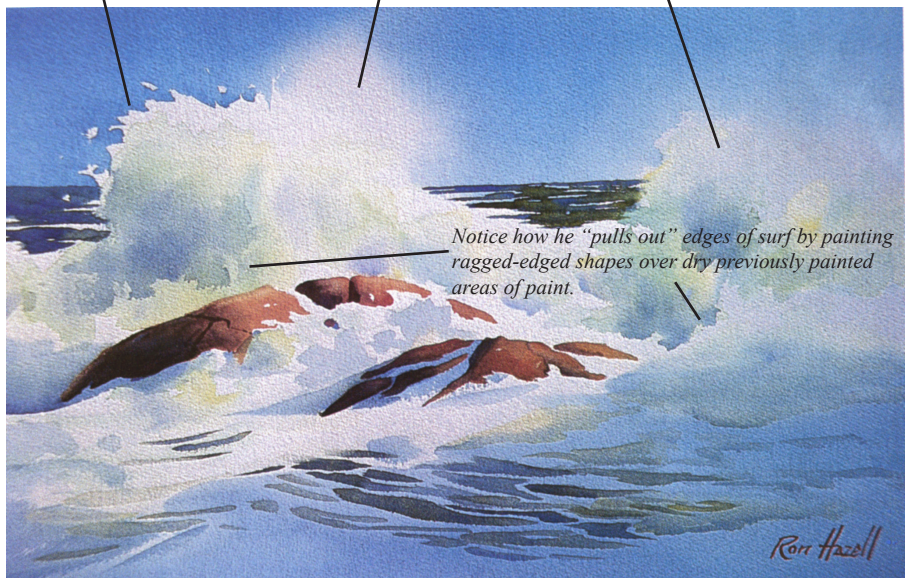
High surf hitting rocks can cause spray to fly high into the air. This can be suggested using a variety of techniques: (1) the background color (sky or sea depending on your point of view) can be painted in on dry paper leaving a generally white unpainted area for the surf spray. Very quickly, before the hard edge of the blue/green color dries, use a spray bottle filled with clean water to spray the dry paper next to the blue/green paint. The still damp blue/green paint should "creep" into the sprayed area forming a "rough" spray edge. (2) you can paint the area wet into wet, and lift color out from the damp paint with a crumpled paper towel. When dry, if you want harder edged spray, you can scrape out paint with a razor blade. This works best on rough paper. (3) you can spatter paint on dry paper with a toothbrush to establish the "rough" edge of your surf spray, and then continue painting a more solid passage of sky or sea.



*Waterfall near Mt. Saint Helens
Photo by Ellen Fountain*

Blue paint applied to dry paper

Here the paper was damp/wet, so when the blue hits the damp area, the edge is soft. Saving/using the white paper is critical!



Notice how he "pulls out" edges of surf by painting ragged-edged shapes over dry previously painted areas of paint.

In this painting, "High Surf" by Ron Hazell, he has used a combination of wet-into-wet passages, and brushwork on dry paper (both on white paper and over dry previously-applied washes). Wherever you see hard-edged shapes, you know he applied the paint to dry paper. The dark far away ocean at the horizon line, and the dark rock shapes and foreground wave shapes were applied last.

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This page from English artist Ann Whalley's book, *Painting Water in Watercolor*, illustrates the importance of keeping white paper, and also how valuable a pencil sketch can be in helping you establish the light, medium and darkest passages in your composition.

These sketches can also help you identify and organize the water movement and direction, which is critical to making your finished painting believable.

When she talks about identifying the non-moving objects and placing them strongly, she is referring to the rocks in the stream and how much of the surrounding area you want to include.

If I have a criticism of this painting, it is that the lower left corner seems weak and unresolved. This area almost reads (to me) like cloud shapes, and is inconsistent in handling with the rest of the foreground area.

(Right) **Waterfall, Yorkshire Dales.**



(Below) **Cenarth falls.** The excitement of a waterfall is often outweighed by the fear that it is all too complicated to paint. Contrary to what may at first appear, however, not everything is moving. Look for the static objects, place them well and strongly, and then let the water flow around them. It is the contrast that is so interesting here.



Left: *Shooting the Rapids*, 1902, by Winslow Homer
watercolor over graphite on paper

This painting again illustrates the importance of holding onto white paper. That white is an essential contrast to the other values in the water.

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Compare the “study” at the right to the finished painting below, both by John Hulsey. What changes did he make in the final version? Do they make the final version stronger? What does the study have that the final version lacks?



Waterfall, Colorado - John Hulsey
Watercolor on paper, 2002, 12 x 16 inches



Left: “Waterfall, Colorado” by John Hulsey
12 x 16 inches, 2002, watercolor on paper.

These two “stream” paintings of mine, one watercolor and one mixed media (watercolor with collage) are evidence that regardless of your style of painting, attention to how water behaves will lend an air of authenticity to your finished painting.

*Right, Top:
“Fault Line” by Ellen Fountain
watercolor; 15x22 inches*

*Right, Bottom:
“Falling Water” by Ellen Fountain
watercolor over collaged rice paper
7x10.25 inches*



Assignment

Choose one of your studies, and develop it into a larger, more “finished” painting. Try not to overwork it - paint quickly and decisively. Rather than fuss with a painting that’s not working, begin again.

Use your white paper for the lightest areas in the water, and key all the other values appropriately. Refer to your value study for shadow placement, as the light will have changed before you finish. Pay attention to direction, edges, and local color of the water. Remember that shadowed areas aren’t gray or black. They are the local color, minus light. Try to mix low chroma hues for these areas using complementary colors rather than using black to make them dark.

