

Painting Water in Watercolor

TOPIC: Painting "Still" Bodies of Water

Techniques: Wet-into-wet washes and glazing

Though bodies of water (other than swimming pools) are rare in the desert, we do have them. In addition, during rainy days we have brief periods of wet streets, and puddles which act as very shallow yet reflective bodies of water.

When painting water that is relatively "still", these are the basic principles we have to remember:

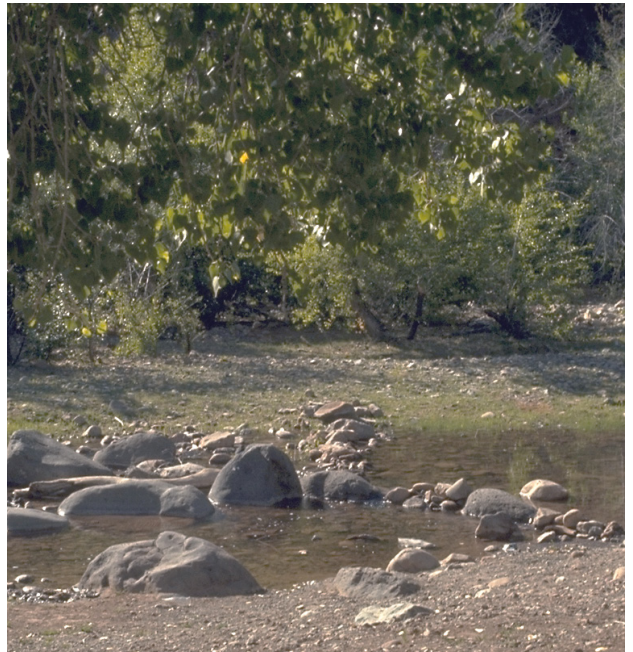
- **COLOR** - water is reflective, and like glass, picks up surrounding colors. Depending on whether you are looking across it or down into it, water will reflect the sky color and/or let you see down through it to what is on the bottom. Finally, water has a local or inherent color (greenish, bluish, brown and silty, clear, opaque, etc.)

- **SURFACE REFRACTION** - what kind of day is it? Calm and windless, or breezy? Are there boats or birds or people disturbing the water surface and creating ripples in an otherwise calm surface? Are you at the seacoast, where tides and currents create constant motion? The reflections will be more distorted/fractured if the water surface is disturbed by wind, boat wakes, etc. than they will be if it is absolutely calm.

- Bodies of water obey the **PRINCIPLES OF LINEAR PERSPECTIVE**, so you need to make waves and ripples smaller and closer together and less detailed as the water recedes away from you into the distance.

Remember that liquid will level itself horizontally at its surface, whether in a glass or in the lowest spot in a valley. **Make your brush marks, scraping or scratching marks mostly horizontal to reinforce this concept.** At the ocean, the horizon line needs to be parallel to the top/bottom edges of your paper unless you want your viewers to get seasick!

Also remember is that **color reflections in water will generally have less contrast than the object(s) being reflected**, and depending on the lighting situation may appear darker or lighter than what is being reflected.



Water, especially when shallow, takes on more color from beneath the surface, and often we can see through the water to the rocks below. Even though it was a sunny day when I took this photo, the blue sky color that would normally "color" the water from above was overwhelmed by the brown/green creek bottom.



The photo at left, taken in northern Arizona, shows what a slight breeze does to the surface reflection of the trees and boat. Note the differences in color and what I exaggerated in my painting, below right, called Fishing Near Greer.

The photo was also badly composed (half land, half water). I gave the trees and background about 2/3 of the composition, and the water just 1/3. There wasn't much going on in the water except for the boat and fishermen.



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What color is water? At night, it would be nearly black, and on a sunny day, it would be lighter because of the sky color reflecting into it. The local color of the water (green, brown, etc.) as well as its depth also influences its color. This effect is clear in Lucy Willis' painting, "At the Water's Edge", watercolor on paper, 12x17 inches, painted from memory on a trip to India.



The water's color (blue, green, etc.) in sunlight influences the color of reflected objects. A yellow boat, reflecting in green water will be a yellow green in addition to being darker in value. In addition to being darker in value, a red boat will have a *greyed* red reflection in green water because red and green are complements.

Reflections in the water are also influenced by whether the water is dirty or clean. Dirty water, because it is more opaque due to silt, contaminants etc., tends to make reflections lighter than the objects being reflected. Clean water tends to make reflections darker than the objects being reflected.

As far as value goes, though, **there's no substitute for observation.** No reflection can be darker than the darkest value in the water itself. To determine the darkest value in the water, bend over it and look straight down into the water where it is being shielded from the sky by your body. The darkest value you see is the darkest ANY value can be even in the reflected shadow areas.



The illustration above, a still life I set up using found objects, a house I built from paper and a geode rock all arranged on a piece of black plexiglass, shows how "muddy" water would affect the color of things being reflected into it. It also illustrates how objects that hang out *OVER* the water show us more of their underside (look at the "dock" for example), and the farther away from the water's edge an object is, the less we see of its lower part, and the more we see of its upper part. This is illustrated by the "silo" (the cylindrical bottle) which is the farthest object in the setup. In the reflection, we don't see its base at all - just the top (including the bottle's cap).



Left: "Suzhou-Venice of China" by Ron Hazell, 2002 watercolor, 15x22 inches, private collection

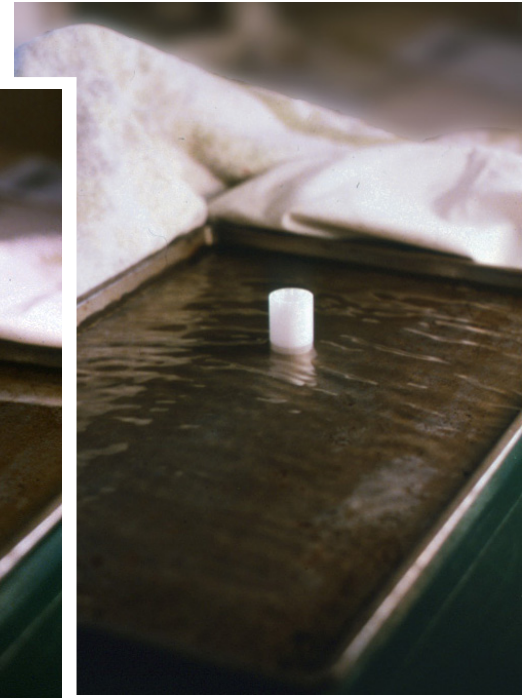
This is a great example of lessened contrast, deepened values and adjusting color reflections to account for the water's local color. Note how he also lessens the detail in back of the arched bridge so that the color reinforces both linear and aerial perspective.

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The two illustrations at the right, which I set up using a cookie sheet with water in it and a piece of plastic PVC pipe, help illustrate what happens to reflections the more surface disturbance there is on the water surface. In figure 1, the water is nearly dead calm, and the pipe's reflection confirms that. It's color and value are changed, but there is very little distortion or fracturing of the reflection.

In figure 2, which simulates a breezy day, note what happens to the pipe's reflection, and to the reflection of the towel "mountain" as well. Both are fractured, with shapes of dark intruding into the light areas, and shapes of light intruding into the dark areas.

Below: "Moki Morning" by David Drummond watercolor, 22x30 inches. Mr. Drummond's photo-realistic style depends on expert handling of washes, including glazing over a pale wet in wet blue area (the sky reflection) with darker, harder edged shapes that are the reflections of the land forms. He pays careful attention to perspective as well.



It doesn't matter what "style" you work in, from photo realism to looser more impressionistic works - your water will feel more "watery" if you incorporate the basic concepts of perspective, value contrasts, color changes and reflection distortion in your painting.



In Silverbell Lake, below, I used cerulean blue with a little cobalt blue for my sky and water with other colors dropped into the water to create the reflections of the trees and bank. After the initial wet-into-wet wash had dried, I used a combination of lifting some thin light lines out of the dry water area with the edge of my flat aquarelle brush, (moistened but not dripping wet) and glazing on a few darker passages both in the reflections and in the foreground so that I had some harder-edged shapes as a contrast to the softer, wet-into-wet areas..



*"Silverbell Lake" by Ellen Fountain
watercolor, 7.5x9 inches, 2005*

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Painting “still” water requires some combination of wet-into-wet washes with additional glazing and/or lifting of color once the initial wet-in-wet area has dried so that you have a combination of soft areas with harder-edged marks over them.

If you plan on lifting your highlights or lights, use non-staining colors for your wet-in-wet passages, or try treating your paper with a lifting medium first. Staining colors, once dry, do not easily lift. If a highlight area is very small and it is critical that it be very light/white and you do not want to use non-staining pigments for your wet-in-wet wash, you can use a liquid mask to protect those critical areas. I like Pebeo drawing gum for masking as it removes easily.



You can also use the “twisted kleenex” technique to lift out lights while the wash is still damp (not sopping wet). This involves taking a quarter of a kleenex (or small piece of paper towel) and twisting it very hard so that it looks like a piece of string. Holding it firmly at each end by your thumbs and pointer finger, you can firmly press the “string” into a damp wash (using your thumbs) to lift light lines out. The string can be curled to lift out curved lines.



Above: Ron Hazell used liquid masking fluid to protect the reflections of the sailboat masts and the masts themselves in this painting, titled “Evening on Melville Cove” (watercolor, 22x30, 2002). Protecting the masts let him paint the wet in wet washes on quickly and fluidly. In the purple trees, it allowed him to charge in additional color to create form and volume without having to worry about carefully painting around the skinny mast shapes.



“Florida Woods: A Memory”, Sandra D. Lloyd, watercolor, 1994, 22x30 inches
Because of the time of day, this water reflects the “high” sky and so its local color has much less influence on its appearance.

“Great Blue Heron”
Neil Adamson
33 x 16 inches
watercolor/acrylic
on paper

Adamson used watercolor for the soft, wet-in-wet background area. When that was dry, opaque acrylics were used for the bird and plants.



Assignment

Do a painting of a relatively “still” body of water. This can be a lake, pond, or even a mud-puddle. Use a wet-into-wet beginning for your water. I usually start by painting everything EXCEPT the water, because then I have a much better idea of what colors and shapes I will be using for my reflections.

Focus on the concepts: if your water goes a long way into the distance, remember the rules of perspective apply. What is the local color of the water? How will that affect the reflections colors? What’s your point of view (high above the water surface, or more at eye level?) How does that affect where the horizon line is on your paper?

Is the water reflecting more of the “high sky” (which it frequently does in early morning or early evening)?