



Tips & Demos

**Watercolor and Watermedia
painting tips & demonstrations
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Using Stencils with Watercolor

The Pattern & Decoration movement in the 1970's definitely had an influence on my work. Miriam Shapiro was one of the main proponents of this movement and her works are full of patterning. My love of sewing and of working with those wonderful patterned fabrics probably made it inevitable that my paintings would be filled with patterns and representations of fabrics. One of the ways I put designs on the fabrics I paint is with stencils. The painting at the right, *Casting Among Pearls*, is a perfect example. The mountain shapes of fabric in the background utilize stencilled-on patterns.

Stencils are simply a way of masking part of your painting to keep paint from going where you don't want it to go. Almost anything can be used for a stencil. You can buy ready-made ones and experiment with them, you can use a piece of lace fabric (spray it first with clear acrylic to keep it from absorbing the paint), you can make your own stencils from stencil paper (available at art stores), clear plastic file folders, or just wax paper if you only need a one-use stencil.

For this simple exercise in using stencils, you will need a piece of stencil paper, wax paper or a piece of clear mylar or plastic (I use clear plastic file folders available at an office supply store). You will also need a small sheet of watercolor paper, and an old toothbrush.



Casting Among Pearls, watercolor, image size 30" x 22",
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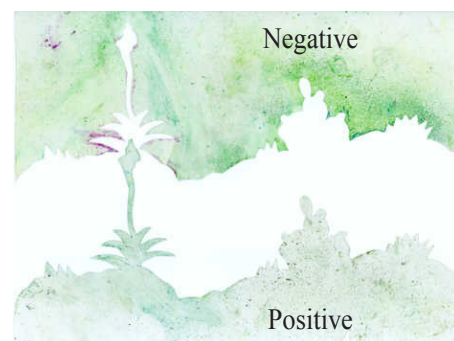


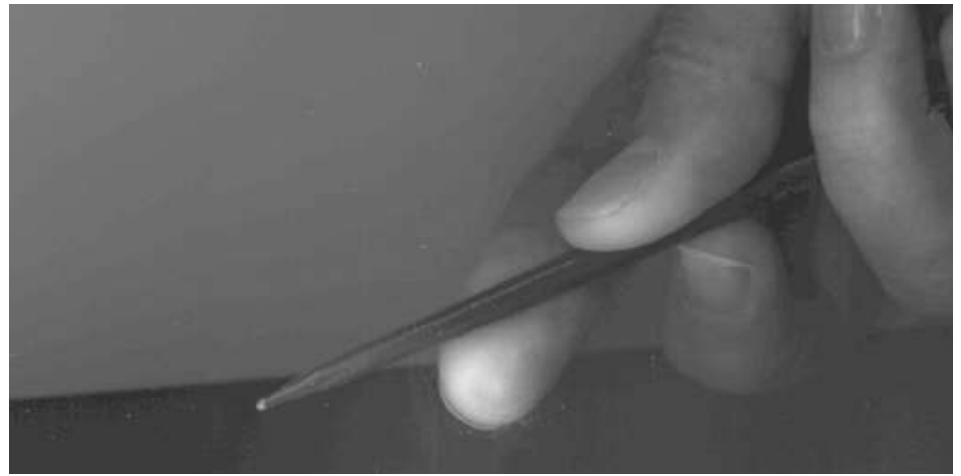
STEP ONE:

Select three colors (I used cobalt violet, cerulean blue and lemon yellow for this demo). Wet your paper all over until it is shiny, then drop the three colors randomly onto the paper surface. Tilt your paper a bit if you want to blend the colors slightly. Try to keep some white paper.

Let this wet-in-wet background dry thoroughly. While you're waiting for it to dry, you can create your stencil. For this practice lesson, we're going to use both the positive and negative parts of the stencil—the positive part is the shape you cut out, and the negative part is the "hole" left in the remaining stencil paper. To create your stencil, draw one continuous line to create your shape.

This can be a landscape shape (as mine is for this exercise), or something more abstract. Let your imagination loose, and create a fabulous interesting continuous line! Once you've got the line drawn copy it to your stencil paper and place it about in the middle. Then carefully cut along your line, using an x-acto knife or a very sharp pointed pair of scissors. Remember you're going to cut the stencil just as you drew it...in one continuous line. The image at right shows both parts of the stencil, negative shape on top, positive shape on the bottom. I left some of the paint on these stencils so that they would show up on the white paper, but they are translucent, so you can move them around on your dried underpainting and decide where to place them before you start spattering on the paint.





Spattering is wonderful for using with stencils because it allows you to layer paint without worrying about lifting any color you already have on the paper (since you are adding paint via gravity instead of with a brush), and because it imparts a textural quality to the painting.

Hold the toothbrush in one hand, with your thumb on top, bristles down and the toothbrush pointed down at the paper. I use a small paintbrush handle to drag across the bristles. Drag the handle from the front of the toothbrush towards the back. Your hand motion will be towards you. This seems backward, but isn't if you think about what is happening. You are applying pressure to the bristles, and as the handle passes, the bristles spring back into position and in the process fling tiny droplets of paint onto your paper.

STEP TWO:

The next step is to place either the positive or negative piece of your stencil over your underpainting. Move it around until you like where it is. I usually look at the underpainting and decide what passages of paint I want to keep (i.e. not cover with more paint), and place my stencils accordingly. For Step Two, I used the negative shape first, placed it so it exposed a part of the bottom of the painting, and then used more of my cerulean blue and cobalt mixed together to spatter on paint over the stencil and onto the paper.

At right, you see the negative stencil piece on the dry underpainting. Because the stencil is clear, you can see through it to place it correctly. You can hold it in place with weights or paper clips. Spatter your paint along the edges of the stencil.

When the stencil (top area) is moved, the area where you spattered the paint shows clearly (detail at lower right). When you finish spattering, lift the stencil carefully off the paper, and remove excess paint by blotting it on a paper towel (or rice paper if you're a collage person...the blots make great collage papers!)

Now, use the other positive part of the stencil, or reuse the negative part but in a different place. Spatter on some more paint.





At left you can see the positive part of the stencil (it looks kind of a blurry gray at the edge of the photo) after stencilling over it with cobalt violet. When you use the positive shape, what is beneath will be protected and the surrounding area receives the spattered paint.

This is just the opposite of what happens with the negative piece. When you use the negative part, the spatter paint creates the shape, and the background is protected by the stencil.

Deciding which stencil pieces to use, and where to place them is half the fun of this technique.

FINISHING UP:

Shown below is the finished painting.

Compare the finished piece with the underpainting, and you will see what adjustments I made to the color values after and during the stencilling process. Since our eyes see light and bright before they see dark and dull, I wanted the movement of the piece to go from the lower left corner in a gentle “S” curve up to the upper right corner. This is an abstract approach to watercolor, but it’s a fun way to introduce yourself to stencilling. Once you get the “hang” of using stencils, you’ll discover lots more ways to use them.

In my fabricscape pieces, I do a controlled underpainting of the fabric piece, including all the shadows. This is allowed to dry. Then I use wax paper to cut masks that follow the edges of folds, or the edge of one fabric where it butts up against another one. With these masks in place, I can expose just the part of the painted fabric that I want to add a stencilled pattern to. It takes time to stencil on designs this way, a section at a time, but the end result is very effective. The painting at the beginning of this tip, *Casting Among Pearls*, uses this technique to pattern some of the fabrics in the still life.

