

Washes: The Foundation of Watercolor Painting

Look at nearly any watercolor painting, regardless of style from loose, non-objective to tight, photo-realistic, and you will see washes - flat washes, graduated washes, wet-in-wet washes. These large areas of color are the foundation of watercolor painting. They may be directly painted (the once-and-done approach) or glazed/layered. They may be wisps of color or in-your-face intense. They may be textured and painted over with more aggressive linear brushwork. Getting comfortable with washes is a large part of learning to paint in watercolor.

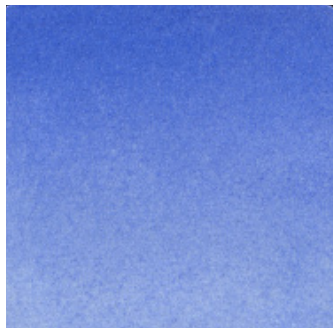
There are basically three types of washes: flat, graduated (or graded) and wet-into-wet.



THE FLAT WASH

Characterized by even tonality throughout. Sediment, if any, is evenly dispersed. Begin at top of area to be covered with a fully-charged brush. Have paper at a 30-degree tilt, with the higher end away from you. Pull a single stroke across the area to be covered, using the side (body) of the brush. A "bead" of excess paint will form at the bottom of the stroke due to gravity and the tilt of the board. Re-charge the brush with paint, and make a second stroke across the paper, slightly over-lapping the first. Work as quickly as you can, continuing until the area is covered. With very large areas, you may pre-wet the area first with clean water to keep it damp longer. Pick up excess paint at the end with a tissue or dry brush.

Most commonly used for defining objects (by shape) and for backgrounds.



THE GRADUATED WASH (Single hue)

Tonality gradually changes from dark to light or light to dark values. Sediment, if any, will be more concentrated in the darker, more saturated areas. Begin the same as a flat wash, except that instead of recharging brush with pigment, you recharge with clean water. The brush can simply be dipped in water, and wiped on the edge of the water container with each successive stroke. This thins the wash, thus lightening the value progressively.

Most commonly used for skies and for creating the illusion of three-dimensional form.



THE GRADUATED WASH (Two or more hues)

Tonality gradually changes from a lighter hue to a darker one, or from a warm hue to a cool one. Sediment varies depending on the pigments used. Premix the washes for the two or three hues you wish to use, trying to keep the saturations equal. Begin the same way as for a flat wash, using the lightest hue first. After the desired number of strokes with the first hue, begin to recharge the brush with the second hue. Repeat for the third hue if you are using three colors. Always work from light to dark with this process.

Again, most commonly used to create form and for skies.



THE WET-IN-WET WASH (Two or more hues)

Tonality is varied in hue, value and intensity, and differences between color areas are characterized by soft transitions/edges. Begin with a wet paper surface and drop or stroke color into this wet surface. Tip your paper to facilitate some blending or directional flow of color. As the paper begins to dry, color introduced will hold its shape more distinctly.

Commonly used for backgrounds, water, some dull, metallic surfaces or for particular objects.



Greens Study - Sweetwater Wetlands, plein air watercolor, 4½" x 15", ©Ellen Fountain
Primarily glazed washes, with a little brushwork and scraping.

Exercise 1: Flat Washes

Work from observation of your subject, and REDUCE it to simple outline shapes (think coloring book). Lightly pencil in your drawing on your watercolor paper, then paint, using only flat washes (no modeling of form). Leave some parts of your image unpainted (white paper). Once you lay down a wash, let it dry completely before painting next to it, OR, leave a tiny white space of unpainted paper between each flat wash. Caution: if you touch one wet wash into another wet/damp wash, the two colors will bleed together, (right) and you will no longer have a flat wash. See the samples below for an idea about how to simplify your shapes and use flat areas of color. Paint each area just once. Try to anticipate how much the color will lighten and adjust the amount of pigment in your wash accordingly.



Above: Milton Avery used flat areas of color (some patterned) to create this painting.



Pigments to use:

Permanent Alizarin Crimson (or equivalent)

Winsor Lemon (or equivalent)

French Ultramarine (or equivalent)

You can vary the values of each color by adjusting the pigment/water ratio. More water = lighter values. You may mix the colors to create new ones, but to get an even flat wash, mix in your palette, not on your paper.

This exercise is about controlling the even-ness of your washes. A “perfect” flat wash will have an even tonality throughout...no streaks or lighter/darker areas.

Evaluation:

- Did you achieve an even tone throughout each wash?
- Did your colors dry to the saturation that you expected?

Right: Southwest by Far East, watercolor, image 22” x 15”, Ellen Fountain private collection

I used primarily flat washes in this piece from my Southwest Series, I also cut stencils, laid them over my flat washes in several places, and spattered additional “washes” of paint over the stencils to create patterns (on the walls) and plant forms (outside the window).



Exercise 2: Wet-in-wet background



Above: "Mission at Zuni" by Fran Larsen. In this watercolor, the background is the most active area, done wet in wet, with clean water and "air blows" introduced as the wash began

Work from your subject, and simplify its contour. Make this subject large enough to fill about 1/3 to 1/2 of your paper, and you can run some of its edges off the paper. Lightly pencil in your drawing on your watercolor paper. Plan to leave some area of your subject plain white paper (you can indicate the white areas if you wish). The white areas can be in your wet-in-wet background or in your subject or in both places.

Pigments to use:

Permanent Alizarin Crimson (or equivalent)

Transparent Yellow (or equivalent)

Winsor Blue (green shade) (or equivalent)

In your palette, mix up a mid-value wash using some combination of your three pigments. Using two will create a secondary hue; using three will create a neutral. Prewet your background with clean water. Begin adding your pre-mixed wash to your background in places by touching your loaded brush to the paper. Tip your paper a bit to let it flow. Then begin adding pure colors to your background, rinsing between additions. Don't get a thick blob of paint, but pick up a fair amount of color. Touch this to your background in places, again, tipping the paper to let it blend a bit with what is already there. Let one color dominate. Don't overmix, or you will end up with a homogenous neutral. As the paper dries, you can add drops of clean water to make lighter areas if you wish and give the background a "mottled" effect, or load the tip of your brush with more concentrated

paint and touch it to the paper for more "intense" spots of color. Let the wet-in-wet background dry thoroughly before going on to the next exercise.

This exercise will give you practice in:

- Creating wet-in-wet washes
- Controlling the blending of colors on wet paper
- Estimating how saturated to make your washes so they will dry the value you want
- Timing the addition of colors to a wet wash to control "spread" or "creep"

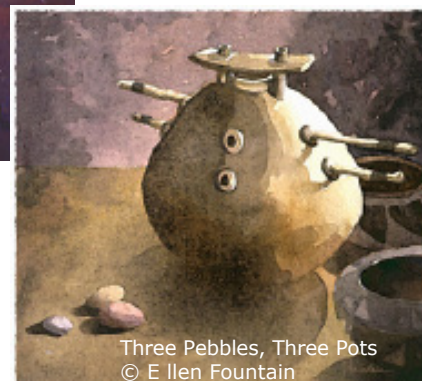
Evaluation:

- Did your colors dry to the saturation that you expected?
- Do the colors in your wet-in-wet areas still maintain some of their individuality, or did you overmix (and get gray/brown)?
- Does one color (red, yellow or blue) dominate?



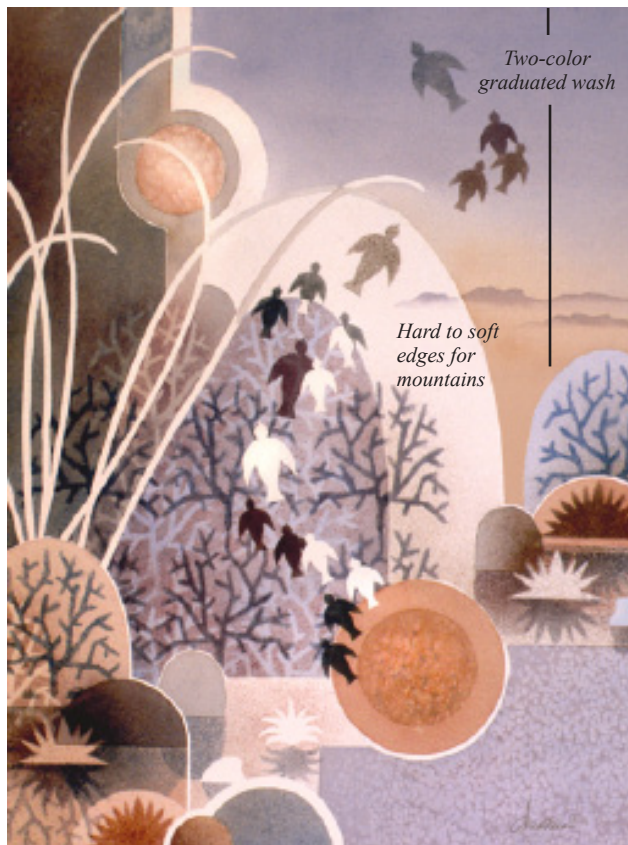
The Night Queen Meets Her Nemesis
© E. Ellen Fountain

Left: I did the background for this night blooming cereus wet-in-wet. Below: I used a wet-in-wet under-painting and then glazed over it in this watercolor, which also employs lost (soft) edges to anchor the pots to the ground.



Three Pebbles, Three Pots
© E. Ellen Fountain

Exercise 3: Graduated Washes and Soft/Hard Edges



"Up and Away," from my Southwest Series, is painted entirely with washes...some applied with a toothbrush spatter technique over handcut stencils, and some given a salt texture.

Use your painting from Exercise 1 (Wet-in-Wet Washes). Be sure the wet-in-wet background is completely dry. In this exercise, you're going to concentrate on the subject you drew in exercise 1 and left unpainted.

Graduated washes and hard/soft edges are commonly used to suggest form; graduated washes are also frequently used in skies, with the lighter part at the horizon line.

Decide on at least one or two parts of your subject that can be painted using a graduated wash. Rotate your paper/board so that the part that will receive the beginning stroke of the graduated wash is placed at the top (away from you) and elevated about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch. Use a large round brush or your aquarelle/flat brush used on the wide side for this wash. Mix a fairly saturated patch of color (enough to saturate your brush). Lay in the first stroke of very wet color, working from one direction horizontally across the shape in a single stroke. The color should be fluid enough to form a bead of paint along the bottom of the stroke. Dip the bottom third of your brush in clean water, and make another stroke, catching the bead of paint from the first stroke. Again add some clean water to your brush and repeat. Each stroke should slightly lighten the value of the color until it disappears into white paper. Work as quickly as you can. Timing is critical, as is the amount of water in your brush. If you make the mixture in your brush wetter than what is on your

paper, you run the risk of back runs (this is minimized by keeping your paper elevated on one edge).



For the remainder of your subject, do some hard to soft edge painting. This means that you are going to begin with a stroke on dry paper and then soften its opposite edge. There are two ways to accomplish this. One is to prewet with clean water an area $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch away from where you will have the hard edge of your stroke. As you pull your paint-loaded brush across the paper, the part of the brush on dry paper will make a hard edge, while the part of the brush that contacts the prewet area will soften and spread. The second method is to make a stroke on dry paper, then IMMEDIATELY take a brush dampened with clean water and touch the stroke on one side, pulling the color out to soften it. Knowing how wet to have your brush will require practice.

Evaluation:

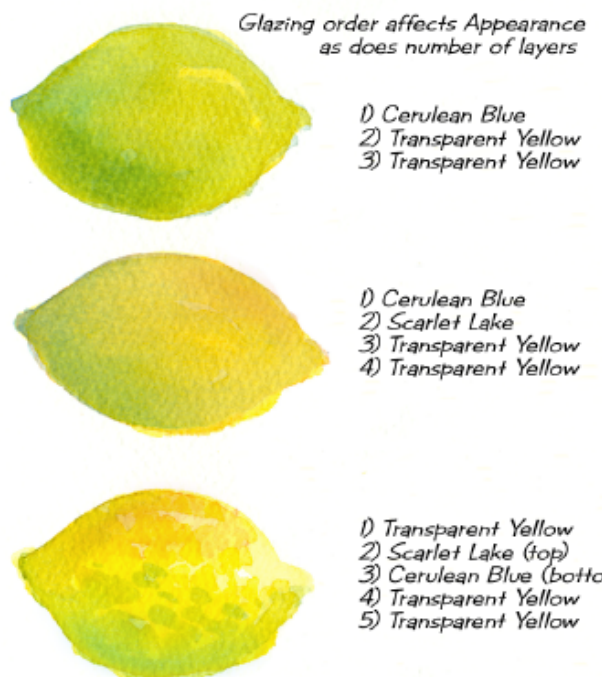
- Did your graduated wash change gradually and smoothly from saturated to unsaturated color, or did you have streaks or large jumps in value?
- Did you successfully create some hard to soft edged shapes?



When glazing/layering colors, care must be taken to keep color fresh and clean, and because the goal is to have these layers mix “optically”, care must also be taken in the physical application of the paint. My recommendation is to use a single, pure color to glaze with, alternating between related (analogous) hues and complimentary hues (when you want to lower a color’s intensity). Why mix a gray to glaze over something when you can create an optical mixture of gray by selectively layering clean, pure color? Notice in my painting below how glazing a warm yellow-orange over the blue-purples in the near mountains created optical grays/browns.



Pima Canyon, transparent watercolor on rough paper, 10"x14"
©Ellen Fountain, 2008. Private collection.



Exercise 4: Glazing

Use the same sketch/subject you used for the previous exercises. Pencil its contours lightly on your watercolor paper.

Pigments to use: any 3 to 5 colors;
three must be primary hues (red/yellow/blue)

Begin with light value, unsaturated washes of color and let each layer dry before applying the next. Once you’ve mixed a color, work all over your paper, using it wherever it is appropriate.

Tips for successful glazing:

- use transparent pigments
- work light/unsaturated to dark/saturated
- use single pigments rather than mixes when possible; mix optically instead of in your palette
- use a very light touch - don’t let your brush dry out
- use a natural hair (I like squirrel hair) as they are softer and won’t disturb underlying layers as easily
- use a hair dryer to speed up drying of layers or work on more than one painting at a time so you won’t be tempted to glaze before the underlying paint is completely dry.

Why use glazing? To get richer, more interesting color passages, and to adjust color hue, value and intensity as the painting progresses toward completion, and to create “negative” shapes by glazing around them. When glazing/layering colors, care must be taken to keep color fresh and clean, and because the goal is to have these layers mix “optically”, care must also be taken in the physical application of the paint.



Glazing wet on dry can build up color value and intensity, and create new hues optically.

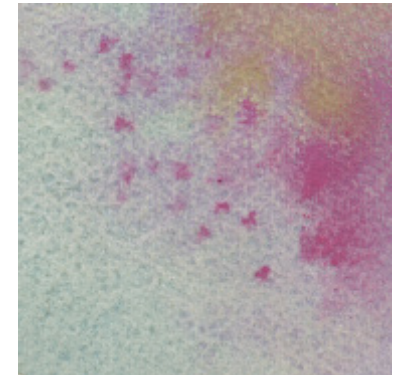
GLAZING TAKES TIME

One significant difference between painting “directly” (the once and done approach) and glazing is TIME. Unless you want all your colors to merge into a muddy mess, you must let each layer of color dry completely before glazing over it. You can use wet-in-wet on any layer, but if you intend to glaze over this wet-into-wet passage, let it dry first. This drying process isn’t all bad. It gives you time to step back and evaluate what you’ve done to that point before going further.

PLANNING

Glazing does require planning ahead:

- Where are your whites/lights, and do you need to protect them with some kind of mask rather than painting around them? You may also need to mask parts of previously painted dry layers before glazing on another color.
- In what order will you apply the colors, while generally working from unsaturated, light colors to saturated, dark colors?



Glazing wet-in-wet over a dry first layer creates softer edge effects.



Wet-in-Wet Does Not Involve Glazing: Transparent Yellow with Cerulean and Scarlet Lake dropped into the yellow while it was very wet



Glazing Can Use a Single Hue: 4 layers of transparent yellow – each layer allowed to dry before applying the next layer, affects value and intensity

METHODS

There are many methods of glazing/layering one color over another:

- Using a brush and relatively unsaturated washes of color
- Using the drybrush method of dotting or dabbing on tiny strokes of relatively dry, very thin, color over and over again
- Using a toothbrush or airbrush to spatter or spray on layers of color
- Pouring layers of liquid color onto your paper



Spattering paint over stencils is one way to glaze

The first two methods require a light touch in order to avoid lifting previous layers of color as you paint over them. The latter two, because they don’t involve a tool touching the paper, are not influenced by your painting “touch”.

If you have trouble with underlying layers lifting or blending with new layers, you can try:

- (1) Using a softer brush like squirrel hair (the synthetics are stiffer and harder than the natural hair brushes)
- (2) Mixing a little acrylic gel medium (matte or gloss or a blend) with each wash. Experiment with how much to add, putting in just enough to “seal” each layer without making it look like plastic. Once dry, these layers are not resolvable. If you use this method, use a disposable picnic plate for a palette, and squeeze out separate color on the plate. **Don’t get the gel medium into the wells of your regular watercolor palette.**

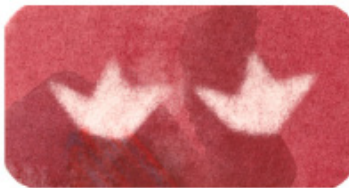
Exercise 5: Lifting Dry Color

Use the same painting from exercise 5 (glazing). It should be thoroughly dry. Using one of the techniques below for lifting dry color, lighten some areas of your painting.



Damp brush/blotting technique

Use a synthetic (stiffer) damp brush to wet the area you want to lift. Scrub the area gently, and then blot with a paper towel or tissue. Repeat as needed until the area is as light as you wish (or as you can get it if you are trying to lift a highly staining pigment).



Stencil/scrubbing/blotting technique

Use clear packaging tape or repositionable clear contact paper. Tape this in place over the area you want to lighten and using an x-acto knife, CAREFULLY cut out the shape you want from the tape or contact paper, without cutting your painting.

Then, use a brush, piece of sponge or even damp paper towel to scrub the exposed area, alternately blotting it, until you have a lightened area. Remove the tape stencil.

This technique can also be used to make corrections as the lightened area can be allowed to dry and then repainted.



Sandpaper technique

This is not for use on lightweight paper - you need 140 lb. paper or heavier, otherwise you risk putting a hole in your paper.

Paper surface (hot press, cold press or rough) determines how this technique looks. As it really abrades the surface, it is something you should use at the end of a painting, and not painted over, as paint will really absorb into any sanded area.

Exercise 6: Lifting Wet Color

You will use these techniques AS YOU PAINT to lift wet/damp color back to the white of your paper or nearly so. This is especially important since most of the modern watercolor paints are synthetics, and most are staining to some degree. If you wait for them to dry and try to lift them, they will not come up easily. Keep tissue, paper towel and/or sponges handy as you work, so you can lift color as needed.



Paper towel/tissue blotting technique

Use a piece of crumpled, flat or twisted paper towel, toilet tissue or kleenex tissue to blot up damp or wet areas. Keep turning the paper to a dry spot in order to avoid transferring picked up paint to a new spot on your painting.



Sponge blotting technique

Use a natural or synthetic household sponge with as much water removed as possible to blot your painting where needed. For a more organic edge on a synthetic sponge - rip off smaller pieces of it and use the torn edge.

