

Painting Reflective Surfaces

Week 1: Metals

Observe carefully

Painting reflective metal surfaces like silver, brass, copper and pewter require, first and foremost, an ability to observe carefully, draw (simplifying if needed) and then paint the distorted, two-dimensional *shapes* you see in the reflection. Like funhouse mirrors, these objects distort the reflections, and the shape of the distortion depends on the shape of the reflecting object.

Note the color and shape of reflections; consider local color

These colored shapes take their hue from the objects caught in the reflection (a green pear will make a green reflected shape) but the reflective object's *local color* will have an overall effect on these colored shapes (a silver object will have "cooler" colors than a brass one). Look at the two details shown from two of my paintings, one with a brass bowl and one with a silver bowl and you'll see what I mean. I used the same silver bowl for both these paintings, but in the brass and green apples painting, I "tinted" every color I mixed with a warm yellow so the "brass" bowl would look like brass.

Exaggerate values if necessary

You may also have to exaggerate your values (make values closer and/or darker) in order to define edges clearly (like the difference between the inside and outside of the brass bowl, for example).

Watch your edges and preserve highlights

Metals are not always highly polished. Age and wear and tear affect the surface patina, and so the reflections in these objects may be more distinct (in highly polished items) or less distinct (in older, aged items or in non-polished metals). When painting these less distinct reflections, try dropping in color wet-into-wet, and then lifting out some of the paint for value changes and subtle highlights, or if you've glazed on color, when it's dry, try softening the edges of shapes with a damp brush. On highly polished metals, you will want your edges crisper and harder, which is usually obtained by painting on dry paper and/or masking out areas, especially highlights, before beginning to paint.

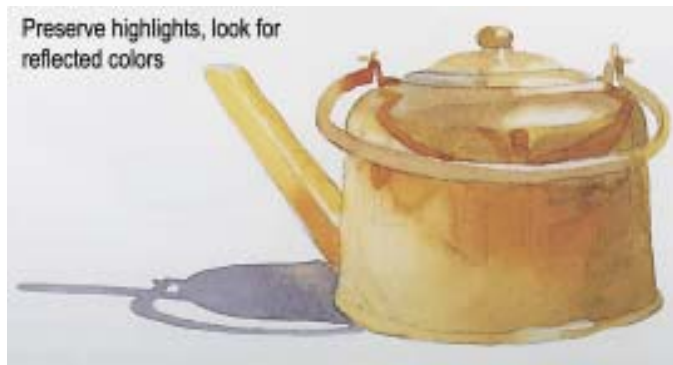


Above: Brass and Apples (detail) and
Below: Cutting Up Again (detail)
both from watercolors by Ellen Fountain



The difference in how you paint metal surfaces has to do with how "polished" they are. The higher the polish, the more distinct and hard-edged the reflections in the surface will be. Note how artist Anne Abgott clearly distinguishes a silver bowl from an aluminum colander by how she treats the reflected shapes in each—wet into wet in the colander and hard-edged distorted shapes in the silver.

This demo is from Liz Donovan's book, *Painting Sunlit Still Lifes in Watercolor*, Northlight Books, 1997. These steps give you an idea of the general process for painting a metal object using the glazing method (working light to dark, and adding more washes as each layer is dry or begins to dry). Liz photographs her still life setups and projects the image onto Trazon vellum graph paper (found at architectural and engineering supply stores). After making corrections to the camera distortions in her drawing, she places graphite transfer paper between the drawing and 300 lb cold press watercolor paper, and traces the drawing onto her watercolor paper.



Brass has a yellowish local color; so the reflections will all take on this overall tone. There will be few (if any, depending on the polish) pure white highlights – instead most will be a very very pale yellow. Shadow areas tend to take on a greenish tone.

Look at the difference in the photo (above) of the teapot, and the one at the right of a highly polished brass door handle, particularly the color of the brightest highlights.



A light pencil drawing of your object, indicating the major reflective shapes, cast shadows and highlights is the first step.

Liz Donovan's palette for this demonstration: Alizarin Crimson, Cobalt Blue, New Gamboge, Raw Sienna, Rose Madder Genuine and Winsor Green, all from Winsor & Newton.

Donovan's painting begins with the first, palest washes in the object itself. She paints in the cast shadow to the left of the teapot right away, getting the value and color right the first time, and does not go back into that area again. She used Cobalt blue and Rose Madder Genuine* with a little yellow added to gray it slightly) for this shadow.

Because this is an old teapot, Donovan kept the painting a little on the damp side as she built up the values, so that the edges wouldn't be too hard. The only hard edges are on the handle, which helps it come forward towards us in space, and the cast shadows on the spout, which are painted in last. She lifted wet paint where necessary to lighten values using a piece of tissue.

At the final stage, she added a few darker passages made from Alizarin Crimson and Winsor Green with a touch of yellow added – around the top of the spout, around the rim of the base and where the handle is attached. She also added a few dots of paint to suggest the small corrosion pits on the teapot.



* Rose Madder Genuine is a fugitive pigment. I suggest a permanent rose or a quinacridone rose as a substitute

In class:

Use the metal object you brought or select one from the still life collection. Place the text sheet(s) with the word METALS under, in or to the side of your object.

Use graph paper to draw your object's outline (the graph paper helps you get it symmetrical). Transfer that outline to your watercolor paper.

Protect your "pure white" highlights with masking fluid (or remember to paint around them). These will be the white of your paper, and left unpainted. All other values will key off of this "white".

Paint your object, working from light to dark. Use a cast shadow to anchor the object, but don't paint a background. (see next page for a step-by-step process)

Out of class:

The photo below contains a more challenging reflective surface. It also has a blurred background that you might practice working wet in wet to suggest amorphous space.

Use this photo, *or set up a still life of your own* with a reflective metal object in it. Use a point of view that will let you experiment with making the background "dissolve" into the distance by treating it wet-into-wet or as a flat wash. Add one or two other object to reflect into your metal object.

What color is silver? Highlights in highly polished silver will be the white of your paper (or opaque white if you use it). Reflected shapes will be various shades of warm and cool gray, along with the grayed colors of any objects reflecting into the silver. Try any two complementary colors to mix a range of grays (red+green, blue+orange or yellow+violet).

Copper objects can be painted with a first wash of pale peach - try permanent rose and hansa yellow medium mixed and thinned with water. You can introduce a little green (cerulean + hansa yellow) wet-into-wet to suggest the green patina copper gets as it ages.

Select the brightest white highlights and protect them with masking fluid (or remember to paint around them). They will remain unpainted (white paper), and every other value will key off this white.

Also **identify your darkest dark.** If it isn't in a good spot, adjust your values so that it is. Ideally, you want your darkest dark and lightest light to be in the focal area.

Eliminate or greatly simplify the extraneous shapes in the reflection that confuse the general form of your object. In this photo, we want the penguin's wings to be distinguishable from the body and also from the dish he is holding. Where do you think some of the reflected shapes could be simplified or eliminated to accomplish that goal?

The reflections will be a combination of hard and soft-edged shapes. Sometimes there are areas or edges that will need to be softened with a clean damp brush at the end of the painting, so that some edges will merge together a little better. When you think you are finished. Set the painting up some distance away from you and see if the edges of your forms are reading correctly.

