

Introduction to Watercolor: Textures and Whites

TEXTURES

Textures as used in art are either **actual** (the rough irregular surface of gesso dabbed on thickly with a sponge for example), **invented** (unique marks that “feel” textural to the eye) or **simulated** (drawn or painted marks designed to mimic real textures like woodgrain, hair or grass)

Watercolor, unlike oil or acrylic, is a THIN-BODIED paint. That means that when it is used as intended (diluted with water), you can't achieve actual impasto textures as you can with oil or acrylic paints. The textures we get with watercolor are *simulated* or *invented* rather than real.



Flowers, watercolor on paper, 22 x 24" by Charles Reid. The artist makes appropriate use of splats, spatters, blooms, and drips to add "texture" to this painting .

Brushstrokes/marks can simulate the texture of hair or grass, the texture of masses of leaves, or the texture of a rough brick. With practice and the right size/shape brush, the number of simulated textures you can create are nearly limitless. But, there are a few more “texture tricks” you can add to your illusionary bag of painting magic that don't depend on skill with a brush.

A word of caution: These textures should be used in moderation and where appropriate. They should enhance subject matter and content, but not overpower it or be a substitute for it. Viewers shouldn't walk away from your work remembering techniques!

Additives like salt and alcohol behave differently depending on the pigment color you are using them with. They are also time-sensitive; that is, they must be put in a damp (not shiny wet) wash in order to work. Other texturing techniques, like spattering, can be done on wet or dry paper. If the paper is wet, the spatters will spread and dilute more, and if the paper is dry, they will retain more color intensity and a harder more defined edge.



In this painting, I used alcohol to simulate the orange counter top, and salt plus dropped in paint to simulate the particleboard inside the drawers. A paper doily was used as a stencil over a light glue wash to create the drawer liner.

Exercise 1:

Experiment with each of the techniques on the handout sheet. Try varying the saturation of your wash as you use the same technique and note the difference.

Exercise 2:

Would one of these texture effects enhance the subject of one of your previously painted works? Repaint it using the texture technique you've chosen, or start a new painting with washes, and try one or more of these texture effects. Remember, you can confine any technique to one particular area - it doesn't have to be all over your painting.

Textures for Watercolor:

There are a variety of techniques you can use to introduce the illusion of texture into your watercolor paintings. Because watercolor is a thin-bodied medium, you can't ever create the kind of dimensional textures possible with oil or acrylic, but you can get some wonderful imitations of textures.

Some of these textures rely on **things that you place directly into a damp or wet wash of color.**

They include:

- **wax paper** - creates a wonderful mottled texture which can be controlled within a shape
- **plastic wrap** - creates a random, rather geometric pattern
- **salt** - creates lighter, snowflake-like speckles that vary in size depending on the dampness of the wash when the salt is added.
- **rubbing alcohol** - creates a mottled lighter area which may have either a darker or lighter edge, depending on the pigment it is used with.

Other textures involve **manipulating the wash using the handle end of your brush or other tool.**

They include:

- **scraping** - leaves a lighter line when done correctly
- **scratching** - leaves a darker line when done correctly

Still other textures **use various tools to imprint, drip, spatter or splash paint on your paper:**

- **sponges**
- **stencils and toothbrushes**
- **stamps**
- **free spattering/dripping with paintbrushes, toothbrushes, spray bottles, squirt bottles, etc.**

See the following pages for illustrations of the above effects.

Textures from lifting materials:

While we commonly use lifting techniques to remove damp or wet paint, *what* you use to lift the paint can also create a texture. Try textured paper towel, sponges, pieces of fabric, or anything else that is absorbent. This will lighten an area, but may also leave behind a "textured" imprint if you simply press and remove, rather than drag or rub an area of paint. Lifting while paint is wet/damp allows more removal of staining pigments than lifting paint when it is dry.



Crumpled paper towel/tissue



Twisted paper towel/tissue



Household sponge edge



Natural sponge

Wax Paper:

In both cases, allow the paint to dry before removing the wax paper. You can introduce additional color under the edges of the wax paper while the paint is wet for multi-colored effects.

Crumpled, smoothed out; laid into wet wash



Cut or torn into a shape; laid into a wet wash



Plastic Wrap:

Allow the paint to dry before removing the plastic wrap. You can introduce additional color under the edges of the wax paper while the paint is wet for multi-colored effects. You can protect areas you don't want to have affected with a mask.

Stretched horizontally; laid into wet wash

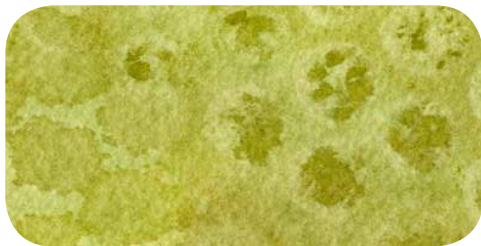


Crumpled loosley; laid into a wet wash



A variation of this is to use any non-absorbent material with a texture. All create interesting effects when laid in wet washes.

Bubble wrap; laid into wet wash



Salt:

Allow the paint to dry before removing any excess undissolved salt crystals. Use this technique sparingly - salt is corrosive. The effect varies with the dampness of the paper when the salt is sprinkled on it, and with the pigment used. Experiment.

Paper barely damp; no shine



Paper damp; shine JUST gone



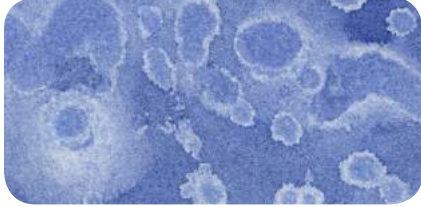
Paper fairly wet; still some shine



Rubbing Alcohol:

Allow the paint to just lose its shine before spattering in the alcohol. Timing is everything here, and the pigment you use with the alcohol also makes a difference. Some pigments react more strongly to this than others. You can repeat this treatment as a glaze, using different colors each time to create really rich mottled surfaces.

Alcohol dropped into one damp wash of ultramarine blue



Alcohol with orange first; then light green glazed over that and alcohol dropped into the green wash.



Scraping and Scratching:

These are “drawing” or “mark making” effects you use the plastic chisel end of your flat aquarelle brush to make. The difference between the two:

A **scrape** leaves a LIGHTER mark, and is done holding the brush parallel to the paper and using the side of the chisel end to push/scrape just barely damp paint. Allow the shine to JUST disappear before you do a scrape.

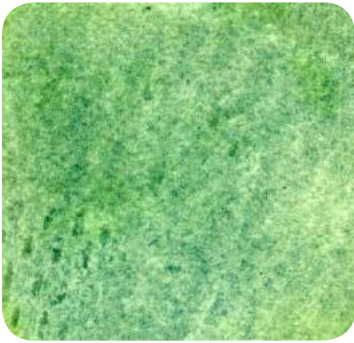


A **scratch** leaves a DARKER mark, and is done holding the brush perpendicular to the paper and using the end of the chisel to draw/engrave marks/lines into a WET wash. Your paint needs to be wet enough so that when you make a groove/indentation in the paper, the paint particles will concentrate in this groove and create a darker mark when dry.

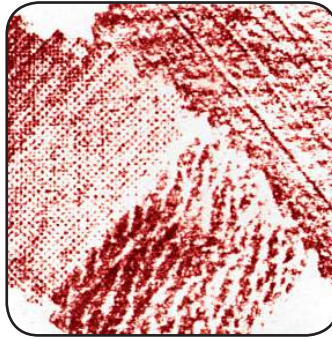


Other textural effects can be created with a wide variety of tools/techniques:

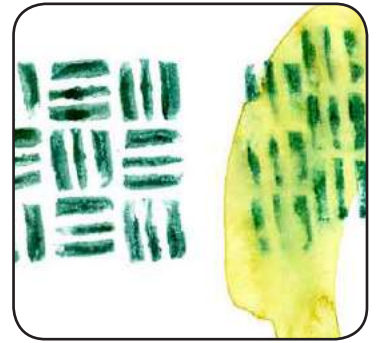
Fabric pressed into a damp wash



Rubbings w/ watercolor pencil



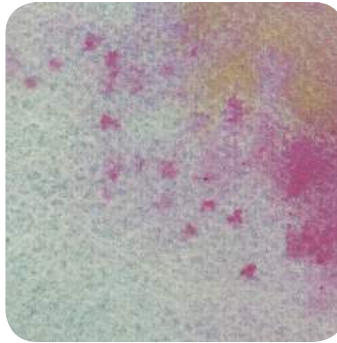
Stamps (hand-cut or commercial)



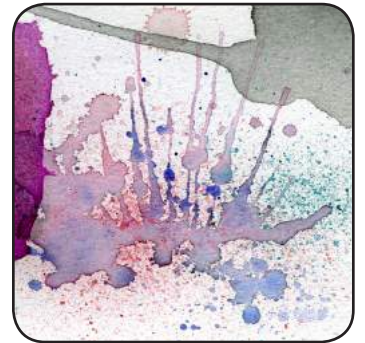
Stencils-toothbrush applied paint



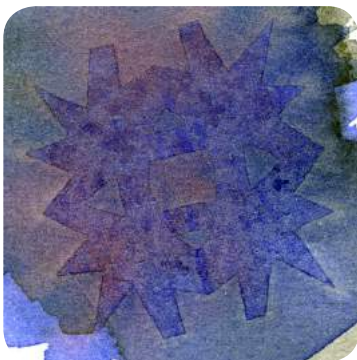
Spattering in a damp wash



Spattering/dripping/blown paint-dry paper



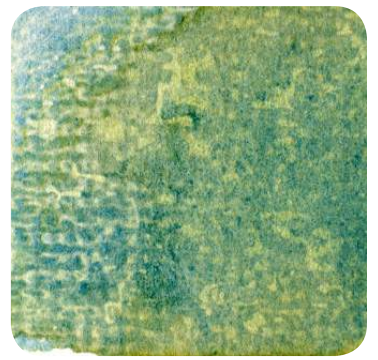
Wax paper laid in glazed wet wash



Carpet pad laid in wet wash



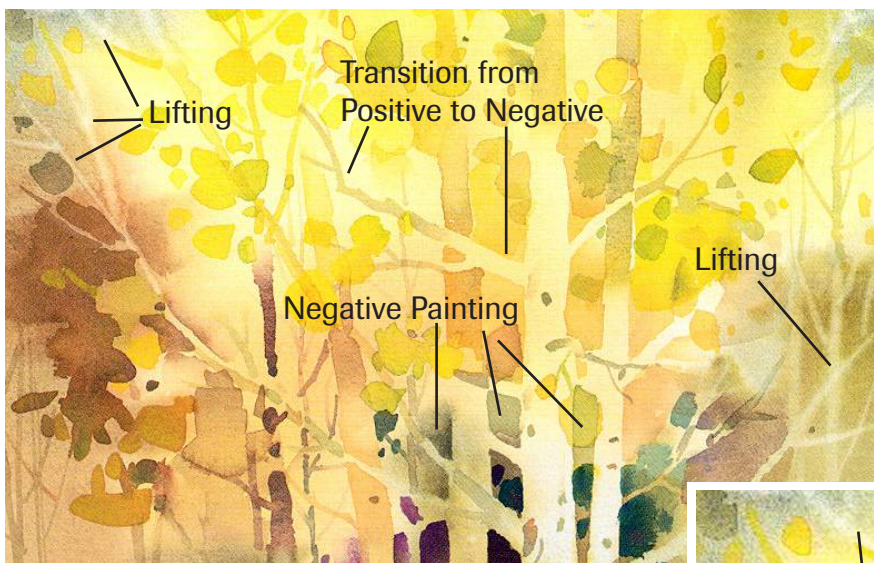
Sponge-wrap laid in wet wash



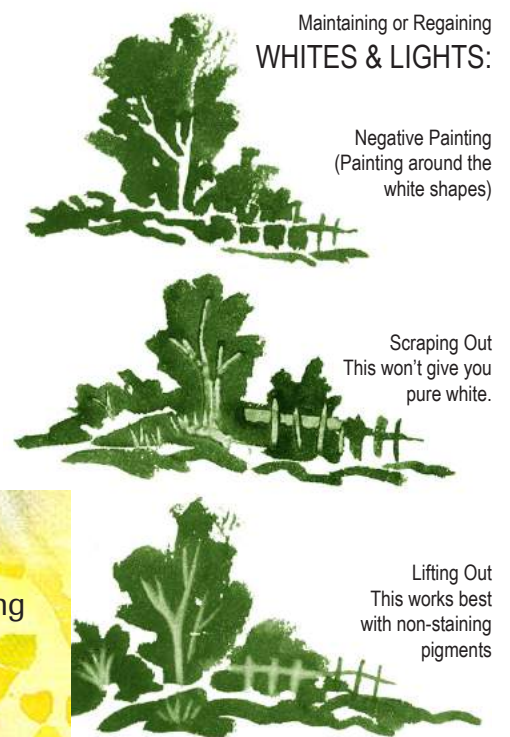
WHITES & LIGHTS

Mediums that use water to thin the paint are known collectively as water-based mediums. They include inks, colored dyes, acrylic, gouache (opaque watercolor), and transparent watercolors. Generally, when the term “watercolor” is used, it describes tube or pan paints that are transparent to semi-transparent and painted thinly on paper. If you are a watercolor “purist”, you only use the white of the paper for your whites, never an opaque white paint. Some watercolor painters stick to transparent pigments except at the very end of their painting, when they use Chinese White (an opaque white watercolor) to add highlights only. John Singer Sargent is famous for masterful brushwork, but he also used opaque white to add highlights at the end of his transparent watercolor work.

Today, almost anything goes as far as watercolor is concerned, including painting on Yupo, which is a polyester film rather than paper. But since there are still some watercolor groups around the country that prohibit the use of any opaque paints, you should know how to keep or regain whites or lights.



In the painting above by Zoltan Szabo, he uses negative painting to pull out the light tree trunks and branches, and also lifting to pull out some of the smaller branches (See the detail at right)



Exercise 3:

On one of the small paintings or samples you've done, go back and do some LIFTING OUT from passages of paint that are dark or very saturated.

Exercise 4:

Find a very pastel area where you can do some NEGATIVE PAINTING to pull out some additional shapes by painting an area around the pastel area a darker (or different) color.

Exercise 5:

Find a place where you can glaze a second or third wash of fairly saturated color. When the wash just barely loses its shine, scrape into it to reveal the color underneath. Scraping not only works to give you near white areas (if done in the first washes you apply to the white paper) but also can reveal dry color washes when you paint over them and then do your scraping. Remember that highly staining pigment colors nearly instantly infiltrate the paper surface. They won't lift back to white paper, nor will they scrape back to white. If you need PURE white paper, paint around white areas or protect them with masking.