

Glossary of Watercolor Painting Terms

Watercolor, generally referring to transparent watercolor, is a technique of painting in which pigments ground with a binder and diluted with water are applied in washes to white or light-tinted papers. “True” or “classic” watercolors are characterized by a luminous transparency: no matter how many layers of color are applied, the paint remains translucent and allows the light to penetrate and be reflected from the paper support. Watercolor paints were being made by the late 1700s, at first as hard, dry cakes. “Moist colors” introduced in the 1830s were easier to work with. Working with this essentially liquid medium, painters can achieve a wide range of artistic effects by varying the composition of the paint, the manner of application, and the texture of the paper.

accent A detail, brushstroke, or area of color placed in a painting for emphasis.

atmospheric perspective Suggesting perspective in a painting with changes in tone and color between foreground and background. The background is usually blurred and hues are less intense. (For example: when you look off into the distance things that are far away are distorted by the atmosphere causing them to look blurry and muted in color.)

background The area within a composition that appears further away from the viewer; objects appear smaller and with less detail.

binder The medium that holds pigment particles together in paint.

blotting Using an absorbent material such as tissues or paper towels, or a squeezed out brush, to pick up and lighten a wet or damp wash. Can be used to lighten large areas or pick out fine details.

cold pressed Watercolor paper that is cold pressed has mildly rough texture.

complementary colors Two hues directly opposite one another on a color wheel (for example, red and green, yellow and purple) which, when mixed together in proper proportions, produce a neutral gray. These color combinations create the strongest possible contrast of color, and when placed close together, intensify the appearance of the other. The true complement of a color can be seen in its afterimage.

composition The bringing together of parts or elements to form a whole; the structure, organization, or total form of a work of art. The “art” of arranging the elements and/or color of an artwork in a manner that pleases the eye.

deckle The rough edges of watercolor and drawing papers.

dry brush Any textured application of paint where your brush is fairly dry (thin or thick paint) and you rely the hairs of your brush, the angle of your stroke, and the paper’s surface texture to create broken areas of paint. The paint remains almost exclusively on the “hills,” or high points of a textured paper, creating a broken, mottled effect. This is essentially the opposite of a wash, where the pigment settles in the “valleys,” or hollows of the paper, leaving the high points white. Used for rendering a variety of textured surfaces — stone, weathered wood, foliage, lakes and rivers, bark, clouds.

easel A stand or resting place for working on or displaying a painting.

figure 1. Separate shape(s) distinguishable from a background or ground. 2. A human or animal form.

foreground The part in a scene or artwork that seems closest to you. Objects appear larger and more detailed.

foreshortening The technique of representing a three dimensional image in two dimensions using the laws of perspective.

genre A category of artistic work marked by a particular specified form, technique, or content.

genre painting The depiction of common, everyday life in art, as opposed to religious or portrait painting for example.

gouache 1. Watercolor painting technique using white and opaque colors. 2. A water-based paint, much like transparent watercolor but made in opaque form. Traditionally used in illustration.

graded wash A wash that smoothly changes in value from dark to light. Most noted in landscape painting for open sky work, but an essential skill for watercolor painting in general.

grain The basic structure of the surface of paper, as in fine, medium and rough grain.

highlight A point of intense brightness, such as the reflection in an eye.

hot pressed Hot pressed watercolor paper is pressed flat through hot cylinders; it is the smoothest texture available and preferred by artists who use lots of detail in their artwork. It is just like ironing your cotton shirt with a hot iron.

hue The pure state of any color or a pure pigment that has not had white or black added to it.

landscape A painting in which the subject matter is natural scenery.

linear A composition in which line is the dominant element in defining form as opposed to mass. Linear is considered the opposite of painterly.

medium (pl. media or mediums) 1. Most commonly, an artist's method of expression, such as ceramics, painting or glass. 2. A particular material along with its accompanying technique; a specific type of artistic technique or means of expression determined by the use of particular materials. 3. Medium can also refer to a liquid added to a paint to increase its ability to be worked without affecting its essential properties.

middle ground The part of a composition that appears between the foreground and background.

mixability The quality with which two paints can be combined to create a third. True pigments have better mixability than do hues.

monochromatic A single color (hue) and its tints and shades.

motif A term meaning "subject." Flowers or roses can be a motif.

muted Suppressing the full color value of a particular color.

negative space 1. The area around an object. 2. The areas of an artwork that are NOT the primary subject or object.

nonrepresentational Refers to art that does not depict recognizable figures or elements of the natural world. Nonrepresentational art can be abstract, non-objective, and decorative.

opaque Impenetrable by light; not transparent or translucent

opacity Denotes how much or little of the painting surface will show thru a layer of paint. True pigments tend to be more opaque, where hues tend to be more translucent.

organic Natural, or referring to nature in shape or form. Organic is the opposite of synthetic.

painterly The term refers to painting where the paint itself is loose, fluid or textured. Photographs and drawings where form is defined more by blocks of color than line are also often described as such.

palette The selection of colors an artist chooses to work with or the board or surface on which a painter mixes his or her colors.

pan color A semi-moist solid watercolor sold in a metal or plastic pan. Lighter weight and more portable than tube colors.

panorama A panorama is any wide view of a space.

paper weights The weight of a stack of watercolor paper expressed in numeric values; the higher the number, the heavier the paper. Watercolor papers are made from cotton rag and when they get wet, the paper will wrinkle up. So, when you paint with 140lb paper it will wrinkle up if you don't stretch your paper first. However, 300lb paper is thick enough to resist the wrinkling of the cotton fiber; this weight paper does not require stretching prior to painting.

perspective Representing three-dimensional objects and space in two dimensions in a way that imitates depth, height and width as seen with your eyes. Usually refers to linear perspective, which is based on the fact that parallel lines or edges appear to converge and objects appear smaller as the distance between them and the viewer increases. *Atmospheric perspective* (aerial perspective) creates the illusion of distance by reducing color saturation, value contrast, and detail in order to imply the hazy effect of atmosphere between the viewer and distant objects. *Isometric perspective* is not a visual or optical interpretation, but a mechanical means to show space and volume in rectangular forms. Parallel lines remain parallel; there is no convergence.

pigment Any coloring agent, made from natural or synthetic substances, used with a binder in paints or drawing materials. Pigments are derived from both natural and artificial sources. The earliest pigments were mined from colored clays of earth (ochers and umbers), but minerals and plants were also early sources for pigments.

polychrome Poly = many, chrome or chroma = colors. Having many colors; random or intuitive use of color combinations as opposed to color selection based on a specific color scheme.

positive space 1. The area an object occupies. 2. The area that IS the primary subject or object.

primary colors One of the three colors (red, yellow, and blue) that are the basis for all other color combinations. Pigment primaries are red, yellow, and blue; light primaries are red, green, and blue. Theoretically, pigment primaries can be mixed together to form all the other hues in the spectrum.

realism The depiction of figures, objects or scenes with minimal distortion or stylization. Realist artists depict subjects with objectivity and accuracy, rather than interpretation.

representational The term refers to art that depicts recognizable figures or elements of the natural world; unlike abstract art.

scale The size or apparent size of an object seen in relation to other objects, people, or its environment or format. Also used to refer to the quality or monumentality found in some objects regardless of their size. In architectural drawings, the ratio of the measurements in the drawing to the measurements in the building.

secondary color One of three colors created by mixing equal parts of two primary colors (red, blue, and yellow); the secondary colors are violet, orange, and green.

sketch A rough or loose visualization of a subject or composition.

still life A painting or other two-dimensional work of art representing inanimate objects such as bottles, fruit, and flowers. Also, the arrangement of these objects from which a drawing, painting, or other work is made.

study A comprehensive drawing of a subject or details of a subject that can be used for reference while painting.

technique An artist's skillful manipulation or application of materials. Also describes an entire process associated with a particular method, such as watercolor.

texture The actual or virtual representation of different surfaces, paint applied in a manner that breaks up the continuous color or tone.

thumbnail sketch A very small, simple sketch usually done before a painting to try out design or subject ideas.

tone A hue with gray added.

translucent A substance (paint) just clear enough to allow light to pass thru but not clear enough to reveal all form, line and color. A more translucent paint will show more paper thru the paint layer.

transparent Penetrable by light; materials or colors that you can see through.

trompe l'œil French for "fool the eye." A two-dimensional representation that is so naturalistic that it looks actual or real (three-dimensional.)

tube color A liquid watercolor or gouache sold in a tube. Tube colors tend to have more pigment and are typically easier to work

value The lightness or darkness of tones or colors. White is the lightest value; black is the darkest. The value halfway between these extremes is called middle gray.

vehicle The material in which a pigment is suspended in paint. Watercolors use gum arabic as their vehicle. Also known as a binder.

wash In painting, a thin, translucent layer of pigment, usually watercolor. Often used as the first layer of a sky.

watercolor Paint that uses water-soluble gum as the binder and water as the vehicle. Characterized by transparency. Also, the resulting painting.

watercolor brush The principle tool for watercolor painting. Watercolor brushes are a specific type of brush, made with soft hair. Good brushes are made from sable hair (an animal about the size of a weasel). These brushes are quite expensive, so many artists use brushes made of synthetic material such as nylon. Some brushes mix sable with nylon for a compromise between the two.

wet-on-wet The technique of painting wet color into a wet surface (paper). Color applied this way usually dries without a hard edge, diffusing and spreading the wash and creating atmospheric effects.