FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH PAINT, BRUSH AND PALETTE

— BY KENNETH WILLIAMS 6/2020



Whether using watercolor fresh from tubes or from pans the novice can be at a loss as to how load the brush with paint or water, or how to efficiently mix two or more paint colors. A brief explanation of these often forgotten beginning steps is given below.

1. Wet the paint pans with a drop or two of water or use a mister to quickly wet the colors. They are ready to use in about 30-60 seconds. The pre-wetted paint is easier to pick up with the brush when wetted and it is gentler on brushes. Scrubbing dried paints with a brush will wear out the points on natural hair and even synthetic brushes very quickly. When using fresh tube paint, only squeeze out enough required for your painting project. Usually, this is a pea-sized amount or smaller.
2. Wet the brush in clean water and wipe it lightly on a rag, paper towel or wet sponge.
3. Pull the brush across the pan or glob of wet paint one or more times to load the brush. An old brush can be used for moving paint to the palette and mixing if the paints are particularly dry and need scrubbing to release color.
4. Swirl the paint in the palette. Add water if necessary by dipping the brush into clean water and mixing it on the palette with the paint. Mix the wash darker than actually needed because the paint will dry somewhat lighter than when first applied.
5. If a large wash is needed, fill a saucer or mixing dish with an appropriate amount of water then add fresh paint until the necessary strength is achieved. Alternatively, a small amount of paint can be added to a saucer and a mister used to dilute the paint to the proper consistency.
6. Mix more paint than you think you might need. It is almost impossible to mix another batch of paint that will exactly match the first. Gauging the amount of paint needed gets easier with experience.
7. Test the paint for color and strength on scrap paper, the edge of your painting or in some inconspicuous place before using it.

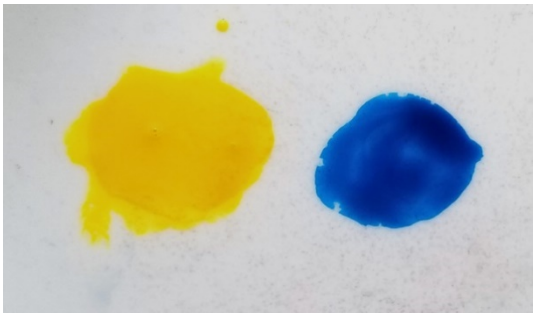
Do not use paint straight from the tube to paper unless the paper is very wet and you are mixing it around. Always add at least a bit of water otherwise the paint is likely to be too dark and will also crack after drying.

Mixing two or more colors –

The same basic procedure is used to mix two or more colors, however there are some differences.

1. Place the colors to be mixed near each other on the palette.

2. With the brush bring a small amount at a time of the darker paint into the lighter paint and mix until the correct color is obtained.

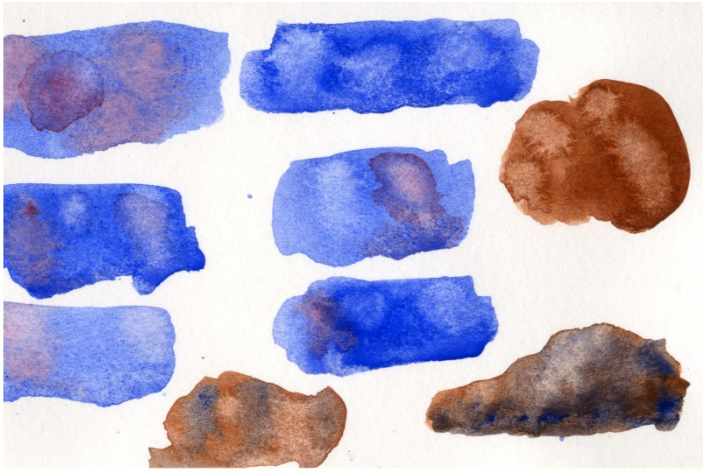




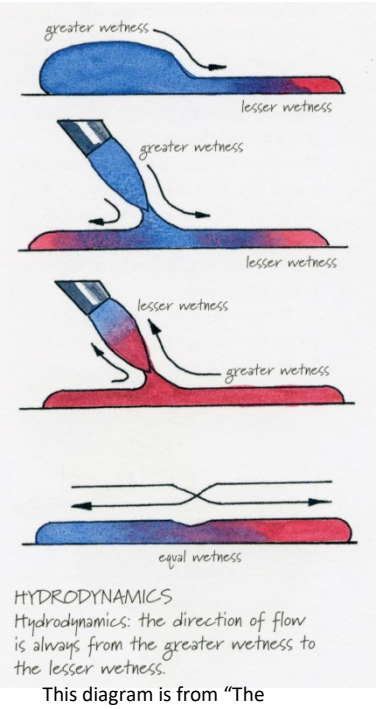
3. Often you may want to switch colors without cleaning the brush,. As an example when mixing yellow and red to make orange. Always start with the lighter color, in this example yellow to keep palette colors cleaner. Yellow is the color most likely to be affected by contamination by other pigments. A quick wipe or two with a brush wetted with clean water will usually clean palette colors sufficiently for use. Some us a second pan of yellow expressly for mixing greens to reduce contamination from blue pigments.

How water moves on paper –

A key to controlling watercolor is understanding how water moves on paper. Water always flows **from wetter to dryer areas**. Paint and water quickly flow from a fully loaded brush to dry paper. It also flows from a loaded brush to wet paper; if the paper is dryer than the brush. A damp brush that has been dried on a paper towel will suck up paint and water from the paper. A relatively dry brush is called a "thirsty" brush. **Importantly**, a wet brush placed on damp paper will flow onto the paper, moving and lifting paint pigment that has not dried enough to set into the paper. A line of accumulated pigment is deposited wherever the water stops moving; causing back-runs, "blossoms" or "cauliflowers" which are usually uncontrolled effects from painting and often not the effect intended. If used with intention, control and skill "cauliflowers" can become foliage, vegetation clouds or many other things.



Various backruns. Some can be useful if applied carefully.



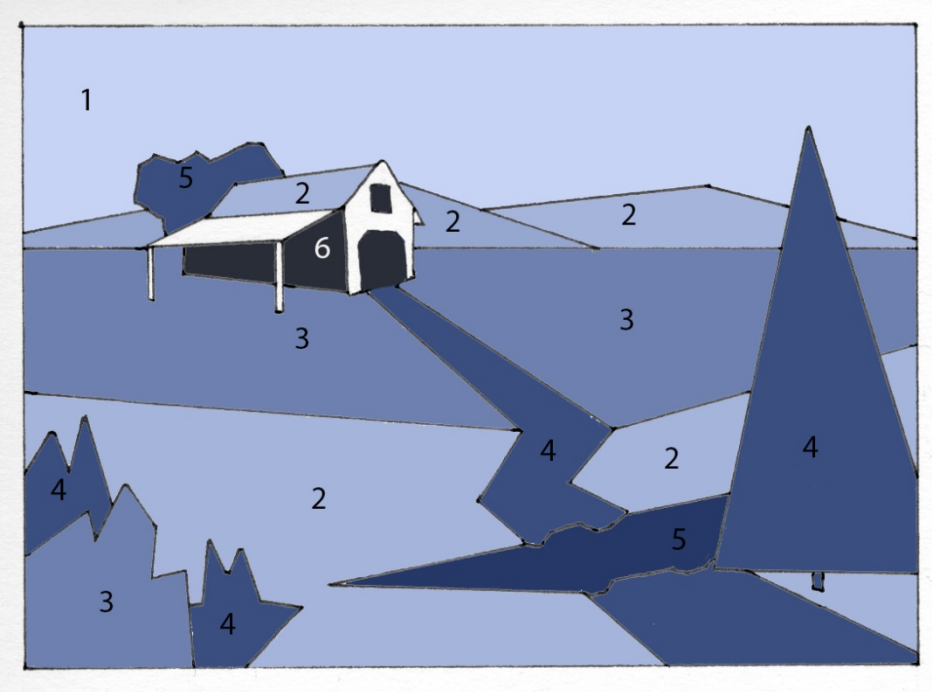
This diagram is from "The Watercolorist's Essential Notebook Landscapes by Gordon mac Kenzie

Painting with washes –

Begin by mixing a large wash, (about 4 tablespoons of water) with enough paint to make a light sky tone. More paint will be added to the wash to strengthen it as we progress through the painting.

The **roof and front of the barn will be reserved whites**. Try to avoid getting paint in these areas. If some accidently gets into the white area do not worry. The white easily can be repaired when the painting is dried. Your darkest tone in step 6 is black or almost so. **Do not mix you washes to dark from the beginning** or you will not produce an adequate range of tones.

1. Tilt your board or sketchbook to about a 30 degree angle. An angle is needed to create the bead of watercolor needed for this technique. Paint the sky and mountains with clean water. This will produce a "wet in wet wash" for the sky. If puddles form, wait for them to dry or damp them gently with a paper towel. Apply a stroke of sky toned wash across the top. The stroke should be straight. It should begin at the edge of the painting and move completely across to the other side. A bead of wash should form at the bottom of the stroke. Often, the first stroke does not form a bead. If so, repeat the application 1 time. Reload your brush with wash, and beginning on the same side of the painting as before. Place the tip of the brush into the bead of fresh paint from the previous stroke and make another stroke. Keep the tip of the brush in the bead of the preceding wash. Continue in this way through the sky and mountains. You may also paint through the tree behind the barn. Stop at the horizon line.
2. Strengthen the wash by adding a small additional amount of paint. Paint the foreground with clean water as before. Apply the wash in the same manner as step 1. However do one section of the foreground at a time. Remember to maintain a bead of paint in each section. Paint the barn roof with the same wash. When the mountains are dry, use the same wash to paint them.
3. Again darken the wash with a small amount of paint. Paint clear water over the mid-ground area between mountains and foreground. Apply the wash. Next paint the left, corner foreground shrub. Paint the shrub with the wash, **without**



using the clear water pre-wash. This is called painting" wet into dry". Remember to form a bead with this method of painting as well as "wet into wet" methods.

4. Again strengthen the wash with the addition of more color. Paint the remaining left corner foreground trees using the "wet into dry" method. With the same wash, paint the large right hand tree and the road. Paint through the shadow of the tree when painting the road.
5. Again strengthen the wash and paint the tree behind the barn and the foreground tree shadow. Use the "wet into dry" method.
6. Paint the darkest darks on the barn shaded area, the door and the window.
7. Evaluate the painting. Do some tones need strengthened? Make any adjustments need at this time. **Caution**! Do not over-work the painting. It is almost always best to leave it alone.

Compositional concepts and tips from this exercise –

1. "Rule of thirds" was used to position the barn and the bend in the road. The page was divided into thirds horizontally and vertically. Where these lines intersect are good locations for subjects of interest.
2. The focal point is the barn. It is emphasized by containing the most detail and more importantly, the sharpest tonal contrast. The lightest light (roof and front of barn) is placed against the darkest darks (Door, window and side of barn).
3. The picture is divided into background (light sky and mountains), mid-ground (Barn, tree and dark grass) and foreground (lighter grass and trees. Each layer tonally contrasts with adjoining layers.
4. The dark tree in the right foreground is united with the left foreground by the tree's shadow. The shadow also keeps the eye from leaving through the bottom of the picture and breaks up the road to prevent the viewer from getting to the point of interest too directly.
5. The road is a leading line going to the point of interest.
6. Tree size and shape are varied for interest.

Monochrome paintings can be very beautiful. The single color unifies the painting with no distraction from competing colors. Here is an example I painted with burnt umber watercolor after David Bellamy.



Wash problems –

Wrong paper –

The wrong choice of paper can be very frustrating and can make an even wash very difficult to achieve. Understand the paper choices you make and know what to expect from them. Ask a fellow artist or salesperson if unsure about a certain paper. Remember, in general, the more cotton or rag content the paper has, the easier it will be to work with.

Streaky, uneven washes are the most common problem.

The solution is more paint and water in the brush. To create an even wash:

Use a brush large enough to supply a generous amount of wash across the area to be painted with each stroke.

Making the stroke too quickly can also cause an uneven wash as the brush skips over the surface of the paper. Slow the painting process down somewhat to get an even flow of wash off the brush.

Make only **one** pass of the brush with each line of wash.

Keep the brush tip in the bead of previously applied paint.

No bead formed on the first pass of the wash.

You may need to paint the beginning stroke two times or more.

Increase the angle of your board or sketchbook. It should be tilted about 30 degrees or even more. Water flows downhill. Let gravity direct the flow of wash in your painting.

Bead dries before the next stroke can be applied.

This problem can occur because the weather is hot or excessively dry. Other more common causes are using too little wash, too small of a brush or painting too slowly.

Wash dries too light – Always mix washes a bit darker than you want the dried paint to be.

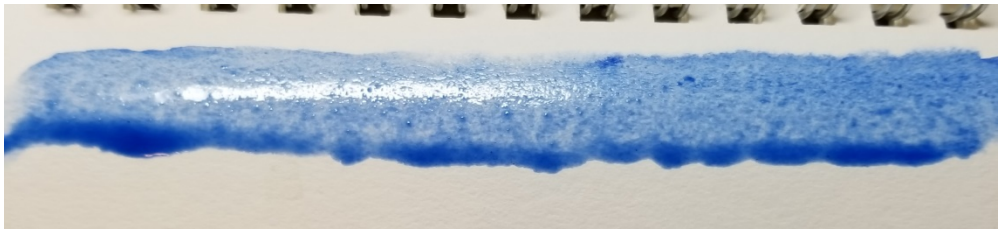
Mid-course corrections –

It is possible to correct a wash if it is still damp by misting the paper with water and working into the wet. The paper may be tilted in various directions to spread and control the flow of paint until it is evenly dispersed on the paper. Care and some practice are needed for this technique.

Recurring problems –

Painting over damp and drying paint - rarely improves the passage and often ruins it or makes the painting appear overworked. Paint it once and stop. Corrections can be made when the paint is completely dry.

Timidity – many, tiny hesitant strokes will appear overworked. Don't be afraid of making a "mistake". Paint with confident strokes.



The bead illustrated in a sky wash.

“The Boar Hills Kirk”

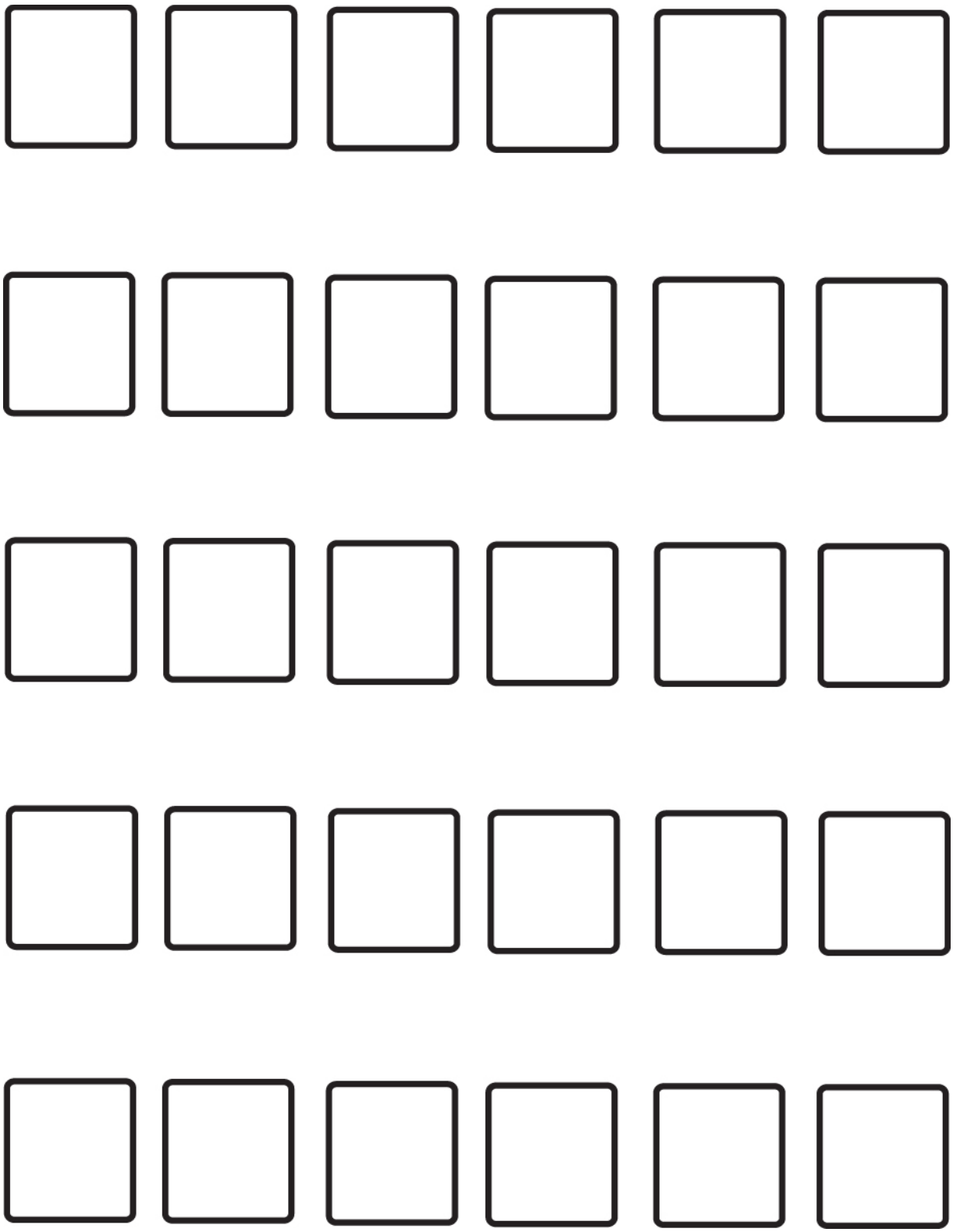
Below is a small Scottish, coastal church to practice with. Use any color. However darker colors will work best. Sepia, Burnt umber, Indigo, Ultramarine blue, Black or any other dark color will make a good choice. This is about a 5 x 7 picture but you can enlarge or reduce it as you desire.



Try a couple of small thumbnail sketches in graphite to figure out a tonal pattern that works for you or use what I have done. You may prefer to do the sky as one
Smooth, wash or even leave it white.



This template is designed to practice small even washes by painting a palette of all your colors.



THE BASIC RULES OF WATER COLOR

There are many ways and many books written about water color and how to do it. These few rules are so general as to be almost forgotten but are the foundation of good water color technique. It is good to keep them in mind as you paint. The most frequent problems artists new to water color have are:

* Use of brushes too small for the passage to be painted.
* A water to paint ratio that does not work for the passage.
* Use of too many brush strokes.
* Over working passages.

Some general Guidelines

1. Map out the whites. Always note where the lightest lights will be and save white paper for them.
2. Paint "back to front" which is usually top to bottom. Start at the back of the painting and work forward.
3. Paint "large to small". Paint the largest shapes first.
4. Paint "light to dark". It is much easier to darken a watercolor than it is to lighten it.
5. Use a broad tonal range. Punch up the painting with a few blacks or very dark tones and white.
6. Use the largest brush possible for as long as possible.
7. Color mixes should contain no more than 3 colors to avoid "mud".
8. Use only 2 colors for mixes if possible.
9. Avoid painting too thin and pale unless applying multiple glazes.
10. Add enough water to the paint to maintain transparency and avoid opacity.
11. Paint a passage in as few strokes as possible. Avoid using too many strokes.
12. Do not paint into or try to correct slightly damp paint unless you are applying a specific technique.
13. Do not overwork it. Less is always better than more.
14. All rules can be broken.



