

Artist Watercolor Tips

Painting Winter Scenes in Watercolor

Consider the snow-covered landscape. Envision the bright light reflected from the surface of the snow and the softness of shadows over the surface. See the dark contrasts of tree trunks, the vertical edges of buildings or the rigid surfaces of partially submerged boulders. These are all elements in the joy of painting winter scenes. One thing that is for sure, snow is not white, but a reflective surface that echoes pastel tones of all colors. The old adage about white being the presence of all color is certainly true when painting snow. Shadows are not dark masses, but are, at the most, soft middle tones. Soft pastels are also valuable in depicting the sky's reflections on the surface of fresh snow.

Consider another possibility. You can paint a perfect wintry snow scene by painting what isn't physically there just as well as what is there. Examine the shadows and any darks in the scene. Since the subjects are blanketed in snow, paint any shadows rather than the subject from which the shadow is being created. It is a positive/negative style that is challenging to do. Try to ignore the reasons for shadows and paint only the resulting shadows. It sounds insane, but the result can be very appealing.

When painting snow, there are many ways to achieve the crispness of a freshly fallen surface, but most watercolorists use a masking liquid to preserve the paper surface and to control the amount of colorant that is allowed to penetrate that area of the paper. This liquid can be applied with a brush for wide swatches of white/light paper preservation or with thin brushes, cotton swabs, or even quill/dip-style pen points for fine detail. Two rules to remember when working with liquid frisk: After application, allow the surface to dry completely before over-painting. Second, remove the liquid mask material as soon after the painting is dry as is possible. The longer it stays on the paper, the harder it will be to remove. Best results are achieved by using a ball of old masking fluid collected and saved from a previous use. It will adhere to the somewhat sticky surface of the mask and help to pick it up without damage to nearby painted areas. Note: A light application of soap lather in your brush or other application tool immediately after application will aid in the removal of the mask liquid.

Other masks include torn paper "stencil"-type blocks used primarily for the control of broadcast droplets as in the depiction of heavy snowfall. Areas covered with the paper mask will be protected from the random spray of paint as it is discharged from the brush tip. While this mask style is limited in application, it is one of the easiest ways to "protect" areas adjacent to paint speckling procedures.

There are a number of ways to capture winter scenes where the snow is just beginning and where no strong buildup or total coverage has taken place. Using an absorbent material over freshly painted, still-wet areas can reclaim whites. There will be no "hard edge" look to this light-recapturing method, but for some winterscapes, it is ideal. Cloth, chamois, a clean paintbrush, or even small clumps of fresh bread (squeezed into a tight knot) can be used to absorb liquid colorants.

Another way to create highlights is by scraping through totally dry painted areas with the edge of a sharp blade, such as a stencil knife blade or safety razor blade. Both of these tools will yield a skip-and-scratch look not unlike blowing snowflakes. Care should be exercised in the scraping technique so that narrow scratches are used.

creating those most like single flakes of snow. Too wide and the scrape will portray damage rather than a controlled subtractive method. Too deep and actual cuts rather than surface scratches might result. Just a little practice will render you an expert. This technique is also widely used to create the look and feel of grasses in foreground, to catch sharp highlights on the surfaces of objects or to offer tiny nips of contrasting, pure white for any reason.

Another method for helping to create a snow scene is the use of an opaque white paint in tandem with your watercolor palette. This could be white gouache or even white acrylic. They are used primarily as topical colorants after the final watercolor work is nearly finished. This is primarily because they alter the surface, and watercolor does not perform the same over them as on the surface of unaltered paper. When using acrylic over watercolor, eliminate brush strokes by smoothing over the painted area with a cotton ball or cotton swab. This will bond the opaque tone over the surface without leaving any telltale evidence.

Pastels can also be used over the surface to soften and lighten areas. Apply the pastel where the highlight is wanted, and then smooth the surface to gently work the powder into the paper. This is a fragile surface and should not be subjected to abrasion, but pastels can yield small, controlled areas of light tone that are strategically placed within a watercolor painting.

Whether you use a large area liquid mask, a paper mask, experiment with wet pigment removal with a cloth or cotton swab, scrape with a blade, use pastel or opaque paint in light areas or paint only the shadows of objects to create a winterscape, you will have a delightful experience in the process.

How To - Stretching Watercolor Paper

For decades, watercolorists have used simple yet effective ways to hold their saturated watercolor paper flat as it dries. The purpose for this "stretching" is to insure a flat, pillow-free surface on which to work and to allow the painting to dry flat for ease of mounting and framing. Some of the simple, direct methods of stretching include the use of tacks and different types of tape. Newer materials now exist to simplify the process, but many artists stand by their tried and true methods.

But before you can stretch a sheet, there are tips that will help insure success. Perhaps the most crucial step in proper paper stretching is the degree of soak given the paper. Some professionals prefer to "spot dampen" their paper, allowing a very specific control of wet-on-wet work. This can be accomplished by using a mist sprayer to saturate certain areas within the full sheet area. Sprayers that have a very light spray broadcast--those that spray very small droplets--work best.

Such sprayers can be purchased at art material supply stores. Mist methods also work very well for watercolor blocks, which cannot be totally immersed.

When overall, thorough dampening is desired, a deep soaking is considered the best idea. This total submersion affords the fastest and most fully saturated soak. Some care should be exercised, however. If paper is allowed to soak too long it can become fragile and is easily damaged. If not soaked long enough, it will resist stretching, may not be evenly "opened" to pigment and might not flatten smoothly. An average of 30 to 45 minutes usually works best for mid-weight papers. Really heavy papers may

require a longer soak, so some experimentation will help. Warm water slightly speeds the saturation process, but avoid hot water.

Where to soak the paper is always a consideration. Obvious choices include the bathtub; but, in studio situations, other options might be needed. Special trays are available up to around 30" x 20". Alternatively, builders' supply outlets offer trays for mixing mortar or potting mixes, and these large trays are perfect for soaking sheets of watercolor paper. Some artists use small children's wading pools for full sheets or oversized papers.

Remember to allow the soaked paper to rest for a short time after removal from the water. Lift and hold the paper by the two top corners, which will shed excess surface water. Then lay the paper in a draft-free area to let the moisture even out. After about 10 minutes, the paper is ready to stretch.

One benefit of thorough soaking is the ease of paper sizing at that softened, pliable stage. It is very easy to size dampened paper and to create a feathered edge simply by pulling the wet paper into sections. For exact sizing, decide on the dimensions desired. Lay the dampened paper over a sharp edge, like that of a counter or desk. Gently pull the paper down, using the sharp edge as a cutting device. The result will be a straight tear and a soft-deckle edge.

Once the paper is evenly saturated, the stretching can begin. A board of some sort is required to which the thoroughly dampened paper can be attached. The old world purist's method is to tack the edges of the paper to a wooden board using thumbtacks. But, over time, the perimeter of the board begins to deteriorate. A more modern method is to attach the wet paper with gummed mounting tape (brown packaging tape), which grips the edges of the wet paper and holds it fast to the board. (Allow a 1" overlap on all sides of the paper to insure a good grip.) With the tape attached to the wet paper edge, simply moisten the dry side and stick it to the mounting board. This taping method works well on Masonite and wood. New specialty tapes are also available that are self-adhesive, clear and waterproof, yet capable of holding dampened paper. They are sold by the roll at art supply centers.

Perhaps the most interesting of the stretching methods are the new clamp and strip systems. These make fast work of preparation. Some of these boards employ a rigid plastic wrap-around edge that surrounds the outer border of the paper as it attaches to the backing board. The wraparound edge is held firmly in place with a second tap-in strip, easily and quickly assembled with a lightweight mallet. The hold is strong, facilitating all weights of paper up to 300 pound.

Other systems use a tap-in strip and slot along the outer edges of the mounting board. The paper is caught between the groove and the stretcher strip, thereby locking the paper in place. One advantage of this style of stretcher is that it goes on very quickly and holds weights up to 140 pound. This system allows for the efficient use of lighter weight papers.

Any of these stretching methods can also assist in flattening watercolors that have become buckled over time or those that were initially painted without some form of stretching device. To stretch a completed watercolor, mist the back side of the paper. Allow this mist to soak in, and then repeat. It may require as many as four or five mists, but the paper will slowly absorb the moisture and soften. It is then ready for stretching/flattening.

How to Stretch Canvas

Stretching your own canvas is fairly easy once you know the procedure and have the proper tools and materials. Note that the canvas referred to below is pre-primed; but you could also use the following procedure with raw canvas and, after it has been stretched, prime it with two coats of acrylic gesso. Please read through all of the instructions first, since certain steps must be prepared for in advance.

First you will need to gather a few tools and materials: canvas pliers, stapler/staples or hammer and tacks, stretcher strips, and canvas. In addition, a T-square is convenient to help you insure that the stretchers are square. Then follow these steps to stretch your canvas:

1. Select the appropriate-sized stretchers for the canvas you want to build. Your art supply store has a variety of pre-cut wooden frame rails (or stretcher bars) that have interlocking mitered edges.
2. Once your stretcher frame is assembled on a flat surface, you should verify that it is square. Do this by taking a tape measure and checking that the diagonal distances from both opposing corners are equidistant. (They almost always will be.) If you encounter an offset, you can correct it by attaching a small metal right-angle brace on the inner frame corner. A small plywood right-angle triangle attached to the rear frame corner will also help correct any shift.
3. For frame rails longer than 36 inches, an interior brace should be inserted between these rails to support them from bowing inward after the canvas has been attached. This will also protect against frame distortion during periods of fluctuating humidity. If this type of support rail did not already come with your pre-cut frame, you should cut a piece of similar wood and attach it with the type of braces detailed in step 2.
4. Take the canvas and lay the primed side down on a clean, flat surface. Place the frame atop the canvas and then cut away any excess material so that there are two inches of excess canvas bordering the frame on all sides. It is important that you leave this border material because this is what you will use to grip, stretch, and attach the canvas to the frame.
5. Fold one side of the canvas over one of the shorter frame rails and then attach a canvas tack at the center of the outside edge of that rail.
6. At the opposite side, use canvas pliers (which are similar to regular pliers except they have a broader gripping area) to grip the canvas at mid-rail. It may be helpful for you to set the frame upright while doing this. With a firm grip, pull the canvas until a straight crease is formed to the tacked end. While keeping tension on the canvas, insert another tack at the center edge of the rail, just like the other side. Note that you may also use a staple gun/staples instead of tacks. (The Arrow JT-21 is easy to use.)
7. Move to the next frame rail (one of the longer ones) and repeat steps 5 and 6. As you do, you will notice a triangular canvas crease as you attach the third side and then a diamond-shaped crease when the fourth tack is attached on the remaining mid-rail.
8. Now, place temporary tacks at all four corners. Starting with the center of one of the long rails, grip the canvas tightly with the pliers and fasten tacks at 2" intervals. Repeat with several tacks in both directions (from center) and then switch to the opposite side and repeat this process. Continue working from the center until both long sides are completely tacked down to all but one inch from each corner, stretching the canvas evenly as you proceed.
9. Once both long sides are finished, remove the temporary tacks that you fastened in step 8. Now repeat the same fastening process for both of the short sides, working out from the centers. For smaller canvases, one entire short side can be fastened first, followed by the opposite side. Larger canvases should be rotated several times to evenly stretch

the material over the frame. Note that a primed linen canvas (oil-primed linen, in particular) will normally require that the tacks be placed closer together, due to the limited stretch of this material.

10. Fold and pleat the corners of the canvas and then neatly wrap them around to the rear of the canvas frame. Keeping tension on the material, tack all of the excess cloth to the rear of the frame so that it is neatly secured. Then place tacks on all four outer corners. This excess material is important to have in case you ever need to restretch or remount the canvas.

Any remaining canvas indentations or ripples can be reduced by moistening the affected area with a damp sponge. Be careful not to saturate, and allow the canvas to dry completely in a well-ventilated area.

Keep in mind that it is easier to stretch primed cotton and Polyflax canvas than it is to mount a primed linen canvas, since linen fibers do not stretch as much. Oil-primed canvas requires the most attention when mounting on a frame because it has virtually no stretch. When working with this type of canvas, you may have to remove tacks in wrinkled sections and then restretch and retack.

By following the above steps and using proper materials and a few tools, you can easily build your own canvas. With a little practice, the process becomes much faster and easier, almost to the point of becoming routine.