

Painter's Tech—Sketches

pushing water



Paradoxically both diametrically opposed and resonators painting watercolor portraits deepens your oil painting. And vice-versa.

Meaning in painting is achieved through the applications and layers of paint.

Meaning in oil paint is derived through its materiality and autobiographical mark making rendered upon the abstract structural surface (the patina) of the painting.

Meaning in watercolor is achieved through alternating washes of cool and warm tones. The 'patina' of a watercolor painting is rendered through water and corresponding pigment loads.

Watercolor is the more technically demanding of all of the painting mediums. The ability to draw is implicit. There is nowhere to hide.

As with all of the other media of painting, there are a multitude of approaches and possibilities to watercolor—wet-in-wet, dry brush, structured layering of washes—hot and cold press papers and boards of varying weights—all demanding their own unique strategies and methods.

The commonality is that watercolor incurs a reductive approach. Light to dark with an ample dose of wet subtraction to further articulate facial structure. I use a nylon filbert brush to lift out and refine facial form. But gently! Once the paper tears and pells you are doomed. With experience you learn just how far you can lift out.



Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) would often do oil studies for his watercolor paintings. The medium of watercolor is well suited to the narrative of sculling and skimming across the Schuylkill River. The oil study feels heavy in comparison.

Employing a layered approach to watercolor, and waiting aeons for it to dry, I find it is of immense benefit to paint the same subject in both mediums. They sound off of one another, each offering pathways of discovery and resolution.

That said, it is important to remember that one must remain true to the medium and not force it to be something it is not.



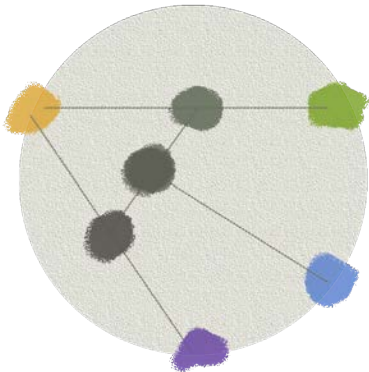
Once the head is lightly sketched in with a 2H graphite pencil I size and stretch the taped watercolor paper with a copious wash of lukewarm water and a broad wash of cobalt blue.

This serves several purposes. The paper is prepped and the primary figure/ground edge (the *sfumato*) set. [I'll discuss the sfumato in a later issue.]

Best to let the painting dry fully otherwise the vales and hillocks of water saturated paper will likely gather your pigment in poorly placed ponds.

The cobalt blue block-in resolves the structural issues of the head and expression. Ever-present and annoying drawing issues will manifest.

I prefer an optical grisaille that effects a mother-of-pearl tone.



The color theory is the Primary Compound Complement. Orange/Green produces the tertiary color which is a toned greenish hue (i.e., terre verte). Orange/Violet produces a russet. Toned green and russet sit opposite blue, hence it is a compounded complement.



That's the theory. In practice there is a fair amount of leeway: terre verte/raw umber; permanent green/burnt sienna, etc. Be aware, however, of the pigment's refractive index. (See [Tech-Sketch #1](#) on glazing.)

For this copy of Degas' *Emma Dobigny* I used emerald green/venetian red. My rationale is to punch down the darks without losing translucency. Deep dark passages can be the devil in watercolor. If you're not careful they'll up and die faster than gold fish.



A light wash of Naples Yellow knits it all together and harmonizes the head.

The middle passages are alternating cool and warm washes. Mostly burnt sienna tempered with venetian red and a wisp of vermilion as needed.

For the cool flesh passages a gray produced from potter's pink and cerulean blue is the cat's pyjamas. It's lighter, more ethereal, than Paynes gray, which is a mix of ivory black and ultramarine blue. My advice: Save yourself a few bucks and invest in cerulean blue. You may have to skip a few dinners to recover your budget, but it is worth the sacrifice.

Always, always a light touch. To emulate the quality of flesh my brush dances on the surface like a waterbug, pushing the water's edge where the the pigment reticulates giving a sense of flush and delicately charged capillaries in the cheeks and body of the nose.





Charging forward, striving for the full stretch of light/dark, cool/warm is fraught with peril in watercolor.

Alas, there is no choice other than to settle for an unresolved painting or to risk color collapse.

That's the game of painting. Finding that edge of optimal conclusion.

With every charge that oversteps and plunges into the abyss you acquire a finer sense of where to draw that line.

If you always stop short you'll never hit that edge.