Watercolour Tips for Beginners

Tip 1. Saving White Paper

The first and most obvious difference is the fact that watercolour is transparent. It relies on untouched paper for the clean, crisp whites. This means you must decide from the very beginning where the areas of white will be in your painting and plan ahead to preserve these areas.

Clean, white paper contrasting with strong dark tones give impact to the cabins on these trawlers.

The process for successful watercolour painting, is to avoid the areas to be left white and apply the lightest washes first, gradually working your way towards darker washes. Try to cover large areas fairly loosely in the early stages of the painting, applying tighter detail towards the end. Here are a few points to keep in mind...

Tip 2. Thumbnail Sketches

Small thumbnail sketches allow you to shuffle your subject around and adjust the composition before you start to paint. Having a plan to work to makes it much easier to avoid problems, particularly when it comes to arranging tonal (light dark) contrast. Break your thumbnail sketches into about four different tonal areas and shade them in. This lets you manipulate the lights and darks so the maximum contrast occurs at the centre of interest.

Tip 3. Colour Harmony

Of all the watercolour tips for beginners, maintaining colour harmony is one of the most important. There are a few simple things to remember to maintain colour harmony throughout your painting.

Limit your palette

Dipping into twenty different colours spread around your palette is tempting but usually results in a discordant, muddy work. Limit your colours to just two or three, particularly in the early stages of a painting. Your subject will dictate which ones to choose. I find for buildings, landscape etc. starting with washes of earth colours - Raw Sienna and Burnt Sienna plus a little Ultramarine or Indigo, depending on what sort of atmosphere you're after, gives a tight harmonious foundation to work on. More intense colours can be carefully introduced later if necessary.

Tip 4. Foreign colours

How often do you look at a painting and see an area of colour that doesn't seem to fit? A group of trees in an out of place green, a discordant blue river or a purple flower that seems to jump out of the bunch. The remedy to this problem is simple, introduce more of the discordant colour to the rest of the painting.

Allowing the Permanent Rose, in the painting above, to spill out across the surface ties the colour into the work. Had it been restricted just to the focal area it would have looked out of place.

Tip 5. Tie up colour

A few fine calligraphic lines in a harmonious colour will usually tighten up a disjointed colour arrangement.

Use a #1 or 2 liner brush or pen and ink. It is important to use just one colour for these lines or you run the risk of adding to the confusion. If you use ink, a fine spray of water quickly after the ink is applied, will soften the lines and create some interesting feathering effects.

Tip 6. Dark Tones

Avoid neutral darks - a painting will have more life and character if the darks tend to either warm or cool. To mix a rich strong dark don't use an opaque Yellow. Windsor & Newton Quinacridone Gold or Rowney Indian Yellow work best. Most other yellows make muddy darks. As well as a transparent yellow, you will need lots of pigment and very little water. It's a good idea to dip straight from one colour to the next without rinsing the brush in between. Rinsing only dilutes the mix and moves it away from a strong dark.

Tip 7. Centre of Interest or Focal Point

A focal point or Centre of Interest is an area of your painting that captures and holds a viewer's attention before letting it wander off to other regions of the painting. As well as an interesting part of the subject, the centre of interest should contain the maximum tonal contrast and strongest region of colour.

For a painting to be successful the centre of interest should be obvious and well positioned. Avoid placing the centre of interest in the middle of a painting (either horizontally or vertically) unless you are after a static, formal composition.

Keeping the centre of interest an unequal distance from each side helps position it correctly. Breaking the horizontal and vertical axis roughly in the ratio of 1:2 will also help to place the centre of interest

Tip 8. Don't Overwork Your Painting

A painting filled with carefully laboured detail from one edge to the other can be difficult to look at. If you like to work with fine detail, consider including some areas of relief.

In this painting the viewer's eye can wander between the interesting textures and detail of the focal area and flat areas of relief provided by the expanse of foreground water.

Tip 9. Drawing

To produce successful paintings it is important to practice drawing.

No matter what you are drawing it is important to first consider how your subject will be placed on the page. Small thumbnail sketches before you start your drawing are a good way to work out the composition.

Start your drawing by mentally reducing the subject to a few simple shapes. Sketch these in lightly and accurately, then proceed to break these up into smaller more detailed shapes. Don't start at one corner of the subject and work your way across to the other.

Your drawing will look better if the most interesting part (called the centre of interest or focal point) is not placed along either of the pages centre lines. The strongest tonal (light / dark) contrast should be placed at the centre of interest.

Have some areas of the drawing less detailed than others. Try and keep most of the detail in the area of the centre of interest.

To gain confidence, practice drawing on large sheets of cheap paper with a soft (5B or 6B) pencil, charcoal, or pastel pencil. Stand up, work on a vertical surface (or surface at right angles to your line of vision) and move your arm from the shoulder. Work from large and bold to fine and detailed. Only the final finishing off needs to be done with small, tight hand movements.

Practice - It doesn't matter what you draw - you have to train your eye to accurately judge proportion and your hand to accurately convert these judgements to marks on paper. There are no shortcuts here, lots and lots of pencil shavings are the only answer.

Tip 10. Necessary Tools

A list of watercolour tips for beginners would be incomplete without a description of the most necessary tools and materials.

One great thing about watercolour painting, if you are just getting started, is the small amount of equipment you need.

A few colours, four or five brushes, some paper to paint on, and that's about it! An old white plate will do for a palette or you can buy a cheap plastic one. The best advice I can give though, is to buy artist quality paint and good paper.

Enjoy what you have done!

Put a matt around your work, sit down with a glass of wine or cup of coffee, and look at all the good things you have achieved. It is important to feel good about your work. Dwelling on mistakes or problems is disheartening and makes it difficult to move on. I have yet to see a painting without some good points. Concentrating on the positive aspects of your work gives you confidence and enthusiasm, and allows you to build on your successes.

Summing Up Watercolour Tips For Beginners

- Preserve white paper right from the start.

- Work out your composition with a thumbnail sketch before you begin.

- Limit your palette to maintain colour harmony.

- Don't allow foreign colours to cause distraction - link them to the rest of the painting.

- Consider using a tie up colour to give the painting unity.

- Make your dark colours either warm or cool to avoid neutral dead spots.

- Make your centre of interest or focal point dominant

- Don't overwork - allow for some areas of simple understated relief.

- Practise drawing - it is the fundamental skill all your painting will be based on.

- Be conservative when accumulating painting gear - you really don't need much!

- Enjoy your successes!