

Watercolour: Flat Wash & Layering

by Kim Fjordbotten

Materials

Black waterproof marker
Xacto knife
Card stock or Bristol paper
Watercolours
Watercolour brushes

Project

Watercolours are naturally transparent. Rich colour can be created by layering flat washes of colour. In this project student will draw repeating and overlapping shapes. Then they will add several translucent layers of monochromatic or analogous colours to create depth and highlights in a watercolour painting. Waiting for the layers to dry teaches patience. Wet on wet painting will create soft-focus edges. Wet on dry painting will create crisp edges.

Art Concepts

Wash: A transparent layer of diluted colour that is brushed on.

Monochrome: A single colour in all its values.

Analogous colours: A grouping of related colours next to each other on the colour wheel. Example: Yellow, Yellow Green, and Green.

Flat Wash (also known as Glaze): An area of a painting where a wash of single colour and value is painted in a series of multiple, overlapping strokes following the flow of the paint. A slightly tilted surface aids the flow of your washes. Paper can be dry or damp.

Foreground: The area of a painting closest to the viewer. In a landscape this includes the area from the viewer to the middle distance.

Middle ground: The area of a painting between the foreground and the background. In a landscape this usually where the focal point is set.

Background: The area of a painting farthest from the viewer. In a landscape this would include the sky and horizon. In a still life or portrait it could be a wall or room interior.

Transparent is just as the word describes. Transparent watercolours allow the light to shine through to the watercolour paper and in turn lets the white of the paper reflect back. The colours look clean, crisp, and glowing.

Procedure

While looking at a leaf, students draw and then cut a leaf shape to create a stencil. A photo could be printed and cut as well. Here, we created a negative stencil. Younger students could trace the positive shape.

The simple leaf shape is then traced several times on a piece of watercolour paper. Encourage overlapping. Students should consider the overall composition while drawing.



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Adding Colour in Layers

1. The first layer is the lightest (dilute colour with a lot of water). It can be painted over the whole surface.
2. The second layer is a little darker (more saturated). Think of this layer as showing shadows hitting every leaf.
3. With a smaller brush add the third layer, a little darker and richer than the second. This colour will start to define the shapes behind the foreground leaves.



4. Keep adding layers of dark (even more colour saturated). Older student may accomplish more layers than younger students. In our sample, we made eight tones. Each layer got darker and bluer by using analogous colour mixing.

Have students keep a record of all their tones on a separate piece of paper.

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5. Here is a powerful demonstration of complimentary colour mixing. Black is not needed to make shadows. Red is the complimentary colour to green. The next step is to apply a transparent layer of diluted red watercolour over top of the green samples. Look at the effect two different washes have on the various colours. Now add two washes of red strategically to your leaf painting to create dramatic shadows. Watch as the dark areas appear to recede. Adding this contrast will make the unpainted areas seem to jump off the page as if they were highlighted.



More Inspiration

This project could be completed using any organic or geometric shape.

Notice in the "Bonfire!" painting, three layers of monochromatic browns created a simple dramatic composition. The unpainted area of white looks very bright in comparison.

