



SECRETS OF WATERCOLOR PAINTING

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There are no secrets to a successful watercolor painting. Or are there?

Are there secrets to the craft of watercolor painting – things that if you mastered them you would be able to master the craft?

A lot of what goes into a successful painting, or even a great career, has to do with hard work and perseverance. You often need to just keep at it until you learn enough to succeed on a regular basis. You then continue to add to your skill and knowledge and before you know it you are a successful artist.

But I think there are some things that definitely help a budding artist get past his or her struggles and go on to have consistent success in painting. I call these “Secrets” but they could also be called rules, or laws, or many other less exciting terms. These are the things that I have learned in my years as an artist – things I have used to create a style and a career as a watercolor painter.

In this book I will go into detail about many of these “secrets”. I will start out with the more “beginner” secrets, and then as we go along I will get into more advanced information. This is not really an “art instruction” book – I have written this to inspire you as a watercolor artist and to help you reach as far as you can. But as I go along I will also include some techniques that I think will help your watercolor paintings. Here is part of the formula that works for me:

INSPIRATION + TECHNIQUES + HARD WORK = SUCCESS!

So let's begin.

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Where are you today in your artistic journey?

That's where you need to begin. It doesn't matter what heights you want to reach as an artist - you first need to determine where you are now, and then build on that. I'm talking about everything that has to do with you as an artist. This would include your training and education. It would also include your track record to date as an artist - the shows you've been in, awards you have won, all the "accomplishments" that make up an artist's career.

But there are also many intangible qualities that make up you as an artist right now.

Things like how you see yourself as an artist. If you see yourself as a beginner that doesn't know anything, you might be afraid to enter the shows that could help you grow as an artist. Maybe you're more advanced than you think, but you're letting other artists around you define who you are. Or let's look at the other extreme - possibly you see yourself as more advanced than you actually are. You may need some more training in drawing or perspective to get to a new level in your work. That's why it's important to at least determine where you are now in your expertise.

So the first secret I'd like to reveal to you is this:

SET A BASELINE.

All this means is to set a starting point. Another definition is this: "a usually initial set of critical observations or data used for comparison or a control". How are you going to know where you are going if you don't know where you are beginning? That's what a baseline will help you with.

This can sometimes be difficult or even painful, but it's essential to any long-term growth. If you have just started in watercolor this is easy, but if you've been painting awhile it may be more of a challenge. You will have to be honest with yourself about your artwork and ask yourself a few questions like these?

What do I like about my artwork?

What do I not like or what bothers me about it?

What is my biggest challenge with the medium?

What kind of challenges in painting have I already worked through successfully?

How does my work compare with other artists in my area? With other artists around the world that I admire?

Those last two questions can be extra tough to answer. Don't dwell on them too much - although at first it can be good to compare yourself to others, later I will show you the wisdom of ignoring other artists and going after your own style.

These questions will give you a better idea of where you are at Today and what to shoot for. Really spend some time thinking about what you like about your work, and what direction you might want to do in. Think about some ways you might want to improve your work. Start with the small things . . . maybe you need to improve your use of value, or color. I spent a lot of time early in my career trying to get a handle on the values in my paintings, but then I noticed that my colors were kind of washed out. So I began to learn about color theory and ways to strengthen the colors in my paintings. What is it that you want to focus on right now? And that brings us to my next "secret".



WHAT IS YOUR FOCUS? (PART ONE)

You really need focus to improve your paintings, or to open up new markets for your work. As I realized that I needed to concentrate on the colors in my paintings, I began to study the things that would help me. And, of course, to practice these things over and over until they were second nature.

Have you decided the one thing that you most need to work on right now? Maybe it's a bunch of things, but it can be overwhelming to attempt to improve in too many areas at once. So choose one and concentrate on that!

I mentioned before that I focused on value and its effect on a painting early in my journey. That was because I had heard that value was one of the best ways to make a painting stand out. And I still agree with that. Here's some of the things I concentrated on to help myself with this painting element:

I did a value sketch for every one of my paintings - hundreds of them filling many sketch books. Today I usually work the value patterns out later in the painting process (it's still important!) but back then I needed to work through the discipline of the studies.

I studied art books to see what they said about value. This helped me learn how to arrange my values around the painting.

This might be the most important thing - I set aside my study of other things (like color, for instance) to concentrate on value. This allowed me to develop this part of my work without having to worry about the rest.

Focus is a wonderful thing - it is a laser-like tool to help you push through challenges in your artwork. This is what Charles Dickens said about it:

"I never could have done without the habits of punctuality, order and diligence; the determination to concentrate on one subject at a time."



Usually the best way to go about this is to focus on what comes naturally to you. For me this was value, and still is. I have improved my use of color in a painting, but it is the strong value patterns that are the strength of my paintings. Maybe it's different for you - what are the elements of a painting that you seem to gravitate toward? Here are several to consider:

- Value
- Color
- Line
- Shapes (this is another one of my favorite)
- Dominance
- Texture
- Design/Composition

It might be that one of these is already shouting out to you. I often hear this from my students - "If I could only master _____ (fill in the blank)". It might be easy for you to identify what to focus on.

If not, the best thing to do is to line up some of your paintings, and ask yourself "What is lacking in my work?" That's a tough question, but it can help you define the best area to start in your improvement.

So my challenge to you is to "Just Pick One" and focus on that until you begin to get a handle on it. It might just become your best strength!

*"Don't hesitate to exaggerate. Don't worry about stretching the truth.
The most tiresome people - and pictures - are the laboriously truthful ones."
~ William Merritt Chase*



TECHNIQUE BREAK NO. 1

As we go through this book, I will periodically take time to share with you my best ideas on improving your painting techniques. It can be hard to do this without video or illustrations, so I will concentrate on the techniques that can be explained with text. The first one is:

Laying Down a Clean Wash

Students often complain to me that their colors get dirty or washed out in a painting. What is the best way to prevent this?

I believe that clean washes begin in the materials you use before you even reach the painting surface. One material that helps me out is the butcher's tray palette. This is a porcelain tray that's available in catalogs or in some art supply stores. It's a great way to keep your colors clean - instead of arranging the colors in the little pools provided around the edges of most plastic palettes, I just squeeze out the colors I'm currently

using into the butcher's tray. Then I add enough water to make the colors workable. This keeps my colors clean because I know exactly how much color and water is in the mix at all times.

Another trick for clean colors is to let your colors mix on the paper instead of in the palette. This is a well-known but often difficult way of color mixing. You may want to practice this on a spare piece of watercolor paper before you go into your painting. It is also advised that you don't mess around too much with the paint after you've laid it on the paper - just let the colors flow into each other. Too much working with it is the main reason for dirty colors!

I also use a sponge to help keep my colors clean. The best type of sponge are the big ones you get at the department stores for cleaning. These are not the cellulose sponges that you use to wash your car - you need something that's absorbent. I dip my brush in clean water when I'm changing colors, then dap the excess water off with the sponge. Then I go right into my palette for color. This keeps the color clean on every stroke.

YOUR STUDIO SETUP

Most artists lean toward one direction when setting up their studio - either they don't spend any time creating a helpful environment, or they concentrate all efforts on it. Both of these are errors in my opinion for this reason:

Your studio should only do one thing - support you in your artistic goals without detracting you from accomplishing your best work..

This means that your studio should be designed around your goals as an artist. It doesn't need to make a grand design statement unless you are entertaining potential clients in it. If you are just painting there, don't spend a lot of time and money to build a show-place studio. On the other hand, if you invite clients in to your studio to view your latest masterpiece, you will want to dress it up a bit.

It all comes down to using your studio as a tool - not letting it use you by taking up time you need to paint. You will want to spruce it up a bit to reflect your personality and inspire you to do your best. But think about why and what you need to do to help you out the most.

Every artist needs at least the following in a studio:

- 1. A place to call their own.** This is the biggest need of every artist. Sometimes we struggle to even have a spot of our own, let alone a grand studio design that will be featured in magazines. Do not skip over this part because you think you can't make this happen. You will never become a successful artist without your own space, even if that means a desk in the corner of the living room. Cleaning off the kitchen table will not work - you need to be able to paint your best when you are creating, and that's not going to happen if you don't have a spot to call your own. If that means cleaning out a closet and putting a drafting table in there, then that's fine. Or grab a corner of the basement, put a table or two there, and begin to assemble your materials. You will find that your focus and creativity will soar when you have your own place.

2. **Good lighting.** This is evident to any artist. You don't have to have a huge, north-facing window, although that is nice. You will need at least enough light to illuminate your work surface properly. If you can get natural light bulbs - this will help you keep your colors true as you paint.
3. **The right tools.** You will need to best equipment that you can buy. It may seem like a cliché, but you will only paint as well as the materials you use. I know that many artists do not believe this, but just stick with me for a minute while I make this argument. Consider this your next "secret". I will say it as strongly as this:

You will never paint a great painting with cheap paper and brushes!



I'm sorry if I offend you with that statement, but I am trying to help you succeed as an artist, and this is what I tell all my students. I've been painting almost 25 years now, and I wouldn't stand a chance painting on a cheap piece of watercolor paper from a pad. Which is why I rank the materials like this in importance:

- 1. Paper - so very important!** Find a way to buy Arches paper or a comparable brand. Go in together with several other students and buy a pack of 50 pieces on the Internet. Or trade a painting for some good paper. Use those cheap pads of paper for practice or color studies. You can really have fun and work with good paper - some of the heavier brands will even allow you to beat them up and still allow nice washes.

I've also found it helpful to get to know how many of the different papers work with your style. Don't get carried away here (there are literally hundreds of different kinds of paper, if you count all the various surfaces) but it can help to learn the qualities of many of them. I count several of them among my favorites, including Arches, Lana, Whatman, Winsor and Newton. I've spent time learning how each of these papers are different, and now I know which one would work best for the subject (and mood) I'm working with. For instance, on a landscape I would lean toward the rough and tough surface of Arches 300 lb. cold-press paper. As you experiment with different surfaces you will learn which ones work best for you and your style.

Another paper that I really love to use is Twinrocker paper. This paper, made in Lafayette, Indiana, is a wonderful hand-made paper that is highly unpredictable yet versatile. I think it's especially great if you paint kind of loose and experimental like I do.

2. **Brushes** - this is next on my list (not as important as good paper!) You can find some good deals on brushes online. Unfortunately, this is a difficult way to find a brush you like since you can't experiment with it before purchase. Ask other artists to find out what they use, or check online for recommendations. But don't scrimp here either - get at least one good flat brush and two rounds for your collection.

I really like the Dragons Tongue set of brushes from Cheap Joes art catalog for my round brushes. They do what I think is very important in a round brush - hold a good amount of paint and still come to good point. You need both of those qualities in a brush, and they deliver at an affordable price.

3. **Paint** - this is one material that you can get by with a budget brand, at least until you reach a certain level of professionalism (which means until you've painted a bunch of paintings!) Many artists begin with a "student-grade" paint, and I see no problem with this. The main difference between the lower grade paints and the professional versions is the amount of pigment in the paints. The higher grade paints will have brighter, more saturated colors. The biggest thing is to know the difference - you will know when it's time to upgrade your paints.

The "student grade" pigments usually say that in the label, or they say "hue" in their name. Experiment with these for awhile, but try to get at least some professional grade colors as soon as you can - it will really help you get richer colors in your paintings.

4. **Palette** - it's very important to keep your colors clean as you paint. The only way to do this is to have enough room in your palette to move the pigments around and mix them well. I recommend a butcher's tray for this. This ceramic palette has no small partitions to hold paint - just one big beautiful area to mix the paint. This really helps me keep the pigments clean (see my other ideas on this on page ____).

I am not a big fan of the standard plastic artist palettes that are sold everywhere. The paint tends to dry out too quickly in those, and believe me - you need fluid and workable paint to create nice colorful passages. Especially when you get to the darks in your painting.

I tend to put out fresh paint every time I paint. This keeps my colors clean and lively. It also makes it easier to tell exactly how much pigment I am working with, another key to a good wash.



DESIGN AND COMPOSITION

This is such an important part of your painting journey, and one that you will surely work on all your life. It's hard to condense my thoughts on this to one short chapter in this book, but I will try.

A lot of what I have learned about design and composition have come from Alex Powers and his great book "Painting People in Watercolor". Don't let the title fool you - this book is about so much more than that. He first introduced me to the concept of the "rectangle" in a painting, which you will hear me mention many times throughout my teaching.

I have learned most of what I know about this subject, however, from years of painting. There are no shortcuts to learning about design - often it develops without you even being aware of it. You can't help but learn design while you're struggling through a painting. That said, I will share with you some of the things I've learned as I've gone down that road.

One way I design in the rectangle is by simplifying the design in my planning. Even though some of my paintings may look quite complex, they have all been broken down into simpler shapes and spaces as I work through the painting's design. I do this partly by "Planning the Painting" (see info on that later). But I also seek to look at the painting in its own design as it emerges.

After you have completed a lot of paintings, and worked through their design, this will come easier for you. Sometimes I'm able to work out a good design in a painting without thinking much about it, but it wasn't always that way. The following steps might help you out with this.



- 1. Plan in the entire rectangle.** Perhaps you plan your paintings extensively with sketches and value studies. Or maybe you like to just "jump in" to a painting. Either way, you need to look at your process with a larger lens. Begin by thinking of the overall design in your painting - the details will take care of themselves later. In fact, if you get the overall design down well, those details may practically paint themselves.
- 2. Simplify the design.** One way to get a dynamic overall design is to simplify it, at least at the beginning. I do this by thinking about how my shapes relate to each other in the rectangle. I make sure there is variety in the shapes - different sizes, shapes and distances between shapes. I often sketch this out lightly on my paper, but you can also figure this out by doing small sketches.
- 3. Enlarge your subject.** Once again I'm looking at the rectangle here, and the relationships of the shapes in it. Both the negative and positive shapes. By making my subject larger I often create a much more pleasing arrangement of both positive and negative shapes. It is also important to keep in mind that all of these shapes are both affected and defined by the rectangle itself. That's why I draw the in the rectangle (in pencil) on every painting I paint.



4. See in black and white (values).

There is nothing more important to the success of your painting. Not color, not subject, not brushwork. You can mess up just about everything else, and still have a good painting if the values are well done. On the other hand, you can paint the most unique subject with great colors, and still leave something out with-

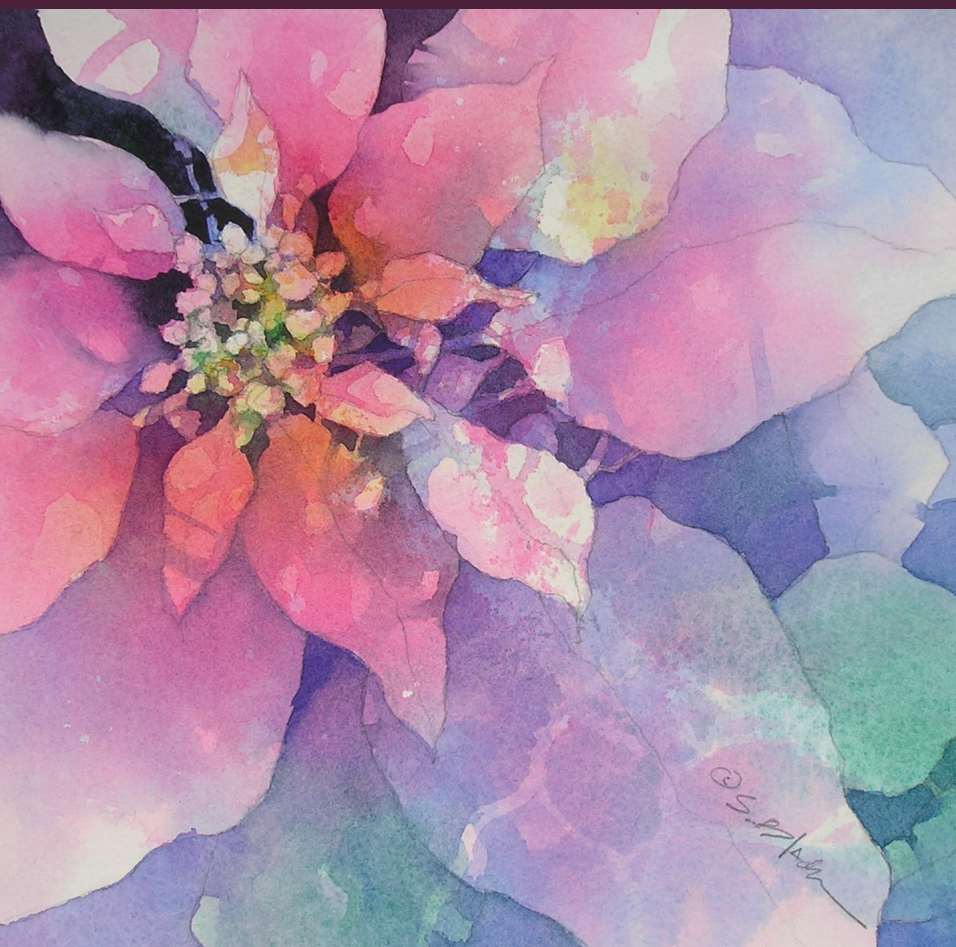
out the correct value scheme. This is something to think about early in each painting, and as you become more successful you will be able to figure it out later in the painting. When I was a beginner I spent a lot of time doing value sketches in preparation for a painting - I have sketch books filled with them! As I became more experienced and experimental with my paintings I began to feel like I could design the values later in a painting, but it still took a front seat in my design thinking. Spend time learning values and how they make or break a painting, and then concentrate on other "more fun" things like color and texture.



TECHNIQUE BREAK NO. 2

Creating Soft Edges

This is one of the things that really sets apart watercolor painting - the ability to soften edges as you are painting. In my opinion this is one of the techniques that will really help the "look" of your watercolors, no matter what your style or subject matter. A painting with hard edges everywhere has a heavy, unrealistic look. The use of soft and hard edges will help you lead a viewer's eye around the painting in a direction that you plan.



First of all, let's talk about where you might want soft edges. Of course, this depends on your particular painting, but there are some basic rules to follow. The most basic rule is to have both soft and hard edges in your composition. The second rule is to have one of the edge types, either soft or hard, have dominance in your painting. Usually for me that means mostly soft edges with a few hard edges at the center of interest. But it's up to you which one (soft or hard edges) is dominant in your painting. This is also dependent on your painting style - some styles favor hard edges, some soft. Just so you choose one.

I like to have hard edges around my focal point area because those edges draw the eye into that area. That just makes sense! That means most of my soft edges are in the other areas of my painting. I also like to soften at least one edge around an object, even in the center of interest. This is because a hard edge all the way around something will make it look too "cookie-cutter" and unrealistic.

Once you have a feel for where you will soften edges, the process is easy - all you need is a good brush and clean water. Put your wash of color down, making sure you use enough water to make it workable. Then, before it dries, clean out your brush of all color and dip it into the water again. Quickly pick which edge you want to soften and lightly drag the brush along that edge and out into the painting. You may have to work with it a bit, or get some more water, to create the effect you are after. The critical component here is the amount of water you have in your brush, and it will vary depending on many things - how juicy the wash is, how much water and paint are already on the paper, even how staining the pigments are.

Practice this on some spare pieces of paper, and then on your paintings. You may be surprised how much you love softening edges after awhile, and how much they add to your paintings!

NEGATIVE PAINTING

I am convinced that the best way to paint in watercolor is to paint the spaces around your subject. This is also called negative painting.

Why is this the best way to attack a watercolor painting? There are several reasons:

- 1. It teaches you to see and paint shapes instead of things.** This is the best reason to learn negative painting – it can't help but improve your artwork.
- 2. It is definitely a cleaner way to paint.** Have you ever messed up a painting by trying to paint a positive shape in a spot that already has paint? That area can get ugly pretty quickly when you try to put paint on top of other paint. Negative painting helps you avoid this.
- 3. It helps with your edges.** If you do it right, negative painting will help you paint cleaner, more transparent edges.

This way of painting does take some thought and planning, however, especially in a detailed composition.

Here is the way I go about it:

- 1. Determine what is in front and what is in back** in your painting composition.
- 2. The best way to paint this way is to make the subjects in front lighter** than the "stuff" in back. Is this possible with your composition? What is the main subject in front? Can you make that lighter than the background? That doesn't mean that is has to have less color, but it does need to be lighter to paint around it.
- 3. What about the background items?** Would they naturally be darker? Can you make them darker or just eliminate them and paint in a darker negative shape? This is often difficult to envision if you are working from a resource that has a lot of "action" going on in the background. But all you have to do is simplify the background. Take out all the background shapes and look at that area as just one negative space that would be darker than the objects in front of it.
- 4. Can you set up the composition to help the negative painting process?** Often I change and simplify the design to help the negative painting process.

This process is often easier with organic shapes like florals than designs like landscapes and seascapes. Or at least I've found that landscapes take more time to determine which parts will be light or dark; in front or behind. Let me give you some examples.

Take a look at the following painting, called "I Am the Vine". This is a high impact painting with a value scale extending from white to very rich, almost black darks. The areas at the top were painted with light and mid-tone colors first, then these colors were brought forward by sinking in very dark negative areas. This technique helps the leaves and apples "pop", while also allowing for nice clean edges. At the bottom of the painting I did it just the opposite, by laying in a lighter background, and then adding the leaves with darker shapes. The top two-thirds was painted negatively, and the bottom was done with more positive painting – the more traditional way. This is easier to do with a botanical subject, because you can pick and choose where you want the negative painting – it's up to you! The photos I worked from did not look like this at all - most of them had a lighter background at the top, like many of the floral photos we all take.



"Now look at the following landscape painting titled "The Fish Are Waitin". Can you see how much more challenging this is to set up as a negative painting? I had to take more care with the brushwork, as the negative parts that framed items needed to be more subtle. For instance, see how the right side of the long boat in the background frames the vertical pier in front of it? That has to be designed with the entire composition in mind. And other negative darks were laid in to "outline" the little boats – those passages needed to work out with the pier itself. Compare that to the apple painting, where many of the dark negative passages were just arbitrary shapes. In a landscape or seascape painting, those shapes are often subjects themselves that need to be painted correctly. You will also notice some "positive" passages in this boat painting, like the backs of the little boats. This step also needs to be planned carefully so that the background is not too dark in those areas. The entire process of this painting requires deliberate planning with careful values and brushwork. I still believe that negative painting is valuable for a composition like this; it just takes more thought to pull it all together. It also takes more care during the entire painting process.



To help you with your negative painting, begin to look at things in a different way as you go about your day. See how subjects are often "framed" by darker or lighter backgrounds around them. Look at lighter buildings on a dark stormy day - see how they come forward from the darks around them. Lighter rocks or other similar subjects are often set up this way. Or lighter trees in a dark forest. Train your eyes to see this way and you will begin to notice these patterns in your compositions. It will also teach you how to see in shapes instead of just things, which will benefit all of your paintings.

PLANNING YOUR PAINTINGS

The common thinking in the painting community is that it is much harder to complete a successful watercolor painting than one in other mediums like acrylic or oils. I believe this can be turned around if you do one thing - plan your painting well. That's what this section will address.

There are many steps to planning a successful watercolor painting. It starts with your intention for the painting - what are you trying to say with this painting? Is there a particular mood you're trying to convey? A color you want to experiment with? Something you want to realistically portray? Think about these things before you start and you won't get into so much trouble later.

Then you might want to do some preliminary practice steps. Studies can be a great help with paintings. That's one of my secrets - even though my paintings look loose and free, there is often a lot of planning that goes into them first. Here's a few preliminary things that I often incorporate:

Sketches . . . I usually begin with a couple of thumbnail sketches for my painting. Even though I paint somewhat loosely, especially when I'm pouring paint, I still have a good idea where I'm going with the composition. So I'll quickly sketch two or three small compositions to see how my idea lays out on paper. Sometimes this will give me ideas to follow that I hadn't even thought of before!

With my current style I tend to rely on very small, ambiguous sketches for my paintings. I want to use the abstract nature of my pouring style to suggest my subjects, so I don't like to get tied down to an exact drawing. But laying ideas out on paper still helps me focus my design. It gives the composition a path and allows me to begin the painting strong, even if the final product departs from the sketch.

When I began painting, though, I spent a lot of time sketching out possible compositions. Then once I arrived at a winning design, I would spend more time sketching the final drawing. Then I would transfer that drawing to my watercolor paper, or redraw it. If you are just starting out in watercolor, or if you paint more realistically, this process should help you, too.

Value studies . . .

this can be a great way to pull your painting together right from the beginning, and I recommend it to all my students. I have sketchbooks full of small value studies - this process is the biggest way I learned about value and its importance to a watercolor. These studies don't have to take a lot of time, either - here's how I go about it:

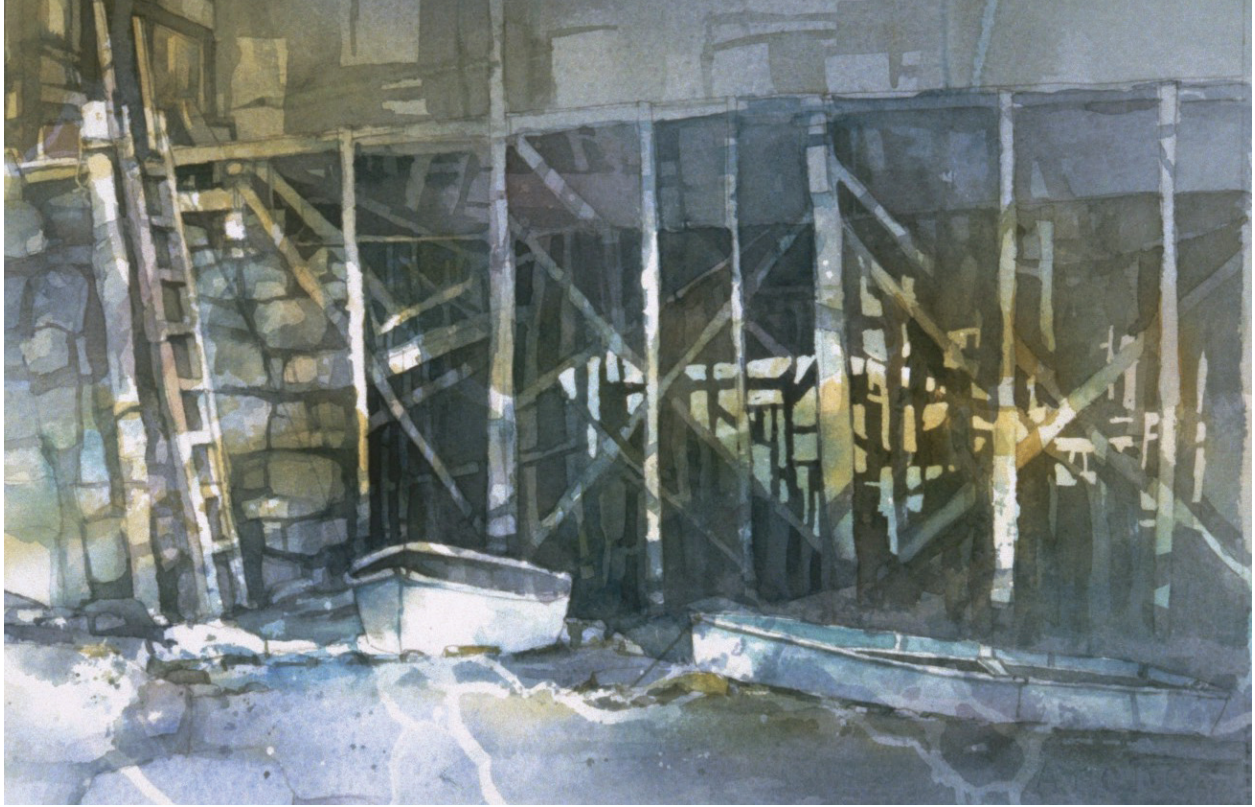
- 1. Take your strongest sketch design,** or the drawing you are using for your painting, and sketch it out again. Then take a soft, dark pencil or black marker and begin laying in the lights and darks in your design. No color use here - just lights and darks. This is the value pattern in your composition, and you're looking for a good, pleasing balance with the lights and darks. Especially the darks.
- 2. Don't worry about any detail at this point** - that can actually detract from your goal here. Instead just play around with the patterns. You are looking for balance in the design, yet a dominance of some of the darks. By this I mean that some darks should be darker than others, and some should be larger.
- 3. I love using a dark marker for this process.** You can really lay in nice, rich darks with a marker. You will also not "sketch" as much with a marker as a pencil - this may help you concentrate on the values alone.
- 4. Try to do four or five good schemes.** This will give you some variations and may lead you toward a stronger composition.
- 5. Choose the best design and let it help you with your painting.** I often put my value study near my painting so I can see where I'm going as I paint. It also helps me come back when I veer off course with my values. Not that I can't ever depart from the original value plan, but at least I'll know that I am - and that it's part of my plan for the painting.

Color studies . . .

unless I'm working on a familiar subject, or a series, I do color studies for every painting I'm working on. I must have hundreds of scrap watercolor papers in my studio with color studies on them. It's a must for every painting for the following reasons:

1. **Better to figure out your color scheme (and make mistakes)** on a spare paper than on your painting.
2. **It's a great way to see how your colors are going to mix and behave together.**
 - Which colors will dominate others?
 - Which pigment do I want to be the dominant color of that particular painting?
 - Will I be able to easily soften an edge with a certain color?
3. Sometimes I go into a painting with a color scheme in mind, **but it's not until I complete my color study that I really know how those colors will look together.**
4. **A color study will also "warm you up"** to using those colors before you begin painting.





Focal point

There are some traditional methods used down thru the ages to set the center of interest in your painting. I prefer to call this the "focal point" in my paintings, because that's the part I want people to focus on! I have a different way of highlighting this, but first let's talk about the concept.

Tony Couch talks about this concept in his book, "Watercolor, You Can Do It!". He defines it as "a small area more attractive than the rest of the painting to serve as a focal point, or headquarters, for the eye." It can also serve as a guide to the rest of the painting. He says, "It's a resting place from which round trip excursions are made to other parts of the painting." That is how I look at it – once you determine a strong focal point, the rest of the painting seems to fall into place.

I think we all know that it's important to have a strong focal point, or center of interest, in our paintings. That just doesn't happen on its own, though - like everything else it takes some planning. In watercolor you can't just throw the focal point in when you are almost finished like you might do in acrylics. So make sure you think about that in your sketches and value studies. In fact, those planning stages should be based around the focal point. Here's a few ideas to keep in mind to stress this all-importance part of your paintings:

1. **The focal point should not be in the center of your painting**, or too near the edges.
2. **Follow the “golden quadrants” rule to set it up.** This puts the focal point in one of four quadrants off-center vertically and horizontally in your composition. Alex Powers says that these “sweet spots are not centered horizontally or vertically, and they are not placed around the edges of the rectangle.”
3. **The focal point in your painting should be the spot with the highest contrasts.** This includes value, color and edge contrasts. You should have your brightest colors and sharpest edges near that area. That would also be a good location for the brightest whites, and maybe the most vibrant darks. All those things bring the eye into that focal spot. Those things should be thought about and incorporated into the planning stages like sketches and value scales.

These are all guidelines, and once you get a handle on designing with a strong focal point you can use other methods to determine where it should go. I use the technique of “letting the painting talk to me” to kind of “discover” the focal point in my poured paintings. You can read about that in the next “Technique Break”.

Positive/Negative Painting. . .

this is an area that I think about in my planning, too. If your painting contains negative passages you will need to plan this. That can mean just looking at your design and figuring out what's in front and what's behind. Or you might think about it when doing the value sketch. But it has to be part of the planning process at some point or you will not be successful with the technique. This is crucial in watercolor painting or you will lose the freshness of your washes. Don't think that you can rely on putting "paint on top of paint"! This is a great technique in acrylic painting, where the pigments are much more opaque, and stay where you put them. But in watercolor the shapes need to be planned out more, and the positive-negative relationship is crucial.

TO SUM UP ON THE PAINTING PROCESS . . .

Let me just say that I do not use all of these planning tools with my pouring paintings, or at least not at the beginning of a painting. I often do a very preliminary sketch, pour the colors for my painting, and then do a value study. This might come after I've redrawn the design and know which direction the final painting is going. Why do a value sketch before I know the direction it's going? The order or timing for these planning stages will depend on your workflow and often how abstract you want to remain. But even a totally abstract painting will benefit from a strong value scheme, so don't let that keep you from using these hints to help improve your paintings!

TECHNIQUE BREAK NO. 3:

Where to put your focal point in a more experimental poured painting

Here's how I think about the focal point in a poured painting. Since I let my paintings "emerge" in the pouring process, I try not to get too specific with a pre-determined focal point in my composition. Why would I do that when I often don't know exactly where my paintings are going? That's not to say I never have this idea - it depends on the painting. I usually have an idea where the focus should be, but I try to let the painting change my mind if it want to. (See, it does talk to me!). When I draw my composition I try to "hint" at the focus area, because I want to know where to pour colors and make shapes. But I am also open to the colors doing their own thing. Like a lot things in life, it's a balance.

Then once I have two or three pours completed, and remove the masking fluid, I redraw the piece and really think about where I want the viewer's eye to go. This is when I will almost always decide where the focal point is to be, and I think about the spaces and shapes that will help me highlight that area. In that focal area, I want:

The sharpest edges and the biggest change in colors - the most contrast!

I also think about how other shapes in the composition complement the focal point. Like Alex Powers says, "The arrangement of shapes in the rectangle is a critical design consideration." Don't think that this just happens on its own! Often shapes in other areas need to be simplified or even eliminated. I tend to place larger and less complex shapes outside the focal area. I also think now about light or dark negative spaces, and how they enter the plan. With all these thoughts I tighten up my drawing, with the most detail and contrast in the focal area.

And yes, I do think about traditional rules for this, such as keeping the focal point out of the center of the composition, and usually in one of the "golden triangle" quadrants. But I can't emphasize enough that I seek to be guided more by what my colors and shapes are doing, and less by these "rules". And as I see the most important part of the painting emerge, I often enhance and push this by using more color and sharper edges in that focal area, even when pouring. For instance, if I see a strong red color emerging in a certain area, I will strengthen that red color there, and make it weaker in the outside areas. Or drop in a darker shade in that area. I am always guided by what is already going on in the painting - don't let a "plan" spoil what the colors want to do on their own. As you practice this it will be easier to follow the path on your paper.

WHAT SUBJECTS SHOULD I PAINT?

It is my belief that there is only one answer to this question

Paint subjects that you are passionate about!

This, of course, can change over time. I have seen my passions turn from landscapes to seascapes to abstracts to floral to still lifes. For me it's easy - I can only really connect with a painting if I'm excited about the subject.

Now being excited about the subject can come from many different angles. For me it's not always about the subject itself, but how that subject allows you to paint. Florals, for



instance - to tell the truth, flowers don't do it for me as a subject just because they are flowers. I am excited about the shapes and colors that are in many floral patterns. I like also that these patterns contain the shapes that most lend themselves to my style of painting.

So what excites you? This is what you should paint. When my wife and I were doing a lot of traveling on the East coast I was excited about the landscapes and lighthouse scenes that we came across. So that's what I painted. And I think my excitement came across in my paintings - the painting's viewer can pick up on that.

Traveling to different places always inspires me in my subject matter. But what if you can't afford to travel much? Look for different inspirations in your own hometown. Wherever you live there are new and exciting subjects that will inspire you if you just look for them. People, for instance - even if you don't paint people they can still serve to inspire your paintings. Think about all the other subjects that are around people:

- Their homes and places of business.
- Their pets.
- The places they worship.
- The food they eat.
- The toys they play with.
- The books they read.

The list goes on and on . . . can you see how you can be inspired in many ways? The key is to find something that you are passionate about and bring that into your paintings. If you can't find something to be inspired about in this world, then I probably can't help you anyway. And maybe you should try to do something else than be an artist!





TECHNIQUE BREAK NO. 4

How to Achieve Great Darks

This is one technique that will combine with negative painting to really help your paintings pop! Dynamic darks do so many things in a painting. They set up and frame your entire composition. They can help balance the lighter areas in the scene, They also help draw someone in to your framed piece - even from across the room.

I have three basic rules to achieve great darks in my paintings:

- 1. Use the correct pigments.** You will never get a vibrant dark with "wimpy" paints. This may seem evident, but I have seen many students in my workshops attempt to paint darks with the wrong pigments. You can't paint a dark background with Permanent Rose and Ultramarine Violet, for instance. These two colors may make a good looking color - they are just never going to make a great dark. Pick up colors like the following to mix your darks:
 - Alizarin Crimson or Quinacridone Rose
 - Ultramarine Blue
 - Prussian Blue
 - Phthalo Blue or Green

You will soon learn which of your pigments make the best darks. Experiment with them until you find combinations that help your color scheme. It also helps to plan your colors from the beginning of a painting to include those that will produce great darks.

- 2. Use enough pigment.** Once you determine the colors to mix your darks, make sure you are using enough of them. This is another mistake I often see in workshops - students use the correct pigments but then are stingy with the paints. This is okay for workshops, but not for the masterpieces you will be painting in your studio! Practice with mixing and applying darks and you will develop a feel for how much paint you will need. You also need to mix enough paint to fill the space you are painting. This is often more than you originally think. This is one reason I love the butcher's tray palette. It allows me to put out and mix enough good paint for my dark passages. It also keeps the darks clean. Trust me - you will never get a great dark by pulling a little bit of paint out of those small compartments in most palettes, especially if the paint is old. Use fresh paint for your darks, and make sure you have enough. Otherwise you will have dingy, colorless darks in a prominent part of your painting.
- 3. Do it once and leave it alone!** I never (okay, almost never) paint over a dark area. Rules #1 and #2 above will help with this, but if I still don't like the final dark I tend to leave it alone. This is because I've discovered that I almost always make it worse when I go back to "fix it". That's because anytime you paint over an area that already has pigment you will lift the color below to some extent, mixing it with the new layer of color, which leads to the dreaded "mud". And even worse, it will be a challenge to absolutely match the edges you created on the first pass, leaving a ragged "double edge" that to me screams "beginner".

SOMETIMES YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN

What do I mean by that? It means that at some point in your artistic journey you have to stop studying and copying others and find your own way as an artist. That doesn't mean you won't ever read about or study other artists, but once you find how to say your own thing as an artist those times of studying others will add to your art, not dominate it.

This won't happen right away, and unfortunately it won't happen to every artist. Make it one of your goals thought to someday paint with your own distinctive style. I'll talk more about developing your own style in the next chapter, but let's talk about why this is so important first.

I see so many artists go from book to book, or workshop to workshop, and all they ever do is copy other artists. They may think they are doing their own thing, but you can see the influence of almost every artist they study. It is fine to learn a new technique, or take a workshop for inspiration. But at some point that artist inside you needs to be let out. This will never happen if you don't let go of other artists' influence and paintings.

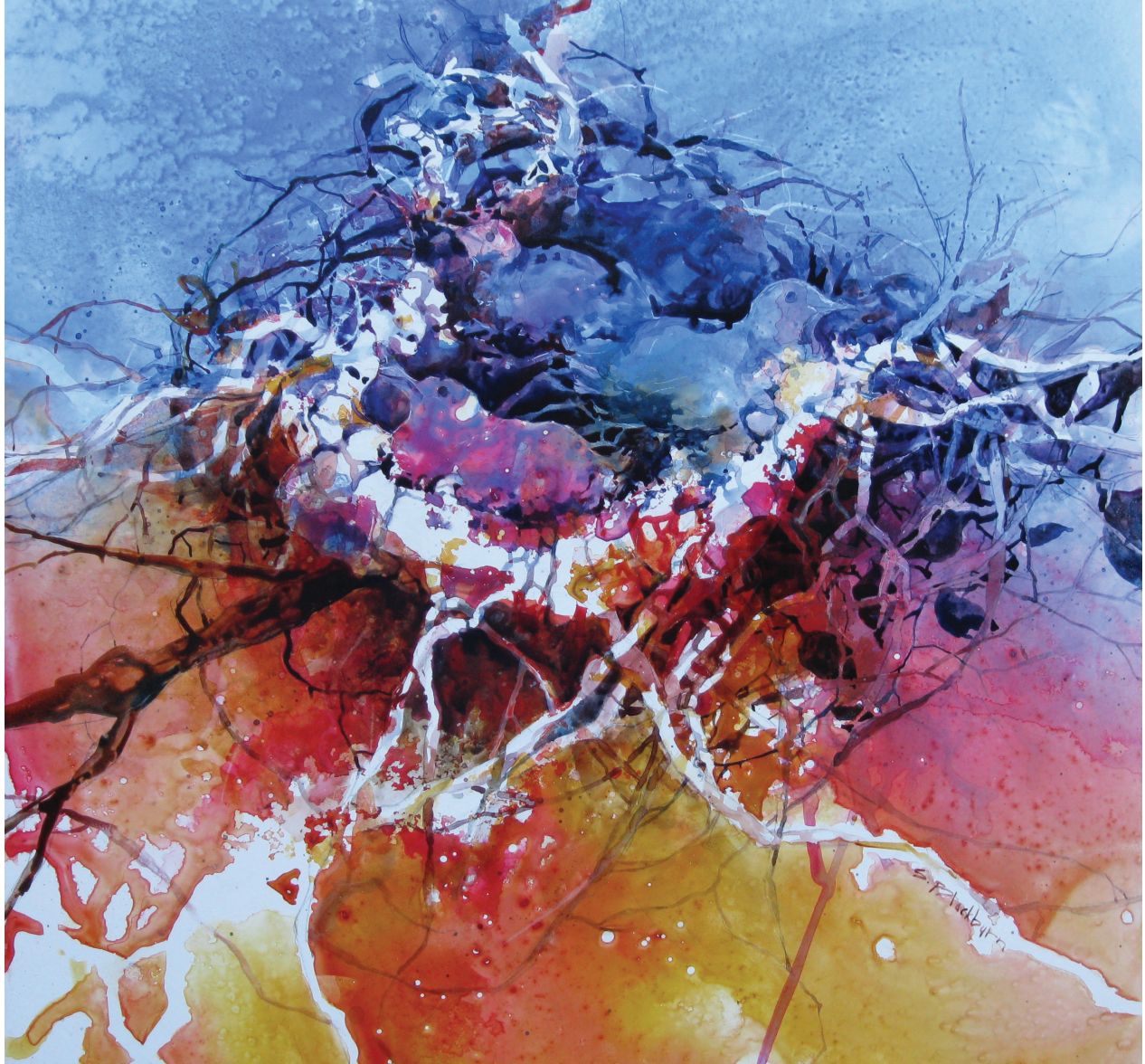
So how do you do this? It's simple, yet difficult. I will tell you how I did it, and how this helped me develop my own style.

I won't argue that it is helpful to study, and even copy, other artists' work when you are a beginning painter. I did the same thing when I started out. I began painting landscapes, and I would copy works I admired from books and greeting cards. Then I wanted to get more colorful so I copied other artists florals. And then of course I went down the workshop road, studying with many artists like Joe Fettingis and Roland Roycraft. But I got to the point where I wanted to do my own thing! I had developed a measure of technical skills, but it had no personality to it!

Here's some of the things that will keep you right where you are, without your own "look" or focus: I call these the ***"Five Terrible Truths You Have To Run Away From"***.

1. **Friends and family telling you what a great artist you are.** . . . we've all been there - aglow in the praise from a friend. They tell you how great your painting is, and how far you've come as an artist. That's all great stuff, and we need to have our ego stroked from time to time. Go ahead and let them see you are pleased and then they will be happy. Then, as quickly as possible, throw that compliment out - it's part of what is keeping you stuck! You need to instead develop an impatience for the paintings that bring compliments but don't say anything different and exciting.
2. **A successful painting. Even a very successful painting.** If it's a success in a new way that is your own that's different, but successful paintings that are only copies of someone else's painting or style will keep you stuck more than any other thing. (They are also the ones that garner the most compliments - see number one above). Instead embrace your "failures", especially the ones that are a departure in style or subject matter for you.
3. **Artist friends.** Especially friends that like to take workshops more than paint. Obviously we all need friends, but how much do your fellow painters influence your own work? You need to get away for an extended period of time and do your own thing. Then you can show them your new work and let the praise flow (back to #1 above).
4. **"I like painting pretty pictures.** When I try to paint something different it doesn't turn out as well." I've said that too. In fact, sometimes they turn out pretty bad when we try to push our limits. But that's how I busted through the wall of - uninspired?- paintings to begin making my own statement. And I'll be honest with you - I began creating a pile of "junk" paintings that didn't work at all. Just like a beginning painter all over again. But that's often what you need to do. Get over it. Start building your pile of loser paintings. A creative body of work is waiting for you on the other side.
5. **Your own ego.** Sometimes you have to get out of your own way. It can be difficult to break from the traditional approach to painting a watercolor, especially if that is how you've done it for years. But how can you expect to do great things without taking some chances?

*The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas
as in escaping from old ones.
– John Maynard Keynes*



FINDING YOUR OWN STYLE

"Cultivate your strong points . . . you should aspire to improve your own strengths to the point that what you already do well, you will do better than anyone else in the world. You might not reach that goal, of course, but it is certainly worth the struggle to see if you can."

~ Edward Betts

So what's the point to getting off by yourself and doing your own thing? What's your end game? One huge benefit is this – you will find your own style emerging, and this can help you in many ways:

You will enjoy painting more as you focus on your individual style. Your individual style will begin to emerge as you concentrate on your strengths and the subjects that you

love to paint. This process will be more enjoyable than if you struggled to go in a direction that may seem at first more popular or marketable, but in the long run will lead you down the wrong path.

Your art will actually improve as you begin to follow your own path. By concentrating on what makes your work unique and paying less attention to other artists, your entire process will become much more confident. This will lead to better paintings!

Whatever ways you market or present your art will benefit from a recognizable style. If you enter shows, you will better your odds at being accepted into the show. You will win more awards and sell more paintings. If this is not important to you, maybe you would like to have your artwork recognized in other ways. Developing a unique style will help you with this, too.

*"The greatest crime in the world is not developing your potential.
When you do what you do best, you are helping not only yourself, but the world."
~ Roger Williams*

I've already talked about having a focus to your work. The steps to creating your own style will help you focus in on what you should be painting. Having your own style is a big part, and comes from, developing a focus in your work.

On your adventure to creating a unique style you will find a benefit most people don't even realize - events, people and other things that go along with and help your style will begin to jump out at you. Things that you never even noticed before.

How do you develop your own artistic style that will set you apart from others?

When we talk about an artist's style we're not only considering the technical aspects of the artwork, but the personal and emotional side of you as an artist. Being a technical maestro will only take you so far - it's the personal side of you as an artist that will bring out your individual style the most.

Think about what makes you unique as a person. These qualities will also make you shine as an artist.

Let's talk about you - your strengths, not your weaknesses. In Marcus Buckingham's book "The Truth About You" he says, "You grow most in your areas of greatest strength". This is where you should concentrate as an artist, too. Begin to list the greatest strengths in your artwork:

This could be many things . . . it could be some of the elements of design, like value or color. It could be your ability to catch the mood of a scene, or the likeness of a portrait. Your strength might be in marketing or selling your art. Or catching the light. Maybe composition or picking out a strong subject. Choose several strengths and write them down. Or, if you feel you don't have any that are real strong, write down some that you would like to have.

Now let's narrow down that list. Circle the one or two that are your top strengths. Sometimes they will jump out at you. Or maybe you have to think about it. Pick one or two right now. Then narrow that down to your biggest artistic strength and write that down in big letters. That's what you will concentrate on in your best art - the pieces that will set you apart!

Next you will take out all of your artwork - not just your best pieces but ALL of them. Set them up where you can see most of them at once, and ask yourself - what pieces most capture this strength that you identified? Set these paintings apart and then separate the one, two or three paintings that this strength is most evident in.

If you still haven't identified this strength, then this is the time - look at your entire body of work and ask yourself - what are my best paintings and why? Answer this question and you will be on your way to developing a strong style.

I hope you have now identified and written down your biggest strength as an artist. The key to developing your style is to take this strength and use it to the maximum in your work. It's that simple . . . and that difficult, because it can take time to define your biggest strength. Let's talk about some other ways to do that.

What's your favorite subject? Write down a few:

If you need a nudge, go back to your art and let it suggest your favorite subject. Now begin a new body of work - all devoted to your favorite subject using your biggest artistic strength. I'm not saying your style has to only encompass one subject, but concentrating on one subject is a great way to bring out that style. I use the style I'm known for in a number of different subjects now, but when I started developing it I primarily concentrated on landscapes and trees, and then florals. This allowed me to finely tune my style (negative painting) while using my biggest strength (dynamic value patterns).

What about your weaknesses?

The best approach is to manage your weaknesses while concentrating on your strengths. There are so many things to paint out there - why spend time on something you dislike painting? I know - we are supposed to be "well rounded" artists, with the ability to paint anything well. Rubbish! That will produce meaningless art with no emotion. What gets you most excited? That's what you should paint! If that means learning something new or developing a different strength - that's one thing, but don't paint a bunch of mediocre paintings just because you can.

Marcus Buckingham also says, "Working on your weaknesses will drag you down and, at best, will lead to small improvements. Instead, you should call your weaknesses what they really are, "things that weaken you", and then you should figure out ways to manage around them".

So don't worry about the subjects or passages that you don't excel in - just do the best you can there and pay most of your attention to your area of strength. Ask the following questions about your strength as a painter:

- Have I defined my greatest strength? If not, what can I do to learn what it is?
Ask a friend?
- Am I concentrating on that strength in my paintings?

- Am I obsessing on my weaknesses in my art (wrong approach) or managing them (right approach)?
- What subjects use my biggest strength? (This will really help you concentrate where you should be painting).

So forget about other artists' work for awhile, focus on the best parts of your paintings, and before you know it your style will emerge. A style that will set you apart from others. Then continue to build on that style in your area of strength. Keep defining that area, as it can change over time.

Just remember that your paintings will be more successful and more fully capture your personality the more you follow your own style.

*Painting is like telling a story, you have to make it short, beautiful,
precise and concrete as well as clear, exciting, magical,
imaginative and pleasant. To do that you use economy of technique."
~ Alvaro Castagnet*

TECHNIQUE BREAK #5:

Brushing and Pouring Frisket

People often ask me if I use a lot of frisket to mask out areas in my paintings. They are surprised to learn that I use very little masking in the light areas of my paintings. I prefer to paint around the subjects rather than use frisket on them for a couple reasons. One reason is technical, and the other is more philosophical:

The technical reason . . .

When you frisket over all the "stuff" in front and then paint the backgrounds in, your subjects will tend to look "cookie-cutter", like they are cut out of the page. This is fine for a small area of the painting, but too much of this will make the hard edges dominate the painting. Also, it can be hard (if not impossible) to soften edges when there is frisket over these edges.



The philosophical reason

. . . If you depend too much on frisket to save your edges you will miss out on learning more about how to use shapes in your paintings. The relationship of all the shapes in your painting is very important, and you will better see these shapes if you don't rely as much on frisket for their edges.

Now on to the 'technique' part of using frisket. The following is my technique for pouring frisket to create patterns of light on my poured paintings.

First you will need to draw your basic composition on the paper. Don't spend a lot of time on this, or get into great detail – just enough drawing to show the basic shapes in

your painting. Then you are ready for the frisket pour. I like the Pebeo masking solution because it goes on gray (neutral) and dries almost clear. If you have a clear or white solution you might want to tint it with something non-staining like Cobalt Blue since it's hard to pour with the clear or white ones - you can't see them when you're pouring.

The first thing to always remember when pouring the frisket is to make sure the paper (or board) is completely dry. DO NOT wet the paper before adding the frisket . . . we only use the spray bottle here to move the frisket around the paper.

I begin by determining where I might want the frisket to go in the composition. If you think about it, you want the frisket in areas that would be white or lighter. This is usually on the subject (versus in the background) in areas that the light might be hitting the subject. So just pick one of these areas and begin there.

Start by pouring a dime- or nickel-sized puddle of frisket on the paper in the area you've chosen. The size depends on the size of your painting. Then immediately spray just a bit of water at the edge of the puddle of frisket. Avoid spraying into the center of the frisket - this will create a mess. Tilt the board until the sprayed edge starts to flow a bit, then turn the board and spray some water at the opposite edge. You need to hit the puddle of frisket all the way around and get it moving or parts of it will begin to dry. Once you do this you can continue to move it around the painting.

The most important trick to moving the frisket around with your spray bottle is to always PULL it towards you - avoid pushing it around. This is useful when you're pouring paint, but it is especially important with the frisket. This is because if you push it around by spraying into it with water you will dilute it too much. Then you won't get the great spidery effects that make wonderful patterns in your paintings.

So after the frisket puddle has begun flowing it's time to move it around. Hopefully you've already decided which direction you want it to go. Now it's just a matter of getting it to go that way. You achieve this by turning and tilting the board so that the flow is moving towards you. That way you can Pull it with the water flow. So if you want it to run down the paper, turn the board so the bottom is toward you and begin touch just the edge of the frisket with a spray of water while you tilt the board. This should get it to move towards you. Then keep pulling it toward you and tilting the board to get the effects you want. I usually try to get it to change direction rather than go in a straight line. If you use the spray bottle correctly by touching just the edge of the frisket and not spraying into the middle of it you should get a nice "spidery" and lacy run of frisket.

A few things to remember with the frisket pour:

1. **Connect all the patches of frisket across the entire painting.** By this I mean - don't have areas of frisket that are not connected to each other. This will be very distracting when you remove the frisket.
2. **Let all the flows of frisket run off the edge of the rectangle.** The reason for this is the same as number one - if you don't run the frisket off the edges, it will stick out at the end when you remove the frisket. Then that white patch will need to become something in your final drawing - possibly something you don't want to include.

I learned these two "rules" from much trial and error. Just trust me if they don't make sense yet. Hopefully they will make more sense later in the painting process.

3. **Avoid at all costs using the frisket to "paint" the subject.** It is tempting to try to get the frisket to flow as a subject in your painting. For instance, to "make" a leaf or petal in a floral painting. This goes against what I am trying to accomplish with the frisket pour - I am not trying to "paint" the subject by protecting it with frisket. I am trying to just get a play of light and texture THROUGH the subject. So instead of going along the edges of the subject try to get the flow to go through it, and connect with other shapes. Sometimes I almost forget the subject when I'm pouring the frisket. Although I am thinking about where it is to a certain extent, so that I can pour the frisket through it.
4. **It is important to not try to push the frisket past where it has run out of liquid.** This happens on larger paintings when you're trying to move the frisket all the way across the page. You will need to keep an eye on the trail of frisket, and add more to it as it runs out. A mistake I often see students make is this - they will keep spraying water into the end of the frisket run to get it to go further. But it can't move any more - it's out of material! Spraying more water into it at that point will only make a mess. The answer is to add a bit of frisket to the end of the run and then continue to spray it with water and continue the flow.

If the frisket starts to dry before you are finished getting it to flow into all the places you want it, don't push your luck. Just let it dry or assist the drying with a hair dryer, and then add a bit of frisket to a dry part of the run and continue moving it around.

I also use a device called "The Incredible Nib" to move parts of the frisket flow around, and connect areas with other flows. You can get this from most art supply catalogs. You can use a brush, also, but the Nib is better because you can just rub the frisket off when you're done. If you use a brush just remember to rinse the frisket off every five or six strokes. I've also seen students use other things to move the frisket around - the other end of a paintbrush, a toothpick, a straw, their fingers.

Do I ever use masking fluid later in a painting after I've removed the poured frisket? Sometime I do - it depends on what effect I am after. I may put some more frisket on with a brush if I want to pour more color in an area that I don't want to disturb. I will allow the painting dry very well (often overnight) and then brush the frisket on the area I want to protect with a light touch. Then I can pour to my heart's delight without worrying about disturbing that area. Just make sure you let the first coat dry well before you apply the frisket, or you will lift all the paint underneath!

SOME THOUGHTS ON COLOR

Here is the question I hear most often in my classes and workshops . . .

What color is that?

Everyone wants to know about color. It's often the most exciting thing about a painting. And sometimes the hardest to master. Here's a few of my thoughts (and others) on color.

I paint most paintings with a limited palette of four to six colors. Sometimes I only use two or three colors on a painting. This allows me to keep the colors clean. When you hear the terms "watercolor" and "mud" used in the same sentence it usually means that the artist made one of two errors: either using too many colors or the wrong color combination. Using a limited palette can help with both of these problems.

I do a lot of color studies to see how the colors interact in a painting. I may try up to ten different colors in a study for a single painting before settling on the palette for that painting.

I have done several color wheels to plot the relationship of my colors. My favorite is Stephen Quiller's color wheel. I have taken my favorite colors and laid them out like his color wheel. This helps me tremendously when planning a painting. I usually use an analogous color scheme with my poured paintings to simplify the color scheme. Having the colors laid out on the wheel is very helpful in seeing which colors will go with each other.

I like to use Jim Kosvanec's "*Transparent Watercolor Wheel*" theory of color mixing, also.

The following information is from his book of that title:

Transparent Non-Staining Colors:

These colors mix or glaze well with other transparent without restrictions. The only colors you shouldn't mix these with are the staining colors.

Examples:

Permanent Rose	Aureolin	Cobalt Blue
Rose Madder Genuine	Viridian	

Semi-Transparent Non-Staining Colors:

These colors are not as versatile as the fully transparent colors. Use with more restraint or do a color study to see if they mix with other colors you want to use.

Examples:

Permanent Magenta	Sap Green	Burnt Sienna
Opera	New Gamboge	Quinacridone Burnt Orange
Prussian Blue	Raw Sienna	Quinacridone Burnt Scarlet
Antwerp Blue	Quinacridone Gold	

Transparent Staining Colors:

These colors mix well with other staining colors, but create problems with colors in the other categories. Mix with other colors cautiously, adding the staining colors last.

Examples:

Alizarin Crimson	Indanthrone Blue	Hooker's Green
Winsor Red	Phthalo Blue	Winsor Yellow
Thalo Red	Phthalo Green	
Winsor Violet	Permanent Green	

Semi-Opaque and Opaque Colors:

There are several rules about these colors:

1. Two of these colors usually mix well together.
2. Three of these mixed together will turn muddy.
3. These colors mix well with transparent colors.
4. Most of these colors do not mix well with staining colors. Generally, the more opaque a color is, the less likely it is to mix cleanly with a staining color.

Examples:

Quinacridone Violet	Cerulean Blue	Hansa Yellow
Cobalt Violet	Manganese Blue	Cadmium Orange
Ultramarine Violet	Cobalt Green	Cadmium Scarlet
French Ultramarine Blue	Cadmium Yellow	Cadmium Red

Whitened and Blackened Colors:

These colors fit in the same category as the semi-opaque and opaque colors. You should also avoid selecting one of these colors as a complement to another color, since they are so neutralized.

Examples:

Brown Madder Alizarin	Terre Verte	Raw Umber
Mars Violet	Olive Green	Sepia
Neutral Tint	Davy's Gray	Burnt Umber
Indigo	Naples Yellow	
Payne's Gray	Yellow Ochre	

You can see why I do so many color studies. How else will I know which colors will mix with each other? This is especially important when I am pouring the colors, since there is less time to adjust the mixing.

There are many pigments that can cause trouble mixing with other colors. This difficulty is increased by the many color brands we have available today. So take the time to learn your colors and how they fight each other, and even better, how they get along. The only way to effectively master your colors is to experiment with how they mix and relate to each other, and write down what you discover. Since every brand is different, there are really no shortcuts to the process.





TECHNIQUE BREAK NO. 6:

Pouring Paint

As in many of the "techniques" in watercolor painting, there are two parts to pouring paint - the "Why" and the "How". First of all, why would you want to pour paint instead of brush it on as usual? I see the following advantage to pouring the paint:

1. The number one reason - the paint mixes on the paper in a way you just can't get using a brush! Especially working wet-in-wet, where you let the colors mix on the paper. Unless you are pouring one color and letting it dry before adding a second color, you are effectively using a wet approach, only pouring it. And the poured washes will mix and blend in a wonderful way once you get a handle on using the correct colors - the pigments that mix well. When you use a brush with wet-in-wet painting, you are constantly disturbing the colors that are already down . . . pouring lets the colors mix in a more fresh manner that lets the colors shine through.

2. The second reason I love pouring is that it kind of forces me to use a more "hands off" approach and let the colors do their own thing. This helps me stay loose and let the painting take off on its own - with pouring you often have to let it happen! This is easier for me because of my semi-abstract style, but how do you think my style got that way? Pouring helped me get away from always trying to dictate the "path" and let shapes and colors emerge on their own.

That's the main points to "Why" . . . what about the "How"? I usually also used poured masking fluid before I pour paint (see above in Tech. Break No. __) but here I will concentrate on pouring the paint.

First you have to think about your painting surface. Hot-press watercolor paper or watercolor board will receive a different pour than the more absorbent traditional papers, like Arches cold press. The smoother surfaces will cause the water and paint to "roll off" before it is absorbed, meaning you need to keep your board and paper flatter. The cold press surfaces may cause some more staining colors to sink in and dye areas of your painting. You will also need to work faster on the smoother surfaces, as they tend to dry quicker. All this means that you just need to consider your surface first, and practice with different ones. The following "system" is one I use for traditional cold or hot press paper - usually 300 lb. Arches paper taped (not stretched) to a board.

Make sure the frisket is dry on your painting - then you are ready to pour the color. Determine where you want to pour the color first. Since your first pour would probably be the main hue of the painting, you would usually want to pour it over a primary part of the subject. Take your spray bottle and wet the painting in that area, taking the time to saturate the surface well. It usually takes several sprays to do this. It's better to get it too wet than not wet enough. But also try to leave some dry and semi-dry spots in some areas of the painting.

I have a large container for this part, to dump the water off your board. Tilt your board and let the water run off your painting into this container, and mop up any excess with a paper towel. Don't leave the water sitting on your paper or you will have a mess. Then pour your first color in the area you chose and begin tilting the board to move the color around. You may need to push the color over the frisket areas. Use the spray bottle to pull it around the rectangle as needed (remember - Pull it towards yourself, just like the frisket pour - don't Push it). Let any excess paint fall off the edge into your large water container, and mop up puddles if needed with a paper towel.

Before this first color dries introduce your second color. I usually pour it on in a different area than the first color and tilt the board to let them mix at some points. This is where your creativity comes into play. Continue to introduce color and move it around until you have a good mix, and then set the painting flat to dry.

One thing to concentrate on with these first pours - remember to keep it light. Try to pour with thin layers of colors and build up the effects slowly. You can adjust it easier this way.

Let the first pour dry completely or dry it with a hair dryer. It is important to dry each step thoroughly, or you will lose some color on successive pours. In my studio I often let a pour dry overnight by working on several paintings at once.

There are several ways to approach your second pour. You can pour some of the same colors as the first pour - I often do this to reinforce and brighten the main colors of the painting. Or you can introduce a second or third color as a glaze over the dry first color. You can even pour with your first color mix and then blend a third color into the mix wet-into-wet. You can see that your creativity comes into play here.

Let me give you an example with one of my favorite paintings - sunflowers. Of course, on this subject I would start out with a pour of a yellow color with maybe a bit of red. On my second pour I often pour the same colors again, since it is common for the colors to lighten up after drying. Then I might introduce a green color next in a different part of the composition.

This sequence also depends on the size of your painting. On a large painting I might be willing to use more colors and really let them flow. On a smaller painting I usually hold back on the different colors - maybe even wait until the brushwork to introduce colors that might fight the first batch. For instance, if you have areas of green leaves on a sunflower painting, I would be more careful introducing them on a smaller painting. This is because they would fight my first pour and seek to dominate the color scheme.

Every time you pour colors you will need to do the following:

1. Make sure the surface is dry.
2. Saturate the area you're pouring into with your spray bottle.
3. Pour the color into that area.
4. Move it around by tilting the board and pulling with the spray bottle.
5. Maybe introduce other colors while the mix is still wet.

Depending on my subject matter and the size of my painting, I will do two, three or up to ten more pours before I remove my frisket. I usually do about three or four pours before removing the frisket. There's no magic formula to this - you just want to get color into most of the composition, and have some nice color mixes. Again, it depends on what you're painting. I will say, though, that it is better to stop too soon rather than too late. Then it's time to remove the frisket.

THE VALUE OF AN “UNSUCCESSFUL” PAINTING . . .

where I explain why I never throw out old paintings.

Did I say “never”? I must admit that I have thrown out old paintings, once I determine that I have passed a certain point in my artistic journey. Let me explain with a story.

Many years ago I taught a weekly class at a local art society. This was one of my first teaching experiences, one that I treasure to this day. I know I learned more in that class than my students! I was following the adage that “you only have to be one step in front of the people you are teaching”. At that point in my career I had reached a certain level of competency, and was beginning to develop my own style, one that seemed to appeal to those trying to learn watercolor. My group held mostly beginning or intermediate students, many of whom were impressed with what I was doing with my paintings. They seemed to think that my competency in drawing and moving a brush around was beyond any level they could even hope for - that my efforts came just from “talent” and not hard efforts over the last several years. I decided to wake them up, and at the next class I brought forth my first efforts at watercolors.

These paintings were both amateurish and ugly; despite some talent at drawing I truly missed the mark with my first efforts. The group contained the requisite ugly barn painting, some horrible attempts at portraits, and several of my own class projects. Truly a motley group of failed paintings.

I brought these to class to show my students that we all had to start at the beginning and grow through practice and failed efforts. As I went to unveil my masterpieces, I was not surprised to read on their faces that “these paintings will be unpolished, but still good”. I shudder as I remember their horror-stricken expressions as they took in my first paintings . . . and I could read their minds - “these paintings really are terrible!” Several of them tried to cover up by saying things like, “they are not so bad . . . that one is okay”, but the cat was out of the bag. I had started out terrible just like them! ((Insert a quote here about how every skill must be learned through a series of failures.))

I must admit that I haven't dragged out those first paintings many other times (an artist can only withstand so many shots to his ego), and I did throw out or paint over many of those old efforts. However, I did learn that it can be very useful to keep older paintings around, for the following reasons:

It can help you see how far you've come!

It can be difficult to remember what you've done "right" in a painting unless you can look back to see what you did "wrong". For instance, learning how to use frisket, or make a hard edge.

You can also use some of your old paintings as a springboard to a successful new one. That's my next story.



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MY BIGGEST BREAKTHROUGH IN PAINTING . . .

came when I didn't give up on a "loser".

Back when I began pouring in my paintings, I was really struggling with getting any of them to work out. My colors would turn into mud, or I couldn't get the composition to work out. I had started a rather large, involved sunflower painting by pouring frisket and then the bright colors, and then I got stuck. I was trying to paint some negative passages to get the flower shaped to emerge, but it was not working out! I felt frustrated in my efforts, and remember that I actually got lost in the shapes. So I put it in the drawer with the rest of my halfway-done starts. What I didn't realize was that I was still working it out in my head!

Weeks or months later, I pulled that painting out and studied it some more. What was lacking was some "starting point" that would help me identify where to go. I thought that the bright colors I had poured worked out great, and I could now see some shapes coming forward. "Why give up on it . . . what do I have to lose now?" I thought, so I dove into that one area that seemed to have some direction emerging, and started to



develop shapes and a direction in the painting. I was now really enjoying the process, and worked out the shapes and colors that grew from that one area - the spot that became the focal point. And this finished painting went on to win the Grand Prize in an International Artist magazine competition, which led to a feature article in their magazine. The lesson here - never give up on a painting!

It also showed me the path to another "secret" that I've used ever since then. That's the subject of my next "Technique Break".

Of all the joys of painting, experimenting is the most like play. It's a matter of letting curiosity lead to discovery, trying new ideas just to see what will happen."

~ Nita Engle

ONE THING YOU MUST HAVE TO COMPLETE A SUCCESSFUL PAINTING

What is the one thing you must have to complete a successful painting?

Without this, you will muddle along with your work and probably never paint anything that will make you proud. You will struggle with passages time after time, and make the same mistakes over and over. You may even get frustrated and give up before you paint a good piece.

What is this characteristic?

Confidence.

If you paint with confidence, you will quickly overcome your mistakes and learn to work past them. You will no longer allow the voices and opinions of others to affect you. You will begin to look forward to challenges in your paintings, because you will know that you can use those challenges to improve your work.

One of my favorite sayings is "I would rather put down a quick, confident brushstroke that was wrong than a hesitant brushstroke that is right". How can I say this? It's because I know that a hesitant stroke that is "right" is made because I was so worried about messing up that I really took my time to get that one stroke right. This will probably lead to strokes later, if done the same way, that will not go with the look of the rest of painting. The piece will be made up of a bunch of single strokes that, while done competently, don't go together in the painting as a whole.

On the other hand, if I try to make quick confident strokes, I will capture the "essence" of the painting faster. This will lead to a more cohesive work, with every stroke complementing the last.

So how do you develop this confidence in your work?

Think about it first. I spend a lot of time reviewing my drawing and working on it between painting stages. This helps me concentrate on where I want to go next in the painting. I can then choose the best stroke for that passage.

Give up having to make each stroke perfect. This is a biggie - you have to give yourself the gift of making mistakes. Don't worry about crafting a lousy brushstroke or putting down paint in the wrong place. As you loosen up, you will find your confidence increasing. If you make a mistake, leave it along and go on with the painting - most attempts to correct the mistake just make it worse!

Concentrate on the values and shapes. You will make a much more confident stroke if you give up having to get the color exactly correct, and instead concentrate on the values and shapes. This will help you paint more abstractly, even in a realistic painting, by forcing you to think of “shapes” and “lights and darks” instead of things. Then you can take a bolder approach to your work, which will increase your confidence.

Make up your own mind about your work. Don't put too much stock in what other people say about your work, either good or bad. Concentrate on painting for yourself, and your confidence will increase. Opinions are very subjective in the art world. Listen to your own inner voice both while you're creating a painting, and when you are viewing your work.

Work on increasing your confidence, and watch your work grow!

*“I can't recall ever seeing a fine painting by a timid painter.”
- Irving Shapiro*





TECHNIQUE BREAK NO. 7 :

"Finish Your Focal Point First".

I've talked a lot about the "focal point" in a painting - what an important area! That's where all the good stuff hangs out - the best color, the sharpest edges . . . the focus! But did you know that it can be useful to work out this area first, before you complete your painting? There are many advantages to this, such as:

- Your painting will retain the "lightness" that makes up a good watercolor. In traditional watercolor, we work from light to dark the entire way. If you're not careful, though, this can leave you with a finished painting that is too dark. Developing your focal area first will help with this.

- Would you agree that it's often hard to know where to go next in your paintings? Do you finish one area, or work on the entire painting to the same level? Concentrating on the focal point will give you a better, more decisive "path".
- This will help you judge what you need to do in other areas, especially in value and color. How do you know how dark to get up in that far right corner? It's hard to judge that until you know the value of the focal point; once that is complete, the other areas will almost paint themselves.

Here's how you pull this off. First, you need to be at the place where you've decided where your focal point is in the rectangle, and have it (and most of the rest of the painting) drawn well. At this point I have done my initial pours, removed my frisket, and redrawn my composition. Maybe I've done some more pours, or brushed on some color and started to develop negative spaces. But the main thing is - I've chosen my focal point, and lasered in on that area.

Now I decide the most important thing about that area - its value. If I've contained my pouring and not gotten too dark to this point, I have some freedom with value - I can get very dark in the focal point, or just halfway on the value scale. If my overall painting is rather dark, I may need to up the value in that area. The main thing is to decide where that focal area is, and how dark it will be.

Then I jump in and start developing that area - all the way to its finish. This is where I depart from the traditional advice on watercolor painting, where you work on the entire painting. It's a mix of working out a small painting of its own right there in the focal area, and keeping an idea on what this does to the rest of the painting. But ideally I will complete that area fully, and then emerge from there to complete the painting.

Sometimes I can't believe how much this helps my paintings - it's almost like some areas paint themselves now! You will find areas in your paintings where you thought you were going to do a lot of work now need just a touch of color, or in some instances, no work at all. Let the rest of your painting "grow" from the focal point, and you will have a much more cohesive structure - one that will keep the focus where it's supposed to be, not all over the place!

IN CONCLUSION . . .

Watercolor is such a great medium! It's fresh and spontaneous, and if handled well can bring out the best in any subject. But it does take time to get to the point where you are producing quality work in a consistent manner. Don't rush it – spend the time to learn what works best for you. Here are a few more tips to consider:

Try to see the negative and positive shapes in whatever you are painting. If this is a challenge, begin looking at the shapes in nature, especially when the sun is out. Try to see the patterns in the trees, rocks or other shapes. This will help you identify those shapes in your paintings.

Don't worry about problem areas or "mistakes" too much - they will usually work themselves out in the course of the painting.

Try to look at the composition as a whole while you are painting - don't concentrate too much on one area.

Spend as much time thinking about what you're going to do as painting that area.

Experiment . . . and, above all - have fun!

*"The amateur is afraid of boldness, the professional is afraid of timidity."
- Ed Whitney*

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