

WaterColors that

POP!

Contemporary Realism Techniques Using Watercolors

Lesson 1
Painting Glass



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WaterColors that POP!



Introduction.

Before we even begin to talk about watercolors and how I use them . . . we need to discuss a few other subjects.

For those of you who are seasoned artists (notice, I did not say old) you may want to skip ahead. One of my primary challenges is that I do not know the skill level or experience of the watercolor artists who are reading these lessons. So, feel free to jump ahead.

I believe, there is only one way to get better and that is to work smarter and harder. Smarter being the operative word. If you work harder, but are doing things that will not make you better, then you are wasting your time.

Also, I want to be very clear about these lessons . . . **this is the way that I work.** This is certainly not the only way to work in watercolor. My way, may not work for you! I'm only sure of one thing about this method . . . it works for me. Hopefully, you can take away some insights from these lessons that will help you get better.

However, getting better doesn't necessarily mean more fun. What if you improve, but you are not having fun anymore. Is it worth it? I don't think it is. I work very hard on my watercolors, but to me it's not work. It's really a lot of fun and extremely gratifying when I finish a well done piece. I feel that you have to be in love with the process in order to make wonderful art.

I'm very old school when it comes to **Drawing and Seeing** they are two things which I feel are completely intertwined. Every subject that you want to draw or paint contains **visual information.** If you don't understand the information in front of you, you will never be able to draw the object or the subject very well!

Drawing is to painting, what an architectural diagram is to building a skyscraper. If an architectural diagram is bad . . . catastrophe awaits. I believe, if your drawing is bad, then your painting has no chance of being good.

If you want to improve your watercolor paintings, then you have to begin by improving your drawing ability. I will address this later and give you some ways you can improve the way you see.

I would like to end this introduction by saying that I personally am not a big believer in talent. What do I mean by that? I think some people are more inclined in certain areas and it may be a little easier for them in the beginning. Some find it harder to get started. I believe, that hard work can overcome this difficulty and that everyone can improve their skills and get a lot better! If you have a little patience and are willing to put in the work, it's amazing what you can accomplish.

The Lessons.

At this time, I'm not sure how many lessons there will be. The first one, will deal with how I set up the still life and how to position the relationship of the glass objects in relation to it's surroundings. Also, if you paint from life or from a photograph.

Let's get started and move onto the first lesson.

Painting Glass - Lesson 1.

This first lesson is going to be relatively simple, but important. It will include many of the fundamental principles that I apply when doing the majority of my watercolors.

I usually work from a combination of photographs and actual still life objects. Usually, I rely more heavily on a photograph when I have a subject that will perish over a short period of time. Like a flower or a fruit.

It really doesn't matter what you prefer. If you are more traditional and want to work from an actual still life, that's fine. If you prefer photographs, then I suggest you set up your own still life and take your own photos. (Now, I'm a descent photographer. Photography can be very technical and many elements contribute to the taking of a good photograph. The type of camera you use, the lighting, the shutter speed, and on and on it goes. Your photography know how will be important in order for you to get a solid reference photo to paint from.

In **Photo 1**, I have taken a photo of a simple glass that I am going to use as a reference for my painting. It's a good photo. It has lots of highlights and some very interesting reflections. However, it really doesn't jump off the page, because the contrast is not very strong. There are highlights and middle grays, but no really dark values.

Protect your white areas! Like you would your children!



In **Photo 2**, I have taken the same photo with the same lighting, but the background is much darker. It's actually a very dark navy blue. Now, in my opinion this glass is starting to "pop" off the page. Just increasing the contrast between the glass and the background makes a considerable difference. It also makes it easier to render the glass realistically. Also, notice this photo has the entire tonal scale. There are bright whites and very dark, darks. With a bunch of middle grays in between. This is very important if you want the glass or any subject to appear realistic and to have that all important feeling of dimension.

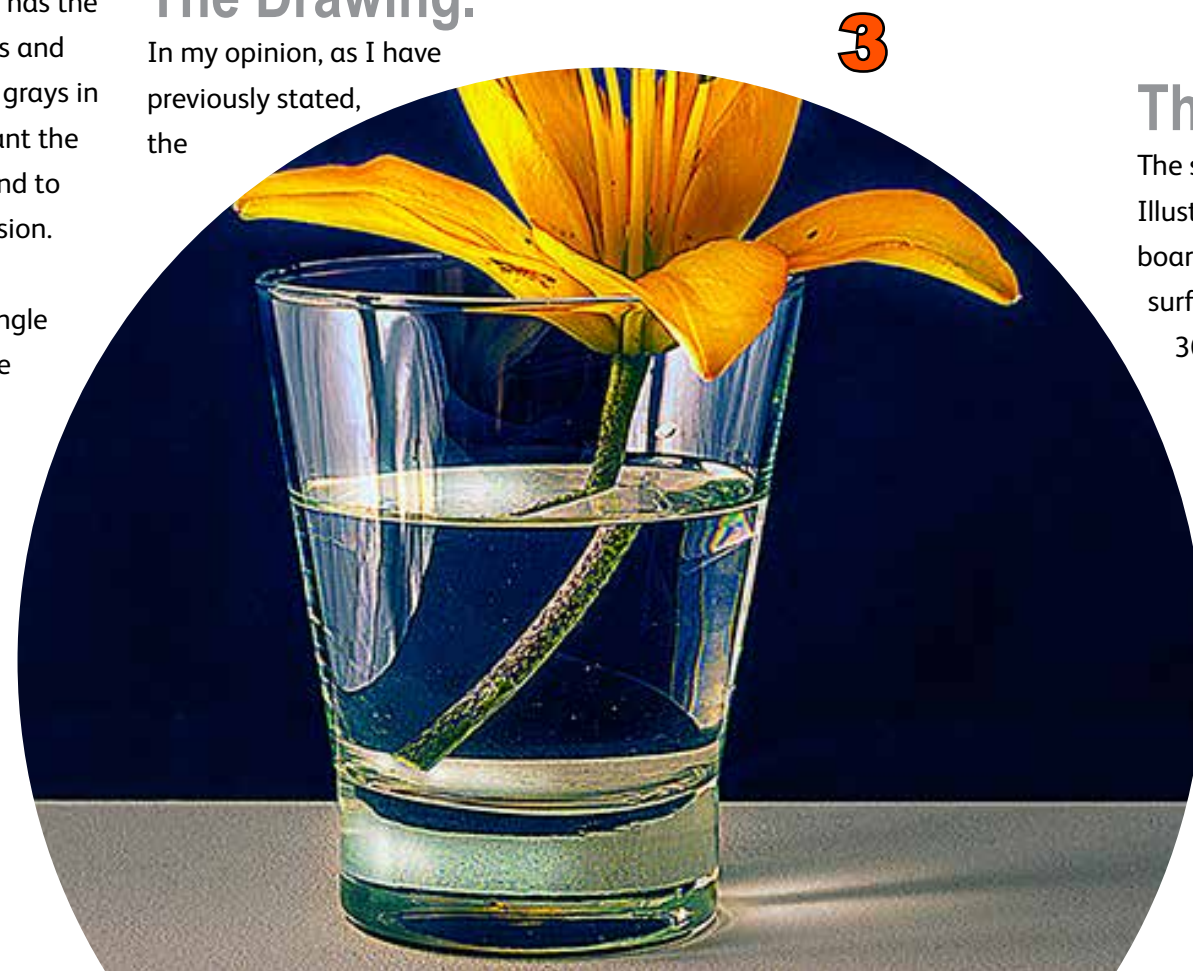
In **Photo 3**, I have added water and a single orange lily to the glass. I think this simple still life is very appealing. It has all the attributes that a really good painting needs (strong contrast, complementary colors and a simple, but clean and elegant composition). I also, look for interesting reflections and refractions in the glass itself. Notice the stem of the Lilly it has a really cool distortion.



This is all I need as a reference. It's a great base to jump off from. I'm now ready to start my painting.

The Drawing.

In my opinion, as I have previously stated, the



drawing is the most essential part of your painting. How do you get an accurate representation of this glass and flower?

This is what I do . . . I usually use a grid system. The grid gives you an accurate way to render the proper portions of the subject. If you are not familiar with the grid system. I suggest that you do a little research and learn about this method of drawing. Really take your time in doing the drawing. **I can't stress enough how essential this step is!**

Take a look at my drawing in **Photo 4**. I have not only drawn the outlines, I also draw in some shading very lightly. I use a 6H pencil, so that it is impossible to get really dark. With the shading I am beginning to establish my values (lights & darks). This is very important. This drawing took me about 2 hours.

I am very happy with this foundation drawing and I'm ready to start painting.

The Materials I Use.

The substrate that I paint on is Strathmore 500 Illustration Board. It is a Hot Press (smooth) board. This is my preference. You can use any surface you like. Paper, hot press, cold press, 300lb paper, 140lb paper, or whatever you prefer. I'm not going to get into soaking your paper because I don't know the best way to do that. There is also a relatively new product on the market from Ampersand. It's called Waterboard and some people do wonderful paintings with it. I believe, it is a clay surface on a wood like substrate that is very durable. It's probably worth checking out.



So, there are a lot of ways you can go when it comes to painting surfaces. I will leave that up to you. The surface you use will effect the look of your watercolor. You have to, through trail and error find which you like best.

What paints do I use? I really buy all different brands. I suggest you buy a professional artist's grade paint. I don't think you can go wrong with any of the major brands. If you pinned me down for an answer, I probably would choose Windsor Newton. The colors are really bright and very fade resistant. They also are very reasonably priced. I know that price is a very important consideration for most people. The price of watercolor paints can be extremely prohibitive.

Also, while I'm the subject of paints . . . you need to be able to mix your colors properly. You don't have to go out and spend a fortune and buy every color in the store. Here is a very simple example: If you have yellow and blue. Do you really need to go out and buy a green tube of paint? Why not make your own? There are some colors that you will find are very difficult to mix. Those colors are worth the cost of buying the tube. I find it very difficult to mix a certain purple. So, I just buy the tube.

Brushes. I use lots of different brushes. I won't name a brand because I have many different brands of brushes. You can buy Kolinsky brushes and spend an absolute fortune. I don't really think it's necessary. A second grade of brush that costs \$10.00 to \$15.00 dollars will work fine. Grumbacher or Escoda are good brushes (apparently I will name a brand). I'm not talking about the junk brushes that come in those \$5.00 watercolor sets. The ones that will not hold a point.

Basically, I believe the story . . . it's the archer and not the arrow. In this case, the artist and not the brush or even the watercolor brand. Sure, you need good supplies. They do make a difference. However, especially if you are a beginner, you don't have to buy the most expensive supplies to do good work. It's just not necessary!!!!

The Painting.

Before we begin, You need to know that I really do not use watercolors in a traditional sense. It's probably why my paintings don't for the most part look like watercolors. I love watercolors for a number of reasons. They are a true partner and I can do things with watercolors that I can't do with other mediums. I use a combination of dry

brush and wet on wet techniques. The wet on wet is really when watercolors become your "dance" partner. You have to give up control and hand it over to the medium and sometimes wonderful things can happen. You can discover a lot about yourself when you work with this medium. You have to develop a level of trust. To some, this trust or belief comes quickly. To others, it takes a long time. It took me a long time. So, don't worry. It will happen for you, when it is suppose to happen. Just stick with it and I promise – you will get better.

Also, I'm not necessarily trying to make my paintings look realistic. It just kind of happens that way. I am very aware of the abstract shapes and lines that inhabit my paintings and reality in general. I would say, I'm actually trying to make things look simpler, but at the same time bigger, brighter and more vivid than life.

The very first thing I do when painting is try to develop my value scale as quickly as I can. I try to establish my very darkest areas first. When I have the darkest areas in place, then I can use them as a reference for all my lighter values.

In **Photo 5**, I'm going to fill in the background first. I lay down an undercoating of **Cerulean Blue** and I'm not really concerned about an even layer. I'm just trying to cover the white of the board. I will let this layer completely dry. Then I will paint the next layer even darker. It will be a combination of **French Ultramarine** and **Indigo Blue**. I like to build up colors and use many layers. That's how I achieve really bright and deep colors. Incidentally, I never use straight black out of a tube. I will keep adding layers and waiting for each layer to dry before applying the next. Eventually, it will look like **Photo 6**. A deep dark layer with a minimum of streaking or brush marks.



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Now, that I have my darkest value established. I can easily go ahead and begin painting our glass.

One note of caution: You have to protect the background that you just carefully painted. Cover it as much as you can while you paint the rest of the painting.

See Photo 7. To paint this glass, I used **Cerulean Blue, Prussian Blue** and **Indigo Blue**. First, I establish the darkest areas by painting and building them first with Cerulean Blue and then add a layer of Prussian Blue and finally Indigo Blue for the very darkest areas.

If an area is a very specific shape, then I use a dry brush technique (very little water on your brush means thicker paint). This gives



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me total control over the placement of the paint. Painting using the dry brush technique is almost like painting with Acrylic paints. I usually, lay down a color and let it dry completely before applying the next layer. I slowly build up colors with many layers of paint. The transparency of watercolors will sometimes make it difficult to get bright, rich dark colors. You can do it with many thin layers of paint.

Once I've completed the first area and established my values then I can basically just paint.

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This is essential!

Protect your white areas. Like you would your children. Because, it will be very difficult, if not completely impossible to recapture the white areas if you accidentally paint over them.

If I accidentally paint over an area that is meant to be white, I will scrub out the area and remove as much paint as I can. Then, I will paint the area with white gouache. It works okay, but it is never really totally white again.



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In **Photos 8, 9, 10, & 11** you can see how the glass painting has progressed. You can also see that I paint and complete small areas at a time. Working in small areas helps me to focus. I'm very aware of the entire painting, I just don't paint it all at once.

I painted this very carefully and it took me about 2 full days to complete the glass. There are lots of dark blue tones where you can see directly

through the glass. There are tons of reflections. Without the reflections of white in this painting . . . this glass would not look like a glass.



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Refractions or distortions are also what makes a glass very interesting to paint. Look at the crazy distortion of

the Lillie's stem in **Photo 11**.

Except for the areas of translucent orange (which are reflections from the Lilly and the table) this glass was painted with a minimal amount of colors (Cerulean Blue, Prussian Blue and Indigo. Even though only a few colors were used, I created many different values and hues by adding more and less water to my painting mixture.

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Something, that I believe is very important is to become aware of the shapes and lines that make up this painting. If you study **Photo 10**, try and look for all the abstract shapes and lines that compose that "realistic" looking glass. There are lots and lots of them. In fact, the whole glass is just made up of lines and abstract shapes.

The reason I want you to be aware of these elements is because it can help you break down a very complicated image that you might want to draw or paint. This particular glass is actually quite simple and straight forward. Being aware of the different shapes and lines can help you with a more difficult subject in the future.



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I went ahead and finished the Lilly and table area. I'm won't be showing you step-by-step photos of that process since this lesson was primarily about painting glass.

On the last page is the completed painting. It is 15" x 19" on Strathmore board and it took me about four days to complete. I really like the way it turned out.

I hope that this step-by-step tutorial was helpful to you and that you picked up some tips that you can use in your own watercolor paintings.

