

WORK AS SLOWLY AS POSSIBLE

You should paint as slowly as possible, given your materials and objectives. The only constant is to keep the wash bead moving downward in a way that prevents brushmarks, pigment deposits and backruns. But how quickly you must move the wash bead depends on the tilt, the brush, the wash mixture, the heat and humidity, the absorbency of the paper, and other environmental factors. If you can adjust any of these components to give yourself more time to complete the wash, there is almost never a reason not to do so.

TILT THE PAPER

As a general rule, tilt the paper enough to get the benefits of gravity flow without any of the drawbacks. The tilt most appropriate for a painting depends on specific factors — the size of the wash area, the time it will take to complete, the type of paints in the wash mixture, its dilution with water, the size and type of brush you are using, the surface texture and absorbency of the paper, even the humidity and temperature. Change the tilt as needed when working. If you are unsure of anything, test out the wash on a sheet of scrap watercolor paper.

STUDY PIGMENT AND PAINT MIXTURES

Almost all the difficulties in wash technique — tiny pinholes, wash banding, streaky or visible brushstrokes, blossoms or backruns — comes down to the behavior of the paint solution, which means the pigment in the paint. Think about which pigment mixture you want to use, and why. This is a topic you will only understand with experience: keep painting to learn how your materials behave, and discover what works best.

SELECT THE MOST LOGICAL APPROACH

There is always more than one technique — different tilt, different brush, different wash strategy — to paint a wash to get the same wash effect. If the results are the same, choose the method that you can do most confidently or that creates the least risk of accident or failure in the execution.

CONSIDER MULTIPLE WASHES

You will have to use multiple washes in order to glaze one pigment over another, but you can also lay multiple layers of the same pigment to produce more even, homogenous results. The main constraints here are the complexity of the wash edges and the eagerness of the wash already applied to dissolve under a new coating of liquid.

VISUALIZE BEFORE YOU PAINT

Begin by looking at your subject and visualizing your wash against it, exactly as if you were painting over a transparent sheet of paper. Visualize the brushstrokes, the pigment intensity, the wash flow, the edge painting. Locate the areas of light and dark, warm and cool and intensity changes. Continue the visualization from the first stroke of the brush to the last bead of the paint. Repeat several times, if necessary. Then, look down at your paper, and begin

IMPROVISE

Don't lose sight of the fact that you can change and modify washes in midstream. You can change the tilt, the brushstroke, the dilution of the paint, the wetness of the paper; you can go back in with a dry brush and touch up uneven areas; you can add water to create expressive blossoms or backruns; you can blot water with a towel or let it run. Once you have mastered the separate elements of the wash, you'll discover an amazing freedom to improvise rather than slog mechanically through a routine procedure.