

Faux Watercolor on Fabric

by Susan Brubaker Knapp

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Host Susan Brubaker Knapp

Materials

- PFD (prepared for dyeing) fabric (I used Robert Kaufman Pimatex.)
- Cotton backing
- Cotton batting
- Transparent acrylic fabric paints and base extender (I used PRO™ Chemical & Dye PROfab Transparent Paint and Base Extender.)
- Round paintbrushes
- Foam brush
- Palette for mixing paint colors
- Water cup for cleaning brushes
- Masking tape
- Black thread
- Black Micron Pigma® pen, size 1

Optional

- White pigment pen or gel pen (I used Uni-ball Signo UM-153.)

I've been making wholecloth painted art quilts for years. They usually include highly realistic subject matter, and I paint them using transparent acrylic textile paints. Recently, I thought I'd try to achieve a looser, more transparent watercolor look but when I diluted the paints with water, they bled into the fabric and I couldn't control them at all.

In watercolor painting, one of the desired looks is to preserve some white (areas without paint on them) while using transparent paint. One of the techniques is to paint one color—such as yellow—and then paint in drops or streaks of a darker color—like orange—and let the colors blend but not completely mix together. It is a somewhat serendipitous process.

To get a watercolor look, I first tried using lots of transparent base extender when I mixed my colors. Base extender is basically the stuff that paint is made of minus the pigments that give the paints their color. The extender keeps the paint very fluid and moist, so I was able to swirl in other colors to try to get a watercolor look. This worked okay,

but it wasn't quite as transparent as I wanted. The main problem, I decided, was that paint does not move on fabric the way it does on paper. It immediately sinks into the cotton fibers and stays there, and the first color on the fabric is the one that stays. How could I make fabric act more like paper?

When painting on canvas with acrylics, the canvas is 'primed' first with gesso, I realized. Hmm ... What if I used base extender to prime the fabric before applying the paint?

This priming did the trick. The coating allows me to use fairly watery paint with no bleeding. The final effect is much lighter and more transparent—like watercolor! (figure 1)



figure 1

INSTRUCTIONS

Prepare the fabric

1. Create an original drawing and enlarge it to the size you want your finished piece to be. (figure 2) Don't make the drawing too complex. Start with a fairly small piece first—my sample is 10" square—while you're learning. The spaces need to be large enough to color in with the paint.

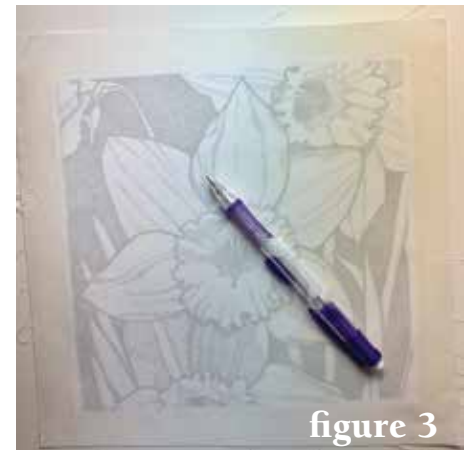
Tip: *If drawing an image is out of your comfort zone, trace one of your own photos (or a copyright free one) and enlarge the tracing to the size you want your finished piece to be.*

2. Cut a piece of PFD fabric 1" larger on all sides than the enlarged drawing and place it on a smooth, protected surface. Using a foam brush, apply the transparent base extender out to the edges of the cloth and completely saturate the entire fabric. Use your hands to smooth out the extender so there are no streaks or globs. Allow the fabric to dry completely. Press.

3. Tape the drawing to the unpainted side of the fabric. Trace the main lines of the image onto the primed side with a pencil using a lightbox or sunny window. (figure 3) Add in lighter secondary lines indicating areas where the watercolor effect should be. The pencil lines will be mostly covered by black thread in a later step. Lastly, pencil in a line around your composition, about $\frac{1}{4}$ " beyond the edge of the drawing. Make sure you paint out to this line. This ensures you have paint out into the seam allowance when you finish the piece.

Add stitching

1. Remove the drawing and tape from the fabric, and create a quilt sandwich with batting and backing. Pin baste the layers together.
2. With a free-motion foot and feed dogs lowered, stitch the main pencil lines with black thread. Try to be precise and cover the line completely. I usually stitch over most of the lines twice. (figure 4) You can always go over the stitching again if you want them darker after you've finished painting.



Paint

1. Mix colors in a palette. Add a good amount of water to make them more fluid, and mix well. (figure 5)
2. Paint the composition, leaving some white areas for “sparkle.” Allow to dry. (figure 6)



Finishing

1. To add depth to the quilt image, use a black permanent marker to add crosshatching or stippling for details and shading. (figure 7)

Note: I also added black dots around the creases of the petals and center of the flower for more detail. If you need to add sparkle or highlights, use white pens with pigment ink or acrylic paint.

2. If desired, add additional quilting in colored thread. (figure 8)
3. Finish the piece with a traditional binding or facing.

This technique is a great addition to the wholecloth-quilter’s toolbox. I hope you enjoy experimenting with your own images and subjects! ■

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TIPS FOR PAINTING WATERCOLOR EFFECTS

- Paint up to (but not touching) the stitch lines. The holes where the stitches perforate the fabric may pull the paint in and cause the paint to migrate.
- Leave some areas of white, unpainted fabric to mimic the look of a watercolor painting.
- Using the light pencil lines as a guide, apply the first layer of color (such as yellow) over a small area. While the paint is still wet, come back in with another color (such as a few drops of red) and pull it through the paint. This will allow the two colors to mix just as watercolors do on a paper substrate.



figure 5



figure 6



figure 7



figure 8

Project and process photos courtesy of the artist