

5 Beginner Watercolor Painting Mistakes

A few simple habits make beginner watercolor painting much easier!

You can't instantly become a great artist, but you can learn to paint watercolor paintings that make you smile in a few weeks. It's actually much easier for a beginner artist to learn to paint with good habits rather than an intermediate artist change their habits, so that's good news for complete beginners!

Speaking from experience: These are things almost all beginner artists do that mess up their paintings from the start. If you get a good start to a painting, then the rest of the painting is much easier.

If you avoid these 5 mistakes then your paintings will improve dramatically!

1. Not Leaving White Paper at the Beginning



At one time or another, we've probably all heard: "Paint a nice wash of cobalt blue over the entire sky with a big flat brush."

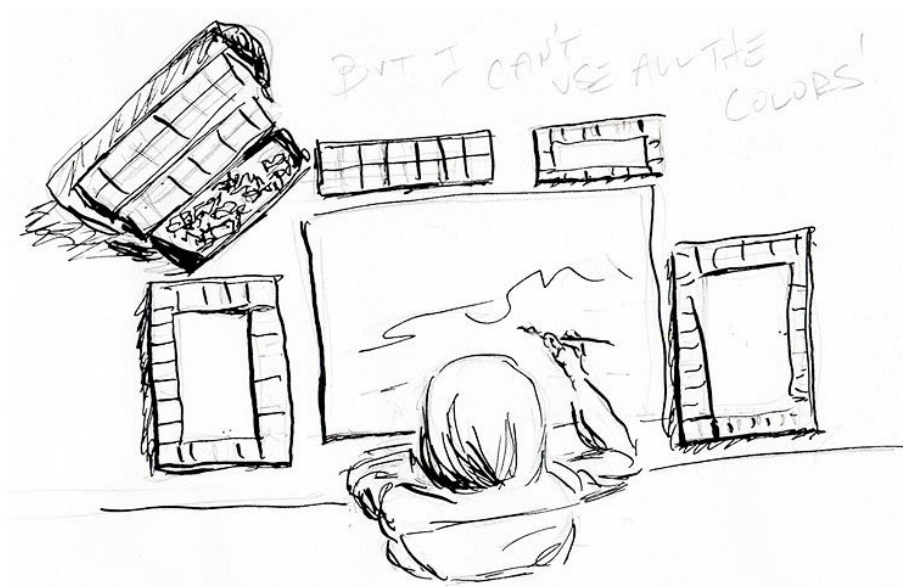
The only part of that instruction I agree with is: with a **big brush**. I agree with painting the entire sky in one go, **but leaving holes is critical**. If we don't leave holes in our washes we lose the sparkle of white paper.

If you lose the white paper sparkle then you're pretty much limiting yourself to painting a dull lifeless scene. Sometimes this works for night or rainy days. But even on rainy days we want a little bit of sun coming through the clouds and giving life to our work.

You can regain light color by scrubbing out paint but you can never regain the effervescent sparkle of pristine white paper.

Always leave at least 1/4 of your paper white **on the first wash**. Paint all over your painting but leave lots of holes. When in doubt, leave white paper!

2. Too Many Colors



But I can't use *ALL* the colors!

Stick to **3 pigments (colors)** in a wash before letting the painting dry completely. The danger point starts when you add more than 3 colors in a wash.

Keep in mind many paint colors are already mixes of several pigments.

Artist's Tips

Use 3 Pigments Maximum in 1 Wash!

Half of the point of watercolor is the multiple layers of paint. It makes a difference which pigments float on top of which pigments.

If you stick to a limited palette of 12 pigments and only use 3 of those pigments at a time, your paintings will look gorgeously bright and fresh compared to someone else using every color they can get their hands on.



3. Too Much Detail At Beginning



See how isolated this beautifully detailed flower is? It will be nearly impossible to connect the flower with the landscape around it.

Too much detail and painting only at the very center of interest are interlinked problems.

TOO MUCH DETAIL: If you're painting tiny details at the beginning of a painting you're not thinking about the **big shapes and value pattern** in the painting. You're not thinking **big shapes and color temperature pattern**.

You're painting each and every stamen on a lovely detailed flower. That flower is usually isolated in the very center of interest, floating in space. All of that detail you've done usually then migrates to the rest of the painting. You've set a high standard for precise details and you want to continue that detail throughout the painting.

Problem #1: When you start with tiny details instead of big shapes, your proportions are off.

Even if you're drawn everything beautifully, the shapes of the colors and shadows are just a bit off. If you start big and work toward small shapes you're much more likely to have those proportions right.



Problem #2: If you put a lot of detail in at the beginning of a painting, you tend to put detail everywhere in that painting.

This makes the painting extremely fussy. By putting unnecessary detail away from the center of interest you're drawing the viewer's eyes away from where you want them to go. Not a good visual choice.

If you put the details in very last, you only use as much as absolutely necessary. The simplest way to force yourself into this habit is to use a big brush for 90% of your painting!

4. Working only in the Center



Artist's Tips

Decide where you're going from the start. Are you painting a little sketch or a powerful composition? It can't be both!

If you start off painting only at your center of interest and don't move around your painting, your center of interest will be isolated from the rest of your painting. It's always going to look like a cutout pasted on your painting rather than an integrated part of your painting.

An isolated little sketch is charming to remember a scene, but it's not a finished painting. **A finished composition works the entire paper, not just a little patch in the middle.**

The background of a painting is planned from the beginning, not an afterthought. Everything in the background directs the viewer's eyes where you want them to go.

5. Clean Water!



A picture speaks a thousand words - that's the point of all this anyhow!

If you use dirty water to paint with, you'll get dirty looking paintings. You can see how much a clear pinkish-red like quinacridone red changes without changing the water.

Change the water with every wash, minimum!

Look at how muddy water gets after 1 wash!



These beginner watercolor painting mistakes are all very easy to avoid. Some, like changing water or working all over your painting, are just changing a habit.

Using a big brush to avoid tiny detail at the beginning is easy.

Limiting yourself to 3 colors in every wash is a simple thing to do.

All of these little painting habits will make your paintings dramatically better. Your colors will be brighter (or more the color you wanted them to be!)

Your compositions will be more simple, but bolder and stronger.

These are a few simple habits to change your paintings for the better!

Extra Practice! (use scrap watercolor paper)

Try painting a sky with a really big brush.

Paint at least 3 layers, drying in between layers.

1.Layer #1

Paint 2/3 of the painting at most, hitting all quadrants equally.

Let this dry completely!

Change Water!

2.Layer #2

Paint only 50% of what you just painted, still using the big brush.

Let this dry completely!

Change Water!

3.Layer #3

Paint only 10% of what you've already painted. You can use a small brush for 2%.

You will be amazed at how lovely your sky looks!