

THE NEW PALETTE

Issue #68 2019



"Silver, Cherries, Pears & Magnolia" - Laurin McCracken

Prize-winning watercolorist
Laurin McCracken,
demonstrates

accuracy, precision & performance



There was a time when painting a watercolor meant pretty much one thing: packing up your paints, trekking to some rustic or exotic spot and dashing off a half-sheet before the light changed or onlookers gathered. You might pack a lunch and go with friend. And if you worked fast, didn't linger over lunch, and the light was just right, you might get a second half-sheet done. That's the way watercolorists did it.

Today, watercolor is employed in a wide variety of styles and techniques. Watercolorists paint inside and out, fast and slow, big and small, loose and tight. Depending on the expressive intent, technical approach, and personality, artists will work in styles ranging from juicy abstraction to precise, visually accurate realism. Texas artist, Laurin McCracken, is a realist who values visual accuracy and possesses flawless technique. Here, McCracken demonstrates that technique.

Laurin McCracken Describes his Artistic Philosophy

“I believe that there are three basic aspects that contribute to being an artist.”

Seeing

The first is **Seeing**—You must be able to see things in a fresh way. You must see things in a way that reveals new ways of seeing to others. Walter Anderson said, “Everything I see is new and strange.” From that, he created art that attracts our attention, warrants our attention, and astounds us.

The Cubist’s created a new way to view objects on a table in front of an open window. We can never look at those objects the same way again. How you see things determines the story you will tell your audience in your painting.

Drawing

The next is **Drawing**— The fundamentals of art is all about drawing. Drawing is the way artists transfer our unique way of seeing into any media. The more you draw the easier it gets, and the better you draw.

The better you draw, the better you paint.

Mastery of Craft

The third is **Mastery of the Craft**—You must be able to be facile with the tools of your medium if you are to successfully transfer how you see paint to paper. Without mastery of the craft of painting, your audience will not be able to see past your poor painting abilities, read the message you are trying to communicate about what you saw, drew, and painted.

This is especially true of a process driven medium such as watercolor. It is virtually impossible to be a fine watercolorist if you haven’t mastered the basic techniques that have been developed for the medium.

I am a realist watercolorist and I interpret the real world through the medium of watercolor. While I see things as a photographer and as a painter, I am able to use the medium as a tool to express how I see things. One of my goals is to help people see everyday things in a new light.

Influences

My still life paintings are influenced by the Dutch and Flemish still life painters of the 16th and 17th Century, such as Pieter Claesz, Willem Kalf and Jan Davidz de Heem. Like these wonderful artists, I try to explore the world of rich materials, beautiful objects, and bring their stories to the viewer.

I especially enjoy painting beautifully crafted objects made of reflective materials; crystal, glass, silver, and pewter. One of the joys of painting these objects is to see how the reflections of objects work themselves around the other objects, and how the light is reflected and refracted. The color of one object can be reflected back on the body of another object from the reflection under a curved handle. For the casual viewer it will remain a mystery as to why that shape and color ended up where it is.

Subject Matter

I am always looking for interesting objects from which to set up a new still life. Often these are elegant pieces, owned by friends and family. Sometimes the objects are more

mundane; simple glasses and canning jars. Art can be found in any place. While it is fun to pay homage to the beautifully crafted silver and crystal objects,

there is art to be found in the ordinary plate, cup, and glass.

Photography

As a studio

painter who puts a lot of hours into my efforts to render objects as realistically as the medium will allow (and I am always trying to push that envelope), I work from photographs. I have been a photographer for many years and even had a student assistantship at Princeton to teach photography and darkroom techniques to the architecture students. I see things from a photographer’s eye and perhaps at a greater degree of detail than is typical. That photographer’s eye is now greatly affected by the consideration of “will that photograph make a good watercolor.” I have learned that not every great photograph will make a great watercolor.

Teaching

From time to time I teach workshops. It is a great joy to share the many things I have learned from others, and from my studies. I find that most painters come to my classes with great enthusiasm, a willingness to learn and to enjoy the experience. One participant asked where I got my angst. When I asked her to explain her question, she stated that she had heard that all painters needed to be angry to fuel their desire to paint. My reply was, “if painting wasn’t fun, I wouldn’t do it.” Painting brings me great joy and peace of mind. I paint for myself and if others find value in it, that adds significantly to the joy that painting brings.



“The more accurately your work represents life, the better it will be.” Albrecht Dürer

“Magnolias and Silver” Step-by-Step



My Reference

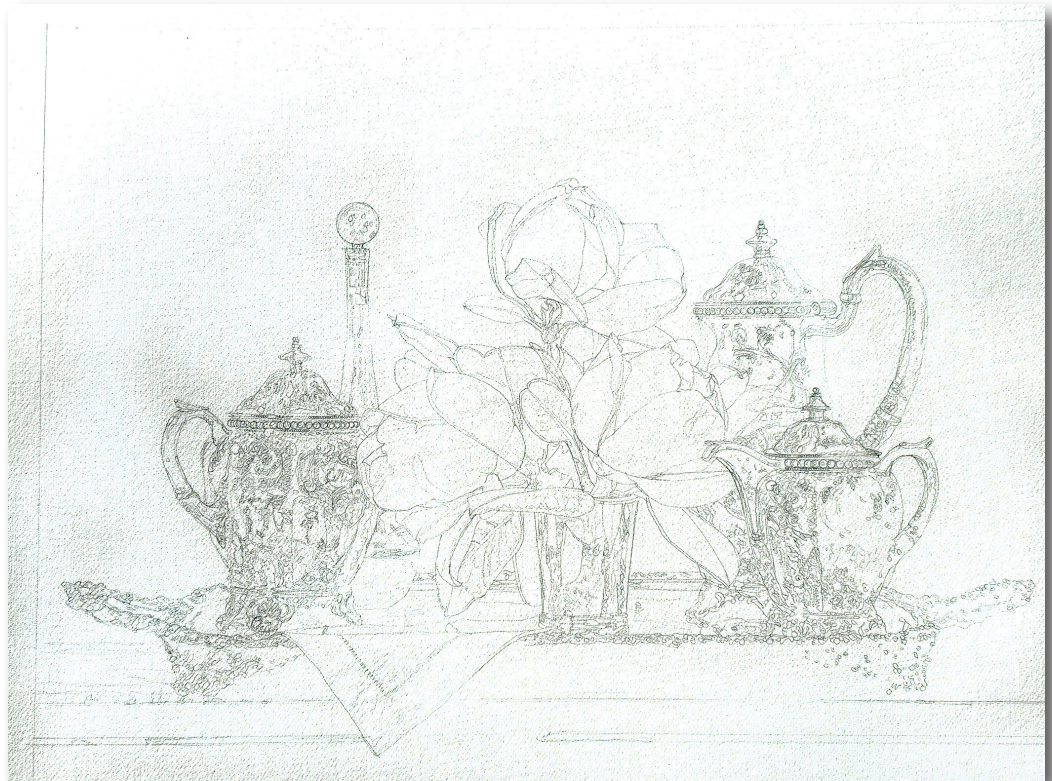
This is one of many photos taken during the photo session. I spent a great deal of time trying to find the most impactful composition

Technical Note

This painting was created using Daniel Smith Watercolors and Escoda Versatil Brushes on Fabriano Artistico 300 pound, Soft-pressed paper.

My Drawing

This detailed drawing was created by projecting the photo onto the watercolor paper using a high-resolution LCD projector (Artograph). I used a 2H lead in a mechanical pencil to create three line widths: a medium width for the outlines of the major objects, light width lines for the details and shadows, and a heavy width line to remind me that I need to mask those parts. I am always conscious of the fact that if the detail is not in the drawing, it will probably not be in the painting.



My Palette

I set up my palette (right) using one of my small palettes (Laurin's Multi-Pan Palette) nestled in my John Pike palette. I fill as many wells as necessary with a range of grays that I will be using on a particular piece of silver.



Progressive Steps

Moving from left to right, the main objects were painted. Each piece was masked individually. The painting was covered with thin tracing paper and each object was exposed as it was to be painted and the area around it was masked with drafting tape.





Highlights

The magnolias were painted next. The highlights on all the objects in the painting were masked with Daniel Smith Artists' Masking Fluid. I used the British Two-brush technique to get the roundness in the magnolia petals.

Working Across

I worked across the painting from left to right, always covering the parts of the painting where I was not working with light-weight tracing paper. That way, I did not have to worry about paint drips or splatters ruining the painting.

Color Setup

Here is my palette set up to paint the leaves of the magnolias. I have mixed a range of greens, from light yellow green to dark blue green. This saves me time when I paint and allows for better concentration when painting the details. It also improves the consistency of color across the painting.





Background

I completed all of the major objects of the painting (above). After the black background is finished, I will need to adjust some of the darkest areas of the painting to improve the over harmony of the painting.

An underpainting was applied to the background areas before the application of the final black paint. The area below the table was first painted with a Burnt Sienna to harmonize with the table top. The Quinacridone Gold adds a warmth to the final black.

I have masked the completed parts of the painting with lightweight tracing paper and drafting tape. Drafting tape is low tack but is very good at keeping the paint from flowing under the tape.

(Technical note)

If it becomes hard to remove, warm it up with a hair dryer to loosen the glue on the back of the tape.



Last Steps

The final black of the background is created in one coat. The paint is relatively thick, and as it dries, it is scumbled with an old brush to take away the brush strokes and break up the surface of the paint so that it has a velvet-like finish that does not reflect light.

The Completed Painting

The photo of the final painting (below) was taken with a Canon EOS SD5 to create the highest possible image.



"Magnolias and Silver" by Laurin McCracken Watercolor on 100% Cotton rag paper

McCracken Technical Page

Mixing black

I mix the Black paint using a wide variety of colors; essentially the base is Prussian Blue, Daniel Smith's Carbazole Violet or Holbein's Mineral Violet and Permanent Alizarin Crimson. Then I mix in all of the earth tones to get the blue to turn to jet black. To that, I add small amounts of almost all of the other colors in the painting to be sure there is a harmony with the background. I usually mix this in a small baby food jar, so I can seal it and use it as a Starter, like sourdough starter, the next time.

Pigments used

I usually start with a tube of Prussian Blue and then add about a third of a tube each of Violet and Permanent Alizarin Crimson. To that, I add dollops of the other earth-tone colors, such as Burnt Sienna, Burnt Umber, English Red Earth, etc. until it goes flat black, then I top it off with a bit of Quinacridone Gold and/or Quinacridone Burnt Orange. I typically use Daniel Smith paints. Other paints may react differently.

Mixing method

A thorough mixing is essential. I mix it very thick, with only a few drops of water. I have found that plastic coffee stirrers from McDonald's are great for mixing. I test to see if it is flat black by putting a small drop on a piece of test paper and hitting it with a 6 or 8 brush loaded with water, drawing out the color until it is a thin wash. You can then easily see if it is too blue. When it is being mixed it will look black long before it will really be black.



Adding water

I add some water when I apply it to the paper, just enough to make it spread. It goes on like it was several layers thick. I do it in one continuous wash. The stops and starts can be worse than in doing any continuous wash. I usually have several sizes of brushes (2-4-6 old Kolinsky rounds) working at the same time, large ones for the big areas and very small ones for when I get near the subject matter.

Application

I tried just about every method of applying the black. Layering is where I got the most Gum Arabic rising to the surface and creating a bright sheen that looks like snails have crawled across your painting. I also found that in the later layer takes off more paint than I was putting down.

Best method

The method that has worked the best for me is to do two things. First, give the whole area a thin wash to seal the paper. This provides an underpainting that can enhance the mood of the painting. Such as, if I want the painting to be warmer, I use an Alizarin Crimson or Quinacridone Gold as an underpainting. This also seals the surface of the paper and helps prevent holidays (a missed spot) in the final coating of black.

Second, I use a scrubbing or scumbling motion to apply the paint so that the brush strokes won't show. I find this also helps minimize the effect of the Gum Arabic rising to the surface and creating a bright sheen on the painting. ■

About the artist

Laurin McCracken was born in Meridian, Mississippi. He attended Auburn University, holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Architecture from Rice University, and a Masters in Architecture and Urban Planning from Princeton University.

McCracken is an award-winning artist whose paintings have been exhibited in juried shows around the world including the Philadelphia Watercolor Society, Niagara Frontier Watercolor Society, Pittsburgh Watercolor Society, the Adirondacks National Exhibition of American Watercolors, California Watercolor Society, Watercolor West, Southern Watercolor Society, National Watercolor Society, and the American Watercolor Society.

He is a signature member of more than a dozen watercolor societies including the American Watercolor Society, National Watercolor Society, Transparent Watercolor Society of America, Southern Watercolor Society, Watercolor West, and Watercolor USA Honor Society. He is an Elected Member of the Allied Artists of America in their Watermedia Category. He is President of the Watercolor USA Honor Society.



THE NEW PALETTE

"The best art instructional magazine in the world!"
In each issue you will find:

- **Articles** of interest for all artistic levels .
- Exciting **concepts** to make your work more expressive.
- Expert **advice** from today's best painters and teachers.

YES! I want to be a better artist!

- ONE YEAR** subscription (4 issues) of The Palette, \$22.95 US and Canada. (\$33.95 outside of US and Canada)
 TWO YEAR subscription (8 issues) of The Palette at a reduced price of \$40.00.

Information: (billing and payment address)

Please Charge My: MasterCard Visa Discover

Name: _____

Card Number: _____

Address: _____

Exp. Date: _____ 3-Digit Security number on back of card. (Required by DISC.)

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Signature: _____

Phone Number (____) _____

-OR-

Email Address: _____

My check is enclosed, made out to The Palette Magazine

*Call us at **1-800-227-2788** to start your subscription by phone.*

Or sign up online a save a few bucks: One year = \$19.95 / Two years = \$35.00

<https://www.cheapjoes.com/the-palette-magazine.html>