

The Magic of Light  
makes the ordinary  
extraordinary

Ones to Watch  
10 artists who are  
making a splash

16 Must-Have Gifts  
you'll want to keep  
for yourself

Silver Made Simple  
25 handy tips and  
techniques

# Watercolor

DECEMBER 2007

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## magic

### Attention to Detail

Make a grand statement  
on a small scale



# WATERCOLOR ESSENTIALS

Vol III, Part VI: Silver Still Life Objects

## Striking Silver *By Laurin McCracken*

**A**t first glance, silver appears to be a series of grays with some dark shadows and some very bright highlights. But for me, one of the joys of painting silver is finding all of the reflections and colors the silver picks up from the objects around it. If there is a flower in the still-life setup, for example, the silver will reflect back the color of that flower. Reflections are not always as

straightforward as the ones on the fat belly of a teapot. The flower might reflect off the underside of a curved handle and onto the side of the teapot away from the flower. It's those kinds of details that can only be discovered by careful observation aided by very detailed photographs. In the pages that follow, I'll introduce you to my best tips and techniques for painting believably real silver still lifes.



I've read that to paint something complex, you shouldn't try to paint the whole thing at once; instead, you should paint it bit by bit. That's the way I approach silver, usually painting in small 1x1-inch bits. As I work, each small section appears as a small abstract painting. If I'm consistent as I move across the object, the whole comes together, creating the illusion of a piece of silver, as in *Reflections in Silver* (watercolor on paper, 18x23).



Teapot with Pears (watercolor on paper, 16x23)

## GETTING OFF TO A GOOD START

One of the great truisms about painting realism is that the more detailed the drawing, the better the painting and the more realistic the appearance of the objects. For one of my complex still lifes, it's not unusual for me to spend four to six hours on the drawing alone.

I also spend a lot of time setting up the still life, thinking about the elements and photographing the scene. I may take 100 digital photos of one setup and from those I may paint only two or three still lifes. I've learned that not every good photograph makes a good painting, no matter whether it's a still life or a landscape, so it's good to have more than enough to choose from.

To get an accurate drawing, I'll have slides made from the digital photos and then project the images onto the paper. While I'm creating the initial drawing, I make changes to the shapes and locations of objects. Sometimes these are very small adjustments because I've already spent a lot of time and effort in generating the right photo from which to paint.

After creating the initial drawing, I spend a number of hours correcting it using a large photo print (typically 13x17 inches) as my guide. Again, the more detailed the drawing, the more accurate the painting. If you want to capture a particular sparkle in the silver, it must be in the drawing, or when you get to that spot in the painting, you'll probably miss it.



Still Life with Plums (watercolor on paper, 20x28)

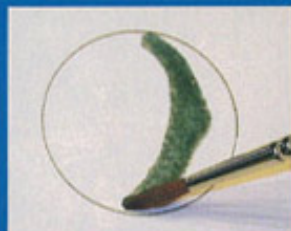
## TWO AT A TIME

One of the fundamental watercolor painting techniques I use to paint silver is the two-brush technique, essential for making two-dimensional objects look round. Quite simply, this approach requires you to have two brushes in your hands at the same time: one charged with color, the other with water. There are two ways to use this technique:

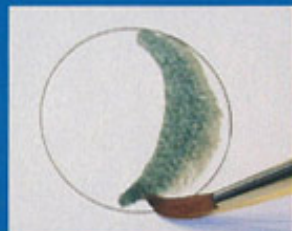
1. Paint the object using a brush charged with strong color. Immediately, while the color is still very wet, follow with your brush charged with clear water. This will soften the edge of the paint, and you can spread the color into the entire area that needs to be covered. You have to have the water-charged brush in your other hand ready to use, because if you have to put one brush down and then pick up another, the paint will have started to dry and you'll have missed your chance to create a smooth edge. You can see in the demonstration at top, right that I've brushed water on both sides of the paint to make the circle into a sphere.
2. The alternate approach is to put down water first and then add paint. This can be useful when you want a hard edge flowing into a soft edge or where space is restricted. See the demonstration at bottom, right.

The two-brush technique can be used to form the belly of a simple teapot or the small refined chasing of a complex creamer. It can make a pear plump and an apple round. Almost anything made of silver, and for that matter, glass, is composed of curved shapes. Even the smooth surfaces on the side of a cut-crystal pitcher are part of the curvature of the overall shape of the pitcher. The small details that make up the feet of a teapot or coffee server are composed of curvilinear elements. The two-brush technique is also the best way to reproduce those shapes.

### The Two-Brush Technique Approach #1: Start With Color



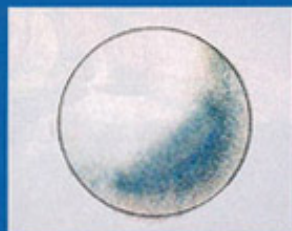
1. With one brush charged with paint and another nearby charged with water, make a bold stroke of color.



2. Immediately switch to the brush charged with water and guide the paint into a shape, diluting the paint as you go.



3. Using the water-charged brush, repeat the same strokes on the other side of the paint.



4. Voilà, you've created the illusion of a sphere on a two-dimensional surface.

### Approach #2: Start With Water



1. Another option for creating the appearance of a three-dimensional object is to use a brush charged with water to cover the area you want to paint.



2. Then, using a paint-charged brush, start in the lower edge of the watery shape and work the color into the area.

**Tip:** For most applications, your water-charged brush should be a size larger than your paint-charged brush. From time to time I'll use brushes of the same size, and in rare cases, such as working on the center of a small round area, I'll use a water-charged brush in a smaller size.



Silver, Crystal, Pears and Lemons (watercolor on paper, 20x26)

## SHADES OF GRAY

While surprising and colorful reflections are what excite me about painting silver, the truth is: the underlying framework of a painting of a silver object *will* be a series of grays. I use several different manufacturers' products, but for the purpose of this discussion, I'm going to stick to Winsor & Newton paints. Every paint maker can tell you about a variety of grays that can be mixed with their paints. For the chart on the opposite page, I used a variety of Winsor & Newton colors to mix interesting grays.

The fundamental way to make gray is to mix colors on opposite sides of the color

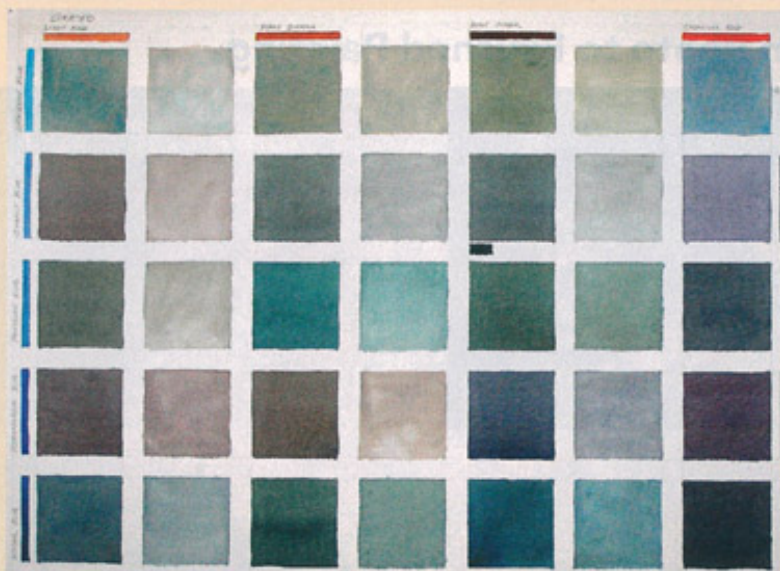
wheel. I've also found that cerulean blue and light red combine to produce an excellent range of grays. Because these two colors have different granularity, they produce some terrific effects when applied to paper. You need add only a very small amount of light red to cerulean blue to make an interesting gray. Play with variations in the amounts of each color in the mixture to create a range of grays, which can be warm or cool depending on your needs. Note: light red is an earth tone and not a member of the red family, which includes crimson and cadmium red.

I make sure to have plenty of paint mixed before I start painting so that the colors will be consistent from the top of the piece to the bottom. For the silver objects, I mix a range of grays from very light to very dark. At the darker end of the scale I might add Prussian blue or Holbein's mineral violet

**Tip:** Because of the extreme difference in granularity of light red and cerulean blue, the colors will separate easily in the well of your palette when mixed together to make gray. Remember to remix them as you dip your brush into the well to charge it with color.

or even some permanent alizarin crimson to add depth. You can see the range of grays I typically have on hand in the photo of my palette below, right.

Of course, as I said, silver objects aren't just gray. As you study the reflections, you'll incorporate a lot of other colors in your paintings of silver. You'll also find that not all silver is polished evenly. I like to add a bit of quinacridone gold to indicate tarnished areas on the silver and add richness to the piece. Just be careful about which colors you paint with—or over—your grays. If you follow my color recipe, remember that the base of the grays is blue, so if you add yellow, you'll end up with an icky green.



For the chart above, I mixed colors from opposite sides of the color wheel to make a variety of interesting grays.

In this photo of my palette, you can see the range of grays I typically have premixed and ready to go at all times.



## Frequently Asked Questions

I get a lot of questions about my materials. Here are answers to a few of the most common:

### Brushes

When I first started painting, I assumed my biggest expense would be paint. In truth, my biggest expense has turned out to be brushes. Painting fine details the way I do quickly wears down the points of the brushes, and having fine points is the key to creating fine details. After a brush starts to wear, I move it to my *plein air* painting kit.

I use kolinsky sable round brushes, both Series 7 by Winsor & Newton and Performer by Creative Mark. I have sizes 10 and 12 for background washes, but the brushes I use most often for painting my detailed silver still life objects are sizes 0 to 6. Of those, the ones I turn to most frequently are Nos. 3 and 4. I also have some flat brushes for use on large background areas and a range of synthetic brushes for lifting and creating special effects such as marble and wood grain.

### Paper

I've found Fabriano's Uno soft-pressed paper ideal for my still life paintings. While it's very much like a hot-pressed paper, it's still soft enough to absorb the paint, and therefore can react to the two-brush technique the way I want it to. From time to time, I use hot-pressed paper if I want really sharp hard edges, such as when I'm painting cut crystal. I use 300-lb. paper exclusively. I hate to waste time stretching paper, and I like the stability of the thicker paper.

### Blacks

I get more e-mails asking me about the rich blacks in my paintings than I do about any other subject. I don't use lamp black or India ink; I mix my own blacks. I start with Prussian blue and then add alizarin crimson and the deepest violet or magenta I can find. I mix a lot of this black at a time and store it in baby food jars. When I go to use the black in a painting, I may mix in some yellows or earth tones such as burnt sienna, depending on how opaque I want the mixture or how warm or cool I want it.

## From Photo to Finished Painting



**Original Photo:** I cropped the photo of my carefully planned setup on my computer and adjusted the contrast to give the background the depth I wanted. Note the reflections of the lemon and the rose on the sugar holder and creamer. Also note the reflections of the red tabletop on the undersides of the objects.

**Step 1:** I created a very detailed drawing, not only to give me the shapes of the various objects in the painting, but also to record the highlights, the shadowed areas and the cast shadows.

**Step 2:** While I generally use the traditional English watercolor approach of painting light to dark, I start each painting by painting the objects that I believe will be the most difficult. In most of my setups

that would be the silver objects, but in this example, the most difficult object for me was the flower.

**Step 3:** Here you can see where I've used liquid masking fluid on the top of the sugar dish to save the white or light color highlights. I've begun to work in some underpainting of the colors in the reflections before I start laying in the grays and blacks.

**Step 4:** Here most of the sugar dish is complete. I typically work from top to bottom, completing each section before moving to the next. Again, note that I have carefully captured the reflection of the lemon in the major surfaces of the creamer, as well as in some of the smaller curves.

**Step 5:** From time to time, I remove all of the tracing paper drapes and tape masks to step back and critique my progress.

**Step 6:** Here I added the crystal pitcher, which was painted using much the same technique as I used for the silver.

**Step 7:** I masked the highlights on the creamer and laid in the underpainting of the reflected colors. Each piece of silver or crystal can take up to four to six hours to paint on a full-sheet painting.

**Step 8:** Note the wide range of colors that show up in the creamer as reflections from many parts of the painting. Note that the underside of the handle creates a reflection on the body of the creamer.



**Finished Painting:** To finish *Heritage* (watercolor on paper, 20x27), I added the tabletop and additional still life objects. I also spent a lot of time softening the edges of the highlights and deciding which highlights should remain white and which ones should be toned down and where reflected color needed to be added.

## MASKING METHODS

As you may have guessed, I use any and all techniques for masking. I particularly depend on Masquepen's masking fluid, which has an easy-to-use applicator. I especially like the supernib because it can lay down very small controlled drops for the tiny highlights, such as the beading around the lid of a creamer or teapot. The supernib can also be used to create fine lines that detail the edge of a shape and to separate areas of color during painting.

I also use ½- and 3-inch drafting tape. I prefer drafting tape over "painter's" tape because it's easier to remove from the paper without damaging the surface. This tape forms a waterproof seal with the paper; I seldom have any color that bleeds under the tape.

Whether you use tape or fluid, it's important to keep in mind that every paper reacts differently to masking material. Winsor & Newton's 300-lb. cold-pressed paper is practically indestructible. I've left masking fluid on the paper for more than a month and it still came loose cleanly. Of course, I wouldn't try that with a sheet of

Fabriano soft-pressed or Twinrocker paper, two of my other favorites, as those papers are easily affected by masking fluid.

One other technique I use frequently is draping, a process similar to what surgeons do during an operation. There are few things worse than having a drop of staining blue fall directly on top of a highlight that you worked so hard to maintain. To avoid this, I keep several different sized rolls of lightweight tracing paper handy. I keep most of the painting covered at all times with this tracing paper, only opening up the area I'm working on. You can see this technique and the others I've described here in action in the demonstration *From Photo to Finished Painting* (at left and above). ■

Laurin McCracken is a signature member of the National Watercolor Society, and his paintings are in a number of corporate and private collections. For more information, visit his website at [www.lauringallery.com](http://www.lauringallery.com).