

Tarantella – part 1 – Nicholas Simmons

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In the article "[Painting Large in Watercolor: Faded Glory](#)", I covered techniques and concerns faced by watercolorists trying to paint bigger pictures. However, there were aspects of the subject I did not get into, many of which were addressed in another Watercolor Gallery WIP, "Tarantella." As with Faded Glory, I have edited the original WIP into an article, maintaining the WIP point of view. Relevant questions and comments that arose in the thread have been integrated into the text. Several members remarked that this WIP was more instructive than Faded Glory; I don't know about that, but I do hope that each person reading it might gain something that will improve his or her painting.



I discussed in some detail the materials I use in the other article. A word about paper: pictured is a roll of watercolor paper - Arches 156 lb, which is 52" wide, by 10 yards long. It is shown here next to a 60" mat cutter. I also have a selection of standard 22x30 watercolor sheets, in Arches, Fabriano, and Yupo. I keep a stock of 40x60 8-ply museum mat board, 40x60 acid free foam core board, and 40x60 1/8" plexiglass on hand for framing.



This is where most of my pictures start, and of course it's the most crucial step in the process: deciding what to do. I have tons of ideas for paintings bouncing around in my head, but only by staring at a blank piece of paper do I start feeling which way to go; the shape and proportion are enough to suggest subject matter. For this painting, the tall vertical panel shape won out, and since I've been doing some of these dancers* anyway, I settled on a single dancer, and a "cross" composition.

Some thoughts about large paintings:

One reason I do large paintings is because many of the spaces they end up in put some distance between the work and the viewer. Considering the distance a work is likely to be viewed from is very important. Small paintings can look ridiculous or even invisible from far away, and large ones can be disorienting up-close. The scale of a large work can also render its detail unfavorably at close range; I'm reminded of one great painter whose work astounds from fifty feet away, but the crudity of the work at three feet is almost shocking. I try my hardest to make mine look powerful and dramatic from afar, but with enough detail and nuance to make them interesting upon close inspection.

Another reason is that people generally don't expect to see large works executed in watercolor; traditionally, it had the reputation as a precursor to "real" paintings. As a

result, watercolor has been relegated to a corner of the art world that is simply not taken as seriously as oil. Some of this is also due to the fact that many watercolorists select subject matter that highlights the qualities of the medium, but lacks the substance to be considered "serious" art.

Bigger is not always better, but when comparing works of comparable quality, the power and drama of larger work is undeniable.

A major problem - maybe the main problem - for watercolorists attempting larger paintings is that many watercolor effects that look wonderful on a small scale, look puny and insignificant on a large scale. For example, it's very difficult to load a brush fully enough to make large strokes across a huge piece of paper, and have them maintain the amount of pigment and intensity as oil; watercolor simply runs out of gas. You can go back into it, but then you begin to alter and possibly destroy the qualities that occurred in the initial stroke or wash - the very qualities that are for many, the essence of watercolor painting. It's not easy to paint large-scale with the conventional techniques that dominate the medium. This was a great disappointment to me when I first tried to make that jump beyond the 30x40 format. Things that looked amazing in a smaller context didn't even register on the Art-o-Meter at those larger sizes. Had to change the approach, and discard some of the traditional watercolor thinking. (Why don't I switch to oil? I love the transparency of watercolor, the natural and at times unpredictable properties of water, and the fact that lots of watercolor effects are virtually impossible to replicate in oil.)



Lastly, another point worth considering regarding size is this: a small mistake can ruin a small painting, but you've got to make big mistakes to ruin a big painting! I've never heard anybody else say this, but there is a lot of truth in it.

Onward...

The tarantella is originally an Italian dance, popularly adopted by Spanish flamenco musicians and dancers.

I didn't photograph the drawing, because at this size, you can't see it - the white of the paper overpowers the camera. I worked from a photograph, but tried to reduce it to its barest essentials. I attempted to play smooth lines and shapes against what somebody once nicely characterized as "nervous lines." There is a frenetic energy to flamenco, but the grace of the

dancers legato-izes what is a very percussive style of music.

I first brushed on a thin coat of gesso in the direction of the action I envisioned in the painting. Gesso has a resist that makes interesting things happen with the paint. A little bit like Yupo, but not nearly as slippery. (I explained at some length about gessoing watercolor paper in the Faded Glory article.) I didn't cover all of the paper, and I was mindful not to be too careful with it - a casual application looks best to me.

As you can see in the photograph, I began with the background. It probably looks as though I started with darks, but as this area will end up much darker than what you see, it's actually closer to the midtones.

It's usually safest, I think, to start with midtones, because you can then adjust the lights and darks accordingly. At any rate, it assures that you can go darker, and lighter. I've started similar paintings with what I thought were the lightest values, only to find I had actually gone darker than I meant to, and was in deep trouble in a matter of minutes. I think that is because really light-valued colors look so anemic on the paper, there is a tendency, for me at least, to start enriching them.

I have found this method especially helpful in large paintings, where it's harder to visualize the "big picture" (working up close to a small piece of paper, you have constant awareness of values in relation to the proportion of the painting).

I try to paint using a variety of "safety measures" - that is, painting in a way such that things can be progressively altered if need be, without having to paint opaquely, or change the design. A good reason, also, to go brighter with colors, as you can always make them duller, but you can never make them brighter (transparently).

Another thought about "safe painting": I ruined countless pictures by making rash, abrupt decisions (though sometimes incredible things happen by doing that). I have found, particularly with larger work, if I take my time, make gradual changes, and most importantly, look at them for a while (though not so long as to lose objectivity), I have a better chance of not doing anything regrettable or irreversible. I use lots of acrylic watercolor along with regular watercolor, and scraping or lifting after it's dry isn't possible. However, I never liked those techniques anyway, because they can make a dry, dull look I don't care for.



This photo is a good example of the kind of thing that used to drive me crazy. When laying down initial washes, I was for a long time annoyed by inconsistencies in the value, amount of pigment, backwashes, crawlbacks, blooms (whatever you want to call them), etc. Many was the painting I agonized over or destroyed for these "flaws." There are things I don't like to see in washes and glazes, but that's for another article. I don't know quite when it dawned on me that once framed, and under glass, it was these very things that I ended up liking best. Strange, because I already admired these

anomalies in other people's paintings. (Another good subject for an article) I had lots of great teachers, but I wish someone had taught me to more readily embrace this aspect of watercolor. Maybe they did, and I didn't listen. Or maybe they were wise enough to know that I would have to learn this the hard way. (On the other hand, a determination to create perfect washes improves technique) Now, while a painting is in the "ugly" stage, I take on a very detached attitude, and just blow that stuff off. It's not a bad thing to even occasionally get a little sloppy and careless, just to prove to yourself it's only paper and paint. Keeps you loose.



I don't like most colors straight from the tube, at least committed to large areas. This wash is Payne's grey, raw umber, alizarin crimson, and ultramarine blue - mixed mostly on the paper. Not too precisely, as you can see. This is just an underpainting wash anyway, and I've discovered the uneven, disjointed look enhances the final effect.

The dress, in a variety of reds, pinks, and oranges. There is some raw sienna in there - one color I have found mixes tremendously with almost anything. I leave bits of white paper open, as another safety measure. If a painting begins to get too dense and "closed in" with color, it's nice to have those whites available as air holes, or to be filled in with some other color that will add to the sparkle. You can always go back and make them the surrounding color, too, which creates textural interest.

Also started on the fan. Going brighter with the color, as I expect to tone it down later.



On the subject of color: I have a sense of warm vs. cool, but I am no color theorist, and wouldn't know a color wheel from a wagon wheel. Everything I do is purely instinctive, and hoping for the best. I feel like a really good artist and a really horrible artist, at the same time. Everything I learn opens up new ideas, mostly about what I can't do, or haven't fully exploited. I like the idea of being right on the edge, learning every second - that's when you can still surprise yourself.

I added little bits of blue to the dress, and some green to the fan. They keep the eye moving, and add a dash of Moorish and Oriental costume flavor; they could be sequins, or simply glints

of reflected light. I used the whites mentioned in the previous step, but didn't fill them all in. I could have waited until later to do this, since it is basically an embellishment, but it's nice to have some fun while the main work is still in progress. I'll fill more of them in later, and add some metallic colors in there too.

The main objective in this painting, besides the color and highlighting the abstract qualities of the shapes, is to capture the twisting, whirling motion of the dress, juxtaposed against the rigid profile of the dancer. That's often the posture of flamenco dancers. I spent a lot of time in a grand old Spanish restaurant that had an elaborate floorshow, and was very attracted to that aspect of the art. Of course no painting will ever capture that as vividly and unforgettably as Sargent's "El Jaleo."



Here I've gone back to the darks, and the red portions of the dress. I stayed away from the face because I'm not exactly sure yet what is going to happen there. Not easy to see in a small photo, but there are a hundred variations of red. I don't remember all of the colors I used, but some were mixed with raw sienna and raw umber. I'm not happy with the line of the dress on the left edge, next to the dark; I'll change that.

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