

Masterclass: Wet in wet watercolour

Fábio Cembranelli is one of Brazil's leading watercolour artists. Here he shows you a simple method for tackling one of the medium's trickiest techniques



Tools of the trade

- **PAINTS**
Cadmium Yellow Pale, Quinacridone Gold, Raw Sienna, Sangue di Drago (Dragon's Blood), Burnt Sienna, Sepia, Quinacridone Red, Permanent Rose, Alizarin Crimson, Cobalt Blue, Winsor Blue, Olive Green and Payne's Gray, all artists' quality watercolours from Winsor & Newton and Maimeri Blu
- **BRUSHES**
Half-, one- and two-inch synthetic flat brushes; No.8, 12 and 18 synthetic round brushes; a No.2 rigger brush
- **PAPER**
Canson Fontenay 300gsm cold-pressed watercolour paper, 58x40cm

I'm passionate about painting with watercolour using the wet-in-wet technique. It suits my personality to paint quickly and each new painting is a challenge for me: the wet paint is laid on wet or damp paper, the colours flow and blend into one another in beautiful, unexpected ways, creating a diffused effect. It is the method I feel most comfortable using to portray my own view of my subjects.

Before I start painting, I draw an outline of the main shapes quickly and lightly so I can place the focal point of my painting. I like to avoid too much sketching and leave plenty of space on the page because I prefer to sculpt and create some shapes intuitively.

I use a 300gsm, 100% cotton watercolour paper and stretch it so that I have a perfect flat surface to work on. I paint with

transparent watercolour paints only (Most good watercolour brands will specify whether a particular colour is transparent, semi-transparent or opaque). I avoid painting with opaque colours as I prefer the light in my watercolours to come from the white of the paper, not the paint itself. As a result, I paint from light to dark, although sometimes I restore some white areas by wiping out some paint from the paper with my brush.

Try to be quick when painting wet in wet. I spent just 30 minutes painting the sunflowers shown here. Or rather I should say that was the time it took to execute; spontaneity and intuition guide my painting process most of the time.

Fábio will be hosting a number of painting holidays across Europe in 2012. For details, please visit www.fcembranelli.com.br



1 SELECT YOUR MATERIALS

Here you can see my full range of materials. I work with watercolours in a mixture of tubes and pans, displayed in a portable, folding, plastic palette. I prefer to paint with pigments from tubes, as the consistency is easier to work with. However, I do use pans for some colours so before I start painting, I pre-wet them with a spray bottle just to get the same creamy consistency as you would straight from the tube. I use round and flat brushes with sharp points made by synthetic fibres and one or two rigger brushes for final touch-ups.



2 APPLY A BRIGHT WASH

After applying plenty of water to my stretched watercolour paper, I began working on the background with a light, cool value mixture of Cobalt Blue, Ultramarine Blue and Quinacridone Gold. Using a one-inch flat brush, I did this very carefully as it's important to keep the colours clean and bright for the first wash. A background that is too dark at this stage can affect the whole composition.



3 SOFTLY INTRODUCE FLOWERS

I started painting the petals of the sunflowers with a mixture of Quinacridone Gold, Cadmium Yellow Light and Cadmium Orange. For the centre of the flowers, I applied a mix of Burnt Sienna, Sepia and Sangue di Drago. It's important to start painting the flowers while the first background wash is still wet. If your aim is for soft edges in your composition, you need to connect the flowers with the background in this way.



4 MAINTAIN A BALANCE

After the first background and flower washes, I'll begin painting two or three new looser flowers on top. I'll fade out the edges of these flowers and let them run to add more strength to the whole background. Balance and unity is quite important in a composition such as this so if I feel I can add darker, loose or faded shapes in the composition to achieve it, now is the best stage to do so.

TOP TIP
KEEP THE PAPER MOIST BY SPRAYING IT WITH WATER FROM A PLASTIC GARDEN SPRAY BOTTLE



5 WIPE OUT EXCESS

When I added a darker background flower closer to this bright one, notice how the contrast between the two added freshness and excitement to the painting. I achieved this by wiping out the paint underneath first with my flat brush and then applying a darker petal mixture of Quinacridone Gold, Raw Umber and a bit of Burnt Sienna. Some interesting soft-edged highlights can be made with this technique too.

6 KEEP EDITING

I used a round brush to develop the centre of the sunflowers with a mix of Sepia and Burnt Sienna. If you keep your paper wet at this stage, you are still free to edit, leave out or add anything you want in the entire composition. At this point in my painting, I felt I needed to add strong contrasts because the wet paper can have a habit of diluting everything you put on it. The darks will lighten considerably as the paint dries and that's the moment where we can exaggerate the contrasts.



7 SUGGEST OUTLINES

Here I began working on the petals with a pointed round brush, smoothly drawing the outlines of the petals from the centre of the flower to the tip. I used a mix of Quinacridone Gold and Burnt Sienna to make these lines. You don't need to draw an outline for each petal, just make a few lines so the viewer will be able to imagine something and lots of petals will just optically blend together.

8 PICK OUT CONTRASTS

I worked again on the background, adding dark touches near lighter shapes or white spaces because I need to ensure the centre of the painting has strong contrasts to keep it interesting. At this stage, I mixed a range of blues and yellows, including Cobalt Blue, Prussian Blue, Quinacridone Gold and Raw Sienna, so that I could get some rich greens to help suggest some leaves in my background.



9 LINK ELEMENTS TOGETHER

Now it's time to start adding some touches that will connect all the different elements of the composition. The stems and buds were painted with Olive Green, Cobalt Blue and Burnt Sienna – a pointed round No.8 brush is my choice at this moment. Including stems helps to break the uniformity of the composition, although we don't need to paint a straight stem to each flower: leave an open window to the viewer's imagination.



10 DELVE INTO THE FOLIAGE!

At this stage, I added another kind of foliage to the background with a round brush and a mixture of Winsor Blue and Sepia. It's important to understand how to work with the leaves (or foliage) because they are the support for the whole flower composition. I like to avoid painting with ready-mixed greens straight from the tubes to add variety: here we can see some foliage with a shade of blue colour, for example.



11 TAKE A STEP BACK

Nearing the end, I like to step back and look at my painting from a distance. It helps me to check where I need to add additional darker areas and glazes over the main flowers to bring the composition together. I can also check if I am able to enhance my painting by adding areas of warm or cool colour, or if I need to add or eliminate (by lifting out some paint from the paper) any aspects of my composition.



12 FINISHING TOUCHES

I finish my painting by adding some lines using a rigger brush and a mixing of warm colours, including Burnt Sienna, Sepia and just a little bit of Payne's Gray and Sap Green. I aim to vary pressure on the brush, holding it at the top of the handle, so I can create different types of lines. I like to call these lines my 'calligraphic touches' and they help to define some spaces, shapes and directions. They're very important in a wet-in-wet painting, as I can emphasise certain elements that will attract the viewer's eyes.