

Watercolor on Gessoed Paper

Some of the advantages of painting on gessoed paper are:

- The paint sits more on the surface of dried gesso than it does on watercolor paper. This allows the paint to be wiped off to the white of the gesso several times before the paint begins to stain the gesso. Staining watercolor pigments will stain more quickly of course. You can rewet and wipe off paint that is completely dry. YUPO, an all synthetic polypropylene “paper” which also allows you to lift any color even when dry is similar, but there is no way to permanently affix watercolor to YUPO. Gesso on the other hand, bonds with the paper, and the watercolor, in turn microscopically adheres to the surface of the gesso.
- You can “texture” the wet/damp gesso any way you wish, and once dry and painted over, this actual texture gives an additional dimension to your painting.
- You will also discover that gessoing over “failed” watercolor paintings is a good way to get another surface (or two) from an expensive piece of watercolor paper. I typically gesso both sides of the paper with different textures. I can choose which side to paint on, and gessoing both sides helps keep the paper from curling as the gesso dries.
- You don’t have to gesso the entire surface of your paper. Watercolor “takes” to gesso differently than it does to paper, and you can take advantage of this by selectively applying gesso, leaving some parts of the paper untreated. You can use a contact paper stencil or blue masking tape to protect parts of your paper while applying the gesso - just remember to remove the tape or stencil right away after applying the gesso so that it doesn’t get stuck permanently to the paper by the gesso.
- You can vary the thickness of your gesso by diluting it with water. Thinner applications allow more of any underpainting to show through the gesso. These “skins” of thinner gesso in concert with thicker passages can give the painting more depth and visual interest.
- If you don’t like the look of the white gesso, and are gessoing unpainted paper, you can use clear gesso instead of the white. It has no color, so will not cover any previously painted areas, but it still allows you to add textural effects. You can also pre-tint the cool white gesso with raw sienna or yellow ochre (for a warm white tone, or any other watercolor hue you wish) prior to applying the gesso to your paper. Dissolve the watercolor first in a little clean water, and add to your gesso a bit at a time until you get the color you want. Mix thoroughly to avoid streaking.



Can you see the underlying texture of the gesso in this painting? I textured the surface with an old paintbrush, swiping the bristles across the surface of the damp gesso in more than one direction.



In the painting at left, I applied gesso selectively to just parts of the paper (the snow banks and some of the tree trunks). I applied a piece of paper towel to the damp gesso in the foreground, and peeled it off. It left the bumpy impressions, and picked up enough gesso so that after it dried, and I applied paint, the lifted "bumps" accepted the paint differently than the more solid areas of gesso.

"First Snow", watercolor on gessoed paper by Ellen Fountain, 11x15 inches, private collection

Transparent watercolor on gesso tends to take on a more "pastel" look. If you want more intense color, you will need to use more pigment in your mixtures than you would on plain watercolor paper.

Techniques to try:

- (1) All over textures, applied evenly with a scraper, then evenly textured (using a comb, brush, sponge, etc.)
- (2) Specific patterned textures - apply a base coat of gesso, then lay in pieces of fabric (lace, burlap, etc.), leaves, bubble wrap, crinkled plastic wrap, paper towel, etc. Allow to remain in place for 30-60 seconds, then carefully pull up, leaving the impressed texture in the gesso. Using a roller to roll over the lace, leaves, etc. before pulling them up will imprint the texture more completely than just pressing with your fingers.
- (3) Drawing into wet gesso. You can use the handle end of your paintbrush, a popsicle stick, even your fingers! This requires you have a specific subject in mind. You can also put gesso into a squeeze bottle with a medium fine tip and use that tip to "draw" with gesso. This will result in raised lines.
- (4) Use a scraper to pile up gesso into forms/shapes/textures on just part of your paper. You might create a gessoed border, for example, or like Tom Kirby, create a subtle landscape on the lower part of your paper, and just slightly texture the upper half with a thinner coat of gesso that may be textured further if you wish.

Right: "Hidden in Silence" mixed media, 22x22 inches, 1998, by Tom Kirby. The upper half is given a thinned coat of gesso, and scraped vertically. On the bottom third, gesso is applied more heavily, a little fine sand added to it and then it is scraped/piled into a more dimensional suggestion of a landscape and a seashell. When this dried, it was painted with watercolor.



Steps for Watercolor on Gessoed Paper

This is not a collage process where actual objects are affixed to your paper. Rather it is a texture-creating process that gives you a new surface to paint on.

What you need:

Gesso

Use clear gesso only for unpainted papers; for recycling failed watercolors, use white gesso which may be tinted with watercolor paints if desired. The untinted gesso is a very cool white. I like using raw sienna or yellow ochre to tint this to a warmer white tone.

Paper - either new or used 90-300 lb. watercolor or drawing paper or any heavy paper or lightweight cardstock.

Texturing and application tools, which may include:

- scrapers (used mat board scraps work well for this)
- brushes (old house painting brushes, dish scrubber brushes, etc.)
- trim rollers (any hardware store carries these small rollers - some are disposable, most have roller covers that may be replaced)
- faux painting tools which may include specialized sponges, scrapers, and rollers that have built-in textures/patterns
- fabric pieces (anything that has a texture may be pressed into the wet gesso to create a texture. Cheesecloth may be left in place in the gesso if desired.
- leaves or pressed flowers (these need to be book pressed for an hour or so to flatten them enough so that they can be pressed into the gesso. Rolling over these items impressed them more evenly than pressing with your fingers. Organic materials should not be permanently left in the gesso. They will deteriorate over time and may create mold problems as well.
- inert additives: fine sand, glitter, mica, and other similar items may be added to or sprinkled on the wet gesso and left in place.
- rice papers or other archival papers may be pressed into wet gesso and left in place if desired. Make sure you get all the air bubbles out from under any papers you adhere. Otherwise, mold can take hold in these air spaces.



The basic steps:

- (1) Using a new sheet of paper, or a failed watercolor painting, apply gesso to the paper (either clear, white or white tinted with a watercolor pigment of your choosing).
- (2) Texture this gesso using a technique of your choice.
- (3) Allow to dry to the point where you can turn the paper over and repeat this process. If the first side is heavily textured, this drying process may take several hours. You can use a hair dryer to speed up the drying, or put it outdoors in the sun.
- (4) Apply gesso to the flip side of your paper and texture as desired.
- (5) Allow the gessoed paper to dry thoroughly before painting on it. Because the paper is sealed between the gesso coats, it has to dry from the inside out, and this process takes time. Putting your papers outside in the sun to dry helps accelerate the drying time.
- (6) Remember you can wipe paint off (even when dry) to create highlights. Use a damp painbrush, paper towel, sponge or q-tip to do this.

Presentation:

These are still works on paper, and must be framed under glass or sheet acrylic to protect them. If you want to frame them without glazing, then the finished paintings must be mounted to a hardboard backing and varnished. They can then be framed as an oil painting would be.

“Caribbean Palm”, watercolor on gessoed paper by Ellen

Fountain, 12x9 inches. I partially gessoed the paper, leaving part of the palm trunk and some of the foreground area untreated. Since I had specific imagery in mind, I drew into the wet gesso to create the palm fronds, palm fruit, and some of the bush and rock textures.