

For most artists, one of the greatest pleasures in painting is exploring the thin dividing line between controlled technique and accidental effect. Indeed, some of the most successful paintings are those that contain a happy blend of the two, so that there is an underlying sense of order and structure as well as of naturalness and spontaneity.

Sometimes, though, seemingly spontaneous effects can be engineered by an imaginative artist. Purists may disapprove, but an artist should never be afraid to experiment with a variety of tools and techniques, or to mix different media in one painting if they complement each other. In fact, it requires some ingenuity to manipulate paint, paper, brushes, and other tools in such a way as to merely suggest a particular texture or effect, without it looking false or labored. The examples shown here should serve to whet your appetite for experimentation, and no doubt you will produce many more ideas of your own.

Of course, too much reliance on technical "tricks" can make a painting look gimmicky. But, when used as a complement to a well-disciplined skill, they can add much to the expressiveness of your work, as well as teaching you a great deal about the potential of your chosen medium.

Plastic wrap

Some artists, instead of setting out to paint specific things, prefer to start out with random shapes which suggest a particular image, and then work on developing that image. This idea is far from new: Leonardo da Vinci often suggested to his students that they look for pictures in the cracks and stains on an old wall, and the Russian-born painter Alexander Cozens (c1717-86) wrote a book on developing

images from ink blots (see BLOWN BLOTS).

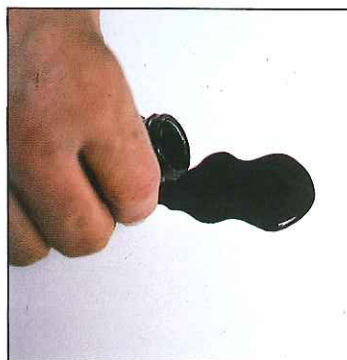
Watercolor and colored inks are particularly fluid, spontaneous media; random shapes and patterns often occur, especially when working WET-IN-WET, which can provide the spark of an idea for further development.

An excellent way to try out this idea of painting from random forms is to create patterns and textures in a wet wash of watercolor or colored ink, using a sheet of thin, plastic food wrap. The plastic is pressed into the paint and then squeezed and prodded with the fingers so that it forms folds and creases. The support is then left to dry in a horizontal position for several hours.

When the plastic sheet is removed, a mottled or striated pattern will have formed in the paint, due to some of the pigment having been trapped in the creases in the plastic. Such patterns might suggest a rocky landscape, a woodland scene, or even the design of a butterfly's wing. Once you have decided on an image, you can then develop and strengthen it further, using other media if desired.

Ink and plastic wrap

This process is very simple and produces extraordinary and unpredictable effects. The random patterns created when the ink has dried can be left as they are, or further worked with different colors and media.



1 Begin by pouring ink onto dry paper in a heavy wash. You can either create a specific shape, or tilt the board this way and that to create an entirely random shape.



2 While the ink is still wet (it should not be too thin) lay a sheet of thin plastic, such as Saran wrap, over the area. Using the tips of your fingers, press and squeeze the plastic so that it crinkles up and forms ridges. With the plastic still in place, lay the board flat in an undisturbed corner and leave the painting to dry. This may take anything up to a couple of days. When you think the ink looks dry, peel away the plastic wrap.



3 The finished result. Where the ink became trapped in the folds of the plastic, it has dried with a hard sheen.

Salt

The use of salt sprinkled into a wet wash of watercolor or ink produces exciting textures and effects. The granules of salt soak up the paint where they fall, and when the paint is dry, the salt is brushed off, and a pattern of pale, crystalline shapes remains. These delicate shapes are very efficient for producing the illusion of falling snow in a winter landscape, or for adding a hint of texture to stone walls and rock forms.

The technique sounds simple, but it takes practice to get the timing of the salt application right. The ideal time to apply salt is when the wash is wet, but not soaking, damp but not too dry. Large, soft shapes are produced by applying salt to a wet wash, whereas smaller, more granular shapes are produced in a wash that is just damp.

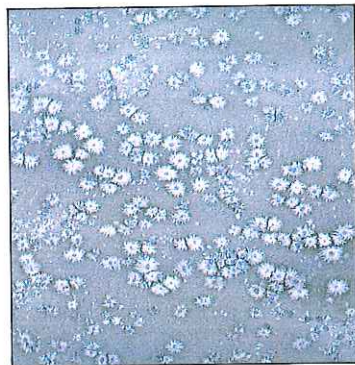
If you want to produce a fine, delicate pattern, ordinary table salt can be used. But in general, coarse rock salt works better. Do not sprinkle on too much salt, because this spoils the effect. Once the salt is applied, leave the surface in a horizontal position for 10 to 15 minutes, or until the wash is completely dry, then simply brush off the salt.

It should be remembered that salt will not react on pigment that has previously dried and been re-wetted. Nor will it work on poor quality paper or with inferior paints.

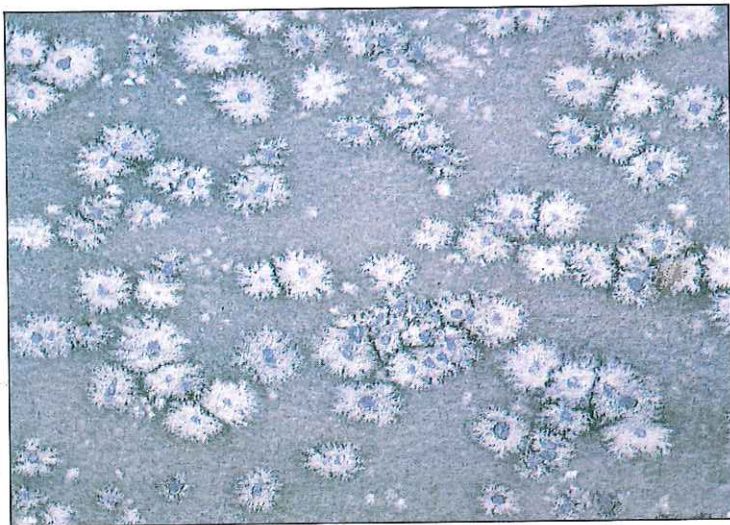


The Salt Technique

1 Apply a flat wash of color to the paper. Just before the wash loses its shine (you can see this by holding the paper, horizontally, up to the light) sprinkle a few grains of rock salt into it. Leave the surface flat and allow it to dry naturally.



2 When the paint is dry, brush off the salt. Pale, crystalline shapes are left where the salt granules have soaked up the pigment around them.



3 Sometimes the textures created by the salt technique will suggest other images which can be developed further. These flowerlike forms were created by dropping salt crystals into a slightly wetter wash.



Watercolor on oil

Try painting mineral spirit over an area of paper and then laying a wash of watercolor over it. Interesting things happen as the paint separates on the oil. The technique is unpredictable, but beautiful marbled effects can be obtained.



Gum arabic and watercolor

Gum arabic is the medium that binds the pigments in watercolor, and it can also be bought from art shops specifically for adding to the paint. Gum arabic added to watercolor pigment makes it thick and glossy and enriches the color. Try mixing colors together on the paper to create a rich texture suitable for painting subjects such as animal fur and stormy skies.

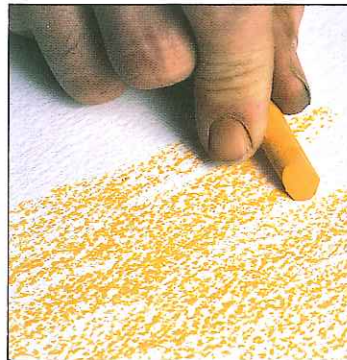


Gum water and watercolor

In the painting the hedge was first painted in watercolor. A diluted form of gum arabic known as gum water was then added to the paint to heighten its greenness and create tonal variety.

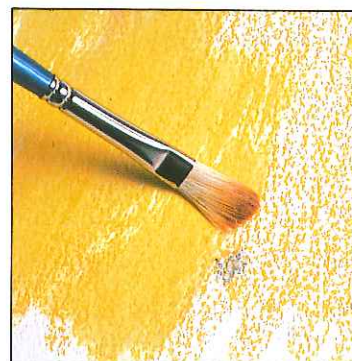
Turpentine

To produce a soft, painterly effect in a pastel painting, try blending the colors by moistening them with turpentine. The finished effect is similar to that achieved by Edgar Degas (1834-1917), when he sprayed boiling water over some areas of his pastel drawings and worked into them with a brush.



Oil pastel and turpentine wash

1 Using the side of the pastel stick, lay an even area of color over a rough-textured paper. Apply the pastel lightly so it catches on the upper layer only of the paper's tooth.

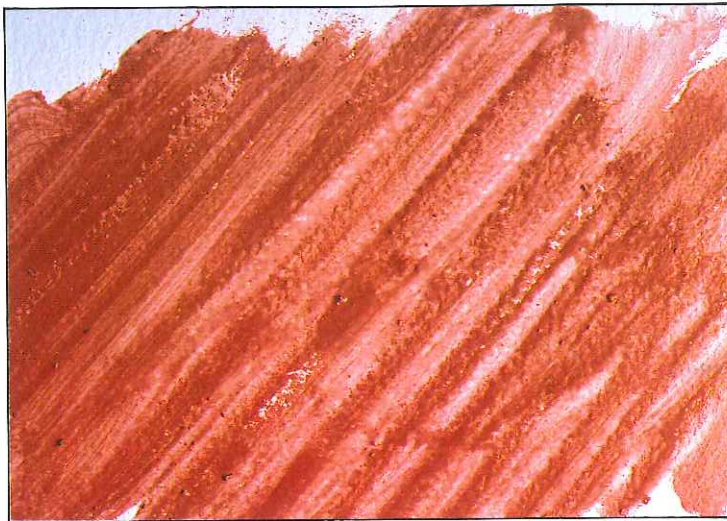


2 With a clean brush and turpentine, work into the pastel to dilute the color and spread it into the grain of the paper. As the pastel mixes with the turpentine it takes on a painterly, washlike quality, and the color becomes richer and darker.



3 If desired, further pastel tones can be added on top of the pastel-turpentine wash. This combination of washes and strokes adds much to the color brilliance of the final image. Use this technique for blocking in backgrounds, for underpainting, or for any subject with rich colors and textures.

SPONGE PAINTING



Pastel and acrylic medium

As with the pastel and turpentine wash technique, the combination of pastel and acrylic medium can produce a picture that is somewhere between a drawing and a painting. Here, diagonal strokes of soft pastel were applied to rough paper and then brushed with acrylic medium to soften and blend the strokes.

The sponge is a highly versatile painting tool, capable of producing a broad range of effects in any painting medium. Most artists keep two sponges in their painting kit: a synthetic one for laying a flat, even layer of color in large areas, and a natural sponge for creating patterns and textures. Natural sponges are more expensive than synthetic ones, but they have the advantage of being smoother and more pliable to work with, and their irregular texture produces more interesting patterns in the paint. For example, a mottled pattern is produced by pressing a moistened sponge into fairly thick paint and then dabbing it onto the paper. You can dab one color over another, or produce a graded tone by dabbing more heavily in one area than another. This technique is successful in rendering foliage on trees, or the pitted surface of weathered stone.

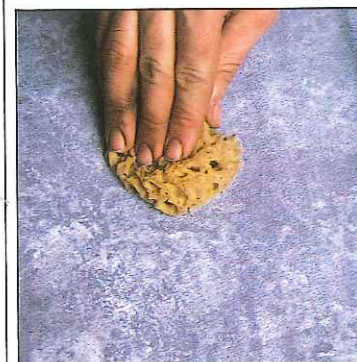
Also, by twisting or stroking with a paint-soaked sponge, you can achieve subtle gradations of tone when painting soft, rounded forms such as clouds, fruit, or perhaps misty hills in the distance.

Natural sponges

Painting with a sponge gives textural effects that are often impossible to render with a brush. The mottled patterns produced by dabbing color on with a sponge are perfect for simulating the textures of weathered rock and crumbling stone, pebbles and sand on a beach, sea spray, and tree foliage. In addition, you can create lively broken color effects by sponging different colors over each other.



1 Paint for sponging should be diluted with just a little water or medium — if it is too fluid the marks will be blurred. In acrylic painting, diluting the pigment with matte medium gives sharper results than water will. Always use a damp sponge. Soak it in water, squeeze it out until just damp, then dip it into the pool of color on your palette. Apply the color with a soft dabbing motion, without pressing too hard.



2 You can also press a damp, clean sponge into a wet wash to lift out color and leave a subtle texture.