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American Artist

ICD



ROLLIN PICKFORD, Jr.

A Philosophical Approach to Watercolor

WATERCOLOR is the poetry of painting. A watercolor can be a brief, succinct lyric poem or a long, detailed narrative poem. Either will lend itself to the most muted, sensitive imagery or to a bold, vivid statement. Its watery vapors can distill the concentrate essence of the motif, transcribe mood, give form to the vital impact of the artist's feeling at the height of his emotional involvement.

People often ask, "Is watercolor difficult?" or "Is watercolor harder than oil?" Such comparative judgments are questionable. A strong communication, aesthetically and technically excellent, demands the best from the painter in any medium. But watercolor, because of its fluidity, speed, unpredictability, and tendency to dry lighter in value, makes unusual demands upon the artist's experience, foresight, and technical dexterity. Add to this the natural hazards of painting outdoors—wind, rain, heat, freezing (this can give a rare crystalline beauty to the frozen pigment, too) fog, drifting sand, animals (I have been surrounded by cattle, run over by a herd of sheep, and had a thirsty horse drink up the only bucket of water within



Photograph of the artist painting on location, by Bob La Mar

a country mile). Temperature, sunlight, shadow, breeze make a difference too. Everything has to come together just right and dry before it comes apart or runs together in anarchy. Whenever I see a fine watercolor in a museum or gallery, I pause before it in appreciation and awe, because I know what depth of involvement, what bravery and skill, what fortuitous circumstance and convening of the stars went into its accomplishment.

In a letter to Suvorin, his publisher, Chekhov wrote: "Medicine is my lawful wife and literature my mistress." Painting can be such a mistress, too, embodied in the motif. Central California's vast San Joaquin Valley, my principal motif, has a subtle beauty which may escape the casual observation of a hurried traveler. In this wide valley, where rows of orchard and vineyard sprawl mathematically to the gentle lift of foothills rising to the mighty crescendo of the Sierra Nevada mountains, where eyes cannot measure the march of wind-bowed stalks of wheat, nor mind conceive with irreverence the limitless bounty of nurtured earth, one may go directly to nature—to earth and sun and seasons and infinite sky.

The quality of rhythm is strong here. It is strong in my other major subjects too—the sea and music. The timeless, steady roll of the sea, the repeating curves of rocks and pebbles on its shore, even the regular design patterns of shells and sea life, reflect this rhythm which lends itself particularly to the calligraphy of working and drawing in watercolor.

Also in painting the sea, or even a rain puddle, the medium is the motif—water. Watercolor is particularly apt for depicting water because of its identical physical properties.

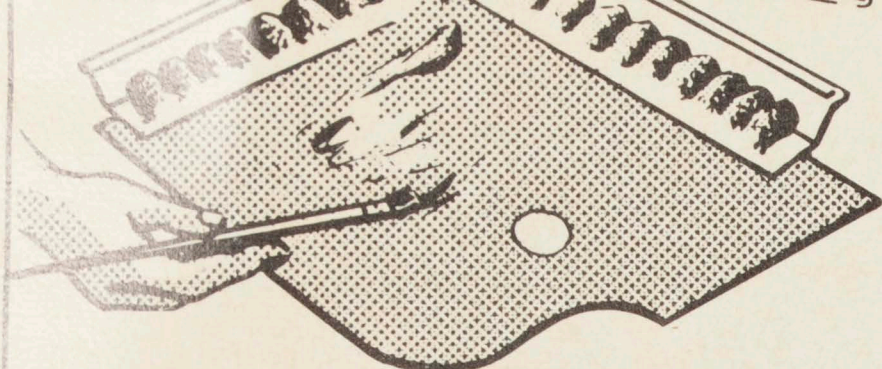
"Your vaporous painting conceals the purest draughtsmanship . . .," Edgar Degas once told Berthe Morisot. How applicable this is to the best practise of painting in watercolor. Good drawing constructs a solid, unifying foundation or skeleton for the rich color, juicy washes, subtle values and other gratuitous blandishments of watercolor to build on. I don't mean to imply that for every watercolor a drawing must be made first with pencil or charcoal. Overdoing this can be stultifying. Much of the drawing in watercolor must be done with the brush right in the painting, often in wet areas. It is necessary for the watercolorist to "see" his design mentally, to have it clearly fixed in mind before applying the first washes. How else, for instance,

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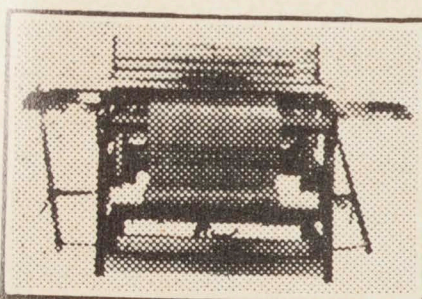


RIVER BOTTOM WATERCOLOR 24 x 37 BY ROLLIN PICKFORD, JR.

ROLLIN PICKFORD, JR. was born in Fresno, California, in 1912. Studied at Fresno State College and Stanford University. Recipient of over 100 awards, including a First Prize at Watercolor USA. Represented in many private collections and in ten institutions and museums. Member of art groups including West Coast and California Watercolor Societies



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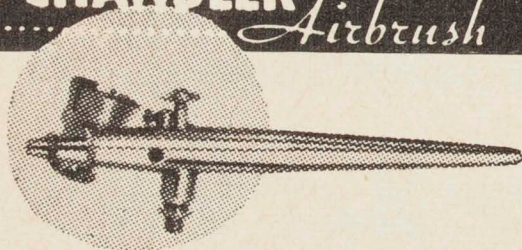


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PICKFORD (from page 68)

can he preserve his precious areas of white paper? Once stained, it is never again white.

Watercolor has one unique advantage. The painter may "second guess" the composition by making marginal adjustments and area selection when he mats the work.

Edouard Manet's oft-quoted statement that "the most important person in any picture is the light" may also be gratefully remembered by the watercolor painter. Light is a life-giving ingredient in any painting. This applies as appropriately to abstract or even non-objective painting (which can have a kind of interior illumination), as it does to impressionism, magic realism, or any form of representational painting. In outdoor watercolor one must be sure to make areas of light *warm* enough and *light* enough. Contrast is achieved by forcing values—lights lighter and darks darker, warm light against cool shadows. Shapes of white paper within the same painting may be made to look either warm or cool by contrasting surrounding washes.

In this respect, watercolor is a "backward" medium. One must paint

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