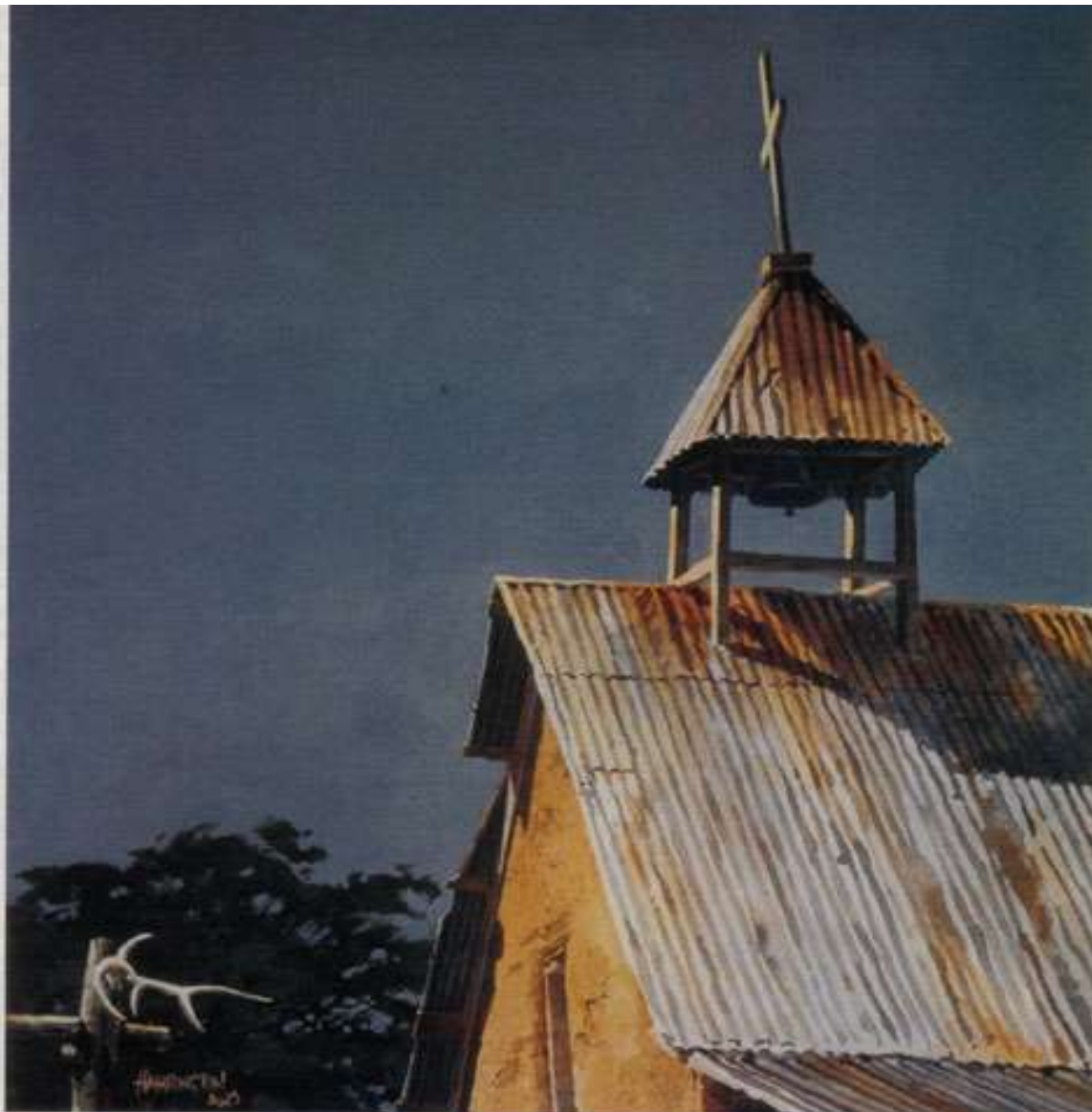


### Opaque to the rescue

In an earlier version of *Cross Over Golindrinas* (acrylic, 21x21), I had a typical watercolor-y type sky, complete with clouds. I felt the clouds competed with the detail in the roof, so I mixed up some opaque acrylic and just enough water to get it to flow and painted the sky one flat color. Because the sky doesn't have any detail to draw attention, it visually pushed the roof and the bell tower forward, making them a more important focal point.



# The Best of Both Worlds

Add more power to your paintings by exploring the transparent and opaque natures of your acrylics.

BY CHARLES HARRINGTON

**W**hen I first started painting, I was attracted to watercolor because of its unique attributes—its transparency and its fresh, spontaneous aesthetic.

After a finished watercolor painting suffered water damage, however, I started to experiment with acrylics as a more durable alternative.

Happily, I found that with acrylics I could retain most of the attributes that attracted me to watercolor, while at the same time exceeding watercolor's capabilities. For example, adding translucent and opaque passages to an otherwise transparent watercolor painting isn't only visually awkward, it's also frowned upon. Switching to acrylics allowed me to develop a technique that's predominantly transparent—but with translucent and opaque passages—without violating the integrity of the medium.

### A masquerading medium

Painting in a watercolor technique with acrylics is really a simple matter of diluting my paint to a washlike consistency. Even the more opaque acrylic pigments will look transparent then. I'll put in the transparent passages first, building those up with washes, eventually moving to the more opaque passages before applying the final transparent glazes. Knowing that I'm working with acrylics, I don't have to worry about saving every little highlight as I would in watercolor—I can just cover a passage with gesso to get back to white.

When I paint on paper, I don't have to worry about adhesion problems because the acrylic paint adheres well to the paper. As long as I can see the white of the paper, I haven't applied enough paint to seal the paper completely. When the layers get opaque and I want to come back over them with transparent washes, I'll add some acrylic matte medium to the water and paint mixture so that it will bond properly.

### The process

Because of time restrictions and frequent adverse weather, I usually rely on photographic documentation and study sketches to develop my paintings. With the exception of class demonstrations, my paintings are done in multiple sessions because I like to set a painting-in-progress aside and just think about it. Generally, my painting process falls into four stages.

**The concept stage:** I need to feel strongly about an idea before I can paint it, so I'll ask myself: Why does this idea deserve to be painted? What is the essence of this subject that could be communicated through a painting? After I've clarified a concept and developed a degree of enthusiasm for the idea, I'm ready to move on.

**The design stage:** I usually precede the actual painting with multiple



### Letting the light shine

*Baths of Caracala* (acrylic, 29x21) began with photos I shot in Rome several years ago. My goal was to emulate a transparent watercolor technique, but in acrylics. I'd painted all of it but the foreground when I hit a brick wall—it wasn't looking right. A year later I came back to it, covering up a few things with gesso, going back over the gesso with transparent glazes and spattering opaque paint for the gravel.

## Washes of color



**1 Off to a good start.** I believe a good drawing is a prerequisite to a good painting, so I began this painting with a small conceptual sketch, testing ideas and working out compositional issues such as value arrangements. When I was satisfied, I transferred the drawing to a sheet of Arches 300-lb., cold-pressed watercolor paper. Since this painting would be predominantly warm, I applied a transparent wash of yellow ochre over portions of the paper using my 1½-inch wash brush. This added a special warm glow to the focal area.



**2 Establishing value.** Acrylics are excellent for glazing with multiple transparent washes. I continued using washes that represent the lightest values in the finished painting, making sure that each wash was dry before applying another. This process of building up the painting with multiple washes allows me to make subtle changes in color and temperature while maintaining transparency. I try to get some of the darkest passages in place at the beginning to help me accurately judge the relative value of other passages.



**3 Building up color.** At this point I concentrated on shaping the clay pots with multiple washes of burnt sienna and ultramarine blue applied with my round brushes.



**4 Adding texture.** With the clay pots nearly finished, I masked the bottom edge with Misket and masking tape. Not having to worry about these edges allowed me more freedom as I painted the foreground. (You can also apply the masking at earlier stages to keep a clean edge as you're layering washes.) With my 1-inch flat brush, I painted the ground plane with a mixture of blue and burnt sienna. For the gravel texture, I spattered on a variety of values, shapes and colors.

Demonstration continued on the next page.

## Toolbox

### The artist's materials

Most of my painting tools and materials are typical of those used by watercolorists, with a few adjustments to accommodate acrylics.

**Paints:** Ultramarine blue and burnt sienna are the backbone of my palette and allow me to mix many warm and cool grays. To these grays I add other colors appropriate to the painting. I often apply thin glazes of yellow ochre or ultramarine blue to maintain a warm or cool dominance. I mix my blacks, and I use acrylic gesso for white; tube whites tend to overpower my mixtures.

**Brushes:** I prefer synthetic or a synthetic/sable mix, doing 95 percent of my work with these Winsor & Newton brushes: 1/2- and 1-inch flats (series 995); 1 1/2-inch wash (series 965); Nos. 4, 6 and 8 rounds (series 101); and Nos. 1 and 2 script (series 303).

**Palette:** I use a porcelain butcher tray because acrylics will stain standard plastic watercolor palettes. I place paints on a damp, folded paper towel at one edge of my palette. The evaporation of water from the towel keeps the paints moist.

**Mediums and additives:** Acrylic matte medium, mixed 50-50 with water and added to paint, dilutes the paint while retaining enough of its body so it can adhere to the paper. Acrylic Flow Release (Golden) keeps paint from beading up on nonabsorbent, gesso-primed surfaces.

**Supports:** Arches 300-lb., cold-pressed paper or gesso-primed panels and gesso-primed canvas.

**Masking medium:** I often use Misket brand liquid frisket to mask parts of a painting and to control edges.

**Spray bottles:** Misting the paper as I paint extends working time and allows me to manipulate the edges before the paint dries. Old hairspray bottles give me a fine mist while houseplant misters give me a more vigorous mist.

**Water containers:** Acrylics are hard on brushes, so frequent washing with clean water and/or soap and water is essential.

**Miscellaneous stuff:** Tissues, white paper towels, rolls of thin tracing paper, No. 2 graphite pencils and roller-ball pens, and a soft white eraser for corrections.



**5 Final glazes.** Next, I removed all the masking tape and Misket and took a careful look at how well the multiple components of *Clay Pots* (acrylic, 21x29) were working together. At this point, changes may require darkening or cooling a shadow, softening an edge, changing a value, applying a few highlights, or just warming

or cooling a portion of the painting with transparent washes (glazes) of yellow ochre or ultramarine blue. Here, I did some of all of these, mixing these final glazes with a bit of matte acrylic medium so they would go on more uniformly and adhere to the layers below.



### Leading the eye

*Spanish Tiles* (acrylic, 21x29) was another painting that had a classic watercolor-y sky, but after I finished, I felt it wasn't appropriate—it pulled the eye away from the foreground tile, which I wanted to be the subject. The flat opaque sky I added allows your eye to stay on the building in the foreground. Then, to correct a compositional imbalance, I added the church in the background. It was painted opaque, then glazed with transparent washes.

thumbnail sketches, progressing to more involved compositional studies. I often do small color sketches to test compositional strategies and color schemes. It's especially important that value relationships be worked out before I construct a detailed drawing. This full-scale detailed drawing involves roughing out the major shapes on tracing paper and making sure I get the perspective right. I then lay another sheet of tracing paper over this drawing to refine perspective, shapes, proportions and so forth. This is followed by successive overlays, each one further refining the drawing and adding detail.

Once I'm satisfied with the accuracy and completeness of the drawing, I place a sheet of graphite transfer paper between the drawing and the painting surface to transfer the drawing. There will usually be some additional drawing work to be done on the painting surface before I feel ready to start painting.

**The application-of-medium stage:** Depending on the subject and anticipated color scheme, I usually start the actual painting process by applying a thin underpainting—yellow ochre, for example. This subdues the white of the ground and establishes a subtle sense of color and temperature. This step has a unifying effect on the finished painting.

From this point I begin to rough in the shapes, establish value patterns, and, I hope, feel a confirmation that the design is working. I try to work all areas of the painting equally through these steps. It's helpful if I apply some of the darkest passages early in the process. This allows me to correctly evaluate value relationships among dark, medium and light elements of the painting. I continue to define details and fine-tune value relationships until I'm satisfied with the overall look.

**The final step:** This stage is when I apply highlights, refine details where needed, subdue

overworked passages and apply transparent glazes where needed. Much of this work is done with opaque paint, but in a manner that unifies opaque and transparent passages. Opaque passages are always present but seldom noticeable in my paintings. Then I apply a final glaze of acrylic matte medium to seal and protect the surface of the painting.

### Above and beyond

I'll always appreciate the transparent qualities of watercolor, but using acrylics gives me so many more options, including building up multiple glazes without the dreaded "mud effect" that plagues watercolorists. With acrylics I can also use a masking medium over painted areas without lifting pigment from previous washes. The more I work with acrylics, the more I'm convinced that virtually every technique and effect that makes watercolor such an attractive medium can be duplicated in acrylics. ♦



### About the Artist

A signature member of the American Watercolor Society and the National Acrylic Painters Association, **CHARLES HARRINGTON** has shown his works in juried exhibitions, including NAPA, the American Artist's Professional League, Allied Artists of America, Watercolor USA and Arts for the Parks Top 100. A trained architect, he pursued fine art through workshops, self-study and coursework at the University of Arkansas

and Louisiana Tech University (where he taught for 25 years). He currently lives and paints full time in Bella Vista, Arkansas. You can see more of his work at his Web site: [www.charlesharrington.com](http://www.charlesharrington.com).