

## Painting a Dramatic Landscape in Watercolor

Mark Mehaffey, AWS, NWS  
review by Adele Greenfield

When you want drama, be brave! Push color and contrast and remember Mark's message: If you're worried about making a mistake, your art will look it. For powerful paintings, paint powerfully and don't be afraid to overdo. It is better to be bold than timid.

While his subject, a dramatically backlit scene of a mountain lake in the Tetons at sunset, is impressive, what you'll learn about moisture control for wet-in-wet as well as charging shapes with color and varying the temperature is just as impressive. It's one thing to do smaller shapes but another to paint larger mountainous ones while giving them dimension and depth.

Mark creates mood by using vibrant color against stark neutrals. The more intense color adds drama through value contrast and striking transitions. Because the painting is low key (with lots of darks), he paints with fresh pigment. Constantly changing the consistency of his mixes, you'll see interesting combinations of colors intermingling with plenty of variation in intensity and value.

And speaking of mood, it's so relaxing to watch what he does with his calm voice, soft strokes, and the rich, velvety textures that result, it is almost meditative. You're gently lulled into his world.

Starting with two sketches, he picks one, draws it on tracing paper, and transfers it to fully stretched 300-pound rough Arches watercolor paper soaked for 7 to 10 minutes and stapled to gator board. He plans to use a lot of water and wants it to lie flat.

After pre-wetting the paper, he applies heavy pigment, painting with all parts of the brush and different kinds of brushes. You'll get the details but here are a couple of hints. He uses a 3-inch hake to saturate the paper. Choosing a slightly smaller nylon brush, he pushes the paint and "sculpts" the forms. Sculpting works better with nylon than with sable but it can push pigment so much, you might splash color in areas where you don't want it.

Paint is diluted twice – once in the palette and again on the wet paper. Manipulate it before it dries. "As long as this is still wet, I can keep adding paint to my heart's content," he says.

In the video, he demonstrates moisture control for wet-in-wet painting. He lays down a wash then paints into it with a brush loaded with water and pigment. Edges creep until shapes are indefinable. The more water, the more he risks a backrun or blossom because there is more liquid in the brush than the relative wetness of the background. Next, he shows you how to do it with the right combination of moisture and pigment. The result is a nice soft edge and a shape that retains its definition. When paint is dry, you can rewet the area and apply color with no problem.

The wet paint glistens on the surface and then looks like velvet as it dries. When it's moisture-free, it sets into the fibers and is less likely to move after more pigment is added on top. His solution is to wet it again and add paint with less water so it's stronger and darker.

Varying the temperature and hue (but not value), he charges many colors into a shape. For example, instead of doing a tree in a solid temperature, he says, "If I were to paint it all in the same green, the viewer would get bored between the top and the bottom." By adding both cooler and warmer colors, he creates variety. And he's unified color with this change of temperature. You'll know what he means when you see a close-up. A very valuable lesson to remember for all forms.

Shape, color, and value contrast move the eye across the paper. Harder edges in the focal area create a bold center of interest with dark surrounded by light.

When he refines his piece, among other things, he demonstrates how he:

- treats an area when it is too visually intrusive
- allows the edge of the brush to act like the edge of rocks
- paints vertical reflections in the water
- floats dark greens over an underpainting of new gamboges
- warms indigo so it is a luscious color
- softens edges with water against the paint
- pre-wets paper so paint will run just up to the edge of this area
- gives an indication of the light and shadow from the distant clouds

You'll watch a wonderful visual summary at the end, highlighting the journey taken to create this dramatic landscape.

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