

Chapter 1

Watercolor Is Wonderful!

In This Chapter

- ▶ Grasping the basics of watercolor
- ▶ Separating the myths and truths about watercolor
- ▶ Examining the basic art elements
- ▶ Dropping into your first project

All paint begins with pigments. To do watercolor painting, you take those pigments, add water, and use a brush to apply the paint to paper. It's as simple as that.

And, painting is a good thing. Your blood pressure goes down, your brain is stimulated, your mind is active, and your body is challenged. It's up to you to express your artistic calling. When you do so, you benefit in big ways.



Two of the most important things to keep in mind as you become a watercolorist are to breathe and to have fun. Breathe? Yes, when you concentrate so hard and focus like you will while painting, you hold your breath. Breathe! And have fun. Art tends to be stuffy, pretentious, and cerebral. Forget the art snobs for now. Have fun by enjoying the colors, how they interact, and the results they yield. Because art is fun. Keep in mind that it's only paper, and you have to mess up some paper to make art.

In this chapter, you discover the interactive nature of watercolor, start to understand its attributes, get a quick overview of art design, get some ideas of what to paint, and then put some paint to work in a quick project.

Appreciating Watercolor

Watercolor has a life of its own. When you apply paint to watercolor paper, it moves. You then add more paint or more water, and again the watercolor responds with a swirl. Painting with watercolor is a dance; it's a relationship between the paint and the artist.

When you paint watercolor on paper, you can make anything in the world happen. Figure 1-1 is one of the latest paintings I've made. To be fair, I probably should show you one of the first paintings I ever made, but I'll spare you the meager beginnings. It was probably a finger painting on the wall. But trust

me, however bad you think you are starting out, I was probably worse. But I wanted to paint so badly that I kept at it. I have done watercolor as long as I can remember. I still struggle to make a great painting. But it's an enjoyable struggle.



Figure 1-1:
One of my
recent
watercolor
paintings.

Transparent watercolor is what I want to share with you. In my opinion, it's watercolor at its best. Thin, transparent layers of paint are applied to white cotton rag paper. The see-through layers allow light to penetrate the paint, bounce off the white of the paper, and reflect back through the paint to the viewer. The result is a watercolor painting that glows and sparkles.

Opaque watercolor is called *gouache*, pronounced *gwahsh*. Chinese white is added to watercolor to make the *opaque* (not see-through) gouache paint. Acrylic paint is also an opaque, water-soluble medium. All of these can be used together. The big difference is that watercolor and gouache can be rehydrated and moved after they dry. Acrylic is like plastic and doesn't rehydrate. When it's dry, it stays in place on the palette or painting, and it can be painted over in layers. I'll save these mediums for another book.

What aspects attract an artist to watercolor painting? What myths make an artist fear watercolor? There are many old wives' tales and misinformation about the medium, but watercolor is

✓ **Permanent:** Watercolor is a permanent medium. But because it's a work on paper, it may seem less substantial than a work on canvas. But good quality watercolor paper is made from 100 percent cotton rag content, which has been found intact in Egyptian tombs thousands of years old.

Watercolor also had a reputation for not being lightfast. And, though it's true that the old masters' watercolors are often stored in museum drawers between black sheets of archival paper so they're not exposed to light, the good news is that today's technology and chemistry ensures that paint pigments are more lightfast than ever. Today's watercolors will last a very long time.

- ✓ **Portable:** Watercolor is a portable medium. Paper, paint, a brush, and some water are all you need to get to work. They fit easily into a bag, and you can take them wherever you want to paint. So whether you travel around the world or just to class, you can take your supplies with you.
- ✓ **Correctable:** Watercolor is a changeable medium. An artistic myth is that once watercolor is put down on paper it can't be removed or erased. Well, that just isn't true. You can manipulate the medium completely. You can erase. You can make additions and corrections in layers of paint on top of other paint. Chapter 3 talks about erasing.
- ✓ **Immediate:** Watercolor dries quickly — in a matter of minutes. Oil paint can take up to six months to dry completely. We live in a culture that appreciates immediacy. Watercolor fulfills that need.
- ✓ **Fluid:** Some folks are scared of watercolor because it's difficult to control. Watercolor moves. It ebbs and flows like water does. That very aspect is its charm. It reacts to you. It paints itself if you discover how to give it some room to work.
- ✓ **Varied:** Watercolor is technique intensive. There are *lots* of techniques. That's part of watercolor's charm too. (Chapters 3 and 4 explore techniques.)

Watercolor is full of surprises. It's a great experimental medium. Although I spend a lot of time painting realistic scenes, it can be great fun for abstract and experimental painting as well.

Digging into the Elements of Art

Some art basics help get the party started. These basics are called the *elements of design*. You use these pieces to design your paintings. This section is like Art 101 — you can use the information here for all types of art in any medium.

I tell you what to do with these elements of design in Chapter 6, which presents the *principles of design* — the verbs you use to act on the elements of design, which are the nouns of painting.

The basic elements of design that I explore in the following sections and throughout this book are

- ✓ **Shape:** A circle, square, or triangle, for example, or any other organic form (blobs and other curvilinear shapes)
- ✓ **Line:** A continuous path between two points
- ✓ **Size:** The quality of being large or small or somewhere in between
- ✓ **Direction:** The overall physical arrangement of the objects within a painting — either vertical, horizontal, or diagonal
- ✓ **Texture:** The real or implied tactile quality

One more element of design is color, which is so much fun that I use all of Chapter 5 to talk about it.

Seeing in shapes

You were taught to recognize geometric shapes as a child, so you have a head start on working with this element of design. But I have a few tricks up my sleeve that you can use:

- ✓ **See everyday objects as simplified shapes.** Developing this vision lets you draw more quickly and accurately. (Chapter 8 helps with your drawing skills.)

For example, a house is a cube with a pyramid on top with a cylinder for a chimney. And even though a rose looks really complicated, you can simplify it into a circle or oval first. A complex garden may begin by breaking down the shapes into many ovals first.

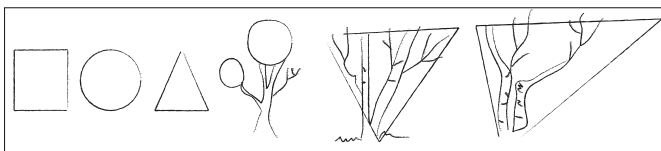
- ✓ **Make shapes more interesting by varying their sides and edges.** Squares, triangles, and circles are equal-sided shapes and are less interesting in a painting than unequal-sided shapes (see Figure 1-2). Try to create shapes that are more intriguing to look at by varying the sides and edges of the shapes.

You've heard that variety is the spice of life. In art, variety is the essence of interesting design. Chapter 6 covers this concept in more detail.

- ✓ **Group elements in your painting to create a shape.** Some shapes are implied. Take a look at the tree on the right in Figure 1-2. It forms an overall triangle. This tree is more interesting to the viewer because the triangle isn't equilateral — the three legs are different lengths.



Figure 1-2:
Even versus
uneven-
sided
shapes.



Judging size

Size is just what you expect: big versus little. And yes, in art, size matters. Objects using the elements of line and shape can be different sizes, as can areas of texture.

You can direct the viewer to see what you think is most important by making it larger or *dominant*. (More discussion on dominance in Chapter 6.) One flower bigger than all the others captures the viewer's attention and creates more interest in your painting than having all the flowers equal in size. An example is Figure 1-3. The big flower is the star of the show, and the other flowers are the supporting cast.

Figure 1-3:
The bigger
flower gives
the viewer a
focal point
by using
variety in
size.



You can influence the viewer with size. For example, Georgia O'Keefe forced viewers to really look at a flower by taking what is normally small and making it huge. Her paintings have a grand impact because of their large scale. Conversely, small paintings can bring your viewer in and create an intimate relationship.



Variety of size is nice. After all, if all the flowers in a painting were the same size, you'd have wallpaper. A nice design for wallpaper, sure, but probably not an exciting painting. (Chapter 7 talks about composition and making more creative painting designs.)

You can also make something small the attention grabber. Check out Figure 1-4 — a Western painting featuring a lone cowboy on a horse in the rain. Everything is dismal gray to make you feel the weather and the cold the cowboy is experiencing. But he's wearing a bright yellow slicker that immediately grabs the viewer's attention, not because the rainwear is so big in the painting, but because it's a small change of color in a big area that is all the same.



Figure 1-4:
A small size
can take
up a lot of
space in a
viewer's
eye.

Size is also important to establish *aerial perspective*. Bigger objects appear to be closer, and smaller objects seem to recede into space. (I discuss perspective in Chapter 8.)

Looking to lines

There really aren't many lines in nature. Look closer at edges in real life. Is there a line? Usually there is some type of difference, but generally not a line — often just a change in color or value.

Artists use an artificial line to define edges and contain a shape, which is very useful. Lines help you define an area and create detail in items like hair, grass, the veins on a leaf, and a ton of other things.

Line and shape can be real, as in an outline to indicate where to paint, or implied, as in items in a line of sight. You can also have viewers connect the dots in an implied line. If you make a line of geese in the sky, it really isn't a line, but the eye will see it as a line if the geese are in a row. So the geese become an implied line.

Figure 1-5 shows the three different types of lines:

- ✓ **Curved lines:** Arcs, circles, and curvilinear lines form soft edges, round shapes, clouds, figures, and most natural shapes.
- ✓ **Straight lines:** Horizontal lines symbolize calm, while vertical lines create upward movement. It's nice to counterbalance one with a bit of the other.
- ✓ **Angular lines:** Diagonals and zigzags create a feeling of uneasiness, excitement, and action.

Figure 1-5:
Curvilinear lines are round; straight lines can be vertical and horizontal; angular lines lay diagonally.



There are curved lines, straight lines, and angular lines.



In fine art, variety is the rule. Even shapes are not as interesting as uneven shapes. Odd numbers are more interesting than even numbers.

Deciding direction

Direction can refer to a line or the thrust of an entire picture. Direction can be horizontal, diagonal, or vertical, and each type of direction performs a different function.

You arrange the various parts of a painting and the objects in it to create direction within the painting. (Find more on organizational formats in Chapter 7.)

- ✓ **Horizontal:** A horizontal format and thrust implies calm and peacefulness.
- ✓ **Vertical:** A vertical format implies dignity.
- ✓ **Diagonal:** A diagonal thrust creates movement.

The diagonal thrust to the bull gives the cowboy in Figure 1-6 extra movement and excitement.



Figure 1-6:
Ride 'em
diagonally!

Adding texture

Texture is a feeling of tactile sensation. You can add things to your paint or things to your picture to create texture. You may want to add real texture by sewing on beads, gluing on trinkets, or employing some other idea. Paint additives give the paint enough body to be thick enough to have texture.

Implied or *faux* (French for *fake*, pronounced *f-oh*) texture is the illusion of texture. For example, by painting rough texture and adding little lines of detail, you make tree bark seem real. If you run your finger over the paper, it isn't rough like tree bark, but simply an illusion. Rough texture is described in Chapter 3.



Traditional watercolor hasn't made much use of real texture. Today, anything goes. Creativity is the name of the game. You can explore texture and invent looks that work for you. You're not limited to the way things have always been done. Just don't overdo it. Like all good things, too much can be chaos (unless you agree with Mae West, who said, "Too much of a good thing is marvelous!").

Deciding What to Paint

You may think you have to wait for inspiration to find you. A true artist can find inspiration in an empty box. It sure doesn't fall from the sky. By painting every day, whether you feel like it or not, you develop inspiration as well as skill. You may have an aptitude for art, but you need to develop it, practice it, and nurture it. If you want to be an artist, you must work for it. The good news? The work is pleasure. You'll experience frustration and produce paintings that embarrass instead of impress. Make more until they work for you. Make a hundred paintings before you judge yourself.

A large part of this book is devoted to subjects to paint. Still lifes, landscapes, seascapes, and animals are just a few of the topics I cover (check out Chapters 9, 10, 11, and 12). After you try the subjects I chose, look around you and see if you can find similar topics to paint, or apply the techniques to your own choice of subject matter.

As you start painting, you begin seeing in a new way. You look at light, shadows, lines, and angles with a painter's eye, and you pick up inspiration for new paintings in the everyday world around you and in the rich arena of your imagination.



Some good advice was given to me years ago: "Paint what you know." So it's also good advice to research and explore your areas of interest because they become sources of painting material. My husband and I are fascinated by muscle cars. I paint the ones I can't afford to own. Figure 1-7 is an unusual view of a Shelby Cobra with reflections of the American flag in the vehicle's paint.



Figure 1-7:
Painting
what I know
I want.

Following Your Artistic Instincts

In the project steps throughout this book, I tell you what to paint, what size to make your painting, and what colors and techniques to use. You can completely ignore what I tell you (who listens to me anyway?) and pick your own size, colors, and techniques.

I give you suggestions to help you create a successful finished piece like the one I painted. You can use your own creativity to pick and choose something you would rather see happen. This is art, and really there are no rules to art.

That being said, I hand you a bunch of rules throughout the pages of this book. Enjoy the rules. Savor them. Analyze them. Get to know them. Then when you're comfortable with them, you can break any rules you want because you can justify why the rules don't apply to you.

Many rules are just words and concepts that artists (that includes you) use to discuss art using the same language. *Art speak* is the eloquent usage of these concepts. The better you become at art speak, the bigger grants you will get and the better you can justify the higher price tags on your masterpieces.

Project: Creating a Garden of Blooms

In a garden, a bloom is a lovely flower. In watercolor, a *bloom* can be a fun technique that happens when you drip wet paint into paint that's drier.

You may be thinking, "I'm not ready to paint anything yet!" but if you have some paint and a brush, you're ready for this fun little project. You simply can't make a mistake in creating this garden of blooms. I tell you how to set up your palette in Chapter 2, so for now just put a few colors out that you can play with. You choose what colors your garden will be. Think fun and abstract, and enjoy how the paint reacts to other paints and to water.

- 1. Get a piece of watercolor paper about 5 x 7 inches.**
- 2. Cover the paper with clean water using a 1-inch flat brush.**
- 3. Pick up the paper and let the water drip off into your water container.**

The paper should be shiny damp everywhere without puddles.

- 4. Choose one color and cover the whole paper with that color.**

Mix enough water with the paint so the color is transparent. No thick paint needed. Use your ½-inch flat brush so you can work quickly before the paint dries.

- 5. Before Step 4 dries, drop water and other colors into the paint one drop at a time.**

Drop clear water into the paint and watch it make a bloom. You can continue to drop colors or water until the paint and paper dry.

- 6. Let the paint dry completely.**

7. Sign your name at the bottom.

Signatures should be small in the corner, usually the lower right one. Make it legible if you want anyone to know who created the work. If the brush is too difficult to sign your name with, use a permanent pen or pencil that will show up.

My garden of blooms is shown in Figure 1-8.

8. Mount your painting on a card and send it to someone to brighten their day.

Figure 1-8:
Some
water, some
paint — a
watercolor!

