

Read All About It

Doing your research

There are two books that helped me a lot early in my painting career, and I've recommended them to my workshop participants. These books are full of easy-to-follow, step-by-step, how-to exercises. They are: *Glorious Garden Flowers in Watercolor* by Susan Harrison-Tustain (North Light Books) and *Painting Watercolor Florals That Glow* by Jan Kunz (North Light Books).

There are also a number of great books that can enhance the way you look at flowers and paint them. One of my favorites is *Flowers* by Charles Rennie Macintosh and Pamela Robertson (Abrams). Macintosh was a Scottish architect and a leader in the Arts and Crafts movement who worked primarily in the Glasgow area. He was also a fabulous watercolorist.

I researched architectural movements to find inspiration for creating a building, I also study books about flower anatomy and plant construction to capture the essence of a particular flower. This research helps me capture my images accurately and get acquainted with flowers in new and different ways.

Working with life

I'm a studio painter. Though I love the opportunity to do simple *plein air* paintings, most often I take photographs to capture the way the light falls on a flower. I love to take flowers that people see every day, see them in a fresh way and describe them in a painting for my audiences. I like to think that I can see the details in flowers that the person next to me, upon seeing the same flower, can't see.

Before I begin a sketch, I use my digital camera to take reference photographs. I then remove extraneous material from the digital image, alter the contrast to my liking and focus in closely on my subject with the help of computer software. I turn these digital works into 35 mm slides, project them onto my paper and trace the basic shape of the image. I use an Epson 1280 printer to create my reference images because I can print 13x19 photographs of my composition. This allows for close detail in my subjects. I then work from a print of the digital image to refine and fill in the details of the pencil drawing. I perfect the final image as I draw, moving and eliminating objects as I see fit, until I finally come up with a sketch. These

drawings, and the paintings that result, are a combination of precision, mathematics, design and art—an achievement I've been striving for since I first held that architecture brochure in my hand all those years ago. ♦

JENNIFER BALL is the associate editor for *The Artist's Magazine*.

Seeing red

Painting a red rose seems so simple, but painting vivid reds is a challenge. In *Red Floribunda Rose* (watercolor 26x20), I really tried to keep my reds from becoming dull and flat, as they often do in watercolor.



About the Artist

LAURIN McCracken is the Marketing and Strategies Officer for Looney Ricks Kiss Architects. He's been a practicing watercolorist for five years and lives in Memphis, Tennessee. To see more of his work, visit www.lauringallery.com.



Toolbox

An architect's choice

Paper: I like Arches cold-pressed regular and bright white, or Fabriano Artístico cold-pressed and soft-pressed. I enjoy the soft-pressed paper for very detailed subjects. If I'm looking for a particularly white surface, I use Cheap Joe's Kilimanjaro paper.

Paint: I primarily use Winsor & Newton watercolors, with a few colors made only by other manufacturers, such as Holbein's mineral violet and Juane brilliant.

Brushes: I use kolinsky sable rounds, either Winsor & Newton

series 7 or Creative Mark's Performer series. I have a few flats that I use to lay in large background washes.

Masking: I do a lot of masking using a Masquepen because I like the applicator tips that they come with. I use drafting tape as a masking film, and I use a medium-weight tracing paper to mask large areas.

Pencils: I use 2H lead in a .5 mm mechanical pencil to trace the basics of an image.

Through the course of my career, however, I strayed farther and farther from my original dream. I became the marketing director for an architectural firm in Chicago and traveled all over the world selling architectural services to clients. But while my job has afforded me some amazing opportunities, and I love what I do, I had to admit that there was still something missing from my life. I needed art.

The building blocks

When I look back and consider why I chose to paint florals, and why I picked watercolor as my preferred medium, I'd have to say that these choices might have had something to do with their similarities to architecture. I like working in watercolor because of its fine balance of strategy and fluid mechanics. You have to plan ahead, which, because of my training, suits me. But with each little piece of the painting, because it's water and pigment, wonderful surprises can also happen. It's this spontaneity that makes creating art so fulfilling—and makes it so different from my 9-to-5 life.

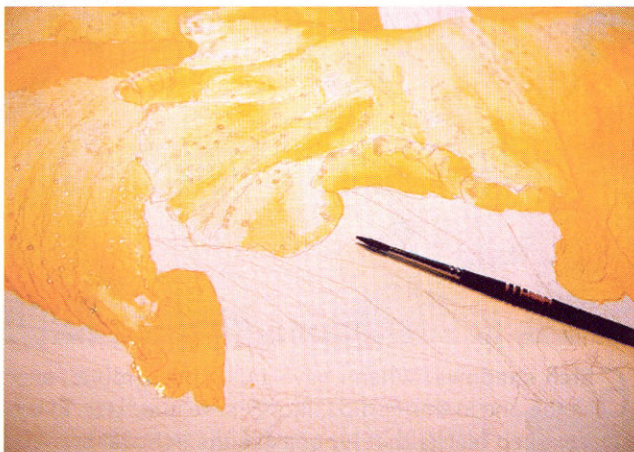
Also, painting the structure of a flower is much like creating a blueprint; like a building, each flower is uniquely designed and must be approached in a new and different way. Just as

Shades of white

Growing up in Mississippi, I often had the chance to see magnolias in bloom. In the painting *Two Magnolias* (watercolor, 20x20), I really wanted to pay tribute to this flower of my childhood by exploring the shininess of the leaves and the many different values of white.



Gilding the lily



1 Petal by petal. To save the texture of the flower and the water droplets on the petals, I masked all the parts of the flower that I wanted to stay white. I prefer the Masquepen because it uses a variety of nibs, including a very small one that allows you to apply masking in very close detail. To mask large areas in a painting, I use tracing paper fastened to the support with drafting tape. This kind of adhesive is commonly used in architectural renderings because it stays watertight without disturbing the surface of the paper.



2 Lightening up. I typically start a painting with either the lightest part or the most difficult passage of the piece, and then work to the darkest or least difficult. In this painting, I chose to paint the lightest portion of the flower first. I used cadmium yellow to create the underpainting, working over the masking fluid highlights.



3 Creating a layered effect. I use paint in a pretty concentrated manner. I'm careful never to mix more than two colors at a time so they don't get muddy. In this stage of the process, I painted one of my concentrated layers of cadmium red over the cadmium yellow to capture the next darkest values in the lily and its stem.



4 True value. To darken the yellow and add depth to the successive layers, I used alizarin crimson and mineral violet. At this point, the flower is completely finished, but still contains a lot of masking fluid.

Demonstration continued on the next page.



5 Supporting players. Next, I laid in the buds and leaves. The buds near the foreground are more detailed and colorful, while the background leaves are more loosely rendered so as not to distract from the focal point.



6 Rich shadows. When I have a dark background, such as the one in this composition, I save it for last. To create the deep blacks that emphasize the light yellows and oranges of the flower, I use a premixed “soup” of watercolor that I keep in covered containers (see Achieving Luminosity below, left). I add pigment to this soup depending on how warm or cool I want the background to be.

Color Recipes

Achieving luminosity

The basic “soup” I use to create my deep blacks is composed of Winsor & Newton’s Prussian blue, permanent alizarin crimson and Holbein’s mineral violet. Then I add other colors, such as cadmium yellow if I want it to be more opaque, light red when I want it to be warmer, or quinacridone gold if I want it to be richer.

To see more of Laurin McCracken’s work, click on Gallery at www.artistsmagazine.com.



7 Removing the mask. After I completed the painting, I revealed the texture of the flower by removing the masking fluid. I then hung the painting in my studio and lived with it for several days before I decided it was truly finished. Over that time I found a few things that needed to be adjusted or changed. When I found myself altering details that no one else would notice, I stopped working. Once I was done fussing with the work, I was finally happy with it. The result: *Yellow Daylily* (watercolor, 20x28).

Delicate textures

In *Bearded Iris* (watercolor, 20x20), I was most interested in how the sunlight emphasized the texture of the flower's petals and stem.



a new way of seeing

A marriage of
architecture and fine
art produces
beautiful results.

BY LAURIN MCCrackEN
WITH JENNIFER BALL

My whole life changed when I entered the seventh grade. That's the year I received a glossy brochure from the American Institute of Architects. Up to that point, I'd been torn about whether I was going to be a musician or an artist; I loved both fields, but I knew that eventually I'd have to make a choice about which one would receive the focus of my energy. But this brochure explained to me that I didn't have to choose. It told me that architecture wasn't just about math and physics—it was actually the mother of the arts. The next few paragraphs then went on to describe how the field of architecture encompassed all the fine arts, including drawing and music. From that point forward, I knew I was destined to be an architect.