



There is something mesmerising about gazing along a meandering river. The calmness of the water, drama of the mountains and punctuating darks of the trees seem to constantly draw your eyes into the distance.

For this project we take a simple approach to what might at first appear a complicated subject. We will use a limited palette of five colors and build our subject up with a series of overlaid washes.

What You Will Need

All we need for this project is a 1/4 sheet of medium or rough 300gsm paper (I'm using Arches 300gsm medium), 5 colors plus white gouache, a pastel pencil, #1 Rigger brush, 1/8 or 1/4 inch flat brush to adjust our fine lines, a 1/2 Bristle Brush for most of the work and a 2 or 3 inch Hake to adjust the washes





This is our subject - the thumbnail sketches below give you a few different options, or you can explore the arrangement further and come up with your own composition. I chose the thumbnail at the bottom right.



Thumbnails need only be the size of a credit card and very quickly sketched. There is no need for detail, it is just a way of checking what the composition will look like before you get started.



First Wash

Our first step is to very lightly and very simply sketch our composition onto our watercolor paper with a charcoal pencil. Be as economical as possible with your lines - just enough to indicate where things will go - and no shading or you'll end up with a dark muddy mess. The first wash goes over all but the area of mountains at the top. Keep the wash (a mixture of Alizarin Crimson and Quinacridone Gold) pale and watery then, before it dries, clean and dry off your 1/2 inch bristle brush and lift the wash out of the upper area of the river.



Distant Hills

The distant hills are put on while the first wash is still wet. Mix up some Ultramarine Blue, Quinacridone Gold and a little Alizarin Crimson to make a dirty grey/green. Put it on so that it bleeds up into the sky wash. I added a little more Ultramarine to the furthest area of the hills to push them back. The lower edge of the hills can be left as a hard line against the light area of the water.



Sand Shapes

Next we will start to build up some detail in the foreground. Let the painting dry before adding these marks. Put them on with a mixture of Quinacridone Gold and Alizarin crimson. While the marks are still wet stir some Ultramarine into the mixture and drop in a few cooler spots. Use a clean damp 1/2 inch bristle brush to soften some of the edges and make the marks appear to blend into the sand. The marks in this photo look stronger than I need them because the photo was taken while they were still wet. Most pigments lose intensity as they dry out.



Middle Distant Trees

Make sure the background washes are all thoroughly dry then mix a dirty green from Ultramarine Blue, Quinacridone Gold, Alizarin Crimson and a tiny bit of Phthalo Blue. We are going to add another layer of closer trees, but this time the edges will be harder and more defined to bring them forward. Paint them on with you 1/2 inch bristle brush making the shapes varied and interesting and the edges rough and jagged. While the paint is still wet drop in some darker pigment to add variety. Once you have applied the trees use a clean, damp brush to soften just a couple of the rough edges. Be sure to keep that hard contrasting line where the trees meet the edge of the river.



Distant Trees

Next we will add that purple/grey patch of distant trees. Use a mixture of Ultramarine Blue, Alizarin Crimson and a little Quinacridone Gold to make the color. Paint in the shape then quickly wash your brush clean, dry it so it's just damp and run it along the top then back underneath the shape to produce a soft broken edge. Just touching the damp brush on the wet shape will make a slightly broken soft edge to suggest distant trees.



Closer Trees

Now its time to add the closer dark trees. This time we will make the mixture as dark as possible. Mix some Phthalo and Ultramarine Blue, Alizarin Crimson and Quinacridone Gold until you get a dirty dark khaki green. The secret to making this dark strong enough is to have plenty of paint squeezed out and not to wash your brush out between dipping into the different colors.

Again this color can be varied slightly to add interest and, once applied, some of the edges can be softened.



Foreground Bushes

It's now time to add more interest to the foreground. We will put in a couple of small patches of pale green with a mixture of Quinacridone Gold and a tiny bit of Phthalo Blue. Put the color on then soften the edges with a clean damp brush.

When the green dries mix up an orange color with Quinacridone Gold and Alizarin then add a small amount of Ultramarine to slightly desaturate the orange color. With this color we will add some details around the edge of the river and suggest some sand patches up into the distant head of the river.



Foreground details

We can let the foreground dry out again then mix up some more dark green (Phthalo, Ultramarine, Quinacridone Gold and Alizarin) and add a few more dark bush shapes to the foreground. Make the size and spacing between these shapes varied, and soften some of the ragged edges with a damp brush. While we have this color mixed we can add some more water to it then splash a few random spots under our bushes.



Fine Details

We can use our rigger brush now to suggest sticks, branches rocks and reeds. Vary the size, shape and spacing of these marks - they should appear random and natural.



Graded Side Washes

The next job is to focus attention on the focal point at the head of the river. To do this we will slightly darken the foreground and either side of the sky with a cool grey mixed from Ultramarine Blue, Alizarin and a little Quinacridone Gold. Working on one area at a time, apply the color, quickly wash out your brush then soften and grade out the edges so there is no defining line between this shadow color and the painting. Use your dry hake brush if necessary to even out the gradation.

TIP

Pull the Hake brush back into the wash rather than dragging it from the wash out into the painting. This will keep the wash contained instead of gradually creeping across the painting.



Once the shadow wash has been put into the foreground and both sides of the sky we can drop some pure Alizarin Crimson into the foreground bushes and far river bank. This will help lead the eye up to our focal point at the top of the river.

White Details

We will now break up some of the dark shapes with a mixture of White Gouache and Quinacridone gold. Put it on with the tip of your rigger brush, varying the thickness of the lines slightly. As you apply the marks, use a damp 1/8 or 1/4 inch flat brush to ease off parts of the marks and take away the stark appearance.

The final step is to cool down the foreground and either side of the sky with a wash of pure Cobalt blue. (refer to the first picture on page 1) We will apply this in the same way we applied the previous shadow washes into these areas. Cobalt, being a very transparent pigment, will have little effect on the tone, but will give a contrasting cool glow to these regions. Work on either side of the sky then the foreground, one region at a time. The main points to remember with these adjusting washes are:

- Make sure the painting is thoroughly dry before you start
- Work quickly on one area at a time
- Don't over work - as soon as things look right stop
- Don't be tempted to go back and fiddle.

Options

Once you have worked through this project you will have learned the skills to navigate your own way through a similar painting. These two photographs can be treated in a similar way to the river landscape you have just completed.

- Start with a couple of thumbnail sketches to fine tune your composition
- Remember to put the maximum tonal contrast and strongest colors at your focal point
- Start with the largest pale washes and build up from there

