

Fundamentals of Veil Painting

Veil painting (also referred to as Illuminism by some contemporary artists) involves building up color with successive washes of transparent watercolor. *Each wash, or veil, must dry before painting another one in the same area.* However, it is more than just a glazing technique when color is built up in accordance with the laws of light, color and darkness. (Diluted oil or acrylic paint might also be used with some adaptation of technique.)

There are several approaches to veil painting, each producing a different style. The one described here is based on the work of Liane Collot d'Herbois, master painter and pioneering anthroposophic therapist, who worked closely with Dr. Ita Wegman. Mastering this approach gives you all the tools to adapt to other styles as you so choose.

The description that follows is geared toward *artistic veil painting*, but this general approach is also used for exploring and portraying *archetypal color relationships* and for advanced *therapeutic exercises*, both of which are more precise and guided with regard to the particular color placement and interactions and may or may not have *identifiable* form, though the *forming principle* is clearly present. In general, we can say that when we work artistically, we engage a potentially larger color world from an observer's point of view; we are looking *at* the color. When we work therapeutically, we enter into a smaller and more specific picture of the color world, where we can strive to develop the various color relationships and nuances much more precisely as a reflection of the human being. We are *in* the color.

General Principles

The first stage of a painting is to create a *color atmosphere* that is in dynamic movement, creating what Collot d'Herbois referred to as a *transparent color space*. "Although we speak of many colors and give them different names, you must think of color as of one substance, one great cosmic substance that is incessantly in movement, and its movements are due to the infinite variety of interactions between light and darkness." *Light, space and movement are the essential ingredients of a successful veil painting.* She emphasized the idea that behind all color is movement, and Rudolf Steiner notes, "Form is movement come to rest." *Form emerges out of the color in the late stages of the painting.* This is brought about not merely through a process of subjective suggestion, but through our conscious intention, utilizing our understanding of the properties of color to achieve our aims for the painting. Paintings based on the laws of light, color and darkness can have a therapeutic effect on the viewer as well as the painter, nourishing the soul and enlivening the spirit through the reflection of cosmic laws in the human being.

- *Movement*: transformation, one thing becoming another. This can be achieved through building up veils that create gradation, metamorphosis and openings in our picture.
- *Gradation*: change in value from lighter to darker (e.g., top to bottom, left to right); change of hue (one color into another); change in tint, tone or shade; change in temperature (warm to cool); dull to bright; hard to soft to diffuse edge; *metamorphosis* of color depending on what's around it.
- Leave *openings* in or between washes or change the contours to *see through* to other colors, especially in the beginning stages of the painting – this adds *transparency* and creates a feeling of *depth*. Overlapping portions of openings helps to maintain some lighter areas as we build up color intensity.
- What we leave out is as important as what we paint.
- *Save some pure color and some light areas as you build up the painting*; these areas should generally include the middle of your picture as a potential area of focus. Ideally, we don't add white (which is opaque) with transparent watercolor, so light areas and pure color areas must be preserved from the beginning. When doing large initial washes, keep them light and leave enough space for other colors to also appear in their purity. There are ways to reclaim light areas, including scrubbing, scrapping, even using white chalk or paint, but being aware and planning ahead can mitigate the need for these.
- Develop a *range of values* representing *light, mid-light, mid-dark and dark*. Highlights (transmitted or reflected light) and mid-lights turn toward light; mid-darks and darks (shade) turn away from light.
- To make your light areas shine, you need darkness. "*One can only make things glow with darkness, not with light, because darkness is warmth.*" (Collot d'Herbois) To make a part of your painting luminous, surround lighter or brighter colors with darker or duller colors. Keep in mind it's all relative. Discover how to bring light

into darkness by adding more darkness to the surrounding area; what originally appeared dark will then look lighter.

- The archetype is in light, color and darkness, not in shapes. We sense spirit through light, space and movement. We don't go into the soul/spiritual world through form but through color. Through movement, color leads us to imagination. *We go from moving color to gesture to form.*

- Form need not be precise but can be suggested; it is better left to the imagination to fill in the details. But show that you are an observer of nature by including some accurate details.

- Remember, *it is the light that forms and makes space* as it makes things visible, so show more form using harder edges *toward* the light. *Darkness dissolves*, so avoid hard edges away from the light or too much in the darkness. (Very strong light can also dissolve form or seem blinding, as seen in the sun shining through branches in a tree.) A small amount of edge can emerge as the rest diffuses, suggesting movement and creative possibilities. This also helps to make the darkness transparent.

- In the last phase of the picture, we bring out the form through the use of *positive space* (building up from the inside) or *negative space* (defining from the outside). Smaller washes and harder edges are often used for this, with larger washes used again later for integration. Use washes to create planes, rather than lines, to bring out aspects of the form. Avoid "cut out" forms—let edges form and dissolve.

- *On understanding atmosphere*: It is the density of the atmosphere, the distance from the light, and our point of view relative to the light, that determine what colors we see in the atmosphere. We experience certain colors when we look towards the light, like at sunrise or sunset, when we look through the densest part of the atmosphere. When there is "darkness in front of the light," we could also say the light is darkened (by substance in the atmosphere) and, therefore, there is light behind the colors. These colors are typically the warm colors: magenta, carmine, vermilion, orange, yellow, yellow-green—up to the viridian green of pure light. (We have to learn to see this ephemeral color in the sky.) Other colors appear when there is "darkness behind the light," when the light shines into or towards the darkness—and is, therefore, at our back. Now the darkness becomes lightened. When darkness (substance in the air or even the dark cosmos) is behind the colors, we typically see the cool colors: turquoise, cobalt blue, ultramarine blue, indigo, violet. Thus, we can learn to see the colors of the sky, sunrise and sunset as the result of the meeting of Light and Darkness in the atmosphere. The light itself is not visible, but spiritual. We only see it when it is reflected by substance—in the atmosphere or by more solid forms. Brighter, purer colors are seen in the path of the light; tones and duller colors, including earth tones, are seen more off to the sides. Colors in front of the light (warm colors) become darker through thicker atmosphere; colors behind the light (cool colors) become darker with thinner atmosphere. In this latter case, a thicker atmosphere becomes light-filled, making the color behind it appear lighter (e.g., the horizon of the sky looks lighter, seen through the thickest part of the atmosphere that "holds" more light, while the deepest blue is generally up above us, seen through the thinnest part of the atmosphere).

- *Regarding space*: We can think spatially, in planes, by identifying a foreground, mid-ground and background. To show space using color perspective, the general rule is that warm colors come forward, cool colors recede—but don't get stuck in this. Nature is more complex, including reflections, refractions, reversals and other color processes. In general, harder edges, brighter and warmer colors are in front; boundaries get softer and colors cooler as we go back into the distance. As painters, we also use other techniques to enhance the feeling of space, including stacking, overlapping, perspective, and "occult" space, as used by oriental masters, to indicate atmosphere and light between planes (foreground /background).

Practical Tips on Veil Painting Technique

- 1- *Paint on stretched watercolor paper* (Arches or Saunders Waterford 140 lb. (300gsm) rough or cold press) taped to a painting board (see separate instructions). However, especially for practicing, it is possible to work on *unstretched paper* that is the size of ¼ sheet of watercolor paper or less. (A full sheet of watercolor paper is ~22x30", so ¼ sheet is ~11x15".) This is taped all around to a board with masking tape. *Use a 1" flat watercolor brush or "mop" brush for large washes. A #10 or 12 round brush is helpful for finishing smaller washes.* Using a two-brush technique (two 1" flat brushes), one for water and one for pigment, is helpful and saves time and paint. Having different dilutions of colors can be helpful for making gradations or transitions. Make sure to prepare enough pigment dissolved in water before starting to paint a wash. Stopping in the middle to mix more paint doesn't work, since the wash will be

settling into the paper and starting to dry before you can get back with your next stroke, creating an edge or a potential “bloom” of wetter paint being absorbed into the dryer area.

- 2- *Paint with your board at an angle. A wash is always painted from above down.* A smaller angle means your wash will flow more slowly; a larger angle, like with an easel, will cause the wash to flow more quickly. Be careful of drips in this case. If you paint with your board leaning on the edge of a table or the back of a chair, you can change the angle as needed to control the flow of your wash. Do not paint washes with your board flat—the wash will not flow. Sit or stand straight with your brush lying across your hand, palm generally toward you. Remember to breathe as you paint!
- 3- *You can rotate your board* to the best orientation for painting a particular wash. In general, try to have the broadest edge of the wash toward you. When you have determined the shape of the top of your wash with a stroke of either water or pigment, go to the highest point and start filling in with *horizontal brush strokes* (for control and smoothness of the wash and to avoid drips), *starting at the topmost part of the wash and working your way down, each stroke slightly overlapping the one above it.* Note that this does not mean washes have to have a horizontal top or bottom—they can be shaped in any way! *The wash should dry sufficiently in the same general orientation in which it was painted before turning the board again;* otherwise, pigment may run back into the wash or water line, creating an unintended hard edge or “bloom” of pigment. If you use a hair dryer to hasten the process, use it on ‘warm’ with back-and-forth movements, starting at the top of the wash and working your way down, then back to the top, repeating the process, so the wash dries evenly in the direction it was painted. Make sure the area has cooled down again before adding another wash in the same area.
- 4- In general, let your brush strokes flow from the heart toward the periphery—if you are right-handed, stroke from the left to the right; if you are left-handed, stroke from the right to the left. Some back-and-forth strokes are fine when needed.
- 5- Keep a *bead* of fluid visible along the bottom edge of your stroke as you work your way down. Each stroke overlaps somewhat into the one above it. This enables gravity to work with you in creating a flowing, non-streaky wash. Mixing the pigment every time you dip into it and moving quickly enough across the paper are also helpful in avoiding streaks. Another possibility is to wet the area of the wash with water first and then immediately add pigment over it. This may lighten your wash somewhat but will help avoid stripes. Some pigments (staining or granulating) are more inclined to make stripes than others.
- 6- Remember: *Prep or Water Line* – applied first only along the *top* boundary of a wash to ensure a *soft edge*, especially at the beginning of a painting. The first stroke of pigment overlaps halfway into this water line. Use a doublewide prep line for a more *diffuse edge*, overlapping a full brush width into it. Be sure you can see the bead on your water line. *Lead Line* (pigment) – leads into the body of the wash and overlaps to varying degrees with the Water Line; keep a bead on every stroke of your wash. *Post-Prep* (water line) – done at the completion of a wash *underneath* it to soften the bottom edge. *Ideally, we try to have the same amount of fluid in all our brush strokes, but the final water line can be done with a somewhat dryer or blotted brush, wiping it after one stroke and going back again. Be sure to soak up the bead from the bottom water line with a blotted brush, so the pigment doesn’t continue to travel down to the edge again.* We need to check back on it periodically to be sure this isn’t happening. If it is, we touch the edge again with our blotted brush that is *drier* than the wash to soften it. For very soft edges, a doublewide water line could be used at the lower edge of a wash, again being sure to blot up any bead at the bottom. The term *post-prep* is also used to refer to the use of a wrung out or “thirsty” brush to soften damp edges after painting a wash, e.g., around an opening left in a wash or for small washes. *Make sure the brush is dryer than the wash you’re going into.* If the wash is dryer, it will act like a sponge and suck up the water, creating a pigment line. Of course, for a *hard edge*, eliminate the initial and/or final water lines and paint only with pigment. (Some veil painting approaches use only hard-edged washes.) Even a hard edge can be delicately gone over by a damp brush gently touching along the direction of the edge to keep it from becoming “crusty.”

- 7- *Avoid the temptation to go back into a wet wash to “fix it.”* The one exception is going in with a *wrung-out brush* that is used like a sponge in a quick stroke to create a soft opening after the fact. It can also be used to soften an edge that starts to form too much as the wash starts to dry (but the brush must be *drier* than the wash!). This could happen if the pigment dispersed through a water line that was too wet and did not have the edges blotted.
- 8- *But it is possible to make some corrections in your painting—after it is dry!* First, thoroughly wet the area with water that you would like to soften or lighten. Generally, go beyond the edges of the area to be changed and create a wet path to the nearest edge of your paper. (This will determine the orientation and tilt of your board.) Let the water soak in for about 20 seconds to start to dissolve the binder in the paint and then gently ‘scrub’ with your wet brush in different directions. Some pigments lift more easily than others. A wet bristle brush or ‘scrubbie’ can also be used to remove more paint, but be careful you don’t damage the paper underneath. Then rinse with more water, letting it flow off the side of your board to remove the loosened pigment. The process can be repeated if desired, but only to the point of not damaging the paper. Let the paper dry in the same orientation as the water flowed off. This will take a while since you’ve gotten it really wet during this process. Keep in mind that most of what you might consider to be ‘mistakes,’ especially early in the painting, will most likely get covered with other veils of color anyway, and the ‘mistakes’ will magically disappear.
- 9- If your pigment starts to *drip* down your board, you can immediately flatten the angle of your board to stop it, or you can put water at the top of the drip, so it washes away the path of pigment. Blot gently with a rag. Keep in mind that continuing with a wash above a drip will cause the fluid to seek out that path again. Holding a rag there can keep it from progressing beyond your wash.
- 10- To keep a painting atmospheric, avoid hard edges in the early stages. Keep some spaces with soft edges later as well, so the soul can breathe. One veil or wash can have both hard and soft edges, e.g., sharper or more formed edges toward the light and softer edges toward the darkness. If there are too many hard edges, we may feel as if we can’t breathe; without some hard edges, we will not have a feeling of transparency.
- 11- *Veil painting can be seen as an “incarnation process,” where our painting gradually comes into being. Stage 1 is developing a “colored atmosphere,”* so we start with light washes with soft edges, not using dark colors initially. This is basically colored air, with no surfaces. *We build up color intensity gradually by adding a bit more pigment to subsequent washes;* otherwise, there will be nowhere to weave. Starting with light color also sensitizes our color perception.
- 12- *Stage 2 of a painting involves the “weaving of the color.”* This can be the building up of warm colors in the center of the picture with smaller washes, or it can be the overlapping of warm and cool colors on the sides of our pictures, in between areas or in shadows. We can use the complement of a color to tone it or create shadow. *Tones* are “toned down” colors created from a warm and cool color overlapping or a color mixed with its complement or gray. These toned colors are duller and may be darker, which makes other areas of our picture look lighter and/or brighter. *We give up some of the pure color in order to make beautiful tones that then create the glow in veil paintings!*
- 13- *In Stage 3 of a painting,* we incarnate our picture even more, arriving on the earth with the working of the light on forms and perhaps a sense of a horizon.
- 14- Initially, use washes that connect to one or more sides. This will help you *avoid fragments early on,* which can work as isolated shapes or hard forms with no connection to the periphery. Smaller washes and fragments are useful in bringing in form later in the process.
- 15- To keep color in movement, change the placement at least some for each successive wash, and consider other options for change, including tint, tone, shade, temperature, etc. *Generally, each wash should have a*

bit more pigment than the one underneath it of the same color. Of course, as the painting develops, lighter washes can be put over darker ones for fine-tuning, integrating or toning areas.

- 16- Develop a rhythm with your washes, working one color, then the next, and the next, around the painting. This way, the picture develops as a whole and “grows like a plant.” It also allows us to paint in a new dry area while another area may still be wet.
- 17- “Weave” the colors behind and in front of each other by imagining where a color might disappear behind another and then become visible again. (Generally, warm colors are more forward and cool colors go behind.) Creating this jump helps develop the space and connects all aspects as part of one world.
- 18- Use “*lost and found edges*” instead of continuous, defined edges. Let hard edges become most defined toward the light and diffuse as they move away from the light. All types of boundaries (hard, firm, soft, diffuse) can find their appropriate relation to the light and darkness in the picture.
- 19- An advanced technique is the introduction of “*light veils*” late in the process to help direct the eye through the painting, often to connect what is happening in front of the light with that which is behind it. They create a sense of movement and relationship. One paints alongside existing, lighter areas by intensifying the darker colors already next to these lighter places. (Acknowledgement to Bea van der Steen). By making an adjacent area darker, it automatically makes the original area look lighter.
- 20- Step back from your painting and look at it from a distance occasionally. Even try looking at it upside down or in a mirror to see if things flow easily or if the eye gets stuck somewhere.
- 21- Remember, we are using pigment, but we’re mostly painting light, so *leave some space between washes* for light-filled atmosphere and intervals to appear.
- 22- “As soon as you get into the habit of seeing it like this, you will develop your own way of doing it. You must have our own style. You use the same laws, but you must find your own style.” *L. Collot d’Herbois*

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