

Judy Lyon  
"Background Washes"  
June 26, 2018

**MATERIALS:**

When doing a studio painting, such as a flower with a dark background, I always use Arches 300 lb. Cold Press paper. It is the toughest paper and it doesn't ripple when wet. It has a tough surface sizing that allows the removal of paint without damaging the paper. Also, for this reason, I use non-staining paints until I get to the stage where I paint the background; then I use staining paints, i.e., thalos, quinacridones always, as well as others.

**PALETTES:**

San Francisco Slant Palettes: inexpensive, solid, and almost indestructible. They stack well, making them compact when not in use. They have a lot of nice mixing wells. I also have a John Pike Comprehensive palette containing 20 color slots for all of my favorite paints; this one stays next to my studio paint table always. I have a granulating palette, a Primatek palette, a plein air palette (no green), a Quiller porcelain palette – it's circular and arranged so complimentary colors are directly across the circle from each other (color wheel), a triad palette for travel (red, yellow, blue only).

**MASQUEPEN SET:**

Purchased from Daniel Smith several years ago. It works well for fine lines. It has tinted aqua color masking in it. You can tint your Amaco liquid latex when you thin it, so you can see where you have applied it.

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**SEALING:**

I usually paint the object up to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the values of the finished painting before sealing it. After the background is painted later and the masking is removed, I continue painting on the object, putting in the darkest darks, and putting wash tints over lighter areas. The surface receives the paint differently after it has been sealed, so large washes on it can be difficult. But it is quite easy to enhance the painting at this time. The paint you put on top of a sealed area comes back off easily, making it easy to play around with the color.

**Sealing the painted area:**

Use acrylic clear medium, matte finish, diluted with water until it is like skim milk. Very carefully coat the object you plan to mask with this, using nylon brushes that clean well with soap and water. One coat is adequate. Don't flood the object with it, but use enough that you don't need to brush back and forth over the object. That would dislodge some of the paint underneath. Let it dry thoroughly before putting the masking on.

When sealing, I carefully paint the darkest areas first, then let them dry. Therefore the dark paint doesn't bleed into the lighter areas when moistened by the acrylic medium. Don't paint the medium over the dark areas again, though, because it might cause them to get a foggy film over them.

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#### MASKING:

I use AMACO brand liquid rubber latex, available from Jerry's Artarama and ASW. The small bottles of masking (Friskit, Miskit, etc.) from art suppliers are expensive and usually become too thick to use before the bottle is empty. The AMACO liquid latex dries clear. You can tint it with non-staining watercolor when you thin it, if you want to. It is intended for making molds, so it is thick and pasty. For use on my watercolors, I dilute it about ½ and ½ with water until it is like whipping cream (not whipped cream). Be careful when mixing it with the water, because if you shake it the mixture will quickly coagulate and become lumpy and thick (unusable). This can also happen if you stir it too vigorously, so stir it gently. Do this in a small jar and don't mix more than you plan to use on the painting. Open the jars as seldom as possible, because the air will also cause it to thicken. But a pint bottle of AMACO latex costs only \$25, and I've been using this one for years.

Do not use good brushes for the masking; it will ruin them. The white nylon watercolor brushes work well and clean well. Soap them really well first, working the soap deep into the bristles, then wipe off excess soap. In a large masked area, you may want to rinse the brush in water and re-soap it periodically, because the latex starts building a clump on the bristles. When finished, any latex that you cannot wash out of the brush with soap and water can be loosened with lighter fluid.

If you accidentally drop some liquid masking on your painting, don't try to wipe it off; it will cause a disappointing mess when you later paint that area. Instead just let it completely dry, then peel it off. That spot can be painted later to match the paint surrounding it, or you can paint another object there if it is a large annoying spot.

I always paint 2 coats of masking, the second coat even thinner than the first. This is filler, because there are inevitably tiny bubbles in your first coat that pop as it dries, leaving tiny holes that allow your dark background paint to seep through to your painted area below. Since I often use indigo (very staining) in my final background wash, it would leave indelible dark spots on my painting, even though sealed prior to masking.

After painting the background and removing the masking with a rubber cement eraser, you will probably discover that you have some white lines along some edges of the painted object where you went slightly over the edge with masking. Fill these in with a #00 pointed brush and background paint left over.

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BACKGROUND WASHES: (After sealing and masking is complete.)

#### TAPE:

Before starting the background washes, tape the painting to a sheet of cardboard for easy handling. Use "painter's grade" ecru masking tape (ACE Hardware). The blue or green colored tape distorts my color sense. Make sure it is pressed down well on the paper before each wash, so no paint seeps under the tape and leaks out as the wash dries, creating an unmanageable blossom.

Study the painting and decide where you want your 'glow spots' – not too many of them. And decide what color you want the glow spots to be. Then decide where you want the darkest parts of the background to be.

## PAINTS:

I always use staining paints for the background, because I paint the background with several layers of diluted colors – it's the safest way to keep the colors clean. Then my final (top) wash will not be so diluted; it uses indigo and 2 or 3 other staining colors applied thicker than the preceding washes. Since they are all staining colors, the earlier washes pretty well stay put when I paint over them. I wet the whole painting before each wash, so this is necessary.

**FIRST WASH:** Wet the whole painting. Let excess water run off. Blot excess water that has pooled along edges of the masked areas and around edges of the painting (these puddles would dilute your wash). Paint a tinted wash in the area of your glow spot(s), using your glow-spot color, leaving part of it nearly white. Let the entire painting dry. Using a hair dryer is okay now that your masking is dry. Do not use a hair dryer to hasten the drying of the masking. That would probably cause the masking to stick to the paper.

**SECOND WASH:** Wet the whole painting, blotting off excess water. Paint a tint of your 2nd color, being careful to not cover the glow spot(s) – so painting some clear water over this first will help keep the 2nd color away from the glow spot. Let dry thoroughly.

**THIRD WASH:** Analyze what has happened so far, then decide what and where you want the 3rd color to be. Continue to protect your glow spots when you paint.

**FOURTH WASH:** I am usually ready for the darker colors now: Burgundy, Dark Green, Gold, Purple, then Indigo. Indigo takes over! Be sure to keep a separate hake brush for each color, so you can keep adjusting colors and values. All of these have to be done quickly at this point, because trying to make adjustments as the paint is starting to dry will cause problems.

If you are not happy with the way it turned out, let the entire painting dry thoroughly. Then take a large hake brush with water and brush it back and forth, without scrubbing, over and over, letting it all run off. You can then blot what's left with a folded bath towel to remove a little more paint. Let dry thoroughly – analyze – repeat the above process, using what you have learned the first time. You will probably get something nice that you hadn't expected.

Pull off masking tape carefully, pulling away from the painting.

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## ADDED TIPS:

I use hake brushes of different sizes to paint the background – one for each color I plan to use.

Have each of your background colors pre-mixed in separate bowls beside the painting.

Have your brushes ready: dipped in water, then pressed damp.

Have a stack of old towels handy to press water out of your brushes.

Keep some dry hake brushes nearby for blending colors in a hurry.

Keep a spray bottle of water handy to disperse intense colors.

I go through a lot of Kleenex while painting.

Sponge for big mop-ups.

Hake brushes sometimes shed. Wait until painting dries to remove the hairs. Trying to pick them out of wet paint will leave marks.

Once you have covered a pencil mark with water, it's permanent. But, you can usually wash off a fresh pencil mark with water.

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