

Atmospheric Perspective Watercolor Painting

An art project that will introduce students to the idea of using color saturation to create the illusion of distance in a painting. . .



Related Subjects: Visual and Performing Arts

Grades: Middle School or High School

Medium: Watercolor Painting

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Time Required: Two 30 minute or one 60 minute lesson

Summary

In this one or two part lesson, students will observe landscape paintings that demonstrate the use of atmospheric perspective, including those of Asher B. Durand from the current Museum exhibition *Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape and Plein Air Past and Present* both on view at The San Diego Museum of Art through Sunday, April 27th, 2008. Students will be shown how color saturation and careful placement of details can be used in a painting to create the illusion of depth and distance, and then create their own landscape paintings using these techniques.

Objectives

Students will be able to. . .

- Discuss and view landscape art where artists have incorporated the use of atmospheric perspective to create depth (e.g. Asher B. Durand)
- Recognize atmospheric perspective in a work of art
- Learn how composition and color saturation can be used to create depth in a painting and demonstrate this understanding in their own work of art
- Create landscape paintings using watercolor painting techniques
- Evaluate their own works and the works of others with guided questions from their instructor

Pre-Lesson Information

Tips for Working with Watercolor Paints

- ◆ **Use scratch paper for practice** – Before embarking on a big project with a new medium, it is a good idea to allow students to first practice using the material on scratch paper.
- ◆ **Use watercolor paper** – Watercolor paper is specially designed to absorb watercolor paints evenly and allow them to adhere to the paper's surface; use it if it is available. Even low grade paper will allow your students more control than papers not made for this type of paint.
- ◆ **Hold the brush straight up when painting** (perpendicular to the painting surface) – This allows the paint to flow evenly from the brush.
- ◆ **Paint lightest colors first, then dark** – Dark colors are much harder to remove after they have been laid down, whereas light colors may always be darkened.
- ◆ **Demonstrate how to keep one's brush clean** – keeping a brush clean is an important part of watercolor painting. Take the time to change water the frequently.
- ◆ **Add water to add lightness** – unlike other paint mediums, such as acrylics, watercolors are not lightened or darkened by adding white or black paint. Instead, watercolor artists add water to make a color lighter (less saturated) or use less water to make a color appear darker (more saturated).
- ◆ **Keep a tissue handy for editing** – although there is no way to completely remove paint once it has been laid down, gently blotting the area with a tissue will remove most of the pigment so that it can be repainted. Take care that this new layer does not over-soak the paper.
- ◆ **Keep a paper towel handy for blotting** – as they are working, students will want to remove water from their brushes at times.
- ◆ **Enjoy happy accidents** – another approach to working with watercolor is to accept its unpredictability and allow unintentional marks enhance a work rather than take away from it.

Art Terms

Atmospheric Perspective –forms meant to be perceived as distant furthest away from the viewer are blurred, indistinct, and often more blue in color

Color Saturation – A color's purity of hue; its intensity. A pure hue has the highest saturation. Watercolors can have low, medium, or high saturations depending on the amount of water used with them.

Landscape – a work of art in which the features of the land are the predominant subject

Background/Middle Ground/Foreground – the part of the painting that appears to be farthest away from the viewer/ lies between the middle ground and the foreground/ that appears to be closest to the viewer

Wash – a thin or watery coating of paint

Materials Needed

Watercolor paper (9x12" size)

Watercolor paints (three colors at least –earth tones)

Watercolor brushes (small, medium, including large, flat brush – for washes)

Artist's tape (or thin masking tape)

Pencils (one for every student)

Paper Towels and Tissue (one for every student)

Water containers (can be shared between two students – *see diagram on page nine*)

Preparation

1. Create an example of the project before the lesson. Even if you choose not to share the work with students, a lot can be learned if you create an example.
2. If teaching this lesson to more than one group of students, think about displaying unique student examples from the first group for students from later groups.
3. Give students examples and inspiration by displaying photographs of the outdoors, nature-related storybooks, and/or landscape art examples.
4. Cover all tables/desks with newspaper – this will ease the clean up process.
5. Gather all materials from the materials list.
6. Distribute materials onto the tables or desks (*see diagram on page 9*)

Procedure

Motivation

Begin the lesson by introducing students to the idea of landscape. This can be done by: Reading through nature-related literature (e.g. Thoreau or Emerson), looking at visuals of the land or landscape art, and/or exploring the outdoors through a group nature walk. If possible, plan a trip to The San Diego Museum of Art to view the new exhibitions of landscape art, including, *Kindred Spirits: Asher B. Durand and the American Landscape* and *Plein Air Past and Present*. If using the exhibitions, the following paintings on display provide good examples of landscape art that includes the use of atmospheric perspective:



Asher B. Durand, Landscape – Composition: In the Catskills, oil on canvas, 1848. Museum purchase with funds provided by the Gerald and Inez Grant Parker Foundation, 1974: 72.



Maurice Braun, Southern California Hills, oil on canvas, circa 1915. On loan from the Smith Collection.

Landscape images can also be found at www.TheSanDiegoMuseumofArt.org.

When looking at these works of art or others, consider asking students the following questions:

- ◆ What makes this work of art a landscape?
- ◆ How does the artist use color to make objects appear farther away?
- ◆ Where are the most details found? Middle ground? Foreground? Background?
- ◆ What might the artist's choice of subject matter and the scale of the figures tell us about his feelings on nature?

Art Making Step-by-Step

Note: It's essential to first demonstrate to students the steps that they will be taking to create their works of art. If you have the time, create a step-by-step display. Most importantly, be sure to explain each step as you model it for the class.

Step 1:

Prepare the paper by laying artist's tape or masking tape on all four edges of the paper. On the 9x12" watercolor paper, use pencil to lightly draw two slightly curved lines. This should create a simple foreground, middle ground, and background.

Step 2

Have students pick three paint colors – one for the background, one for the middle ground, and one for the foreground.

Step 3

Have students start by painting the background. First, students should dip the tip of their large brush into the background color paint and mix it with a lot of water (low saturation). This can be seen as the sky and mountains in the example on page one.

Step 4

For the middle ground, have students mix their chosen paint color with some water. A mixture of half paint and half water should be used (medium saturation). This can be seen in the rolling, green hills in the example.

Step 5

Very little water should be mixed with the foreground paint color (high saturation). This can be seen in the brown hill in the example.

Step 6

Explain to students that by changing the saturation level of the paint an appearance of depth is created (atmospheric perspective), making it appear as if the background is at a distance from the foreground. The foreground should look darker and the background colors should dissolve as the landscape recedes. This simple technique can be applied to any landscape painting to provide depth.

Step 7

As a final step, encourage students to add details to their works. Students should use colors with the same saturation level as the ground they are on. For example, if you want to put a dark brown tree in the foreground area, then almost no water should be added to the dark brown paint (*see example*). In contrast, if you want to add a mountain range in the background, then it should be done with just a touch of color and mostly water to give it the appearance of fading away (*see example*). Another use of perspective in a painting comes from limiting details in the background. Like color saturation, details should decrease as the painting recedes. Remove tape at end to reveal a clean, white border.

Observe Artists in Action

As students are working, walk around and observe the art that they are making. Ask students to describe their choices to you. In doing this, you will help your students to evaluate their work and their aesthetic decisions while making their art. This exercise directly connects with the component: *Aesthetic Valuing*, as described in the **California Visual and Performing Arts Frameworks**. Begin by asking questions such as:

- ◆ What makes your work of art a landscape?
- ◆ How are you using water to control the saturation of your colors?
- ◆ What element are you most proud of in your work?

Model respectful responses to art work by complimenting your students' art work and their artistic choices. This will encourage students to share their work with each other, as well as provide them with ideas for how to comment on the work of others. For example:

- ◆ I love this area in your work!
- ◆ What wonderful choices of color!
- ◆ What a great idea! I never thought of using the brush in that way.

These phrases will help create a dialogue about art between you and your students.

Discussion

(Many of these ideas on discussing work with children are taken directly from the text, [Children and Painting](#) by Cathy Weisman Topal – see *bibliography on page nine of this lesson plan*)

Looking at one's work and the work of classmates is an important part of the experience of art making, and the artistic process is nurtured by respectful and encouraging conversation between participants. If time permits, display the finished works and talk about them. Also consider taking a break mid way through the project in order to show a few student examples to the group. Choose works that display the lesson objectives. This will help remind the other students of the project goals while they are working.

Discussion Guidelines

- I. **Limit the time.** No more than ten minutes for young children – twenty to thirty minutes for older children. Because it may be difficult to talk about everyone's work in such a short period of time, choose only a few works to discuss this time. However, try to remember to include everyone's art in an evaluation at one time or another.

- I. **Model talking about art for your students.** For example, you might say:
 - I was impressed with the color choices in this work. Does anyone else see a work with an exciting use of colors?
 - The details in the foreground of this work are fascinating. Did anyone else include interesting details in the foreground of their work?

- I. **Ask questions that call for specific responses.** For example, you might say:
 - What objects do we see in Angela's work that we also saw in one of the examples we looked at by Asher B. Durand?
 - Where might we find a landscape like the one found in Javier's work?

- II. **Focus on one or two new skills or concepts.** For example, you might say:
 - Who can point out a work of art where the artist used more than three saturations?
 - Who can find a work of art where the artist used fewer details in the background to help create depth?

- III. **Stress the positive** – focus on student successes. To help ensure your student's success with this and future projects, while students are still working on their landscapes, walk around the room and redirect any students who may be traveling too far outside the goals of the assignment. Redirect in a gentle way, or individually, so that the student is not embarrassed in front of their peers.

- IV. **Encourage students to help create discussion leads.** Using the lesson objectives as a guideline, encourage students in pairs or groups to develop one to two questions each to ask during the discussion period. Be sure to monitor the formation of these questions to ensure their objectivity.

Possible Adaptations

This lesson can be easily adapted to suit the needs of most learners with disabilities. For students with visual impairments, cut textured items may be used in place of paint to demonstrate the idea of atmospheric perspective (for example, a highly textured material for the foreground, a slightly textured material for the middle ground, and a material with little to no texture for the background). For students with limited motor skills, try using larger paper and brushes. Also consider group or pair work, where students share the responsibility of selecting colors and applying them to the paper.

California Visual Arts Standards Addressed in this Lesson

Grade Six

- 1.2 Discuss works of art as to theme, genre, style, idea, and differences in media
- 2.3 Create a work of art using varying tints, shades, and intensities
- 2.5 Select specific media and processes to express moods, feelings, themes, and ideas
- 4.3 Develop specific criteria as individuals or in groups to assess and critique works of art

Grade Seven

- 1.1 Describe the environment and selected works of art, using the elements of art and the principles of design
- 1.3 Identify and describe the ways in which artists convey the illusion of space (e.g. placement, overlapping, relative size, atmospheric perspective, and linear perspective)
- 2.2 Use different forms of perspective to show the illusion of depth on a two-dimensional surface
- 4.3 Take an active part in a small-group discussion about the artistic value of specific works of art, with a wide range of the viewpoints of peers being considered.

Grade Eight

- 1.1 Use artistic terms when describing the intent and content of works of art
- 1.2 Analyze and justify how their artistic choices contribute to the expressive quality of their own works of art
- 2.1 Demonstrate an increased knowledge of technical skills in using more complex two-dimensional art media and processes
- 4.4 Develop and apply a set of criteria as individuals or in groups to assess and critique works of art