⚹ In the Flow ⚹

Capturing the mysterious qualities of water may seem like a daunting task, but if you start from the ground, it's simple to work up to the sparkling surface.

Founder of the American Society of Painters in Pastel, William Merritt Chase (1849-1916) preferred the easily portable medium for painting *en plein air*. Famous for completing masterly paintings on the spot, Chase brought his students at the Shinnecock Summer School of Art to the shore so he could demonstrate how to render the lustrous effects of light on water, as in *The Beach* (pastel mounted on canvas, 28x56).

Collection of The Newark Museum. Photo credit: The Newark Museum / Art Resource, NY

The powerful palette of pastel is well suited to the challenge of painting water in all its forms: flowing in a river, standing in a still lake or washing rhythmically against the shoreline as the ocean does. It's important to remember that most of the color you see in deep water is actually reflection on the water's surface, and that more shallow water will be

influenced by what lies beneath. We needn't be experts in physics or optics, but we do need to learn to be critically observant when we paint water scenes.

When I see water that's unconvincing in my own and other artists' work, the reason for the problem is often a failure to heed some basic concepts. The value of a color, for instance, is of vital importance. The sky is usually brighter in value than the water's surface. Reflections are more dull in color and darker in value than the object casting the reflection. The local color of the water itself will be influenced by the movement and depth of the water, the earth beneath the water, and the colors on the shoreline and in the sky.

Painting water requires a bit of magic, too. Our human eyes are sophisticated and will immediately detect flaws in our water scenes. If we're careful not to provide exacting details to the viewers, however, their eyes and brains will fill in the blanks as to what they know should be there.

PAINTING STILL WATER

Step 1
I block in my composition in a loose manner with charcoal, making sure to locate the horizon line and carefully measuring the angles of the shoreline.
This is the labor-intensive part of the painting process. I can make drawing adjustments later, but I want to have a confident commitment to the design at this early stage. The shape of the body of water is an important design feature, and the opposing angles of the shoreline create a nice balance. It's also necessary to observe perspective; distant objects must be in the correct proportion.

Step 2
Next I lay in a loose underpainting in ivory white and black acrylic that establishes a clear value pattern and will later help harmonize color as well. I use old brushes and avoid fussy details.

Step 3
In a still water scene the sky is nearly as important as the water. Here in Tennessee there's always a pinkish color on the horizon due to the high humidity and haze we have during the warmer months. This phenomenon is reflected in reverse in the water. I lay in color - keeping the sky lighter in value than the water. Having a good selection of blue pastels of similar value is helpful. A series of gradations of

lavender pastels will help me, too, when I paint the water. The same line of thinking applies to using green pastels; I choose several values of olive. I also add a lovely Mars violet pastel that I recently discovered. Its deep, brick red hue works to add some warm color and balance to the predominantly cool scene.

Step 4
As I continue to add color and refine the lights and darks, I avoid the bright lime greens, cadmium oranges and magenta purples I often use in favor of a limited, subdued palette. The calmer palette works well for this peaceful subject and forces me to use different color strategies.

Step 5
There's a gap along the shoreline that bothers me, so I make a compositional adjustment and add another tree to the left foreground. I continue to refine the painting. With so much smoothness in the water's surface, I want a contrast of different directional strokes. I add dull, navy blue to the foreground because reflected color usually becomes darker the closer it is to the viewer. I also use a shade of blue that's closer to phthalo blue together with a duller navy. They're very close in value but the different hues create a nice vibration.

To finish *Still Water in Mendota* (pastel on sanded Foamie board, 24x30), I add warm colors to the foreground trees and check the reflections. For reflections to look realistic they need to line up with the object they reflect, but should be loose and more neutral in color. Using a small watercolor brush and Walnut drawing ink, I add details along the bank - knowing I need a few tight details to bring out the broad loose areas. I use a piece of the soft Foamie board to do subtle blending in the water, making greater differentiations between the sky and water areas. Then I step back and check the relationship between the sky and water and decide to stop while the painting looks fresh and alive.