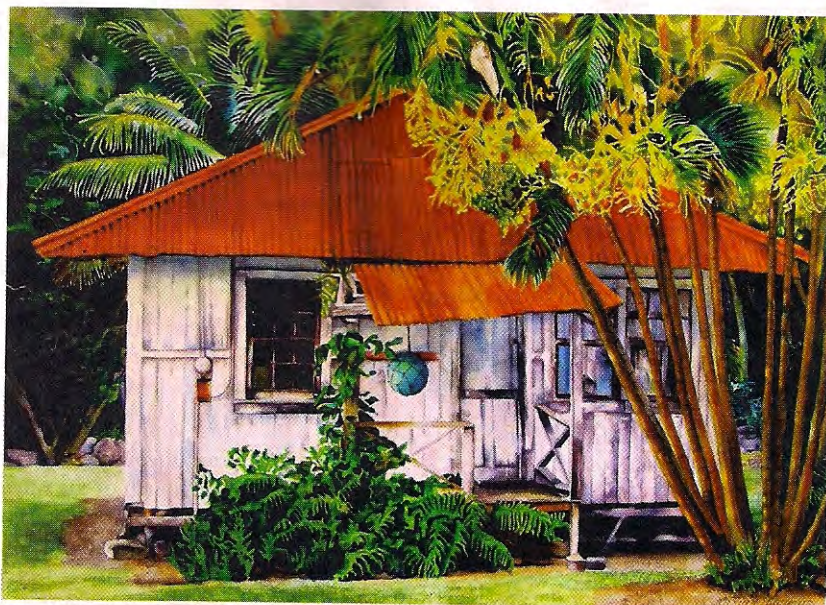


## The Four Basic Watercolor Washes

by Carmen Gardner

**P**ainting a successful watercolor doesn't have to be difficult or frustrating. Once you have mastered the most integral part of the process, you will have a fresh and luminous painting every time. The "wash" is the basis for each of your paintings. It is color laid into an area usually too big to accomplish with only one stroke. Skies, backgrounds, and any space requiring an application of smooth or integrated color, can be achieved by a successful wash.



"Kipaulu Hale", watercolor by Carmen Gardner.

Along with these four basic washes, there is the glaze. A glaze is really a flat wash done with very diluted pigment. Thin, transparent layers are applied over an existing DRY wash. Knowing the properties of your pigments will help ensure a clean, translucent effect. Daniel Smith provides properties charts in every catalog, however it is a very good thing to make your own and discover how each pigment will appear on a piece of watercolor paper.

**There are four basic washes, with variations on each one. In this article, we will focus on the four basics:**

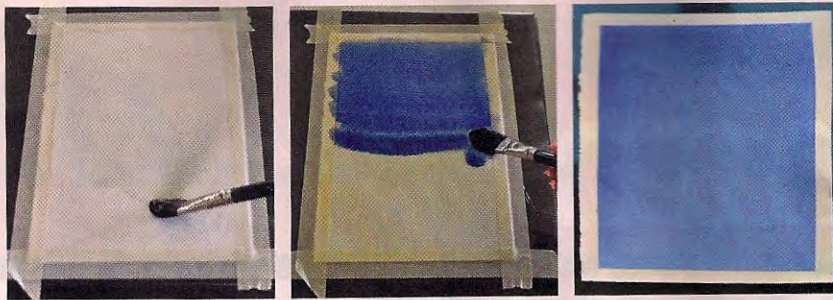
- 1 FLAT WASH** This wash is useful for skies, and any area requiring smooth color with visible brush strokes.
- 2 GRADUATED OR GRADIENT WASH** Also great for skies, soft transitions of light to dark or vice versa, used often in Asian watercolor and prints.
- 3 VARIEGATED WASH** This wash is used when you need a transition of one color to another. It can be very useful, for example, when painting a sunset where the color in the sky transitions from blue to orange.
- 4 WET-INTO-WET WASH** Probably every artist's most favored wash. I always enjoy "playing" with color (especially any new Daniel Smith hue) to see how it reacts with another or several other colors. When working wet-into-wet, we apply color mostly by "dropping it into" a wet surface and allowing adjacent colors to mingle on their own while exhibiting their own individual properties.

**Let's take a closer look at the four basic washes and try them together, step by step:**

### **1 FLAT WASH**

First, I tape an eighth of a sheet of Arches 300 lb. paper to my backing board which I place on a slant using a two or three inch binder under it for support. Next I mix up a puddle of pigment much larger than I think I will need. Using a 1" DANIEL SMITH Platinum Series 24 squirrel/synthetic cat's tongue (filbert wash) brush I wet my paper. I do not wet it to the point of it being sopping wet or I will cause my wash to dry unevenly and may create runs and backwashes. Ensuring the entire surface is equally wet, I begin. I load my brush with pigment and pull it evenly across the top of my paper. Begin on whichever side is most comfortable for you, but remember to start at the same edge each pass. When I reach the opposite edge and have completed my first stroke, I repeat this step by reloading my brush and continuing with the next stroke just below the one above it. Gravity will help pull the color down, and if your paper is not too wet, your wash will begin to even out as you come to the bottom of your paper.

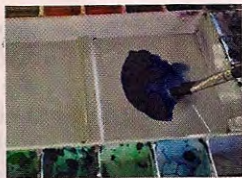
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## 1 FLAT WASH *continued*

Pick up any excess pigment and/or water at the edges of your wash with a slightly damp pointed round brush or paper towel, being careful not to disturb your wash. When the shine has left

your paper, you may set it flat to dry, being careful not to leave any excess moisture on your edges or on your tape.



Some artists like to do their flat washes on dry paper, and you may wish to try this technique. It is the exact same procedure as described above, except you do not wet your

paper first, and you must mix a puddle that is a little thinner (more water, less pigment than above) to ensure a consistency and smoothness to your wash. With each subsequent stroke, you will also want to catch the bead of water and pigment that will form at the bottom edge of each prior stroke.

With either wet or dry paper, don't forget to reload your brush before each stroke or pass across your paper.

Once the paper is completely dry you should have a solid, clean, stroke-free wash. Be careful not to use too much pigment. It is easier to do a second wash if greater intensity or darker value is desired, than to try to get it too dark/deep with the first wash, which can result in streaky, uneven washes.

## DANIEL SMITH WATERCOLORS

- Hansa Yellow Light  
284 600 041
- Permanent Orange  
284 600 071
- Quinacridone Gold  
284 600 089
- Quinacridone Burnt Orange  
284 600 086
- Carmine  
284 600 020
- Sap Green  
284 600 102
- Indanthrone Blue  
284 600 043
- Phthalo Blue GS  
284 600 077

## BRUSHES

1" DANIEL SMITH Platinum Series 24 squirrel/synthetic cat tongue #12 Kolinsky Round

## PAPER

Arches 300 lb. paper torn into eighths

## 2 GRADUATED OR GRADIENT WASH

Providing an ideal background for most landscapes, the gradient wash may be created from top to bottom, then turned "upside down" for use as the artist wishes. A graduated wash typically progresses from dark (or deeper, more intense color) to light (more water, less pigment). Most artists prefer to achieve this wash by beginning with dry paper. I find I can accomplish it just as easily with damp paper. For this lesson, we will begin with dry paper (again Arches 300 lb.) taped to our backing board and set at a slant as we did with our flat wash (above). Mix a large puddle of pigment. The puddle should not be too thick, and remember to MIX your pigment with the water to eliminate particles and dark specks in your wash.

Begin with a loaded brush as you did with your flat wash, ensuring the brush is loaded enough to leave a bead of color/liquid at the edge of the completed stroke. Reload your brush after every pass, and, touching the bead, begin the next stroke ensuring

that your stroke goes the entire way across the surface of your paper. Continue in this manner about one fourth of the way down your paper, then begin adding water to your wash with every other stroke. You want to dilute your puddle of pigment so that it is progressively less pigment and more water. When you reach the area you want to be mostly (or all) water, simply use clear water and no pigment. The pigment will want to flow downward, so be aware of the amounts of liquid you are applying, and once again, be sure to clean off any excess from your edges.

This wash may take a couple of attempts to perfect, but once you do, you will be able to use it in many different ways. For example, you can try turning your paper and doing the wash horizontally, then turn it vertically to create the look of light coming from one side of the painting.

Don't be afraid to try this wash on damp paper. You will require slightly less water, and it's a good idea to control the flow with your free hand.



## about the artist

Since she arrived on Maui in 1981, Carmen Gardner's artistic journey has led her through ten years as a popular radio personality where she explored her love of music ... and the next ten as an actor/director, including a summer at England's Royal National Theatre where she studied with Sir Ian McKellan and other "British Masters." And now, she has come full circle ... back to her first love, painting.

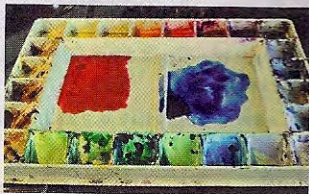


### 3 VARIEGATED WASH

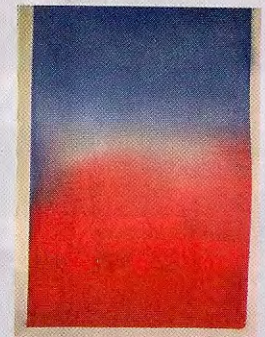
First mix TWO puddles with different hue/pigment in each. I prefer using two transparent colors such as DANIEL SMITH's Quinacridones. Try Quinacridone Rose and Quinacridone Gold for a luminous variegation. This wash is best applied on damp (not overly wet) paper. As with our other washes, begin by taping down a piece of 300 lb.

watercolor paper, and setting it on a slant. Dampen the paper with clean, cool water. I usually prefer to begin a variegated wash with my

lightest color. Start at the top, just as if you were going to do a flat wash. Remember to apply each stroke from the same direction, and to reload your brush with pigment for each pass. You will want to



move quickly. If the pigment is moving too rapidly down your paper, control the flow with your free hand by slightly lifting the "downhill" edge of your board. As you approach the center of your wash, turn your board/paper "upside down," so that you can apply your color from the opposite direction you began with your first hue. Repeat the steps above, ending with your second color about an inch or so above the first. Again, be sure to wipe away any excess color/water from the edges of your wash. Set it flat to dry, ensuring you do not have a puddle in the center of your wash. If you do, take a thirsty round brush (not loaded with pigment or water) and using the point, carefully allow it to extract the excess. Notice how beautifully the two pigments join in the center of your paper? This wash can create a gorgeous sunset when Quinacridone Red and either Phthalo Blue or Indanthrone are used together in a variegated wash. Begin with the blue at the top. See the glowing neutral where the two hues join?



### 4 WET-INTO-WET WASH

This is my "playtime" wash. Whenever I am painting a highly detailed piece, I often feel the need to take a break and "splash around." I feel like a little kid again, playing in the water!

Wet-into-wet washes can take you places you didn't know existed! Let's try my favorite way of delving into the wet-into-wet wash.

First tape down a quarter (or eighth) sheet of Arches 300 lb. paper. Next, using a ruler and a #2 pencil, create a series of either rectangular and/or square shapes, leaving at least a half-inch space between each shape. Now, mix your puddles using two different pigments of your choice.

Working from the top of your paper to the bottom, and on a flat surface, wet one of your shapes. Again, be careful not to use too much water. We do want it fairly damp, but not sopping wet so that there is a big puddle of water in the shape. (If you do put in too much water, use your thirsty brush to extract the excess.) Load your brush with one of the



pigments. Using the tip only, touch your brush to one side of the shape you have dampened. If you have used enough water, the paper should pull the pigment off your brush. This is called "dropping in." Once you are satisfied with the amount of this hue in your shape, clean your brush and load it by dipping into the next pigment puddle. Repeat step one above, ensuring that you drop the color NEXT to the first one, or on an opposite side of your shape. Do not drop it on top of the previous color. Now, sit back and watch the magic happen. Depending on which pigments you have chosen, you will see them seek each other out, as it were, and mingle. You can encourage the process by lifting and tilting your paper/backing board. When the shine has disappeared from the paper, you can proceed to your next shape. Try it with two different pigments.

As you work your way down your paper, you may even wish to try different combinations of pigments. For example:

1. Try three different pigments.
2. Try using two complementary colors (opposite one another on the color wheel).
3. Try three analogous colors and one complementary color (a color opposite one of your analogous colors on the color wheel).

The possibilities are endless. As stated at the beginning of this article, the variations on these washes are only limited by your imagination. Once you have mastered these four basic washes, you can paint anything in watercolor! I remind my students that the most important thing is that you enjoy the process ... remember, no matter where you are in your watercolor journey, take time to "splash around!"

One of my students recently put it quite succinctly, sharing with me that she made a sign and put it in her work area: "Process, not Perfection."

Happy creating!