



# DISCOVER YOUR INNER ARTIST

A Step by Step Guide to Expressive Watercolour



kerriewoodhouse.com



# Discover Your Inner Artist: A Step by Step Guide to Expressive Watercolour

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## Why Watercolour?

Watercolour sometimes gets a bad wrap for being tricky to master. Some say it is wilful and unpredictable. For me that is its delight, and what makes it the most expressive painting medium I have come across.

The way I see it, watercolour will do a lot of the painting for you - if you let it!

That's what I want to share with you.

Because this loose, forgiving approach to painting is what makes watercolour a rewarding and relaxing endeavour.

First things first....

## Step 1: What supplies do you need to get started?

Another advantage of watercolour is that you need very little in the way of supplies.

It really doesn't matter if you have different brands or colours. They will only make your painting more YOU, and that is a very good thing.

I'll put (affiliate) links to my favourite supplies so that you can see exactly which supplies I mean, but **please don't ever feel that you need to have exactly the same supplies that you see a watercolour instructor using.**

Here are my favourite minimum supplies:

- [Watercolour paper](#) (preferably 300gsm (140lb) cold pressed)
- [Large soft round watercolour brush](#)
- [Watercolour paints](#)

Of these, **paper** is the most important.

Using paper that is not recommended for watercolour is sure to make your watercolour experience most unsatisfactory! The magic in watercolour paint happens when it interacts with water.

If you don't have paper that is designed to handle the water.... No magic!

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There is a glorious smorgasbord of watercolour supplies available in the stores and online. Supplies shopping is fun but it can be overwhelming!

If you feel a bit intimidated by all those 'professional' supplies I have a free class that might be just what you are looking for. The class walks you through each of the main categories of supplies that you might need, discussing the options and some of the terms and jargon that you might come across.

Once you've taken this class you will:

- know just what you are looking for in the art store,
- feel confident about asking questions and
- know what NOT to waste your money on!

You can find the free class on my website or at this link

<https://courses.kerriewoodhouse.com/free-guide/>





## Step 2: Choose your subject

Choosing a subject can be the sort of decision that we end up procrastinating over and it can stop us from getting started. Painting is fun, so let's have some strategies that get us painting.

I think watercolour is made for expressive painting so my favourite subjects usually come from nature. I choose these because organic forms are more forgiving to paint.

Man made objects and figures are also fun to paint but I find we tend to be much harder on ourselves if our vase isn't perfectly symmetrical or we give our painted figure an extra limb.

A tree on the other hand is usually quite recognisable even if we don't get it all perfectly accurate.

I have a blog post that gives you lots of ideas of easy things to paint in watercolour, which you can find at this link:

<https://www.kerriewoodhouse.com/blog/easy-watercolor-ideas-for-beginners>

For now, let's choose a simple tree in a grassy field as our first subject.



## Step 3: Sketching

Ah, sketching... this is another thing that can stop us from actually painting, even when we really want to. If you have a lack of confidence about your drawing ability or the idea that you need to be able to draw before you can start painting, you are not alone.

**I think there is far too much joy to be had from splashing the paint about to let your perceived drawing ability stop you.**

Drawing is a very rewarding part of the process but if it feels daunting right now please just use my line drawing below and give yourself the gift of jumping into the painting process.

If you would like to find out more about how to transfer your drawing I have a blog post you might enjoy here:

<https://www.kerriewoodhouse.com/blog/ways-to-transfer-drawing-for-watercolor-painting>

By the way, I do have a **free workshop called *Think You Can't Draw?*** which you might find useful if you are not yet confident about drawing but wish you were.



Find out more about that free workshop on my website or at this direct link:

<https://courses.kerriewoodhouse.com/free-drawing-workshop/>

For now, either sketch out a simple tree on your watercolour paper, or trace mine. To make a loose expressive drawing you don't need a perfect sketch. All you need is a few guidelines to help you with basic placement and proportions of the subject.

My line drawing is available to you on the next page.

## Line Drawing: Expressive Tree





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### Step 4: Let's paint!

I'm going to give you the step by step instructions to paint this loose expressive tree, but I do want to urge you to set the goal of creating **your** version, rather than a perfect copy of mine. That would be far too much pressure to put on yourself and rather spoil the fun of being expressive and free.

Also, remember that watercolour is going to do its part - that is outside of your control... to which I say, hoorah!

Your job is just to relax and enjoy splashing in the colours and be open to receiving whatever tree appears on your page.

Watercolour behaves differently brand to brand, and colour to colour because of the different pigments chosen by the manufactures. Different watercolour paper brands, weights and textures have varying absorbencies.

Each of us is experiencing our own weather - on hot days the paint and paper will dry quicker, if it is cold or humid the paint and paper will stay damp for much longer. All these things will have an impact on your painting results.

This is what I think frustrates some painters, but I love it!

To me, painting is such a reflection of life. There is very little you can control, so why not just relax and enjoy the adventure. Just start, with a bold hand and a glad heart, and trust yourself to let your version of the subject appear as it will. Don't forget, the pleasure of choosing colours and letting them slide off your soft brush and onto that unctuous textured paper is likely far more valuable to you than the finished painting.

**What do you really need more right now... a tree painting or a few moments of fun and peace?**

The chances are, the more fun you have, the better your painting will turn out anyway.

Let's begin...





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## 1. Loosen Up with a Little Clean Water

I like to start with a little clean water on my brush and splash a bit of water into the area I am going to paint.

💡 The important thing to remember is that **watercolour paint only moves where there is water**. Put the paint on dry paper and it will stay there. Put your brush stroke on damp paper, or touching a section of wet paint and it will move into the wet area.

I'm going to start with the foliage on the tree so lets splash a bit of water here and there into that general area. Don't worry too much about staying inside your sketch lines - they were only a suggestion.

## 2. Paint the Foliage

I'm going to paint a green tree but of course you could paint an autumnal version in reds and golds, or an imaginary version in pinks and purples. You do you.

Whichever colour you choose it's best to make it more interesting by adding multiple tones of that colour/colour family. I'm going to start with the lightest colour in my palette which happens to be [Lemon Yellow](#). Using my big round brush I will dab in some of this lemon yellow into the top right sections of the tree. I am imagining that the sun (my strong light source) is shining brightly from the top right corner, so as I paint in these marks I am thinking of how the sunlight dances on the leaves. That means I am not worrying about how to paint each and every leaf. I am painting the collective shapes the leaves make, and right now just the shapes the sunlight makes on some of those leaves.

💡 To achieve a more professional result it is a good idea to choose multiple colours for each section. Choose a dark, medium and light version of each main colour to add variety and interest.

I also happen to have another yellow in my palette that is still very warm and sunny even though it is called green. Actually it's called [Green Yellow](#). I am placing more marks under the lemon yellow marks. Where the colours touch they will blend together beautifully because the lemon yellow is still damp.

💡 Give your subject a 3 dimensional quality by choosing a strong light source. Be consistent in the painting in placing the dark, medium and light version of each main colour to show where the light is coming from..



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I'm repeating this process with some of my greens now, working from the lightest - for me that is [May Green](#), to the mid green - mine is called [Sap Green](#), and finally even adding some of my darkest green, [Perylene Green](#).

Of course, you do not need the same colours as me, nor do you need quite as many. You can always create different tones of green by adding a dark blue to deepen your green, or a yellow to lighten it. Experiment with the different combinations of blues and yellows in your palette - you might find some shades you just love!

💡 Try to vary the marks you make with your brush. Rather than stamping down the same shape from the brush each time, try twisting the brush around a little, try different angles. This will create more natural, organic looking shapes and add another layer of interest to your painting

### 3. Deepen the Shadows in the Foliage

By now we should be able to see some lovely volume in the tree created by those varying shades of green.

Where the paint happens to meet some of the water we placed in at the start you might also see some lovely watermarks, and perhaps some changes in tone simply because that clean water will make the paint paler.

I love all these things. This is the collaboration of the paint and water doing their part in the painting.

Although we have already got some lights and darks into the painting, I like to emphasise these shadows with an extra pop of colour. We are looking for a dark colour here, a dark blue, indigo or something like that might be nice. Today I am going to choose purple. I have a lovely muted purple called [Moonglow](#).

💡 If you want to paint the effect of sunlight, you have to paint the shadows!

The greens are still damp on my page so I can add in the purple marks on top of some of the darkest green areas and know that the colours will soften beautifully into one another.

I decided to add a little bit of a more vibrant purple as well - mine happens to be [Dioxasine Violet](#). I do enjoy a tiny pop of unexpected colour.



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### 4. Paint the Trunk

Clean off the brush and dab it on your kitchen towel/old rag. It's time to paint the trunk. I like to start each section the same way - with a little clean water. I'm not trying to wet the entire trunk in a uniform way, I just want little dabs of water to increase the chances that paint will do some interesting things.

Again I will choose multiple browns. I'll start with [Raw Sienna](#) and place that on the light side of the trunk. Remember to be consistent with your light source throughout the painting.

💡 Your big round brush can make surprisingly detailed, fine marks if you paint with just the tip, perpendicular to the paper. (As opposed to painting with the bristles flatter to the paper pushing on the belly of the brush as we might have done in the foliage marks.)

I will clean off my brush and choose a darker brown, mine's called [Van Dyk Brown](#) to add more marks in the trunk on the shadow side. Where the two browns touch in the middle they will naturally merge to create a mid brown because the paint is still damp.

I also like to add the shadow colours I used in the foliage to create a little more emphasis on the extreme left side of the trunk and to bring some harmony to the tree.

💡 Repeat the same colours in different sections of the painting for a harmonious unified effect.

### 5. Add Some Branches

If you have any little white spaces in the foliage section you can choose to add a few very fine spindly brown marks into those to suggest branches that we can see through the leaves.

Don't stress if you ended up with no white gaps - that's ok! It just means that your particular tree is fuller so we can't see too many of the branches.

You might also want to add a few small branches that connect from the trunk towards the bottom of the big foliage section.

### 6. Paint the Grass

I have a little horizon line marked in my sketch because it is always nice to ground the tree, rather than leave it looking like it is floating in mid air.



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I like to dab in a little clean water using horizontal strokes. Once more, I am not aiming to wet the entire area, just to create a little movement and interest.

Using the light and mid green I paint in the grass in broad horizontal strokes.

💡 Make your brush strokes in the shape and direction of the object you are painting to easily convey more information about the subject to the viewer. Horizontal strokes for flat grassy sections, fine spindly marks for branches and organic blobs for the foliage, for example.

Sometimes, when the paper is dry you get what is called dry brush effect, where the brush skips over the surface of the paper leaving little white specks unpainted. That's a lovely effect for the grass if it happens, but no big deal if it doesn't.

### 7. Paint the Shadow

That beautiful tree is sure to be casting a shadow on this glorious sunny day we are painting, so let's pop that in next.

Use the same shadow colour that you used in the foliage and trunk and place the shadow into the still slightly damp grass.

It is also a good idea to ground the tree by softening off the edge of the bottom of the trunk by running a clean brush that has been dried off on the towel along its horizontal edge where it meets the grass and shadow. The moisture in the brush will move the pigments so that they can feather out a little and make a more natural looking transition into the earth below.

### 8. Final touches

Can you even call it a watercolour painting if it doesn't have splatter? 😊

You might decide that your painting is finished as it is. Hurrah. You are the boss of your painting, you get to decide when it is done.

But a little fine splatter is always fun to do. It can convey a sense of movement... and perhaps pollen! I choose to add a little splatter by getting a nice juicy mix of my green yellow on to my brush and then tapping the brush with a finger while holding it horizontally over the painting about 5 or 6 inches above the paper.

## What's Next?

I hope you have had a marvellous time splashing watercolour onto your expressive tree.

I do hope you go on to paint many more. 😊

If you are looking for some more simple paintings you can do in this loose expressive style, you might want to explore my Watercolour Tutorial Starter Bundle. It is the perfect tasting menu of painting subjects!

Find it at my website or click this link directly:

<https://courses.kerriewoodhouse.com/wct-starter-bundle/>

