

Grappling With Grays

When most of us are setting up our palettes, we justifiably think about the primary and secondary colors first. For many, gray is a distant afterthought, a non-color to be pulled in only when necessary. In truth, a good mix of grays should be an important component of every artist's toolkit.

Finding a good manufactured gray with character, however, can be difficult. I've found I get much better results when I mix my own grays. Follow along as I share a few of my favorite recipes for gray and show you how to use the color to its best advantage for a variety of subjects.



Old Tool, New Trick I found my inspiration for *Bicycles Amsterdam* (watercolor on paper, 20x27) as I was coming out of a train station in Amsterdam. Figuring out how to mask the spokes of the bicycles was the toughest part. I ultimately hit upon an old ruling pen, which was also perfect for adding grays as shadows on the undersides of the bicycle spokes.



For the chart above, I mixed colors from opposite sides of the color wheel to make a variety of interesting grays.

In this photo of my palette, you can see the range of grays I typically have premixed and ready to go at all times.



Getting Started

To mix ample amounts of a range of grays, you'll need a multi-pan palette—mine is a six-pan version from Cheap Joe's. Starting in the second pan, mix your base gray (see my favorite base gray recipe in the next section). Add drops of water progressively to the base gray in pans three through six to create a range of grays from medium to light value. Mix your darker gray in the first pan. This should give you enough of each gray so that you can be consistent with your color choices across the painting.

The first few times you mix grays in this way, I suggest that you create a series of 2-inch squares on a sheet of scrap paper and test each of your mixtures so that you can be certain you have roughly uniform steps between the pans. Of course, this will become less critical as you get into the heat of painting, but it's a good reference point.

Mixing Grays

Almost any two colors that are positioned opposite each other on a color wheel can be mixed to make gray, but the results aren't always particularly attractive. Several years ago I did a study of which colors, when mixed together, produced the most appealing grays and found there were a number of likable combinations. For instance, Winsor blue and burnt sienna make a nice, cool gray.

From that study, I also confirmed what Gwen Bragg of the Art League School in Alexandria, Virginia, taught me: Cerulean blue and light red make a wonderful base on which you can build a superior range of grays. A word of caution: I'm sure you've all learned by now that manufacturers' colors aren't identical. In this case, the mix works only if both colors are Winsor & Newton. Indeed, many manufacturers don't even make a light red—an earth tone that's more like burnt sienna than any other red on your palette.

Not only do cerulean blue and light red mix to make a fine gray, they also bring other wonderful attributes to the painting process as well. For instance, both colors are highly granular and will start separating the minute you mix them together. The light red will start to float to the top and the heavier granules of the cerulean blue will drop to the bottom of your mixing tray. This means that you'll have to stir up the mixture each time you take your brush to the tray. The color will separate once it's on the paper, too—and that's what makes this gray so exciting. If you're painting on cold-pressed or rough paper, the cerulean blue will find the valleys of the paper and the light red will head for the high ground. Even though I'm a realist, I choose to paint in watercolor because of its distinctive character. And nowhere is that character better demonstrated than in the way this gray behaves on the paper.

Expanding the Range

To make a dense, medium-dark gray, I combine four parts cerulean blue with one part light red right out of the tube, with just enough water to allow them to mix thoroughly. To create a range of lighter grays, I simply add increasing amounts of water to the base mixture. To make a deeper gray, I add Prussian blue and a bit of magenta and/or alizarin crimson. (In place of the magenta, I also like to use Holbein's mineral violet, because it's one of the deepest hues on the market.)

Need to go darker still? When I want an even deeper gray, I add black to the mix above. You guessed it: I also mix my own black—the darkest end of the gray scale. I usually mix up a large batch of my black and store it in a baby food jar so that I always have some on hand. I start with a whole tube of Holbein's mineral violet and most of a tube of Winsor & Newton's alizarin crimson and Winsor

& Newton's Prussian blue, then add a bit of this and a bit of that until I've got a nice, flat gray. To give it opacity, I add some quinacridone gold and other earth tones.

In addition to changing the value of the base gray, I can also make it warmer or cooler. Adding more blue, such as Winsor or Prussian blue, makes a cool gray that's perfect for painting silver and other metals. More light red will make a warmer gray. To take it a step further, I very carefully add a bit of quinacridone gold as well. Too much of any yellow, gold or ochre can turn the gray a terribly muddy green very quickly, so I add only a bit at a time until I get the color I want. Warm grays can be used to indicate places where glass or silver reflects warm objects, such as oranges or red pears. They're also great for areas where crystal refracts light.



Updating the Classics In *Yellow Pears in Foil* (watercolor on paper, 10x13) I was looking for ways to bring the Dutch still life painters' approach to modern items. The lighting from the left and the strong background reflect the masters' unique painting style. The objects are a combination of old world fruit and a modern invention—aluminum foil, which was painted with a full range of grays, from light to very dense, applied with care.

Using Grays in a Painting

Grays can be found in almost any subject, of course, but there are a number of still life and landscape subjects for which they play a special role.

Clear Glass

Whether you're painting fine cut crystal or an ordinary drinking glass, a wonderful range of grays is an essential element to recording what you see.

White Flowers

If a flower was pure white it couldn't be painted. Thankfully most white flowers are, in our perception, a range of grays enhanced by reflections of the colored objects around and within it.

Silver

Whether the surface is smooth or decorated, a critical step to painting a silver object is being able to see the broad range of grays present, from the blackest black to the slightest gray.

Seascapes

The essence of a wave is rooted in grays. While the highlights in the spray will be white, the structure of the wave starts with a body of gray paint. One need look no further than Winslow Homer's work to see gray in action in this way.

Clouds

Watercolorists are famous for wetting their paper in the area of the sky and dropping in a range of blues, hoping that this wet-into-wet process will produce something that closely resembles clouds. In the hands of a skilled artist, this technique works most of the time, but I want to see watercolorists actually paint clouds. (See my demonstration of *Delta Sky—Highway 61* on page 70.) With a controlled use of the right range of grays, a watercolorist can paint realistic clouds as well as or better than an oil painter. There, I've thrown down the gauntlet.



Waves of Gray My first seascape, *Acadia Waves—Rocks and Waves* (at left; watercolor on paper, 13x28) is the product of a visit to the Acadia National Park just after a hurricane had passed. The grays in this painting range from the light, cool grays of the waves to the darker grays of the rocks.

Added Dimensions To paint the gorgeous clouds in *Delta Sky—Highway 61* (below; watercolor on paper, 28x18), I relied on my typical range of grays, mixed from cerulean blue and light red. I used a mix of hard and soft edges and light and dark colors to create a three-dimensional effect.

Familiar Fare I always look for ways to bring a fine art approach to everyday objects. *Orangina* (above; watercolor on paper, 12x36) is all about capturing light in a rich range of grays.

White Done Right White flowers such as *Tulip Angelique* (at right; watercolor on paper, 20x20) are an excellent place to use a whole range of grays created from your base color.

An Homage I love to emulate the still life paintings of 15th- and 16th-century Dutch and Flemish artists in pieces such as *Visual Abundance* (at right, middle; watercolor on paper, 20x26). The grays in the fabric hold this painting together and also add to the realism of the other objects.



Grays in Action

1 This photo was taken in the heart of the Mississippi Delta on Highway 61, the Blues Highway. Originally, the sun was coming from the right—the East. I flipped the photo so that sun would be coming from the left—the West.



2 The first step in creating any painting is a good pencil drawing. This is drawn with a 2H mechanical pencil on Fabriano soft-pressed 300-lb. paper.



3 I masked the sky with lightweight tracing paper. Tracing paper is great way to cover large areas and protect them from washes or spattering. Lightweight, inexpensive tracing paper works as well as the more expensive, heavier type.



4 Then I used drafting tape to seal the edges of the tracing paper. I used a No. 11 X-Acto blade to cut the details of the edges of the clouds—being careful not to cut too far into the paper. I used a small amount of liquid masking fluid where the edges would be less ridged.



5 I applied a series of washes using a 2-inch synthetic flat bristle brush. As the washes dried I smoothed them with a 3-inch Hake brush. I applied six or eight layers of wash, mixing in colors such as mineral violet and alizarin crimson to give added interest to the sky.




6 I removed the masking from the area of the clouds, then I used a damp No. 6 medium stiff synthetic round to soften the edges of some of the clouds, mostly on the left side.

7 I started painting the clouds from the top, using my typical range of grays, mixed from cerulean blue and light red. I added cooler blues or warmer colors as the image dictated. I used Winsor & Newton Series 7 rounds in sizes 2 through 6 to paint the clouds.

8 When I had all the clouds painted, I stepped back and found that I needed to add some darker shapes in the shadow areas to make the clouds more three-dimensional. I also added some wash at the horizon to indicate rain at that location.



9 I decided to change the plowed fields to fields of cotton ready to pick. I thought the white crop would be the perfect foil for the clouds as well as the dream of every cotton planter.

10 I finished the details on the buildings and the trees. I paid particular attention to the rust on the roof and the red storage wagon in the shed. This small dot of red helps anchor the items at the ground plane in *Delta Sky—Highway 61*. 



Delta Sky—Highway 61 (watercolor on paper, 28x18)



Visit www.artistsnetwork.com/article/silver-watercolor-demo for another great demo by Laurin McCracken—this time painting one of his signature silver still lifes.