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5 Must-Know Watercolor Techniques

# Watercolor

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*Laid-back Magnolia* (watercolor on paper, 26x20)  
by Laurin McCracken

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# THE Architecture OF DETAIL

Learn how Laurin McCracken constructs astonishingly real still lifes with light and shadow.

By Michelle Taute

You'd never guess it by looking at his work, but Laurin McCracken is a relative newcomer to watercolor painting. After spending more than 20 years on the marketing side of architecture firms, he signed up for a local art class in late 1999. The experience was transformative, and McCracken soon found himself scheduling entire weekends around painting. "I just fell into watercolor," he says. "People often say how difficult it is; it wasn't difficult. It was exhilarating."

Those early highs turned into a dedication to craft that's evident in all of McCracken's work. His highly detailed still life paintings capture a level of realism that pays homage to the old masters, particularly 16th- and 17th-century Dutch painters.

## Coming Full Circle

While he once lamented all the years he missed out on painting, McCracken now realizes—thanks to a nudge from a friend—that his current work is the product of all his life experiences. His interest in

drawing dates back to childhood when his mother brought him stacks of paper and pencils during a period of isolation while he battled polio. That early love for art eventually led him to architecture school, and he spent the first decade of his career on the design side of the business.

In the mid-'70s, McCracken switched to the marketing side, and his career took him all over the world. He's been to Japan 17 times and traveled countless miles on airplanes. Lucky for him, all those travels gave him the opportunity to visit great museums and see some of the world's best artwork in person. McCracken also took a sketchbook with him on his trips, taking the time to recreate the scenes around him on paper. So by the time he showed up for that first watercolor class, he'd already laid the foundation for success.

Today, McCracken is the Marketing and Strategies Officer at Looney Ricks Kiss Architects in Memphis, Tennessee. He's negotiated a flexible work schedule to accommodate his art, spending three weeks a month in the firm's office, leaving

**Inspiration Strikes** ■ When he saw the light streaming through a dining room window at an inn where he was staying, McCracken exclaimed, "There's a painting!" The detailed rendering of the lace alone in *Josephine's Bed & Breakfast* (watercolor on paper, 27x20) took 40 to 60 hours of painting time.



Bennett Digital, Memphis, TN

the fourth free for painting. On weeks when he's at his traditional job, McCracken uses his free time to get ready for those upcoming days in the studio. He'll think about and plan paintings and focus on the marketing side of his painting career.

### Planning With Care

One of the most important steps in McCracken's painting process is creating an intriguing still life setup. He'll play with an arrangement of objects until it seems just right, drawing sketches and taking reference photos as he experiments. In one session, for example, he put several pieces of produce together with some silver, struggling to find a good composition. It wasn't until he split open an artichoke, revealing the patterns inside, that the scene really came together.

Once he has a promising image, McCracken takes a digital photograph and puts it on his computer. He'll crop the still life to the section he'd like to paint and manipulate the contrast until the highlights are

**Small Touches** ■ "I bought this lace on a trip to Hong Kong," says McCracken about *Fusions* (watercolor on paper, 20x18). "Painting the tabletop through the lace created another layer of difficulty for me, but the glimpses of the wood surface add interest to the piece."

**Perfect Arrangement** ■ The light reflected off the surface of the silver plate gives the pears added volume in *Pears and Silver Dish* (watercolor on paper, 11x15).



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## Painting Silver and Crystal



**Step 1:** To start, McCracken projected his reference photo onto a sheet of watercolor paper, then traced the image with a mechanical pencil filled with 2H lead. He was particularly careful to copy a lot of detail in the reflected images.

**Step 2:** Using drafting tape and tracing paper, he masked everything except the background so he could paint it wet-into-wet.

**Step 3:** For the backdrop, he used a mixture of cerulean blue and light red. When he'd finished painting the background, he removed the masking on the objects.

**Step 4:** McCracken then used a Masquepen with a micro-point applicator to save the detailed highlights essential to making the silver and fruit look real.

**Step 5:** Here, you can see in blue where he masked all the highlights.

**Step 6:** In this step, he painted the lemon and pear, including the places where the fruit was reflected on the silver and visible through the crystal bowl.

**Step 7:** To paint the crystal, McCracken focused on the reflections and refraction of light in each small element of the bowl. For the silver teapot, he mixed a rich black, which he used to make a range of grays.

**Step 8:** Finally, he removed the masking fluid and blended the edges with a stiff, wet brush before adding details like the pear stem.

**Demo of Still Life With Silver, Crystal and Fruit (watercolor on paper, 9x11)**



## Meet the Artist

**Laurin McCracken** holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Architecture from Rice University, and a Masters in Architecture and Urban Planning from Princeton University. He's a signature member of the National Watercolor Society, and his paintings are in a variety of corporate and private collections. For more information, visit his Web site at [www.lauringallery.com](http://www.lauringallery.com).



**Order of Things** ■ McCracken often starts a painting by tackling the most challenging section first. In *Oyster Bar* (watercolor on paper, 18x18), for example, he recreated the metallic quality of the aluminum tabletop early on. During the process, he masked off the plate, napkins and lemons with tape and paper.





stronger than he'll actually render them. Next, he prints out a 13x9-inch color copy for reference and has a 35 mm slide made that he'll use to project the still life image directly onto his watercolor paper, serving as a guide for an initial rough drawing.

With the drawing in place, McCracken will move to a table and spend a couple of hours rendering the details—everything from highlights and shadows to the folds in a piece of fabric. "If you're going to have a really good watercolor, you have to have a really good drawing," he says. When it's time to put paint to paper, McCracken often starts with the most difficult object, such as a piece of crystal or silver, or alternately, he'll begin with the background. He paints the objects in his still life one at a time, moving inch by inch as he captures all the details in a teacup or lemon. As he works, he'll look at his reference photo, sometimes going back to the computer and making an enlarged print of a specific area he's working on.


### Focusing on Details

Shimmering crystal and silver are some of the most impressive elements featured in McCracken's still lifes. He tackles these difficult objects as a series of abstract patterns, focusing on light and shadow as he works. McCracken has found that crystal and silver consist mostly of gray shades, and he mixes these colors himself from blue and light red. Brighter colors come into play in the reflections, where these shimmering objects pick up interest and depth from the things around them. A pear, for example,

might be reflected in the silver dish that's sitting next to it.

To help him work in so much detail, McCracken relies on masking. For highlights, he'll typically use masking fluid to save the white of the paper. If it's a larger highlight, perhaps on the side of a teapot, he'll go back after removing the masking fluid to lift and blend the edges of the paint with a stiff brush. This prevents the cut-out look that can be a danger when working with liquid masking. Another technique he often uses is masking off large areas with tape and paper. If he's painting the background, for example, he might cover the rest of the still life drawing.

### Looking to the Future

With all this attention to detail, it's not surprising that McCracken's watercolors have gone from being a hobby to a viable second career. "My goal is to retire in a few years and let my painting fund my retirement," he says. In addition, he hopes to take two or three trips a year, so he can spend time eating, drinking and sketching in gorgeous locales. Then he'll do a series of watercolors based on each trip to fund the next excursion. Sounds like the perfect way to make up for lost time. 

**Modern Twist** ■ McCracken admires the way Old Masters' still lifes tell the story of their time. He put the same concept to work in *Teatime with Graves and Hoffman* (watercolor on paper, 11x24), pairing a teapot set designed by Michael Graves with a teacup by Joseph Hoffman. "Graves is a huge fan of Hoffman, which is the reason I combined objects," he says.

**Michelle Taute** is a freelance writer based in Cincinnati. Her work has appeared in *HOW*, *USA Weekend* and *The Artist's Magazine*.



# Picture THIS

By Laurin McCracken

**"I will make even busy New Yorkers take the time to see what I see of flowers."**

—Georgia O'Keeffe




**Kew Garden Rose (watercolor on paper, 12x18)**

To capture the essence of a flower, I do my homework. I study books about the flower's anatomy to get acquainted with it from a fresh perspective and to aid me in portraying it accurately in my painting.

I love to take flowers that people see every day and describe them in a fresh way. I like to think that I can see details that the person next to me, upon looking at the same flower, can't see.

To save the texture of the flower and the water droplets on the petals in *Kew Garden Rose*, I masked all the areas that I wanted to stay white, then began to add layers of color, never mixing more than two colors at a time

so they wouldn't get muddy and working right over the masking fluid highlights. When I have a dark background, such as the one in this composition, I save it for last.

To create the deep blacks that emphasize the light colors of a flower like this rose, I use a premixed "soup" of Winsor & Newton's Prussian blue, permanent alizarin crimson and Holbein's mineral violet. Then I add other colors, such as cadmium yellow if I want it to be more opaque, light red if I want it to be warmer, or quinacridone gold if I want it to be richer. 

For a more complete description of **Laurin McCracken's** process and to see more of his work, turn to page 52 for "The Architecture of Detail."