

Stretching the Truth

Inland Stream (*watercolor on paper, 21x22*) shows off David M. Band's mastery of realistic trees and low-lying greenery.



Getting Greenery Right

Landscape painters, rejoice: Here's everything you need to know to paint realistic trees and ground cover.

By Kristin D. Godsey

If you've ever taken a stab at painting an outdoor scene filled with lacy tree foliage and lush swaths of grass, you've probably noticed that it takes more than a blob of green paint and a few strategically placed wisps of brown to get the right look. "The artist's biggest obstacle is preconceived ideas about an object," says highly regarded *plein air* painter and workshop instructor Kevin Macpherson of Taos, New Mexico. "'Leaves are green.' 'Bark is brown.' These overly formulaic attributes will hinder your ability to reach higher, more sophisticated art."

In this article, Macpherson offers his best tips for painting trees and greenery along with noted watercolorist David M. Band of Wichita Falls, Texas. "Only God can make a tree," wrote the poet Joyce Kilmer, but you can learn to do Nature justice armed with the combined expertise of these artists.

Color Notes

While you certainly don't want to limit your tree and ground cover palette to simple greens and browns, having a few favorite hues and mixtures to turn to will at least get you started. "When mixing greens, I've found phthalo blue to be an excellent base color when used with yellow ochre, cadmium yellow, cadmium orange, or even burnt sienna when you want a dark, muddy green," says Band. "For browns, I always use burnt sienna as a base. To it I'll add such colors as raw sienna, sepia, yellow ochre or a combination. When diluted, burnt sienna will pick up the qualities of each pigment."



The Importance of Edges

In this demonstration, Band illustrates where and how to place the right edges in a painting of dense foliage. "Soft edges are used throughout and are achieved through wet-into-wet painting," he explains. "You'll want to include hard edges—which are painted onto dry paper—in foliage found at the ends of branches, the tops of trees and in any open spaces."



1 After dampening the paper, I applied the first layer of foliage loosely with a mixture of phthalo blue and burnt sienna. Making sure that the sky area was dry, I then used the same mixture to create the hard edges at the top of the trees.

2 At this stage, I continued to define and separate the prominent masses with a mixture of Payne's gray and burnt sienna.

3 Using the mixture of phthalo blue and burnt sienna, I defined the foliage with light and shadow and refined the hard edges. Finally, I mixed cadmium yellow with cadmium orange and applied a few washes in a gentle, circular motion to soften any hard edges that had developed within the foliage masses. The color and circular motion also create a sense of light.

Tips on Trees

As with any other object you hope to render realistically, trees need to be seen as shapes first, not known entities unto themselves.

“Representational artists must think in terms of abstraction,” says Macpherson. “An accurately drawn silhouette—just one shape—reveals the unique characteristic of each tree.”

To fully understand what it is you’re painting (another necessary step, regardless of your subject matter), you’ll want to observe or study trees of all kinds. Says Band, “Try to think of a bare tree as a road map and follow it where it leads your eye. Pay close attention to how the branches grow away from the trunk and how long it takes for them to gradually shrink in diameter and become delicate, graceful lines.” He adds that artists will often shorten limbs too early or create blunt ends. “Paint branches in the direction they grow—moving away from the trunk—to capture the character and full extent of the branch.”

Macpherson recommends this exercise: “Take a notebook and pen while walking through your neighborhood. Look at each different tree, noting the general local color

The Drybrush Sketch

Drybrushing is a great way to capture the character of a tree quickly and directly in watercolor. Here, working on 140-lb. cold-pressed paper, Band used a No. 6 round sable to sketch in the tree with a mixture of burnt sienna and sepia (view **A**). “The paper has just enough tooth to create bark when the brush is dragged lightly over the dry surface,” he says. He refined the tree with the same mixture in view **B**, then applied a wash of diluted yellow ochre to the entire surface to add light and soften the overall texture.



Lifting Color

While masking is certainly a viable option, “I find color lifting to be a much quicker way to paint a light image over



a dark background in watercolor,” says Band. Here he applies this technique to create depth and variety in a study of tall grasses.

1 I used Payne’s gray to create a dark background in the top part of this study and cadmium yellow for the bottom part. Once this had dried, I mixed burnt sienna and phthalo blue to add in foreground grass.

2 Using a stiff-bristled brush with a flat tip dipped in clean water, I “drew in” taller grasses in the foreground, lifting out the dark color to expose the base wash of yellow in these details.

3 Finally, I applied a wash of cadmium yellow over the entire surface to highlight the grass and soften the overall feel. Once this dried, I added a little contrast and detail with a few darker, shaded blades of grass.

Landscape **Foliage**

of the tree bark. Come up with your own descriptive words, such as ‘plum,’ ‘bread crust’ or ‘battleship gray,’ to describe it. Do the same for the foliage. What colors differentiate one type of tree from the next? ‘Lime,’ ‘sea green’ or ‘French mustard’ may conjure qualities that remind you of a particular color and value much better than trying to jot down recipes of ‘two parts blue to one part red.’”

As Band points out, the more you study trees, the more you may notice similarities between their structure and human anatomy. “For example,” he says, “you’ll see how a small joint is formed on a tree whenever a new growth or branch develops from its source—much the same way our joints enhance our growth and development. Understanding this simple analogy changed the way I see branches and made this one basic element easier to paint and more believable.”

Light, Shade and Leaves

When painting trees, says Band, “I find it useful to decide early on what element is the most

significant and what I’m trying to say. If the painting’s about design, then the structure itself takes precedence. If it’s about color and form, then foliage dominates.”

Ultimately, says Macpherson, your goal is to paint any object as it’s influenced by light and air. “The object’s local color is only a starting point before mixing light and atmosphere, which creates a very different visual statement.” Light itself has color and intensity, he adds. “This colored light, be it red, yellow, blue or green, will mix with the local color of the tree. The strength of the light source—whether it’s a soft light or bright and strong—and the density of the atmosphere will affect the relative value contrasts between the light parts of the tree and its shadow areas.”

When tackling foliage, Band suggests, “Try to identify the most interesting patterns created by light and shadow. Without them, you’ll have an uninspiring mass of color.” Macpherson agrees, saying, “Observe the negative spaces between the branches and foliage, which create variety and rhythm in the

Closer Encounters

Close-up views of grass, weeds and small shrubbery are well suited for drybrushing, as Band demonstrates here. These little areas of greenery can be used to great effect in an overall landscape to establish scale and provide secondary points of interest to lead the viewer’s eye through the painting.



- 1** With a No. 6 round sable, I used burnt sienna and a little watered-down Payne’s gray to create a background, with just a rough suggestion of grass.
- 2** Drybrushing with a mixture of burnt sienna and phthalo blue, I began to develop a cluster of grass and weeds. I stroked the surface lightly so the tooth of the 140-lb., cold-pressed paper would assist in creating the grass textures.
- 3** I used burnt sienna to provide some detail and a defined outcropping of grass and weeds. With a mixture of Chinese white and yellow, I then added some highlights.

Dense Grass

You can use both wet and dry watercolor techniques to effect the look of dense, foreground grass. Working on 140-lb., cold-pressed paper, Band also used sandpaper in this demonstration to produce texture (remember that sandpaper isn't as effective on smoother papers).



1 Using a diluted mixture of phthalo blue, cadmium yellow and burnt sienna, I massed in the area. While still wet, I spread the bristles of my No. 6 round sable brush and drew the wet paint upward into the dry sky region.

2 I used the same mixture to add details and form to the grass. With a small piece of 220 fine finishing sandpaper, I gently rubbed the surface of the paper with short, circular motions to imitate the patterns in the grass. This approach exposed the fine, speckled texture of the original light base wash.



3 Once the surface had dried, I strengthened the body of grass with a stronger mixture of phthalo blue, cadmium yellow and burnt sienna.

tree. Paint the general silhouette of the entire tree, simplifying it, and then carve back into this shape to reveal the background spaces.”

Convincing Grass and Ground Cover

Ask anyone to say the first word that comes to mind when you say the word *grass*: Chances are the answer will be “green.” As an artist, of course, you know better than that. From a distance, a grassy field does indeed appear to be uniform in color, depth and consistency, but it's much more than that on closer inspection. As Band explains, “If you spend any time walking fields or grassy areas, it doesn't take long to see the subtle variations in color and mass. You can use grass to provide more than mere color in your work—it can be a strong and interesting foundation for your composition.”

As with trees, let light and shadow be your guides to determining color and form for this part of your landscape. Use foreground details

as a reference point for depth and distance, and don't forget the importance of using texture to create the right feel.

Band says that watercolor is particularly suited to painting grass. “The versatility of watercolor, from transparent to opaque or a combination of both, makes it a natural choice for capturing whatever feeling or characteristic you choose.” (See his demonstrations above and on page 54 for examples.)

Shrubs, bushes and other ground cover shouldn't be neglected in the process of perfecting your trees and grasses. “They're extremely useful for adding color and interesting shapes, and they can strengthen your composition,” says Band. “Their size and position give us a clearer picture of the scale and relationships of the other elements in the landscape.” Used mainly as supporting players, these touches of greenery complete the cast of a blockbuster landscape. ▣

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