

## Controlled Chaos

Learn four easy painting techniques that help to loosen up a tight drawing.



A detailed drawing gets a colorful makeover with multiple layers of watercolor washes, spatters and scrubs in **Quincy Smelter** (watercolor on paper, 22x30). See the loosening-up steps for this painting, opposite.

**M**y watercolor career is a dichotomous creative response to the drawing precision required in my career as an architectural illustrator. While I love the technical aspects of drawing, and am comforted by its exactness, the renderings that result are necessarily rigid.

My desire for clean, yet loose painting isn't nearly as comforting, however. I'm constantly tightening up and dulling down washes. After creating an enjoyably tight drawing as the base for a watercolor, which can take 8 to 10 hours, the painting process I employ is rather arbitrary



and chaotic. I begin painting on Arches 300-lb. hot-pressed paper with what feels like random layers of watercolor, essentially grabbing whatever color is on my palette. I then add and delete many layers of color back and forth, often wrestling with values, until the painting eventually comes into focus.

My goal is to create a combination of the defined detail I love and the chaotic painting I fear. I want a clean result that hides my many hours of back-and-forth indecision. To achieve this, I often fuss around to find what I want, then scrub out completely and re-paint fresh.

I've developed four methods for loosening up that I use in tandem or on their own: unifying lights and darks early in the painting process; spattering the painting with a toothbrush; working across the paper in smaller, defined areas; and the most liberating technique of all—essentially starting over by scrubbing the paper back to white.

### Unifying Lights and Darks

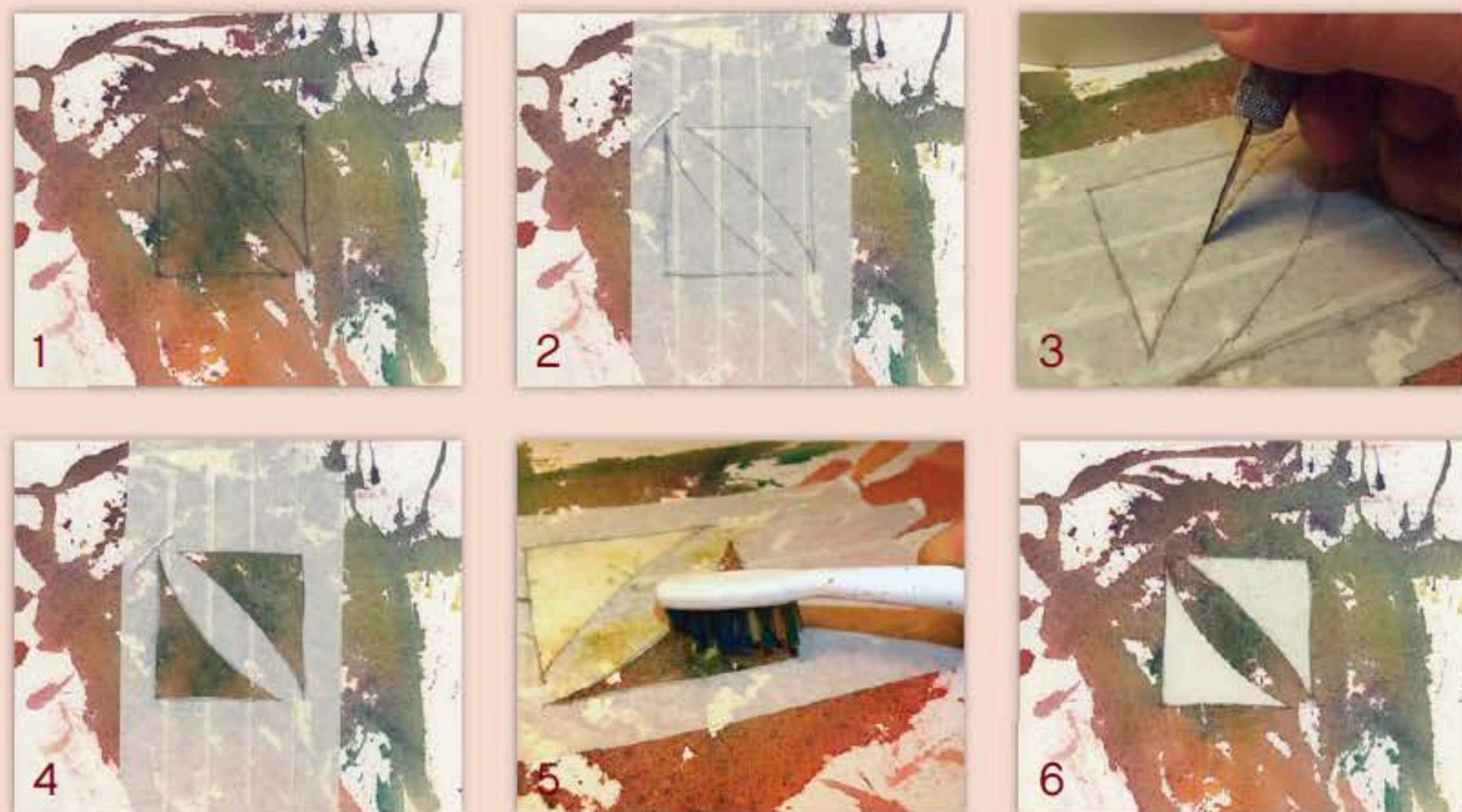
Most watercolorists cover small sections of their painting surface with masking tape or fluid to maintain the white paper. I take the opposite approach: I mask large sections of

my drawing with sheets of paper and drafting tape and then use an X-Acto knife to cut out precise shapes, creating defined areas in which to work.

Next, I lay in an introductory wash (Step 1, above); it helps to define the drawing and set the stage for color variation; it also forces me to paint across the entire surface. My goal at this stage is to do a loose wash without having to make color decisions.

I then follow this initial wash with light washes of every transparent color from my chosen palette (Step 2, above). I do this to unify the





## scrubbing back to white

The most liberating thing I've ever learned about watercolor painting is a fail-safe way to make changes, essentially starting over, by scrubbing back to white. Armed with a drafting pencil, drafting tape, an X-Acto knife and a toothbrush, I can scrub out darks, redefine sharp edges and even repaint an entire sky. This option frees me to be bolder, looser and more experimental in my work.

- 1 I use a drafting pencil to draw the shapes I want to create directly on the Arches 300-lb. hot-pressed paper.
- 2 I wait until the paint is completely dry, then use drafting tape (low-tack tape) to create a protective surface for scrubbing. Because drafting tape is semitranslucent, I'm able to see my drawn lines underneath it. If I'm still having trouble seeing them, I'll pull up the tape and re-check my line. I'll then draw my outline on the tape. I find it helps to run the tape parallel to the outline to minimize tape joints, where water might seep in.
- 3 Using a sharp X-Acto knife, I cut into the tape along my outline, being careful not to cut the paper.
- 4 I pull the tape off where I want the whites back.
- 5 Dipping my toothbrush in water and using a paper towel to blot the paper, I scrub hard with the toothbrush to lift off the paint. I take care to scrub from the tape onto the paper; otherwise, I might pull up the tape edge. I only aggressively scrub any given area two or three times, so I have to scrub wisely and wait to see how things pan out before fixing certain areas. I don't like to lighten an area partially, because the paint quickly can appear dull and overworked. Instead, I prefer to scrub within a taped, defined area until I'm as close to the original paper as possible, which may mean scrubbing quite hard.
- 6 I remove the remaining tape. I usually do this while the surface is still wet, in case water has seeped under the tape. If it has, I just do a little paint touch-up.

lights and darks. I find this to be quite freeing, because I know the areas ultimately will be covered by many subsequent layers.

### Spattering With a Toothbrush

I often use a toothbrush to loosen up a painting, spattering masking fluid or paint in various colors over the area (Step 3, on page 13). Spattering masking fluid makes it feel more integral to the painting than applying it with a brush. In fluid, flowing areas, I spatter various paints with a toothbrush until the paper is saturated, then tilt the paper this way and that, causing the paints to run together.

In more textured areas, I spatter paint on top of the spattered masking fluid. Once it's dry, I rub off the mask and re-spatter, repeating as necessary (Step 4, on page 13).

### Working in Defined Areas

Another technique I employ is to work across the paper in small, defined areas using numerous washes; it's easier to be loose while taking small steps. As I move from one area to another, I slowly layer washes using complementary colors like ultramarine blue and quinacridone burnt orange (details, at right). I also include other colors for variety, and push them—often arbitrarily. Patterns of colors and dark shapes start to emerge; I just wait and see what I get. When I'm satisfied with the direction things are going, I'll wander into other areas of the previously masked white paper.

These four painting techniques help me to achieve a clean result that overrides hours of back-and-forth indecision, resulting in a marriage of defined detail and chaotic painting. 🎨

## try this at home

Use one or more of the described techniques to create a painting. Send JPEGs (with a resolution of 72 dpi) of your process shots and your finished painting to [wcamag@fwmedia.com](mailto:wcamag@fwmedia.com) with "Creativity Workshop" in the subject line and tell us about your process by **February 15**. The "editor's choice" will receive a *Watercolor Artist* subscription (or renewal). Catch up on the Creativity Workshop activities you've missed at [www.artistsnetwork.com/articles/inspiration/creativity/creativity-workshop](http://www.artistsnetwork.com/articles/inspiration/creativity/creativity-workshop).



Slowly layering in washes of various colors in small, defined areas of **Engine 8380—Crosshead** (watercolor on paper, 22x30) allows me to take a loose painting approach.

