

## How to paint trees in Watercolour with a limited palette

Trees have been the theme and inspiration for artists over many decades! What could be more satisfying than capturing the natural beauty and splendor of a tree or collection of trees! No two trees are completely identical, they all have their individual characteristics, textures, twists and turns, furrows and crevices, leaf and bark patterns, branches stretching to the sky, or lush green, thickly-woven canopies of collective trees and forests.

For this article we are going to look at how to paint a tree in watercolours with a limited palette. This is particularly easy exercise for beginners as you only need to think about two pigments, which will create a third colour and the dilution of these pigments to create a variety of light and dark values and a variety of green and brown colours.

**Part one.** We will first look at materials and equipment, and how to use them.

**Part two.** The next section will be actually looking and drawing tree shapes, analysing light and dark values and mark-making, using a 2b and 4b pencil.

**Part three.** Lastly we will look at warm and cool colour palettes and watercolour techniques.

## Part 1 - Materials list; what you will need and how to use them.

### Watercolour Paints;

You don't need lots of different colours to begin with and if you are just starting out as a beginner, a limited palette would be a great place to start.

Suggested colours to buy singularly in tubes would be;

Alizarin Crimson, Cadmium Red, Cadmium Yellow, Lemon Yellow, Yellow Ochre, Ultramarine Blue, Prussian Blue, Burnt Sienna or Burnt Umber and Raw Umber.

These warm and cool primary colours once mixed, will provide you with a good range of secondary and tertiary colour schemes and palettes. Practising mixing colours and creating colour charts are a great way to learn about how colours affect each other and how to manipulate value and vibrancy. To desaturate and mute your colours you can also add small amounts of complementary colours to each other i.e blue to orange, red to green or purple to yellow and vice versa. You would only add very small amounts of pigments to each other to adjust your colour values. (to make them lighter, brighter or darker or muted)

Alternatively if you are really stuck there are many beginners acrylic sets out there you can try. For the tree studies I have used the Cotman sketchers Pocket Box set of 12 colours. Which is both affordable, compact and transportable. This is a student set but the colours are vibrant and intermixable.

### Watercolour paint sets for beginners;

[Cotman 12 Tube Watercolor Set](#)

[Studio Quality Watercolor Painting 24 Set and Brush Bundle](#)

[Daler Rowney Daler Simply Watercolor Set 12 x 12ml Tubes](#)

[Cotman 12 Tube Watercolor Set](#)

## Watercolour papers;

Watercolour paper is available in different weights and comes in three different surfaces; rough texture, hot-pressed (smooth surface) and cold-pressed or NOT (medium texture). For organic themes the rough or cold-pressed papers are the most compatible. Aim to work on paper that is no less than 90lb/ 200gsm. Watercolor paper which is 140lb (300gsm) is generally the best paper to work on when you are just starting off. Watercolour paper which is 100% cotton is the most reliable paper to work on and does give the best results, however an acid-free, archival wood-pulp and cellulose fibre mix would be suitable for beginners and intermediates whilst experimenting with colour charts and practising techniques. Below are some watercolour pads that would be great for the beginner.

[GOLDLINE Watercolor Studio Pad 100 sheets 200gsm/90lbs cold pressed](#)

[Daler-Rowney Aquafine Watercolor Paper Pads 12 Sheets - COLD PRESSED](#)

[Langton Watercolor Spiral Pads \(NOT Surface\)](#)

[Winsor & Newton Water Colour Gummed Binding - Cold Pressed](#)

## Masking fluid; What is Masking fluid used for?

Masking fluid is a medium which can be applied to the paper to retain the white of the paper. It can be painted over once it has dried and will resist the watercolour paint. Great for retaining sunlight on branches, leaves, foliage and bark. Can be applied with a ruling pen, brush (coated in a little soap first to save the brush from spoiling but don't use your best brushes) or cotton buds or even use a sponge dipped in masking fluid to apply random highlights to foliage. Masking fluid must be used before painting and left to dry completely before painting onto. It can be removed when the paint is dry by lightly rubbing with your finger or a soft eraser. If the white of the paper is a little too white, dilute some of the pigment around this area and pull it softly into your white shape, this will soften the edges and brightness.

[ARTdiscount Masking Fluid](#)

[W&N Colourless Art Masking Fluid](#)

## What is a ruling pen used for?

Ruling pen; *(For beginners this is not an essential tool but an option)*

The Ruling Pen is designed for fine line drawing, technical drawing, cartography and calligraphy. It can also be used for making fine lines and borders in indian ink, gouache, drawing ink and art masking fluid. The thickness of the line can be finely adjusted by turning the metal screw wheel. Just set the ruling pen to the required thickness and dip lightly in masking fluid. Remember to remove any surplus liquid mask off the pen once you have finished.

[Jkar Ruling Pen Solid Pattern](#)

[Colour Shaper Masking Fluid Applicator](#)

## Pencil and sharpener; What is the best sharpener for a graphite pencil?

Any 2b pencil can be used to lightly plan out your tree structure and composition. Just make sure you keep your pencil nice and sharp. And keep a light touch whilst drawing. Do not press down onto the paper with too much pressure, this will just indent the paper and be hard to erase. For preparatory sketches a soft 4b pencil will be useful for sketching the different values and cast shadows. See below for some great starter pencil sets with a variety of hard and soft graphite options.

[Winsor & Newton Studio Collection Sketching Pencil Set x10](#)

[Derwent Graphic 6 Pencil Set](#)

[Derwent Twin Hole Battery Operated Pencil Sharpener](#)

[Staedtler Double Hole Tub Sharpener](#)

[Derwent Black Transparent Two Hole Pencil Sharpener](#)

## Palette; What Palette should I use for watercolour?

A small palette or white ceramic plate will do to begin your studies. If you only have the primary colours you will need to mix various earth and green hues to create your tree palettes, so look for a palette with small sections to place individual pigments and a larger space for mixing.

[Plastic Combination Palette](#)

[Plastic Oblong Palette with Thumb Grip](#)

[China Palette](#)

## Masking tape; What masking tape can I use on watercolour paper?

You will need masking tape to hold your paper in place or to create a border around your composition. Choose low tack masking tape so your paper doesn't rip during removal.

[Scotch Masking Tape](#)

## Kitchen paper towel

Any good strong kitchen towel will work for soaking up excess water from your brush or for pulling off paint from your paper. Avoid the heavily patterned ones as they can leave their pattern mark on your painting.

## Soap;

Very mild soap can be used to clean your brushes gently or see below brush cleaner. To help the longevity of your brushes and to keep them in shape you should clean them thoroughly after each use. Never use boiling water, or leave them soaking in water for any length of time, this will ruin the wooden handle and bend the bristles, even synthetic brushes can get damaged in this way. Clean and then let them dry and always store brushes with the handle tip down and bristles at the top vertically or horizontally in a storage case.

[The Masters Brush Cleaner 75ml](#)

## Brush cleaning pot; What is the best brush cleaning pot?

[Artists Brush Tub](#)

[Brush Holder Tub With Integrated Palette/Lid](#)

## Water-pots;

You should aim to have two waterpots, one for diluting pigments and the other for cleaning your brush. Aim to have a heavy bottomed glass jars for your water so they won't move or be easily knocked over. Change the water often to avoid muddy colours.

## Sponge; What are the best sponges for watercolour painting?

Small natural sponges are amazing for creating textural qualities in your paintings, from dry-wall details, rocks, sand, to foliage, leaves, bushes and tree canopies can all be created with these small sponges. Work your textures by starting with a highly diluted light texture then build up your layers adding more pigment to the water to darken your paint. Work light to dark and then you will always be in control of your image. You can work wet on wet for a more softer effect.

[Royal & Langnickel Professional Artist Sponge Set.](#)

[Jkar Artists Natural Sea Sponges - Pack of 10](#)

## Eraser; What are the best erasers to use for watercolour paper?

A good clean eraser that doesn't mark your paper is worth having in your tool box. They are useful for taking out graphite and charcoal marks and great as a drawing tool whilst doing your initial sketching prep, useful for creating tonal shifts and highlights on your trees, bark and foliage.

[Derwent Battery Eraser](#)

[Faber-Castell Art eraser DUST-FREE green](#)

[Staedtler Mars Plastic Eraser](#)

[Pentel Hi-Polymer Eraser Medium](#)

## **Brushes; What are the best brushes for Watercolour?**

First important tip, always keep your watercolour brushes separate from your oil or acrylic brushes. Your watercolour brushes should only be used for watercolour paint. Many watercolour artists use pure Sable brushes as they are renowned for holding water and pigment and for smooth transitions on watercolour paper due to their softness and ability to hold their shape. Excellent for precision and detailing. However some artists would prefer not to spend a fortune on brushes as they are just starting out on their painting adventures and would also prefer not to use animal hair or blended brushes (synthetic and natural). Fortunately there are many alternative synthetic and vegan brushes on the market that have been developed to mimic animal hair brushes, keeping their point, shape, spring and synthetic brushes come in a variety of shapes and softnesses for watercolour painting.

A good selection of different size and shaped brushes will allow you to create detail and texture, so I would recommend you have several brushes at hand, see below for animal hair and synthetic hair watercolour paint brushes available.

A good selection of brushes to start off with would be; a mop brush, a fan brush, a round brush, and a rigger brush.

## **How do I store my brushes?**

Keeping your brushes stored safely and regular cleaning will ensure their longevity.

[Mapac Brush Easel Case](#)

[Canvas Brush Roll](#)

[ArtBin Essentials Brush Box](#)

## **Fan brush: What is a Fan brush used for?**

Always really useful to have these brushes in various sizes - this brush will allow you to create foliage, leaves, grasses, used with dry brush technique it will allow you to create bark textures, debris, stone textures, soil and sand texture. Techniques used would be dotting pigment, directional flicks or lines, small dabs, or dragging with a dry brush horizontally and vertically. Great for long and short grasses and distant textures.

### **Fan brush Synthetic;**

[ARTdiscount Bristle Brushes - Fan](#)

[Pro Arte TwistGrip Brushes - Fan Small](#)

[Pro Arte TwistGrip Brushes - Fan Medium](#)

[Pro Arte TwistGrip Brushes - Fan Large](#)

## **Fan brush: Hog hair;**

[Series-c-hog-fan-sm Pro Arte Series C Studio Hog Brushes - Fan small](#)

[series-c-hog-fan-med Pro Arte Series C Studio Hog Brushes - Fan Medium](#)

[series-c-hog-fan-lge Pro Arte Series C Studio Hog Brushes - Fan large](#)

## **Round Brushes: How can I use my round brushes?**

Round brushes are available in a variety of sizes and are extremely versatile. The larger sized rounds 10, 12, 16 are great for creating broad areas of colour, broad strokes and washes for skys, sweeping landscapes, horizon lines, painting large tree trunks, dropping in large pigment for wet on wet techniques, whilst the smaller rounds 00, 0, 1,2,3,4 are essential for small linear detailing and outlining. The medium rounds 5,6,7,8,9 are a great all rounder for everything else in between! The most cost effective options are the beginner sets as listed below, however there are many synthetic and Sable brushes you can purchase individually.

## **Round Brush: Synthetic;**

[ARTdiscount Pro Watercolour/Gouache Round Brush,](#)

[ARTdiscount Pro Watercolour/Gouache Round Brush Set of 8.](#)

[Pro Arte Sablene Brushes - Round - Series 110 - Individuals](#)

[1 ARTdiscount SAMPLE Watercolour Brush Set of 5 Brushes](#)

## **Round Brushes: Sable; (the brush of professionals)**

[W&N Artists Water Colour Sable Brushes Round size 00](#)

[W&N Artists Water Colour Sable Brushes Round size 4](#)

[W&N Artists Water Colour Sable Brushes Round size 6](#)

[W&N Artists Water Colour Sable Brushes Round size 10](#)

[W&N Artists Water Colour Sable Brushes Round size 12](#)

## Rigger Brushes; What are Rigger brushes used for?

Rigger brushes are used to create long linear lines such as branches, twigs, texture for long tree trunks, long blades of grass or distant thin spindly tree trunks. They are great for linear detailing vertically or horizontally.

### Rigger Brushes: Synthetic;

[Pro Arte Acrylix Rigger Brushes Series 203](#)

[Artmaster Pearl Brush Rigger Series 55](#)

### Rigger Brushes: Sable;

[Pro Arte Renaissance Sable Rigger Watercolour Brush Series RSR size no 0](#)

[Pro Arte Renaissance Sable Rigger Watercolour Brush Series RSR size no 3](#)

[Pro Arte Renaissance Sable Rigger Watercolour Brush Series RSR size no 6](#)

## Mop Brushes: Synthetic;What are Mop brushes used for?

Great for wet on wet techniques, laying down large wash areas, sky, fields and thick tree trunks. Acts like a Sable brush but fully synthetic. Available in various sizes. Mop brushes will absorb a lot of watercolour, water and inks, used for large areas.

[Sablesque Blended Mop Brush - Series 45 no 3/0](#)

[Sablesque Blended Mop Brush - Series 45 no 2](#)

## Mop (Fine Goat hair) and Wash Brushes: (Squirrel)

Excellent spring and responsiveness, excellent pigment and water retention. Great for large and small wash areas, sky, fields and thick tree trunks. Available in various sizes.

[Isabey Series 6234- Kazan Squirrel Mop Brushes no 00](#)

[Isabey Series 6234- Kazan Squirrel Mop Brushes no 5](#)

[Series 50 Kazan Squirrel Artists Wash Brush Small](#)

[Series 50 Kazan Squirrel Artists Wash Brush Extra Large](#)

[Pro Arte Series 320 - Mop Brushes medium](#)



## Watercolour Brush sets: Synthetic

Below are some great starter sets to begin your watercolour painting studies.

[Pro Arte Sablene Brush Set - W14](#)

[Pro Arte Sablene Brush Set - W15](#)

[ARTdiscount SAMPLE Watercolour Brush Set of 5 Brushes](#)

[ARTdiscount SAMPLE Acrylic Brush Set of 5 Brushes](#)

[System 3 Brush set](#)

## Part 2: Drawing and Sketching preparation for painting a tree; foliage, trunk and branches.

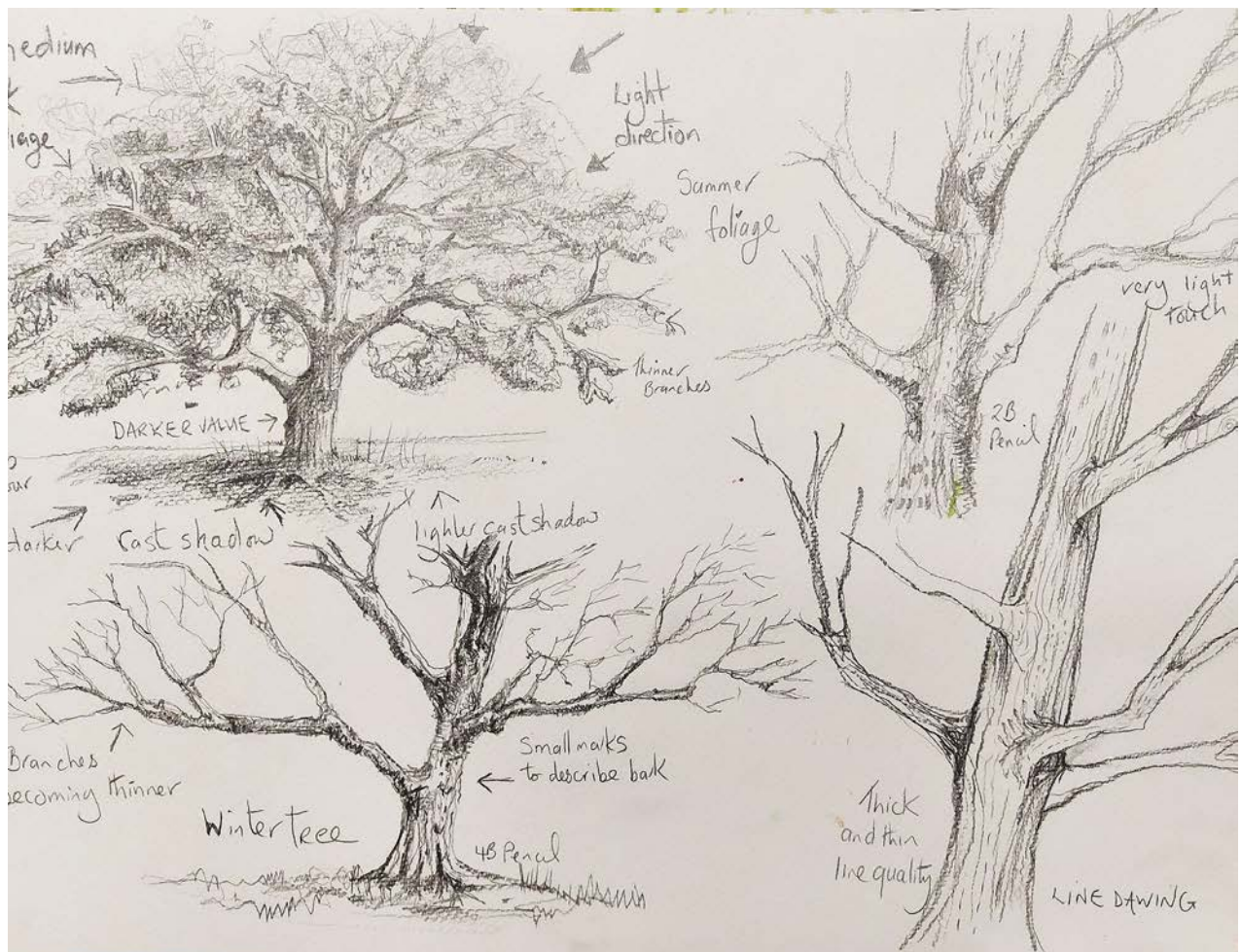
Much planning and preparing goes into a serious commission before artists begin to paint. Employing the same strategies as a professional artist will help you as a beginner to develop your skills quicker. The first task would be to sketch ideas, shapes, textures, practise colour-ways, decide on colour palettes etc..sketching trees from real life can be difficult when the sun shifts and moves throughout the day, or the weather changes from fine to inclement! It is useful therefore to take some of your own photos and make quick sketches on site before you embark on painting back in the studio. Collecting good clear images and creating a number sketches, will help you think about your themes and composition. Rehearsing shapes, values and textures in pencil before you change to a paint brush will ensure your work has a sensitivity and a likeness of your subject. Start by concentrating on a single tree rather than a whole forest to begin with. Also by rehearsing the lightness of pressure used with your pencils, this will teach you to use more control when it comes to painting with the different watercolor brushes. Always only use light to medium pressure.

### **Working from your tree photos in your studio, elements to consider;**

- Establish first, which direction the light is coming from, it is easier to choose either left or right of the tree rather than straight above at this stage.
- Use a soft 2b or 4b pencil lightly to trace out the trunk of your tree first and then the direction of your branches and twigs loosely. Using a **soft** pressure on the paper, draw the thick branches near the trunk of your tree then taper out and with an upward direction move up to the sky getting smaller.
- Some of the branches will disappear within the tree canopy, only to appear again thinner and smaller nearer the top of the tree.
- Once your tree structure is lightly penciled in, look at the shape of the foliage; at this stage you are only looking at the shape, not each individual leaf.
- Where on your tree are the darkest values? create darker shading with the side of your pencil, then look for the mid values and then lastly leave the lightest values where the direction of sunlight will fall on your tree.

- The darkest values will be on the underside of the foliage canopy and the tree trunk and some of the branches nearest the trunk. You should leave areas mid tone and some areas light, to illustrate dappled light falling through the leaves.
- Look at the different textures, and marks on your foliage canopy, aim to create different soft 'scribbly' marks to describe the direction of the leaves without drawing each leaf.
- If you have a large thick trunk look at the different linear marks and patterns, use small marks and longer ones to imitate these. Use, dots, dashes, cross hatching even small scribble marks can be used to familiarise yourself with looking and translating what you see.
- If it helps, make little notes of your observations and analysis on the paper, this will make it easier to remember when you commit to your watercolour paper.
- Make lots of little drawings, investigating these individual characteristics.

## Investigating Form, Shape, Line and Value. Drawing studies.



## Part three: warm and cool palettes and watercolour techniques.

Once you have spent a little bit of time drawing and studying your chosen tree, you will be familiar with the shape and texture and have captured where the light falls on the trunk, branches and foliage. If your tree has little or no foliage it is probably a winter tree where the light is grey and the weather is inclement and cold. To describe these cold conditions a cool palette would help capture the mood of your tree well.

If your tree has a little bit of foliage or a full canopy of leaves maybe the image of your tree has been taken in spring or summer. You could use a warmer greener palette for this tree painting.

I have only used two pigments for each of the first two studies to illustrate how easy it is to create a tree and its mood using a limited palette.

The third study Fig 3 has been painted with all four colours. You can come up with your own two colours to work with as long as one is a green colour and one is a brown or red. These complimentary colours provide a good base for earth and neutral tones. These limited palette examples are just to get you started, once your confidence levels have improved you can use any palette that you prefer. However a good rule to follow would be not to mix more than three watercolour pigments together as your results may become muddy or grey. The more colours you mix the less vibrant they become. If you need to darken your image you can just lay the same pigment over the top wet over dry technique. To lighten just remove with a clean brush or paper towel.

- **Fig 1** - Tree trunk image, no leaves, using Burnt Umber and Viridian Hue to make a third colour of dark Olive green. By using a very diluted mixture of this third colour I lightly painted the trunk and then the branches. Working light to dark, layers of paint were added to create bark detail and texture, roots, and cast shadow. As the branches reach up to the sky they become lighter in appearance. The branches also taper off into smaller branches and twigs. The lighter you paint using this palette the further in the distance the tree looks. Also you could add snow to the branches and under the tree to further enhance the winter feel.



Cool limited Palette Burnt Umber and Viridian Hue makes a third colour dark Olive Green

- **Fig 2** - tree trunk, no leaves, using Indian Red and Sap Green. This is a much warmer palette, this palette gives you the impression of the warm of the sun rising or setting. Again working with just the two colours to create a very diluted warm Olive green, the trunk was painted first using a very diluted pigment, then mixes of the pigments in various proportions and dilutions were used to suggest form and texture. Keep a dark value under the branches and at the base of the trunk.



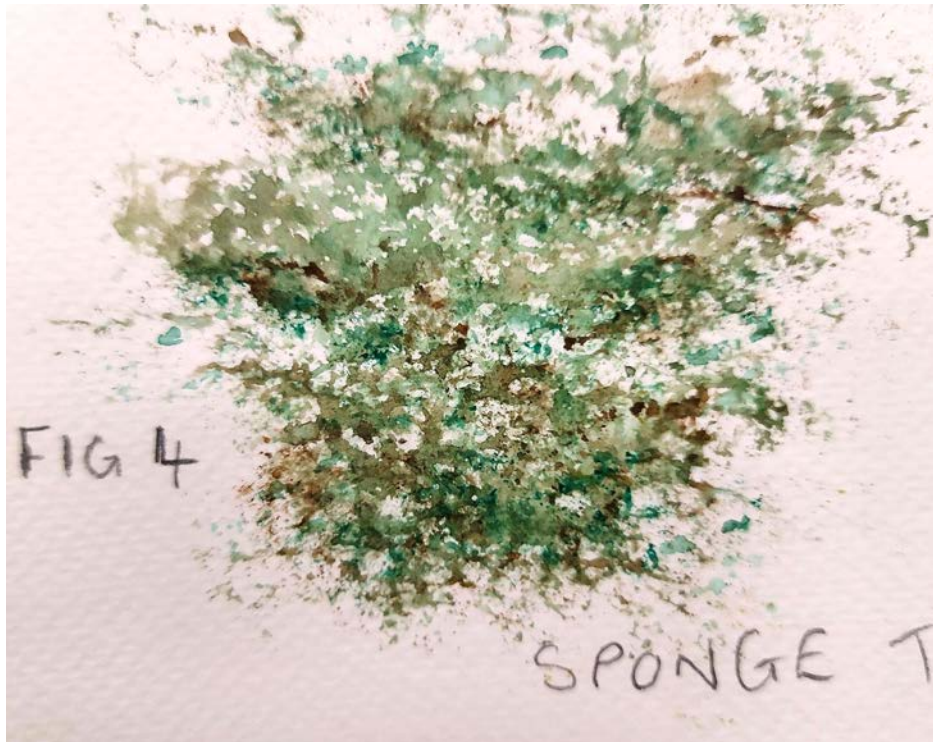
Fig 2 Limited Palette Indian Red and Sap Green makes a third colour warm Olive Green.

- **Fig 3** - this third image tree trunk with no foliage was painted with all four colours. Indian Red, Sap Green, Viridian Hue and Burnt Umber, plus the cool Dark Olive green and the warm Light Olive Green. I worked light to dark, wet paint on dry paper, working in layers. Where the sunlight hit the trunk or branches the pigment was removed to lighten the area, giving the impression of sunlight. To remove pigment off your paper, just paint over the area with a clean wet brush and stroke the pigment off with water. You can also wet the area with water and pull the pigment off with a tissue. By working light to dark and introducing a variety of light and dark colours you can very easily suggest a 3 dimensional form. Add a few dots to suggest bark formations and texture.

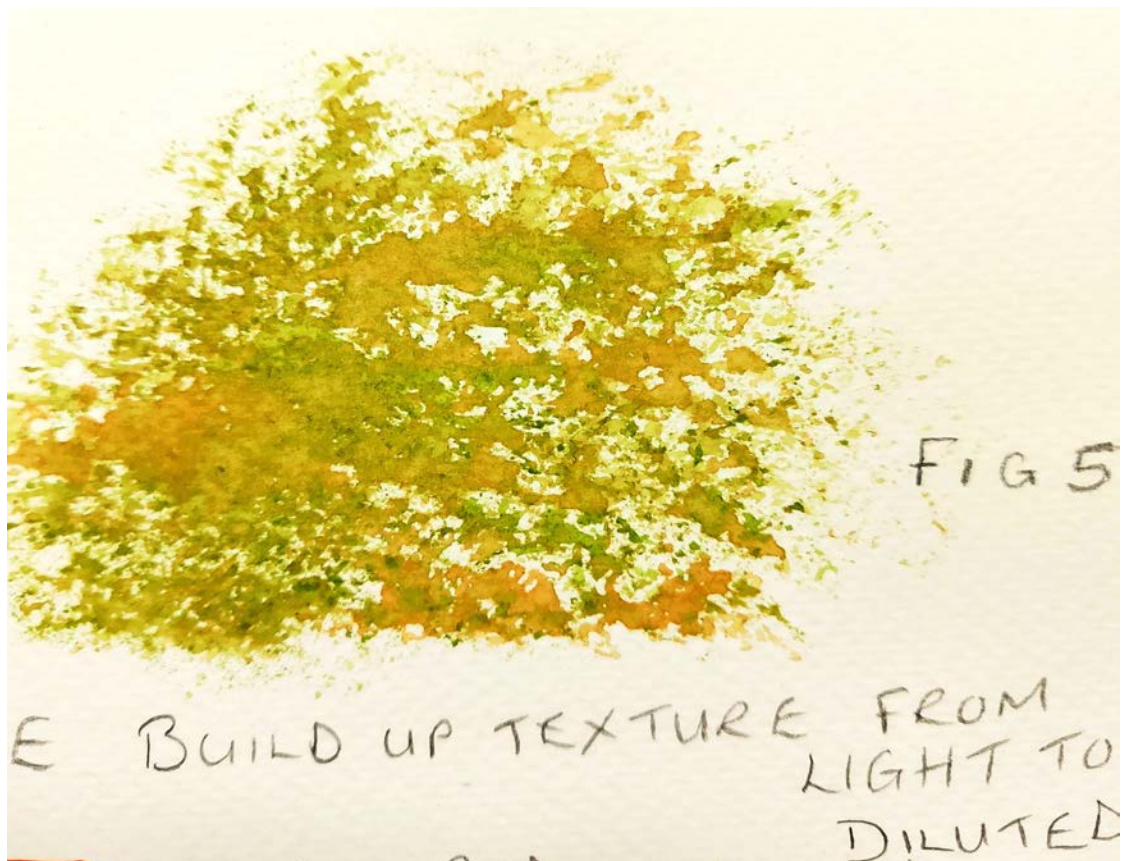


Fig 3 Limited palette. Indian Red, Sap Green, Viridian Hue and Burnt Umber

**Fig - 4** Texture for foliage created using a sponge to apply pigment. First mix Burnt Umber and Viridian Hue pigment to create a dark Olive green. Apply a very diluted dark Olive pigment to the sponge and apply wet sponge to dry paper. Don't use too much pressure to apply pigment. Once dry take a more pigmented dark Olive green mix and apply a darker layer over the more diluted dark Olive green, working the sponge in small areas to give the effect of foliage. Leave some areas more open towards the top of the foliage and darker and denser underneath.



**Fig - 5** A warmer palette for this foliage example. Using the same technique as in Fig 4. Apply a very diluted mix of pigment, let it dry, then work different variants of greens made up of Indian Red and Sap Green over the diluted areas to give the impression of dense and light foliage. Remember which direction the light is coming from. Leave some areas open towards the top of the foliage and darker and denser underneath.





**Fig - 6** Cool Tree with foliage using Burnt Umber and Viridian Hue. The trunk was painted first using the techniques detailed in fig 1, then foliage was added with a sponge, a light and diluted technique first then adding more pigment working light to dark.



**Fig - 7** Warm tree with foliage using Indian Red and Sap Green. The foliage was sponged onto the paper first for this tree painting. A light diluted touch first and fairly spaced out. Then a darker more pigmented sponge technique was applied, creating dark values to suggest volume and shape of the foliage. Using a brush I painted in the small branches in the gaps of the foliage working down from the top and meeting at the trunk of the tree. I used light Olive Green to paint the trunk then painted darker values to suggest 3dimentional form and texture.



Fig 7 Limited Palette Indian Red and Sap Green makes a third colour warm Olive Green

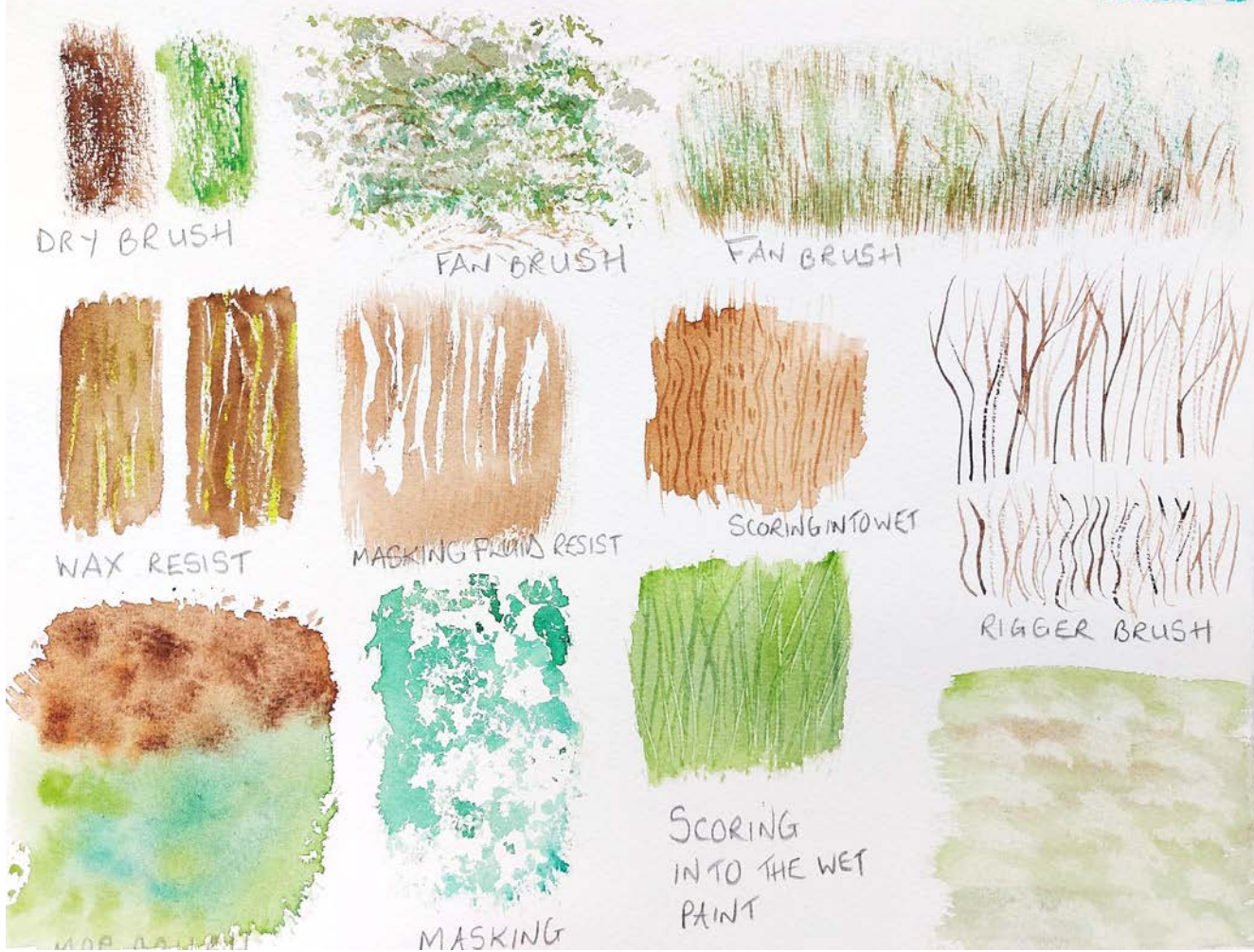
**Fig - 8** This final tree was painted using all four pigments Burnt Umber, Viridian Hue, Indian Red, Sap green and their light and dark Olive greens. The trunk and branches were painted first using a diluted pigment, then adding more pigment and colours to suggest sunlight and texture. The pigment was semi dry in between applications of paint so some colours softly blended together on the paper. A sponge was used again to apply the foliage working exactly the same as before, diluted light colours first then more pigmented added under the light areas to suggest shadow and form.



Fig 8 Limited palette. Indian Red, Sap Green, Viridian Hue and Burnt Umber

## Techniques page Some additional techniques you can use;

1. Wet on wet - wet the paper first before laying down pigment, either with a sponge or brush, whilst still wet drop pigments into the area and they will bloom and diffuse creating a soft variegated effect.
2. Dry brush - using a semi-dry round brush with a full pigment load, drag the pigment down the dry paper using the side of the brush. This will create a textured effect, especially on rough or cold pressed watercolor paper. Great for bark effects.
3. Wax resist - using a coloured or white wax crayon, lightly draw a few marks, dashes and broken lines on the paper first, add watercolour over, diluted or full pigmented.
4. Masking fluid resist - using a brush, sticks, cotton buds or sponge, dipped into the liquid mask, apply the masking fluid where you want to retain the whit of the paper. Wait for this to dry before applying pigment over the top. Once painted wait for pigment to dry before removing the dried liquid mask.
5. Use a fan brush to apply texture, for grasses, foliage and leaves. Dabbing and dragging techniques.
6. Use a rigger brush for fine line details such as twigs and grasses and adding texture to bark.
7. Using a mop brush for large wash areas, dropping pigment onto the wet paper or for creating gradients, pulling pigment across the paper diluting more to create a lighter colour.
8. Scoring into the paint to create texture. Paint the pigment, wet on dry paper, using a toothpick, or the end of your brush score into the wet paint to create your desired texture.



DRY BRUSH

FAN BRUSH

FAN BRUSH

WAX RESIST

MASKING PLUMS RESIST

SCORING INTO WET

RIGGER BRUSH

MASKING

SCORING INTO THE WET PAINT