Painting Raindrops on Roses

A Watercolor Lesson by Susie Short

Supplies and materials needed for this lesson: 8” x10” Arches 140# CP Watercolor Paper, Professional Grade Watercolor Tube Paint (I use Daniel Smith Extra Fine Watercolors): Quinacridone Rose, Quinacridone Violet, Sap Green, Fr Ultramarine Blue, New Gamboge. Round watercolor brushes #’s 6, 8 or 10 (I prefer synthetics with good points) A fine point mechanical pencil, White “Magic Rub” eraser, paper towels, and water container. The “Sharpie” Permanent Marker and Transparency Film are not needed for this lesson, however, I include the information on how I use them in my classes to help get my drawing transferred and ready for the painting process.
The weather forecast was for a nice sunny, partly cloudy afternoon for my visit to the Woodland Park Rose Garden in Seattle, Washington, perfect for taking reference photos for an upcoming watercolor class on painting roses. When I arrived at the garden the roses looked great and there was a wonderful fragrance filling the air. Fluffy clouds were coming and going overhead. Before I could get parked and unload my camera gear it was starting to softly sprinkle. Then came a heavier downpour soaking everything. At first I was unhappy about the garden’s wet welcoming reception, but as soon as the sun peeked out again and shone on thousands of raindrops my attitude changed. Suddenly it looked as though some special little rose garden fairies had just sprinkled glitter over the whole garden. What a wonderful photo opportunity! I could tell this was going to be a great day to photograph roses.

For this lesson on painting raindrops on roses I’m selecting a photograph from that rainy afternoon. I am inspired by the perfect yet simple shape of this beautiful pink rose and I like the smaller buds that were growing near it, and of course the raindrops are just icing on the cake! (You will find a larger copy of this photo to use for your own painting at the end of this lesson.) As an artist, I can change the arrangement of the blooms into different compositions and create several different paintings from the roses in this single photograph.

Let me take just a moment to explain that I love to draw. And I do think that drawing is an important step to learning to see the shapes of any subject. Please, draw every chance you get. How to “draw” a rose is a completely different lesson. So to get us to the painting steps faster - let me share this quick way to trace our subject. 😊

**Prep for painting the rose** - I start by tracing the roses on *transparency film with a **fine tip permanent marker. When I’m planning a composition for a painting I like to work with a simple line drawing of the roses (actually it’s a tracing) and try several arrangements to see what works best. Many times I find more than one good composition – one for now and others for future paintings.

Just for fun, I’ll share three sample compositions I came up with using the tracings and changing the arrangement of the roses. I would add some leaves to complete these compositions. As you can see you can layer the tracings to create several possibilities!

(There is a line drawing included with this package. Even though it is printed on your printer paper you should still be able to see it through your watercolor paper when placed on a light box or window. If you can’t see it try darkening the lines with a pencil or marker.)

*Write-On Transparency Film for overhead projectors
**The Ultra Fine "Sharpie” markers can be found in almost any office supply store.

For this lesson I’ll keep it simple focusing on the larger rose in my reference photograph.
**Rose Step 1** - I can use a light box or window behind my watercolor paper on top of the tracing to lightly trace the rose to my watercolor paper. I usually use a standard mechanical pencil for tracing. I only want a light line to use as a guideline while I’m painting. If there is any excess graphite or pencil lead on the paper’s surface I try to erase it or lift it with a piece of tape to keep it from mixing with my paint. All I need is a hint of a line especially when working with pale colors.

**Rose Step 2** – Let’s start by painting our practice rose. Don’t worry about the raindrops now, we will add those later. Mix up a puddle of pale pink (watery) paint on your palette. You may want to use a piece of scrap paper to find the right water to paint ratio before you start. We begin by painting the entire shape of the rose with a pale pink wash on Arches 140# CP paper. This wash should not be very watery or “juicy” just wet enough to cover the area without running if you tilted it.

While the shape is still wet I added some thicker paint (of the same color) to the edge of my puddle on my palette and then added some darker strokes in the wet rose shape. When you drop color into color it’s called “charging”. If the darker color spreads too much and doesn’t stay where you put it, that’s a sign the area is still too wet, wait just a little bit then try again.

As the paint starts to dry a little (and starts to lose it’s shine) I can also use a thirsty brush to lift a little color for highlights. A thirsty brush is like a mop, just slightly damp to absorb water rather than releasing water into the damp area. Wipe the brush on a paper towel between strokes.

You may want to practice these techniques a few times so you will know when the paper is too wet or too dry, or just right for charging and lifting. It’s not difficult to do – but it does take some practice. ☺

**IMPORTANT TIP**: Allow your paper to dry completely before moving to the next step.
Rose Step 3 – Working on dry paper, the next step is to start defining the rose’s petal shapes. If your pencil lines need to be refreshed, now is the time to do that. You will still be able to see the line drawing through the paint and paper when it’s placed in front of a light source. Remember the lines are just guidelines so they don’t need to be very dark. We will be glazing a thin layer of color over the wash we painted in the previous step. The term used for this technique is “glazing”. It is simply painting thin layers of color over each other, allowing for drying time between each layer. You can even build up several layers to achieve the value you are looking for.

For our practice rose the darkest part of each shape is toward the center of the rose and it gets lighter away from the center toward the outer edge of the petals.

Here’s how we define the shapes:

- Apply color on the inside part of the petal. This is usually the part closest to the center of the rose or where two or more petals overlap. Look for a “V” shape where the petals come together. The petal above the one you will be painting has a lighter edge so you are actually painting a darker value petal under it leaving a hard edge on the upper petal.
- Lay your color on a little juicy in the “V” next to the inside edge.
- Now with clear water, dampening the remaining part of the petal working up to the wet edge of the paint and let the paint run or bleed into the clear water. This is called “blending off”. You want the petal to remain darker at the point of the “V” so be careful not to dilute your paint by using too much clear water.
Tip: It is important for an area to be dry before you apply paint beside it.
Skipping around will allow you to paint on dry areas while damp areas are still drying. Paint a petal, skip a petal.
<-Your practice rose won't look real “pretty” as you work through these steps... but don’t give up!

As you continue to paint the petals and become more confident in defining the petal shapes and petal edges start looking for rough edges that could become drops. You can even start to plan ahead and lightly draw in where you want to place some of the more prominent drops. Too many raindrops can distract from the beauty of the rose so don’t try to put in too many or place them too close together.
Now let’s look at how we add the raindrops .......

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**Painting Raindrops**

We’ll start by looking at the anatomy of a drop. They can be almost any shape but are commonly thought of as either round or oblong ovals. The drop is darker nearest the light source and lighter away from the light source. That’s because the light is shining into the drop and is “caught” and contained by the drop’s shape. The cast shadow is the same width as the drop and the shape of the shadow is determined by the angle and direction of the light source in relation to the angle of the surface the drop is sitting on. The cast shadow is often darkest next to the light side of the drop (opposite the light source) however sometimes there may be a little refracted light present in the cast shadow when the source is extra bright or is near the drop.

**Drops Step 1** – Let’s start with a few practice drops. Paint a couple of patches of color; one the color of your rose and another the color of your leaves on a piece of practice paper. Use a scrap or small piece of good paper so you will get the feel of what you are doing. Dry thoroughly.

**Drops Step 2** - When the area is dry, lightly draw the raindrop shapes on your practice paper, just the drop – not the shadow. Or you could paint them freehand. Wet the area inside the drop with clear water. Using a brush slightly on the dry side, and more paint than water, add the leaf or flower color to sunlit end of the damp drop. (You may want to tilt the paper slightly toward the sunlit end and gravity will help keep the color from spreading too far. In the image (above left) the top drop shows too much water, center shows correct amount of water and bottom shows a partially dry drop. **Now, let them dry.**

In these examples on the right the arrow indicates the sunlight will be coming from the upper left. Approx. 11 o’clock.

**Drops Step 3** – Add the crescent shaped cast shadow to the other end of the raindrop. **Tip: The shadow should be 4 times darker than the light area of the drop.** *(40% rule)*

**Drops Step 4** – Create the reflection of the sun by lifting a highlight from the darkened end of the droplet using a small stiff brush. Or you can use a sharp point of a knife or Xacto to “prick” a highlight. The size of your drop might dictate what tool you use for creating the highlight. That’s it!
The techniques for painting raindrops are not complicated. But it does take some practice to learn how much water to use, and when the timing is right to drop in the color. 😊

As you develop your skills as a “painter of raindrops” here are some advanced touches you can add to your bag of tricks.

- Add some extra color to your larger focal drops reflected from other blooms and things in your painting such as gold (sunny glow) or blue (sky) that might be reflected in the drops.
- Add the color of your rose into a raindrop on a leaflet close to the rose petal.
- Add some pale green to a drop that is near the edge of a petal and in close proximity to a leaf.
- The addition of extra color can be carefully dropped in when the drop is still damp or glazed on later after it is dry.
- Paint a drop half on/half off the edge of a leaf or petal.
- Raindrops can be located on the shadow side of the rose too. Simply paint those raindrops without the highlight.
- Practice painting some drops from a side view. They will have a light edge and the color of the drop is the color of the background behind it. If you plan ahead you can draw the drop, leave it white and add the color after the background is painted.
- A drop that is located on a dark value (such as a deep red) may also reflect lighter objects close to it, including highlights on other raindrops.

Try not to go overboard – this is a case where “less is more”. Don’t place the drops too close together, space them so the cast shadows won’t overlap or cross the drops when the shadows are added.

Are you ready to add some raindrops to your practice rose? First, decide where you want to place your raindrops, keeping in mind that they will become a focal point. Look for a sunlit place that will support a strong cast shadow. In the example on the right the drops have been started on the rose but they still need their cast shadows. The shadows are in place on some of the drops placed on the leaves. Notice the drops on the edge of the petal that are still unpainted white paper.
After you add your raindrops and touch up any petal edges that still need to be defined, you may want to consider how you want to paint the background. The background can be light or dark. You may even decide to leave it white and unpainted as a botanical rendering. In these examples I wet the background area in sections and dropped in the darker greens wet-in-wet for an out-of-focus diffused look. By painting the background in sections I don’t need to worry about an area drying out before I get to it. (I will share more tips on painting backgrounds in another lesson.)

Here is one of my practice roses with the raindrops completed — cast shadows and highlights added.

Practice…play…. and have fun! Remember that it’s only paper. The more you paint the easier it will be.

“Keep those brushes wet!”  Susie
Practice Rose Drawing – Place a copy of this drawing under Arches 140# CP wc paper on a lightbox or window and trace lightly with a fine pencil.