

## Creating the Perfect Watercolor Look from Photos

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How many times have you looked at a watercolor painting of a scene from a place you've visited and said "*I wish I could paint that!*" Well if you really worked at it in a few years you *might* – or you could go the Digital Route, and *counterfeit* that look starting from a photo and applying some digital magic!



Figure 1: Starting Photo

Here is the starting photo slightly cropped, but well proportioned. It has several problems: too little detail in shadows and highlights, and pretty flat colors. Basically it lacks "pizzaz!"

## Beginning the Process – Optimizing the Original Photograph

If you compare the two images, they are very similar except for subtle details; but the Artistry is in the details!



Figure 2: Enhancing details with Redfield's [unobtainium filter](#)

In this image I've run the image through Redfield's [Unobtainium Filter](#) – *Default* to bring up the subtle details in the shadows and midtones. Compare this image to the one above it and you'll see the very subtle differences.



Figure 3: adding spot color to fill-in the highlights

Now we've added a little spot color into the highlights using a masking tool to just the highlights and then a color fill adjustment layer.

So we now have our starting image to work with!

## Applying the Artistry



Figure 4: Styling the image with Topaz Simplify

Here I've taken the image into [Topaz Simplify](#) and applied the *LineArt IV filter*. This flattens and enhances the color. It also adds a thin black outline around some of the details. This can be adjusted in the settings. Although it is starting to have that "Painterly Look", we're still not there yet.



Figure 5: Painterly Effects with Fotosketch 3.02

One of the best programs to date that I've found for producing a true painterly look is [Fotosketcher](#). It only works in the Windows Platform and offers a lot of different painterly effects. Best of all, he's made it free for now, but encourages you to make a donation. *Please do so!* It's worth it!

You can see it has created semi-transparent semi-random shapes with subtle variations in color. In this example I've used the Painting9 watercolor filter. I've found that you can stop it anywhere along the way by pressing the ESC key. I love this since I can preserve the white spaces giving it a more realistic watercolor look. For this I stopped it at about 75%. Compare this to the previous image and you'll see it.

## Completing the Illusion – Adding Texture and Rough Borders

While the image now has the right *painterly look*, it still lacks the very subtle details that you'd find in a true watercolor painting; namely those irregularities, subtle graininess and paper textures, and diffusion patterns. Some software programs try to get this by adding a paper texture throughout the entire image, but it looks too uniform. With this method, you preserve the irregularities and non-uniform nature of a true watercolor.

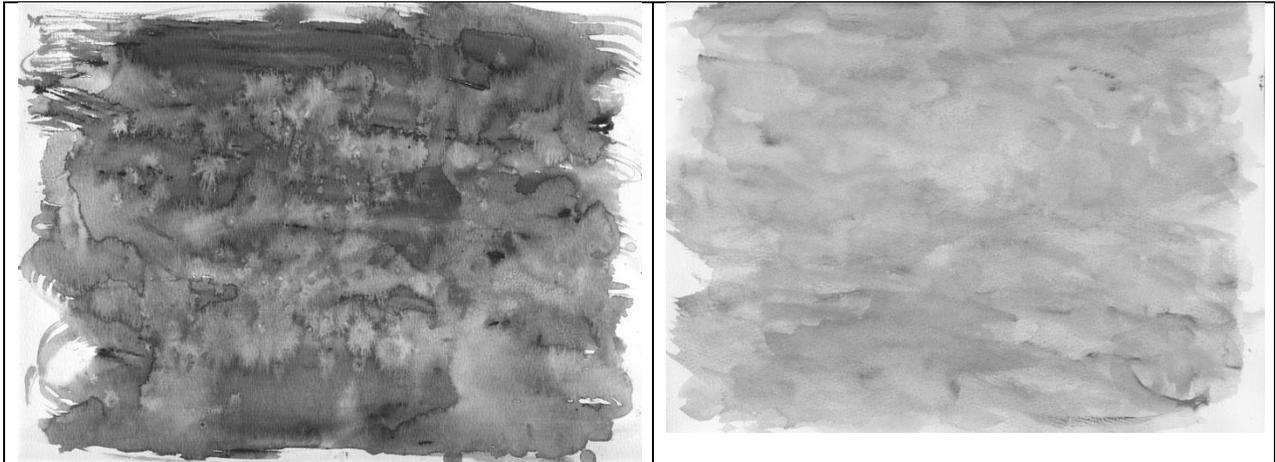


Figure 6: Adding Watercolor Texture with templates

You don't need to really need much to know in order to create your own personal catalog of "watercolor templates". Simply buy some good quality watercolor paper, watercolor paint (black or any dark color will do), and some brushes. Then paint a few strokes on the paper. After they have dried, scan them into your computer at 300dpi and save them as JPG's (grayscale image). Then whenever you want a watercolor pattern you'll have them. The secret is the Composite Method of combining the layers.

### Composite Layer Methods

In order to do this your software must support *layers*. Adobe Photoshop, Corel Paintshop Pro, ACDsee Ultimate, Corel Painter, and a few others all support this.

Normally when you add an image *as a layer*, the *composite method* defaults to Normal or Default. This means it just overlays it as is right on top with no transparency.

Another way, is to use a different composite method. You will usually find a pulldown list of these in the box where it shows "default" composite method.

In this case I used the *Overlay* composite method. What this does is it fuses the patterns and tonality of the top image into the underlying image. You can tweak this by adjusting the lightness and contrast of the upper image, or the opacity to increase or decrease the effect. You can also add more than one layer to give a combined effect. That is what I did with the two templates shown above.



Figure 6: Image with "watercolor templates" added using the Overlay composite method

At this point the image is basically completed. I like to add a rough "painted" border to complete the whole effect. Different software programs may perform this in slightly different ways. In Adobe Photoshop the composite method is called *Lighter Color*. In Corel Painter it is called *Magic Combine*. Basically what it does is lets the image show through in all the black areas, but blocks it out in all the white areas. Again, I'm going to use one of custom templates. In this case I used Microsoft PhotoDraw II adding effects to a black rectangle so that only the edges are affected. You can also do this with opaque black.

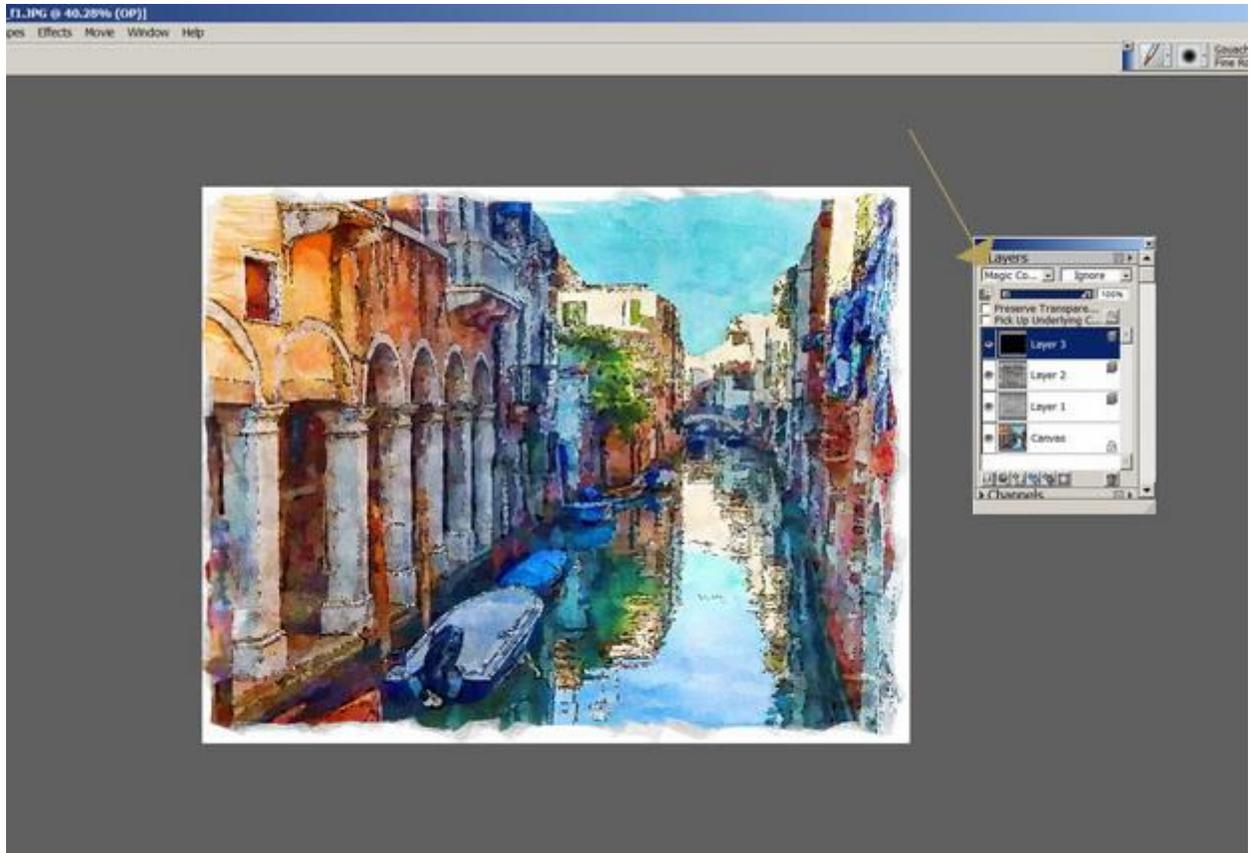


Figure 7: Ragged border added as layer using the Magic Combine composite method in Corel Painter

The Final Result

