

Simple Lessons from Zoltan Szabo

We have all heard of KISS as in “Keep it simple, stupid”. This is applied to many subjects including painting in watercolour. Let’s modify that slogan to “Keep it simple, scholar.” With a bit of study, you can learn the simple lessons to help you succeed in watercolour. The information contained here is simple. The lessons most easily overlooked are probably the ones that seem the most basic, i.e., the simplest. These few points can help you come to terms with the wiles of watercolour.

MAP VIP COW LAP SLAPP KIN

How can these six little words help you simplify your paintings?

MAP: Make a Plan

This is not a new lesson to be sure, but an important one. Plan your work and then work according to the plan that you have made. For most painters, this may mean working out a value study, simplifying your composition, and choosing colors to convey your message. In other words, make a plan. Just as a road map will help you find your way; MAP can do the same thing with your painting. Most artists will do this on paper with a thumb nail sketch. After years of practice, you may be able to visualize and make a plan in your head.

VIP: Value is Prime

Organize your values into a system. Then keep your choice of systems in mind as you execute your painting. Paintings generally are expressed in three values (dark, middle and light) and into three planes (foreground, middle ground and back ground.) As you plan your painting, keep in mind that each plane should be dominated by a single value. The other two values will be evident in smaller amounts. Each plane should be dominated by a different value. In planning your painting, value is second only to shape and ahead of color and texture. Value makes the painting read. As you choose your colors, make test swatches to see the range of values offered by your choices.

COW: Control of Water

Control the amount of water in your brush. Have a moisture control device and use it. Zoltan’s choice was a roll of toilet paper; core removed, crushed and wrapped in wet strength paper towels. His every stroke touches the paper pad in route to his painting. Watch for this as he demonstrates. You can still see some of this in his videos.

If oozles and back runs are an unhappy part of your painting, get control of the water in your brush. Oozles occur when there is more water in your brush than on your paper. The idea of judging how much water is in the brush versus how much is on your paper may be a difficult concept to grasp. If the water flows from the brush to the paper, there is more water in the brush than on the paper. This will generally insure a back run. If that is what you are trying to get, you are in luck. If not, you want to be sure that there is less water in the brush than on the paper.

In general, water should move from the paper to the brush when painting on wet or damp paper. The pigment should move from the brush to the paper. Use the moisture control device to help keep you on track. Zoltan touches the pad to eliminate extra water before he touches the paper with his brush.

LAP: Limit a Palette

This simple concept can help you easily attain color unity in every painting. There are many fine brands of watercolour paint. Which brand or even which pigment you choose is not too important if you have made a compatible selection. You will want a high-quality professional grade of paint in an assortment of colors that allows a full range of primaries, secondaries, tertiaries, and neutrals and is able to achieve all values varying from very light to very dark.

Zoltan generally had 16 pigments on his palette. His choice of colors varied from year to year but always met the standards suggested above. By limiting your working palette to 16 or 20 colors, you will be able to learn the characteristics of each. If you have 100 different pigments at hand, you will be less likely to understand the individual characteristics and properties. Watercolour is an active medium. Unlike oil, acrylics, pastels, pencil, etc., watercolour responds to the strokes that went before and will follow. Watercolour reacts.

From time to time, with a limited palette you will likely feel the pull of a new color. With this pull there may be the realization that some colors on your current palette are being ignored. Move the old out and the new in. As you have intimate knowledge of the colors on your palette, you can quickly learn the characteristics of the new additions.

SLAPP: Severely Limit a Painting Palette

In most cases 6 or fewer colors will do the job. Choose carefully. As you only have 16 or so colors on your working palette, you will know the characteristics of each and know how they all interact. Make color swatches to remind yourself of the available ranges of the colors chosen for

each painting. Notice how often Zoltan uses only three pigments. Be aware of the exciting range he gets from his severely limited palette.

KIN: Knowledge is Necessary

Know your colors. Also have some general knowledge and expectation of pigment behaviour. For example, expect any phthalocyanine pigment of any hue or brand to stain. Know that cadmiums are generally opaque in heavy consistency. If you have this knowledge and expectation, you will more easily make informed decisions when you choose pigments for your own working palette. And when you encounter a pigment that goes against your expectation, it is easily noted as an exception.

Recapping

MAP – Make a Plan

VIP – Value is Prime

COW – Control of Water

LAP – Limit a Palette

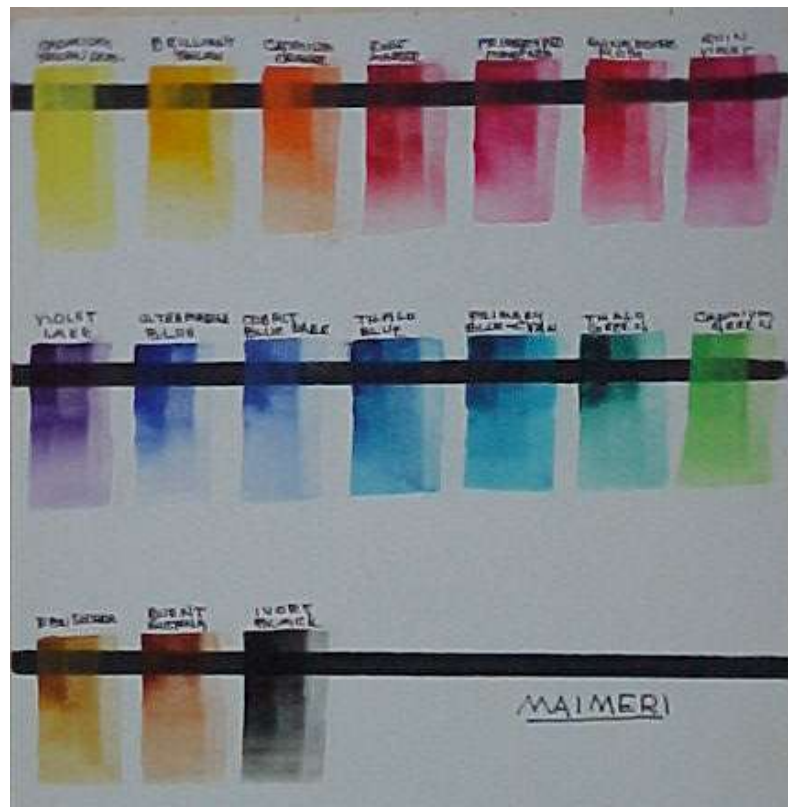
SLAPP – Severely Limit a Painting Palette

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Quick Tips for Watercolour

- Mud? Easy to get. Just mix complementary colors in equal volume. To avoid mud, let one color clearly dominate.
- Wet paper requires more paint. The water carries the pigment into the paper.
- Negative shapes are not painted. They are defined by painting around them.
- Analogous colors are harmonious in behaviour and are close to each other on the color wheel.
- Colors appear brighter when applied as initial wash. Also colors look brighter next to white paper than against other bright colors.
- When painting portraits, use diluted opaque pigments to dominate flesh tones.
- Permanence? Keep in mind that fugitive colors are fugitive. They will not be around for the long haul even if mixed with permanent colors.

- Charge. While a strong dark wash is still wet, paint into it with a lighter equally wet color. The new color will replace the first one by taking over some or all of its initial territory. It is essential that both washes be equally wet.
- Heavy Hues—Sedimentary pigments settle instantly in a wet wash and show texture in a mix. The wetter the wash, the more texture will appear. Also be sure to keep the wash puddle on your palette well mixed as the heavy color will settle out.
- When using a strong staining color, change your mixing water often to avoid polluting your washes. If you would like to know what your own pigments will do for you, make a color chart. This is the simplest form with only basic information.



To prepare, use a waterproof black marker to make a heavy line on watercolor paper--your favorite brand. Next make fairly heavy swatches across the line with each of your pigments. Make the swatch large enough to manipulate. With a damp clean brush, lose an edge. When the swatch dries, try lifting. Check to see how much of the pigment is visible on the black line. In the example here, you can easily see that cadmium yellow lemon and cadmium orange are opaque. Make mental notes of the behavior to see what properties you can expect from each pigment.