



INTRODUCTION TO GRAPHICS

Brush Stroke Bonanza

Information
Sheet No.
PS650

Get believable results from this digital technique that will have your photos looking like realistic pen-and-ink drawings. Before you begin you should look at an enlargement of the potential final result by opening the file Final Result.bmp in the activity folder.

Digital filters and plug-ins net only fair results when rendering the subtleties, depth, and complexities of watercolor. The secret to watercolor conversion that doesn't scream "Digital!" is to use brush strokes that mirror the motions of an artist's hand. One of the best watercolor media is the fine pen-and-ink drawing, loosely stroked with brushes full of color that layer life and light and shadow, yet leave an abstract feel with plenty of unpainted white space. It's sleek, dramatic, minimalist, and imaginative.

The inspiration for this watercolor-conversion technique, which is often used for standalone wall art and as storyboard introductory material in event videos, comes from two intriguing proven successes: the hand-colored fashion sketches for the House of Chanel that metamorphose on the screen into breathing models, glamorously enfolded in texture and shimmering fabric and those of interior designers who often fade her precision architectural renderings into finished interiors with the new furniture, lighting, and accessories all magically in place.

You don't have to be doing either of these to achieve these effects -- just follow this recipe for hand-painting delightful imagery directly in Photoshop. While this technique is far from automated, it requires no color mixing, no custom brushes, and once you get the feel of making strokes, it's almost as simple as a paint by number.

You'll need Adobe Photoshop, preferably CS2 or higher; a stylus and tablet; and a full-resolution 8-bit image that has been color corrected, cropped, and manipulated for photographic accuracy.

Step 1. Blur the Image

Here is a densely populated action wedding scene (Figure 1) to demonstrate how you can achieve very fine detail. Most images will be far simpler and less time-consuming to execute.



Figure 1. This image, with its lush color and iconic meaning reminiscent of Norman Rockwell, makes for a perfect story board scene for a video. To see a larger version, click on the image.

Duplicate the image, and name the new layer "Blur."

Go to Filter > Blur > Smart Blur and enter settings that range from about 50 radius and 55 threshold to 40 radius and 60 threshold. Settings of 80/90 will be too sharp overall and 15/20 too blurry for faces. Choose High quality and Normal mode.

Create a layer mask and paint detail back into the image with the softest black brush, touched loosely over any details to be selectively preserved (Figure 2). On faces, use a brush setting of 50% Opacity and 50% Flow. Decrease that to 20/25% for open areas, and increase it when you want to assure visible detail, such as in the very delicate wedding dress.



Figure 2. Preparation steps are essential, because if you lose precious detail at this stage, you can never get it back.

Flatten the layer and save the file under a new name for safety.

Step 2. Create the Pen-and-Ink Drawing

Duplicate the blurred layer, which is now the background, and name it "Ink Drawing."

Go to Filter > Stylize > Glowing Edges and choose Width Edge, Brightness Edge, and Smoothness settings of 1, 12, and 3, respectively. Another typical setting variation is 2, 10, and 3. The trick is to make sure that edges are fine enough to show all complex detail. The pen and ink drawing will become the outline, making it easy to paint in the right place (Figure 3).

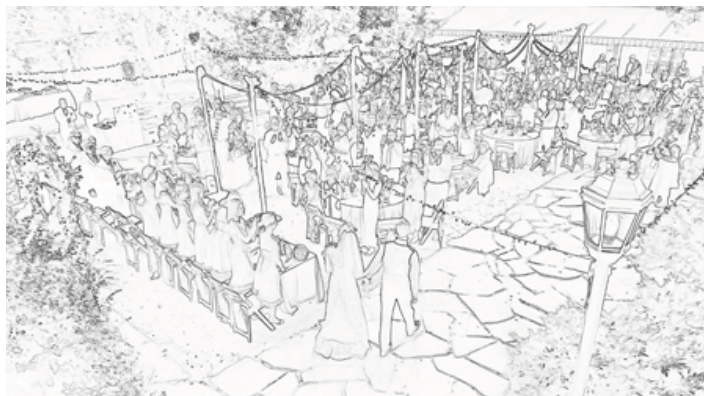


Figure 3. The ink drawing layer looks a little like a paint-by-numbers. Invert the image (Command/Control-i).

Go to Image > Adjustments > Desaturate, then change the layer blend mode to Multiply. Reduce Layer Opacity slightly (here it's 80%), but not too much, or the pen and ink effect will dissolve into a more abstract, free-hand watercolor feel.

Step 3. Prepare the Watercolor Layer

Duplicate the blurred background layer and name it "Watercolor."

Invert the image (Command/Control-i), drag it to the top position, and change the blend mode to Color Dodge.

Step 4. Paint the Color Wash and Background

Using the Dry Media Brush, paint with black directly on the Watercolor layer you just created (Figure 4). The colors will appear from the lower layers in the stack. Make frequent snap shots so you can easily go back to previous stages. During this step, Medium magnification works best.



Figure 4. Paint in the scene, changing Opacity and Flow settings to match the subject matter. To see a larger version, click on the image.

For foliage and the general scene, choose a brush setting of Opacity 30% and Flow 30%. Move your stylus freely, but smoothly and irregularly, leaving some white areas, especially at the edges, and covering others, such as the bushes, completely.

For skin, clothing, and delicate areas, your brush setting should be lower still, at about 20/25%. Be light with your brush!

Try to finish painting every object requir-

ing Dry Brush before you move on. You can alternate between brushes, of course, but switching takes much more time.

Step 5. Paint the Fine Details, Texture, and Depth

Using the Watercolor Textured Surface Brush, paint with black directly on the same Watercolor layer. Set your magnification to high, and zoom in and out frequently to judge the results.

Your brush settings should be small, about 25% hardness, with the Opacity and Flow at 75% to 100%. Vary the stroke size and application so that they're visually appropriate for each object.

Stroke loosely, bouncily, lively, almost scribbling. Paint hair and clothing patterns with curls or squiggles. It will look more real if you don't color totally within the lines (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Now focus on the details that will take your image to a higher level. To see a larger version, click on the image.

Tip: Layer strokes several times to create depth, dimension, and shadow, just like the watercolorist loads her brush, overlaying and changing the mix of color and water. Use a white brush to soak up some color and make an area scratchy or more edgy, as watercolor would normally appear.

Step 6. Complete the Final Touches

Use the Eraser tool to clean up the image's edges, making sure there's enough white space for that authentic watercolor look.

Restore small things that have disappeared, such as the light bulbs in the sample image. They were restored by painting with

a warm gold color, 100% Opacity and Flow, using a tiny, irregular swipe for each bulb.

Darken the whole image (using your choice of Levels or Curves), adding a bit of Saturation for visual intensity. You may also want a slight corner darkening, as here, for greater impact (Figure 6).



Figure 6. For final touches, the light bulbs were restored, the entire image was darkened a bit, and a little more shading was added to the corners. Figure 7 shows the final results.



Figure 7. The final pen and ink watercolor was used in a concept event video as part of a 12-image storyboard. Each watercolor fades into the original photo depicting an iconic stage of the event.