

# MAKING YOUR MARK

by Christopher Schink

The brush stroke—that personal, calligraphic mark that distinguishes one artist’s work from another — seems to be disappearing. From the evidence of current gallery shows and exhibitions, more and more painters are choosing to work in a highly rendered, almost “mechanical” style. Their paintings are done in a flat, controlled and impersonal technique that gives the viewer little sense of the artist’s feelings (other than a compulsion for neatness) or his process. Of course, that’s just the kind of paintings, filled with laboriously rendered details, that the great unwashed public loves and admires, “ Would you look at all the delicate lace in that lovely still-life! It must have taken them hours to paint.” Missing from these works are the drips and skips, starts and stops that are evidence of the artist’s physical and emotional involvement in the creative process.

Painting styles move in cycles, from neat to sloppy and back again to neat. In watercolor, we’re presently in a neat period in which control and finish are more common ingredients than energy and spontaneity . Of course, there are lots of exceptions and there’s nothing wrong with neat; Vermeer and Van Eyck were careful painters and great ones. Nevertheless, I long for a return to that painterly approach—Sargent’s bravura brush stroke, Burchfield’s odd rhythmic marks, Cezanne’s searching lines, Marin’s frantic scratches—that characterized so many great watercolor artists from the past. Let’s look at how you can achieve these effects.



The painterly brush stroke is clearly evident in this briskly painted seascape by West Coast artist Jerry Stitt. He describes each element in the painting—the pilings and dock, the water, the boat—with a confident technique that gives the painting a sense of immediacy and spontaneity.

## Different strokes



**Strokes made with finger movements**  
You have greatest control of brush strokes made with finger movement—a technique used for filling in small areas and accurately rendering details. You might reserve this kind of painting to a few areas of importance. An entire painting produced this way can look tight and tedious.

**Strokes made with wrist movements**  
Painting with wrist movements allows you to make a more rhythmic and expressive mark. With practice, you can learn to accurately describe your subject with simple, direct brush strokes that will give your painting a feeling of immediacy and involvement.

**Strokes made with arm movements**  
You make large, gestural brush strokes by moving your arm rather than fingers and wrists. Such strokes can convey a feeling of boldness and freedom to your painting. You can't paint small details with large arm movements, but you can create excitement.

### HOW YOU MAKE YOUR MARK

The brush mark you make is the result of the kind of brush you use and how you use it. You can apply paint by moving your fingers, moving your wrist, or by moving your arm. Some painters employ a combination of different movements in applying paint—large areas painted with strong gestural strokes of the arm combined with smaller details painted with movements of the wrist or fingers. Some painters depended entirely on brush strokes made with the arm (De Koonig, for example) or with the wrist and hand (Monet, Van Gogh). The size of your work and whether you paint it sitting or standing also affects your choice of brush stroke.

Most experienced painters develop a preference for a particular kind of brush or surface quality. They may select a certain brush for a particular task—for example, a large wash brush for the initial stages of a painting, a small pointed brush for the final details. Whatever your choice, you should try to maintain the appearance of a consistent approach throughout. Your painting shouldn't look like it was painted by three different guys with three different brushes on three different days.

In the painting above I began with large, flat washes and then described the basic form of the figure with rhythmic movements of my arm. I painted the smaller areas such as the hand and parts of the head with brush strokes made with wrist movements. For the mouth and eye I was a little more careful and used more controlled and exact hand movements.

On the next page I describe the kind of marks different brushes make.

### The Round brush

Since the 18th century, the round, pointed soft-hair brush has been a standard part of watercolorists' equipment. Brushes made of Kolinsky sable (or sabelline) have the greatest amount of spring and are easiest to control. They're particularly well-suited for making organic forms. By varying the pressure on the brush as you paint, you can move from a hair-thin line to a thick, snake-like shape.



### The Flat Wash Brush

The flat, soft wash brush didn't become a primary painting tool until the middle of this century. Since then the 1" aquarelle-type brush has been a part of practically every watercolorist's kit. Although it can be manipulated to make a variety of marks, it is best suited to painting flat, geometric shapes characteristic of the "California School."

### The Flat Bristle Brush

Although not usually associated with watercolor, flat, stiff bristle brushes of the oil painting, sash brush or "Bulletin Cutter" variety are essential tools in some painter's kits. Some of the painters in the "California School" used such brushes to attain large geometric shapes and a varied, broken line quality in their work. More contemporary painters employ stiff brushes to create highly expressive gestural marks.



**try this...** If you're tired of producing tight and tedious watercolors and would like to try for something more personal and "painterly," here are some suggestions: Start your painting with the biggest brush you've got (I don't mean a #6 round but something in the 1 1/2" category) and paint the biggest shapes possible. Don't worry about staying between the lines of your drawing. Stand up and use your arm. Try for rhythmic movements rather than accuracy. When painting the smaller elements in your design, continue to use the largest brush possible and try to describe them with a few strokes. Your first attempts may appear a little sloppy, but with practice you'll begin to develop a more natural and painterly way to apply paint.