

## In the Air

Use four paint colors to create a variety of cloud-laden skiescapes.



I painted **Surf Fishing, Core Banks** (watercolor on paper, 12x16) using two gray mixtures: cerulean blue and cadmium red light, and French ultramarine blue and burnt sienna.

**W**atercolor seems like it was made for painting cloud-filled skies. When mixed with water, its translucency enables the artist to achieve soft edges and accidental effects easily and quickly. And, because watercolor dries fast, especially en plein air, layering additional colors in the sky is effectively accomplished.

I rely on four go-to paint colors—cerulean blue, cadmium red light, French ultramarine blue and burnt sienna—to achieve gray mixtures that comprise myriad cloud-filled skiescapes, from sunny vistas dotted with fluffy white cumuli to gray scenes layered with stratus clouds.

### Building a Sky Palette

Regardless of cloud cover and composition, I paint skies primarily with my go-to quartet of colors. At right is a color chart of the mixtures I create with them. The light gray is cerulean blue and cadmium red light. When mixing it, I start with the blue and add a tiny amount of the orangey-red. Depending on how much red I add, I can create either a cool gray or a warm gray. The darker gray is comprised of French ultramarine blue and burnt sienna. I can get a cool or warm gray depending on how much brown I add. I mix these separately in a ceramic flower dish, and then I can combine them together as needed. It's amazing how many variations can be made, and

sometimes the red or sienna will separate a little, creating some wonderful textural effects.

Follow along as I use the four colors to paint seasonal skies under a variety of weather conditions.

### 1 Spring Sky

*Skyfield in March* (opposite) is a studio piece I painted from a photograph of Skyfield, one of the grand houses near my home in Baltimore County, Md., that I paint often. I was drawn to the color contrasts of the scene, particularly the blue-gray clouds, and the rich golds and greens of the lawn. When I paint this scene, it's always about the sky. I minimized the landscape to make the clouds more grand and dramatic.

The clouds in the upper-left corner were thinning and had turned white. The main body of the front was



## tips for painting skies

- I advise my workshop students—and anyone just beginning to explore landscape painting—to practice painting clouds in the studio first so they're not contending with the sky's transitory nature. I encourage them to explore cloud structures via reference photos and to experiment with color mixtures.
- I prefer to paint on Arches hot-pressed paper blocks because of the way cerulean blue settles on it; however, I don't recommend this paper for beginners. The paint will float a bit on the surface, which can disturb the underpainting if applying too many layers.
- Painting skies en plein air takes some practice. I think one should strive for a three-hour painting which, for me, took a lot of discipline. My natural inclination as a realist is to include as many details as possible. Because the light and clouds change quickly, I've learned over time to be economical and to think in broader terms. A landscape painting done outdoors is always going to look a little rough; that's the beauty of painting en plein air.

See the step-by-step progression of *The Finnerty's Outbuildings* (on page 64) at [artistsnetwork.com/medium/watercolor/william-wright-watercolor-cloud-demo](http://artistsnetwork.com/medium/watercolor/william-wright-watercolor-cloud-demo).



**Skyfield in March** (watercolor on paper, 16x12)

**Summer Sky, Greenspring Valley** (below; watercolor on paper, 12x16)



passing by, with the heavier rain clouds moving off to the right.

I painted the sky with the two gray mixtures and the lawn with quinacridone gold, raw sienna and burnt sienna. The green is a mix of aureolin and French ultramarine blue.

## 2 Summer Sky

Maryland's Greenspring Valley is very rural despite being located near Baltimore. This late-spring landscape, *Summer Sky, Greenspring Valley* (above, right) is painted from a reference photo and features a cloud pattern I love at this time of year.

There are actually two cloud formations here: One is a high, thin stratus; the other, a lower cumulus that threatens a little rain. After making a detailed drawing, I used verditer blue for the sky and my light

gray mix for the clouds. I painted the upper clouds wet-into-wet. I then worked on the cumulus cloud, using very little water and paint, trying to stay as light as possible and preserve the white of the paper. For the darker clouds, I used my dark gray mix. I combined this with my light gray mixture and pushed the color toward a browner, warmer gray to give it a greater sense of impending rain.

## 3 Fall Sky

I painted the scene in *The Finnerty's Outbuildings* (on page 00) on a warm, sunny afternoon in early fall from my neighbor's lawn. The trees were just being to turn, and there was still a lot of green in the landscape. I painted the sky as quickly as I could because it was changing so fast. I made a simple sketch, but

without any pencil lines in the sky. I started with the light gray mixture and then painted verditer blue for the sky around the white of the clouds. I worked on the landscape until it dried; I then added layers of gray and ultramarine blue in the top of the sky.

You'll notice when studying a sky that it's a darker, richer blue above your head and a lighter, softer blue along the horizon because of the amount of atmosphere through which you're looking.

## 4 Winter Sky

*Skyfield in February* (on page 00) is a studio piece of Skyfield that I painted from a photograph. We had a cold winter that year, and the snow had packed down into ice. I thought that the sky mirrored the ground and that the ice was in the sky as well.





**The Finnerty's Outbuildings** (watercolor on paper, 16x12)

I made a detailed drawing and then painted the sky and ground at the same time. I used my light gray mixture to begin and then layered my darker gray over it. The tree line and house give the sky dramatic scale. There isn't much color, but the feeling is clear: dark, cold winter.

### 5 Sunrise Sky

When my wife and I were vacationing at the Delaware shore, I awoke early one morning and became captivated by this sunrise in *Saturday Morning After the Rain* (opposite, top). I painted this plein air landscape between 9 and 11 a.m., and the sun was quite high by the

time I finished. I started with the light gray mixture, leaving white paper low on the horizon. I followed it with a line of Naples yellow and red, as well as a pale line of verditer blue and Winsor violet. While this was drying, I painted the sand with Naples yellow and raw sienna.

After the sky dried, I came back on top with my darker gray mixture. The clouds changed slowly, but I still had to paint from memory and use a little artistic license. I painted the sea and surf when other areas were wet, using as little water as possible. At one point, I took the painting inside and used a hair dryer to speed up the drying process.



**Skyfield in February** (watercolor on paper, 16x12)

### 6 Sunset Sky

I painted *Quaker Neck Sunset* (opposite, bottom) during an April plein air event on Maryland's eastern shore. I was working small, and it was still quite light out when I started. After a simple sketch, I applied the first layer—a mixture of cerulean blue and a tiny amount of cadmium red light.

While this was drying, I worked on the landscape. I was interested in the colors of the field and wanted to preserve them before the light faded. The clouds changed every so often, and I tried to capture them as they appeared, letting each layer dry before adding more color. The oranges in the upper sky didn't



**Saturday Morning After the Rain** (watercolor on paper, 12x16)

appear until the end of the session, when the landscape was all but gone. This resulted in a mixture of light effects over a two-hour period.

## 7 Rainy Sky

At 21x16 inches, *Rainy Morning, Annapolis* (below) is the largest size I've ever worked en plein air. I stretched a sheet of 180-lb. hot-pressed paper to a board and painted with the board resting in my lap.

I started this September plein air landscape around 8 a.m. and finished at 11 a.m. A front was moving through, and it had rained earlier. Both of my gray mixtures are featured here. I worked on the sky as quickly as possible, as the clouds were moving past quickly. When the sky was done, I completed the harbor scene. 🎨



**Quaker Neck Sunset** (watercolor on paper, 10x14)



**Rainy Morning, Annapolis** (watercolor on paper, 21x16)