

Painting Backgrounds on Fabric



by **Thelma Newbury**

Things to gather together before starting: white cotton, a selection of paint brushes, Setacolor® transparent paint and/or opaque paint by Pebeo, a working space slightly larger than the piece of fabric you want to paint, a number of yoghurt lids or shallow containers for mixing paints, a squirt bottle or yoghurt dish with water and a bottle of Aloe Vera gel.

For white cotton I use Pima cotton or Egyptian cotton with the highest thread count (tightest weave) that I can get.

For paint brushes I use a two-inch paint brush, a small fan paint brush, a two- or four-inch dollar store paint roller and several fine point brushes.

I know there are a lot of fabric paints out there. The ones I have used are the Setacolor® paints by Pebeo®. You don't need to buy every colour they have. Start with the primary

colours (yellow, red and blue) plus black and white. I have also used Lumiere Light Body Metallic Acrylic by Jacquard® to give metallic and fancy effects.

If you have primary colours, think back to grade school. Yellow and red make orange; red and blue make purple; blue and yellow make green; lime green would require more yellow. Play around with mixing colours. You only need a little bit of each unless you are painting a large piece.

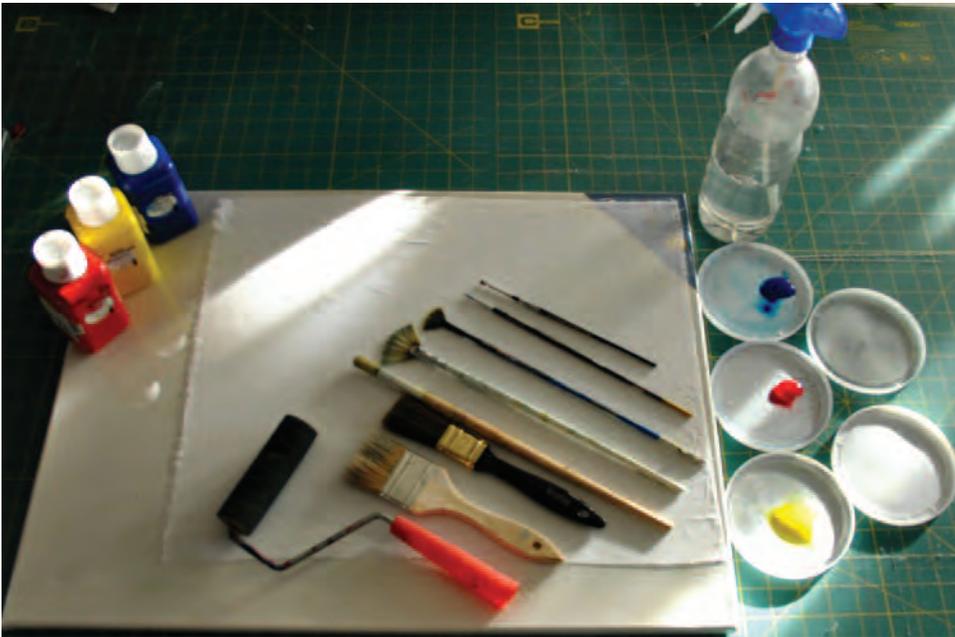
To make tints, add white or water with your colours. To make shades, mix only the smallest amount of black with your colours. You can always add more black, but you can't take it away once you have added it to your colours. To make tones mix a small amount of black with your colours.

For sky and water, I generally use Setacolor® transparent paint. It allows good

colour blending when changing colours in a sunrise or sunset. You can make colourful clouds by laying on other colours (purple or the smallest amount of black to the colours you are using).

Now think about what you want to paint. Is this a portrait or landscape oriented piece? Is this a scenery piece? If so, do you want to paint the whole piece? Just the sky? Or just the water? Is this to be cut up and incorporated into a quilt? If so, think about painting your design in four-, six- or eight-inch squares and/or rectangles in the size that you need.

Let's get down to work. First, cut the piece of cotton to slightly bigger than you want your artwork to be. The paint does not always have the same consistency at the outer edges as in the middle. Because I mount my pieces on an artist's canvas I allow



The basic tools for painting backgrounds on fabric.

two inches extra on each side. Second, put the fabric under the tap to get it completely wet. Squeeze or wring out the excess water. Lay your fabric on a flat surface. I use a piece of plywood covered with mactac to give a non-porous surface, or a shrink-wrapped artist's canvas that is larger than the piece of cotton. Both of these surfaces can be easily wiped off and used again. Third, smooth out the bubbles that occur. I use my hands (or a windshield ice-scraper) starting at the centre and working the bubbles out towards the edges. You seldom get rid of all the bubbles, but work at it for a while. Remove any threads that may be under the dampened fabric (they will show up when you paint).

If I paint an entire scene sunrise or sunset, I figure out where my horizon line will be. Although the cloth is wet, I generally add some water to the Setacolor® on a yoghurt lid or shallow dish. This makes the paint flow easily. Paint a yellow strip. I use the fan brush because it is relatively small and I am usually planning to change colours going up to the top of the piece and down to the lower edge. Add some orange, melding the colours. Add some red, blue or purple. If I want a lighter reflection area in the water I add some water to that area. Blend your colours together, and play a lot. As I paint, if I see a bubble in the fabric I try to work it to the outer edge and get rid of it. Remember colours are always darker when wet, lighter when dry.

You do not have a lot of control about how the colours will mix. My rule of thumb is, "What happens will happen, and I will work with what I get."

When I have enough colour on the cloth leave it undisturbed to dry. If it is a sunny day (even in winter) I take my plywood or artist's canvas outside to dry. It dries in about an hour in the sun. It takes overnight to dry in the studio.



I have painted three pieces to give you an idea of what they look like. These are in the wet stage.

When fully dry, throw it in the dryer and spin for 10 minutes to set the colour. If you are worried about discolouring the dryer, the piece can be ironed instead. Move the iron back and forth for ten minutes (on a warm to hot setting). My dryer is permanently tinged blue because I paint so many skies and waters. It does not come off on my clothes because the heat has set the colour on the drum of the dryer. If you paint something that it going to be washed regularly, use both methods (the dryer and the iron) for heat setting. If it's not going to be laundered choose the method that suits you best.

If I paint a whole scene piece without a lot of colour change, I figure out where the horizon line will be. I mix more of the colour that I want for the sky and/or water, remembering to add some water to the paint for the flowing. Use the two- or four-inch dollar store paint roller for a bigger area. You will probably want to make the horizon colour lighter than the foreground and top of the sky. Roller a strip for the horizon. Add a little more paint to your pallet to darken the colour. Roller to top and bottom melding the shades together. Dry and heat set in the same manner.

Sometimes I want to make a dramatic effect in the water. I paint the cloth the same way and then accordion fold the water portion (like a child's paper fan). I add extra colour to the folds by wiping my fan brush across the tops of the folds. The colour will sink to the lower level of the folds while the fabric is drying. Dry and heat set in the same manner. If the piece is too light for your liking, you can wet it and add more colour.



The piece while wet.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 66

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 65



The piece folded accordion style.



The piece while it has been dried. (Note how much lighter it is than in the wet stage.)

At this point I can appliqué mountains, hills, buildings or figures on the background piece. If I want to paint the mountains or hills on my background piece, I switch to opaque paint thickened with Aloe Vera gel (50/50) and paint away. Then I go to the drying and heat setting stage.



The same three backgrounds with mountains added in opaque paint mixed 50/50 with Aloe Vera Gel.

I keep painting pieces of fabric until the colours I have mixed are all gone, or I store the leftovers in old-fashioned film containers. The contents in the containers will eventually dry out, but do last quite some time.

Have fun! Don't be afraid to play!

Thelma Newbury is a fibre artist and member of the Fibre Art Network. You may see her work here: creativecrittersco.wordpress.com.

Note from the Editor: In this and upcoming issues, *The Canadian Quilter* will be publishing articles written by members of the Fibre Art Network (FAN). FAN is a co-operative of fibre artists committed to promoting fibre as an art form and each other as artists. To learn more about this diverse group, please visit www.fibreartnetwork.com.