Laminate Transferring to Watercolor Papers

by Chris A. Paschke, CPF. GCF

What better mounting topic than watercolors, or their equivalent, for the light and glazing issue? The delicate use of highlights and shadow are integral in successful watercolor painting. Watercolor is a painting technique using any pigment that is soluble in water and uses water as a thinner (even when dry). Although there are opaque versions (i.e. gouache, tempera, etc.), watercolor most often refers specifically to a transparent medium that is applied to special hand papers that have an absorbent quality to them.

So how does this apply to mounting? Knowing what to use and when to use it is always a major part of the battle with any heat mounting technique. Obviously, original watercolors are never to be mounted using permanent techniques, but the craze in canvas transferring leads us to ask: What to do with pastel or watercolor posters?

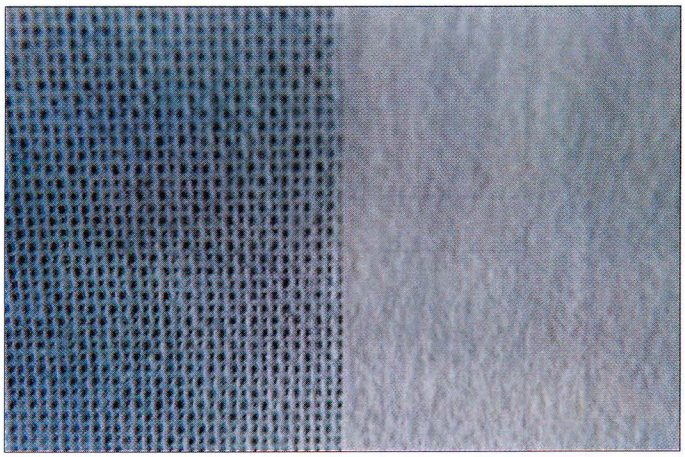
The materials used in the execution of a work of art in any given media affect the final image. In most cases, the artist chooses a particular medium to work in for exactly that reason. A bouquet of flowers by Van Gogh, with heavy oils and a palette knife, will be a much bolder image than the softer impressions of a transparent watercolor wash done by a Chinese master on silk with a bamboo brush, or of an ethereal landscape by Turner on rough paper with a red sable brush. The key difference is the visual texture of the paper chosen as a substrate, which will always affect the finished piece of art by its play of light reflecting off of it and the subtleties of the media itself.

Canvas Vs. Paper

The transparent nature of the watercolor medium gives special importance to the texture of the surface to which it is applied. In oil painting on canvas, the surface is generally selected for the thread patterns and the way the canvas responds to stiff brushes or knives that hold paint. Also, in most cases, the entire surface of the canvas is covered in paint.

With watercolors, the surface of the paper often remains visible through the transparent pigment, and may even be left unpainted as an accent or highlight. The paper surface becomes a more integral part of the painting itself, and in turn, texture the overall image.

Watercolor papers are available in several base textures. Hot pressed (H.P.) papers are smooth; cold pressed (C.P.) are moderately lumpy; and rough (R.) are generally heavy in weight and are the most textured of all. An image painted on smooth H.P. watercolor paper has the ability to maintain crisp edges and produces an evenly applied paint image without tactile texture. Rough watercolor papers allow for light brush strokes to paint only the high spots or lumps in the paper, and as with oils on canvas, this is a major element in the appearance of this medium. Thus the differences between the painting surface of an oil on canvas and a watercolor is like apples and oranges (Photo 1).



+Photo 1: Note the extreme textural difference, both visual and tactile, between raw canvas (on the left) and rough watercolor paper (on the right), then consider the impact laminate transferring would have to the wrong surface.

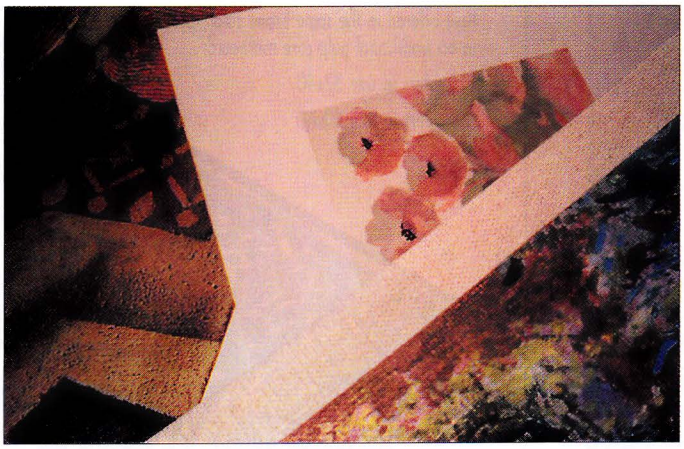


Photo 2: From left to right, notice the granite, sandy texture of the first poster, the watercolor floral at center, and the canvas detail at right. Selecting the appropriate transfer substrate is vital when creating image impact.

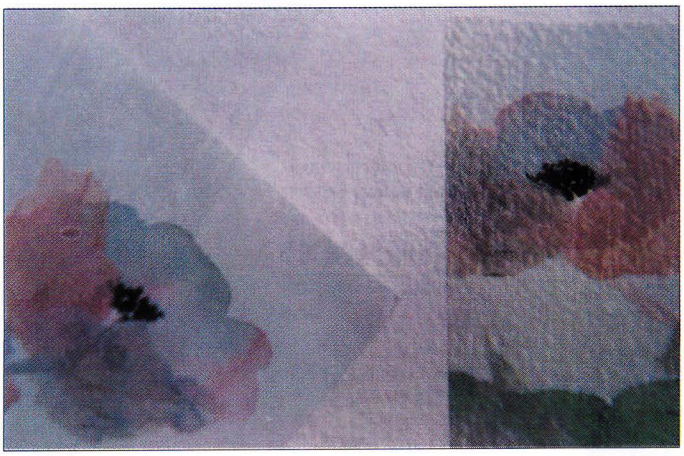


Photo 3: This sample shows a smooth, printed surface (left), and the laminated/stripped image transferred to rough watercolor paper (right).

Canvas Transfers

In past articles (the three part series beginning in October 1994, "Canvassing Photos, Projects, and Prints") and in my book I have discussed canvas transferring techniques using a vinyl over-laminate method. This is one of the most popular techniques for self-transferring currently used by framers in our industry. It uses dry mount equipment (either vacuum or mechanical press), heat-activated vinyl films, and generally, prepared heat-activated canvas fabrics (see PFM May 1998, "Textures and Colors of Canvas Transfers")

The problem with using this process for watercolors is the difference in textures. When original art images are printed onto paper as open edition posters, they may showcase a texture of any number of substrates, including canvas, stone, collage, smooth high gloss photography, or watercolor. It only stands to reason that the transfer substrate should indeed match the original artwork to be transferred. Remember, the whole concept behind transferring a poster print to another textural substrate is to make it appear to be an original.

Therefore, not all images, regardless of copyright issues, are best showcased as a canvas transfer.

From left to right in Photo 2, notice the granite, sandy texture of the first poster, the watercolor floral at center, and the canvas detail at right. Selecting the appropriate transfer substrate is vital in creating the appropriate image impact.

Photo 4: Always match the appropriate materials and substrates to the art/media when considering transferring techniques. This pertains to both cold and hot presses.

Watercolor Reproductions

When watercolors, like oils, are reproduced as lithographs or open edition posters, the option may be open to transfer them. The sample watercolor card in Photo 3 shows the corner of a smooth surface on the left. On the right the laminated/stripped image has be transferred to rough watercolor paper. If the concept is to transfer the watercolor to make it appear as an original, then it must be applied to watercolor paper. Otherwise, don't bother.

Neither heat-activated canvas nor raw canvas brushed with wet glue in preparation for heat mounting will showcase watercolor brushwork appropriately. When a watercolor is placed on a canvas, the textures are drastically different. It's a little like putting a riding saddle on a cow: it could probably be done, but it doesn't quite look or feel right.

Matching the print texture to the selected transfer substrate is mandatory. Mount the print of an oil on canvas to canvas, and a watercolor to rough watercolor paper. Rough paper has the greatest degree of lumpy surface texture and will therefore showcase the transferring technique best; smooth watercolor paper will look just like the original poster stock the image was just transferred from.

Changing the Transferring Process

Selecting the appropriate laminate finish and substrate is only half the battle. Matching the appropriate materials and substrates to the art and its original media is imperative to successful transferring (Photo 4). Even when the technique is perfect, if the textures conflict, the transfer will never be a success.

Laminate the poster print using either matte or luster vinyl film that is sized larger than the image. With the press set at 185° to 220° F, depending on the manufacturer, place the poster, laminate, and overlay foam in a release envelope into the heat system for approximately five minutes. Once removed, the laminated poster must be soaked in water for 15 minutes to soften the backing paper for stripping.

Remove the soaked image from the water, place it face up on a piece of glass or Formica tabletop, and gently roll the laminated image off the paper backing. This process is discussed in detail in the PFM article "Canvassing Prints" in the December 1994 issue. Up to this point, the process is exactly the same as the technique used when transferring a poster to canvas.

The adhesives and steps for transferring remain relatively the same when it comes to mounting to non-adhesived watercolor papers as with raw canvas; you will need to adapt to the paper having no commercially applied adhesive by selecting an appropriate one for the selected process. There are both dry mount films and wet glues that will work for watercolors in either hot or cold presses.

Wet Glue Alternatives

Many of the same wet glues that may be used when transferring to raw canvas will also prepare blank, raw, watercolor paper. They may be prepared by applying commercial wet glues to the surface, such as Acid Free Mounting Glue (Hot Press), then mount the peeled print to it with a cold vacuum frame. In a cold frame, the glue remains wet, and mounting is immediate after adhesive application.

Wet glues that have been proven to be activated by the application of cold vacuum or heat include Berto (Corona), Lamin-all (McDonalds), VacuGlue 300 (Seal), and Lion Liquid Heat Seal Adhesive (Lion UK). Brush the adhesive onto the paper and allow it to dry, thereby preparing the raw surface for later bonding with a peeled laminated print or photo in a heat mounting system.

There is one warning when selecting wet glues and watercolor paper, regardless of whether it is cold or heat mounted. Make certain there is enough adhesive brushed on to cover all the highs and lows of the rough textured paper, while at the same time, do not oversaturate the absorbent, previously unused, paper, causing it to cockle. Mounting a damp decal using a wet glue process will allow for maximum paper texture to show through after transferring.

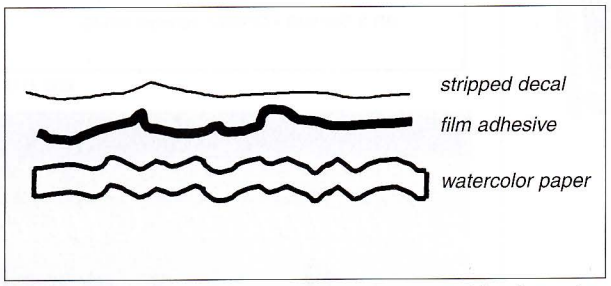


Diagram 1: There are too many loose layers capable of creating a wrinkle in the final mounting.

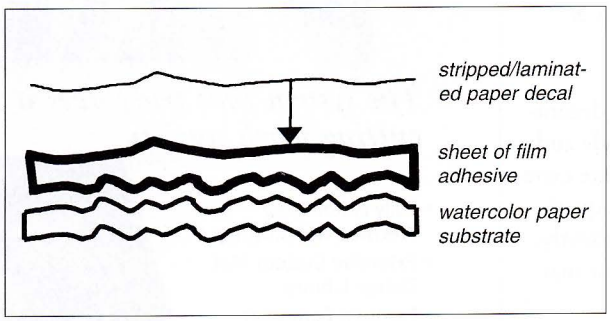


Diagram 2: Film adhesive is self-leveling and, when melted, will fill the unevenness of the paper, leaving the actual mounting surface with less texture.

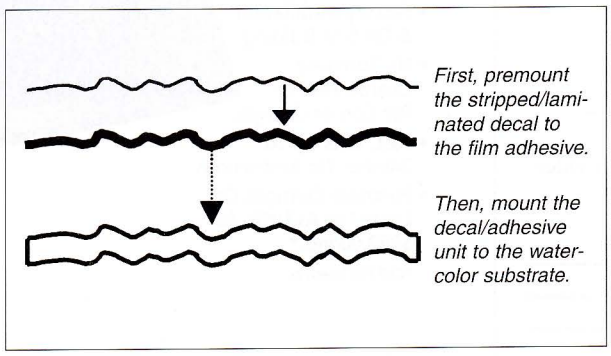


Diagram 3: (See also Photo 5, next page) Use this technique for the maximum texture.

Dry Mounting Film Adhesive

It is possible to use rough watercolor paper and heat-activated film adhesive (i.e. Fusion 400, Flobond...) in a heat press? As when mounting to raw canvas, the potential for wrinkles during bonding increases due to the multiple layers of untacked materials (the stripped decal, adhesive, and canvas) all being allowed to shift or crease during vacuum draw (Diagram 1).

Another problem is the self-leveling effect film adhesive has when it liquified during bonding when mounting as three loose layers, as shown in Diagram 2. This lessens the desired rough paper texture.

Currently, the best solution is to bond the adhesive first to the decal, then, in a second mounting, to the watercolor paper. This not only eliminates some of the loose layers, but allows for the premounted decal transfer to press better into the highs and lows of the rough paper (Diagram 3). The result is maximum texture as with the wet glue method (Photo 5).

Completion and Finishing

When heat transferring with laminate and premounting method, the oversized laminate may be trimmed to the edge of the poster image prior to second mounting (to the watercolor substrate) as in Photo 5. This technique leaves the opportunity to float mount the deckled watercolor transfer image, really giving the illusion of an original watercolor. It may also be left untrimmed when mounted to the paper (Photo 6) because any matting will cover oversized laminate as it does for extra oversized adhesive.

Photo 5: Mounting the film adhesive first to the decal, then to the rough substrate, will allow for maximum texture. Note that the laminate has been trimmed to the edges of the image so that the transfer could be float mounted, showcases exposed deckles.

Photo 6: The arrow shows the edge of the oversized laminate halfway between the image and the paper edge, ready for matting.

When transferring a watercolor image, there ultimately needs to be a clean presentation. When a transfer is made to canvas, upon completion it may be trimmed and mounted to a piece of foam board or stretched onto bars for fitting.

Once laminated, a watercolor transfer, technically, does not require glazing, but if the intent is to create the illusion of an original, then matting and glazing would better complete the presentation. Using a matte finish laminate will best eliminate additional glare from behind glass, while also maintaining the traditional nonglossy watercolored appearance.

Other Than Oils and Watercolors

The other question that remains is: what to do with images other than watercolors or oils? What about photographs, pastels, and high textured multimedia art reproductions? Always think through the matching of textures first, then consider if the image would make sense as a canvas, a watercolor, etc. Does a photographic floral work as a canvas...or would it be better left as a photograph? Just as with mounting, it's rarely a question of "can it be mounted and transferred?"; it's more often a question of, "should it be mounted and transferred?" Maintaining the dignity of the art is always the bottom line. And don't forget the copyright issue!

Enjoy the summer! ■

Chris A. Paschke, CPF, GCF, owns Designs Ink, Oxford, CT, featuring commercial and retail custom framing, product consultation, design, and education. Specializing in mounting, matting, and design creativity, she works with numerous industry leaders including Hunt Corporation (Beinfang and Seal), Crescent Cardboard, Fletcher-Terry, Larson-Juhl, and PPFA. Her first book, The Mounting and Laminating Handbook, *is already in its second printing.*