Acrylic is a popular art medium because of its versatility. For beginning painters and accomplished artists alike, acrylic is great for exploring new techniques and expanding creativity. Acrylic—also known as polymer paint—can be applied thickly with rich textures, similar to oil paint, or it can be applied in thin washes or glazes, like watercolour. It can even be used to imitate the precision and minute detail obtainable with egg tempera. Acrylic paint is synthetic (human-made) and can be combined with other media to achieve interesting results. However, when combining acrylic with other media, it is best to find out which paints are compatible and use them accordingly. For example, acrylic makes a suitable underpainting for oil paints because it bonds with the layers of oil applied over it. On the other hand, acrylic cannot be applied over oil because the acrylic will eventually separate from the oil.

The binder in polymer paints is an acrylic resin emulsion that can be thinned with water. When dry, this “plastic” paint is permanent and tough; it cannot be rewetted and restored to its original fluid state. This also means you can paint over your work as much as you want without muddying the colours. Acrylic is also flexible and can be used on virtually any porous surface, including canvas, cloth, illustration board, watercolour paper, and pressed-wood panel. But the paint does not adhere to nonporous surfaces, such as glass, plastic, and porcelain.

Acrylic dries very quickly, which can sometimes frustrate artists who need more time to blend and manipulate the paint. When painting with acrylic, remember to (1) maintain dampness in areas where you want to blend colours, and (2) plan your work in stages. ”Extenders” that slow the drying time of acrylic are available at art supply stores. Add these extenders to water or paint and then apply them to the painting surface with a mist sprayer or brush. There are also thickening agents available that allow you to apply acrylic paint the way oil paint is applied in knife painting (see Oil Painting).

In this book, both artists use a limited palette of six colours (crimson, brilliant red, lemon yellow, burnt sienna, phthalocyanine, or phthalo, blue, and white). Reeves offers conveniently packaged sets of acrylic paints that make an excellent choice for artists of all skill levels.

We hope this guide will provide you with a solid introduction to acrylic and that you’ll continue to explore new techniques with this versatile medium.
**Tools and Materials**

**Acrylic Paint**

Acrylic paint comes in several forms, including tubes, jars, and cans. Tube paints are the most popular and convenient type of acrylic paint, and Reeves manufactures several sets of acrylic tube paints that are ideal for beginners. Before beginning the projects in this book, test the suggested colours on a separate sheet of practice paper to familiarize yourself with their characteristics. Try combining them to see what new colours you can mix, and experiment with the various effects you can create. Once you start painting, remember that the viscosity of acrylics requires a thick lights and darks.

**Brushes**

Round brushes are great for detail work and for achieving a variety of different stroke widths, whereas flats are well-suited for long, soft strokes and blends. Reeves has a selection of paint brushes that are perfect for the projects in this book. Most acrylic artists prefer synthetic-hair brushes, but you can also use natural-hair brushes. However, natural-hair brushes require careful maintenance for long-term use because acrylic paint tends to cling more readily to natural hairs. Make sure you keep your brushes damp while you’re painting because acrylic paint dries quickly, and the dried paint can ruin the hairs. At the end of a painting session, make sure you wash your brushes thoroughly with mild soap and cool water. (Caution: Never use hot water. Hot water can cause acrylic paint to set in the brush, making it very difficult to remove.) After you rinse out your brushes, reshape the bristles carefully with your fingers and lay them flat or allow them to dry bristle-side up.

**Painting Surfaces**

Because acrylic is so versatile, you can paint on just about any surface—called a “support”—as long as it is slightly porous and isn’t waxy or greasy; water-thinned acrylics won’t adhere to oily surfaces. Most acrylic painters use canvas, a fine-surfaced fabric that is available stretched and mounted on a frame or glued to a board. If you like a smoother surface, water colour paper and primed (sealed) wood panels are good alternatives.

**Painting Medium**

The only medium you really need for acrylic paints is plain water (although there are many types of mediums available) Thin your colour mixes with water to create washes—thin, transparent coats of paint. Add more water to lighten a colour and less water to deepen it. When painting a wash, it’s also helpful to apply water to your painting surface with a brush, sponge, or mist sprayer. This will make the paint bleed and create a soft look. If the surface is dry, your strokes and colour applications will be more controlled and have harder edges.

**Mixing Palette**

You can use glass, ceramic, or plastic palettes with acrylic paint. Plastic palettes are convenient; since dry acrylic paint doesn’t adhere to nonporous surfaces, you can easily wash them off with water. It’s a good idea to purchase a palette that has multiple wells for pooling and mixing colours while painting. And you may want to purchase a palette knife to mix your paints; you can also use it to create dramatic special effects.

SUPPLIES — Since 1766, Reeves has been manufacturing excellent-quality paints and brushes and has long been established around the world as a wonderful source of art material for beginners.
Distinguishing Supports

Some supports, such as illustration board and canvas, are paint-ready at the time of purchase. Others, like pressed wood panels, have a porous surface that needs to be primed with a sealer (usually acrylic gesso) first to make it less absorbent. Different surfaces also have different textures—smooth to rough—which affect the appearance of the paint. The examples at left show how thick (left) and thin (right) applications of acrylic paint appear on the different supports.

Using Painting Mediums

Because acrylic is water based, you can thin it simply by adding water, and that’s all you’ll need to do when you’re first starting out. Once you’ve acquired a little more expertise, though, you might want to try mixing the colours with various painting mediums—additives that change the nature of the paint in various ways, such as making it dry slower, appear more transparent, or become thicker. Some also add luster, making the colours look more translucent than with water alone. The samples above show a few of the most popular painting mediums and how they mix with acrylic paints. Don’t be alarmed by the look of the mediums; they start out with a milky white colour but they become transparent when dry!
# Colour Basics

To mix colour effectively, it helps to understand a little bit about colour theory. There are three primary colours (yellow, red, and blue); all other colours are derived from these three. Secondary colours (purple, green, and orange) are each a combination of two primaries (for example, mixing red and blue makes purple). Tertiary colours are the results you get when you mix a primary with a secondary (red-orange, yellow-orange, yellow-green, blue-green, blue-purple, and red-purple). Complementary colours are any two colours directly across from each other on the colour wheel. In addition, hue means the colour itself, such as red or blue; intensity refers to the strength of a colour, from its pure state (straight from the tube) to one that is grayed or muted; and value refers to the relative lightness or darkness of a colour or of black.

## Warm and Cool Colours

Generally colours on the red side of the colour wheel are considered to be warm, while colours on the blue side of the wheel are thought of as cool. But within a family of colours, some are warm and others are cool—for example, within the red family, there are warmer orangish reds and cooler bluish reds.

![Colour Wheel](image)

COLOUR WHEEL. A colour wheel is a convenient visual reference for mixing colours. Knowing the fundamentals of how colours relate to and interact with one another will help you create feeling—as well as interest and unity—in your acrylic paintings. You can mix just about every colour you would ever want from the three primaries. But all primaries are not created alike, so you’ll eventually want to have at least two versions of each primary, one warm (containing more red) and one cool (containing more blue). These two primary sets will give you a wide range of secondary mixes.

## Value

The variations in value (the relative lightness and darkness of colours) throughout a painting are the key to creating the illusion of depth and form. On the colour wheel, yellow has the lightest value and purple has the darkest value. You can change the value of any colour by adding white or black to it. Adding white to a pure colour results in a lighter value tint of that colour, adding black results in a darker value shade of that colour, and adding gray results in a tone. A painting done with tints, shades, and tones of only one colour is called a monochromatic painting. In a painting, the very lightest values are the highlights and the very darkest values are the shadows.

![Value Diagram](image)

TINTS AND SHADES This diagram shows varying tints and shades of three different colours. The pure colour is in the middle of each example; the tints are to the left and the shades are to the right.
Mixing Colour

Learning to mix colours is a learned skill, and, like anything else, the more you practice, the more skilled you will become. You need to train your eye to really see the shapes of colour in an object—the varying hues, values, tints, tones, and shades of the object. Once you can see them, you can practice mixing them. Below are three neutral gray mixtures created with three different blues mixed with orange and white. Notice that each mix results in a different gray, depending on whether the blue is warmer (such as brilliant blue) or cooler (such as phthalo blue). Learning to see subtle differences in colour (as in these examples) is essential for successful colour mixing.

CONTRASTING MOODS

Compare the moods of these two paintings. The warm yellow tulips and bright blue background in the still life on the left convey a cheerful feeling, while the bold contrast of the red clouds set against the dark green hills in the landscape on the right create a more dramatic, striking effect.

Colour Creates Mood

Colour has a tremendous effect on our feelings and emotions, so colour is used to evoke certain moods in paintings. For example, a painting done with mostly dark, muted colours may be viewed as dramatic or ominous, while a painting composed of light, bright colours may be thought of as happy and cheerful. Paintings done with bright, pure colours can be very bold and eye-catching or even loud and unsettling. Your choice of colours will determine whether your paintings appear warm and comfortable, cool and refreshing, or vibrant and dramatic. Keep this in mind as you develop your colour palette.
**Getting to Know the Paint**

**Brushwork**

Your brushstrokes are just as important as the colours you choose for a painting. Many artists feel that their brushwork is just as distinctive as their handwriting. The brushes you use play a big part in how your brushstrokes look; a round brush leaves a different print than a flat one does, and the size of the brush affects its imprint. The way you hold a brush and the amount of pressure you apply will also change the appearance of your strokes. You can create thin lines with the edge of any brush, make bold strokes by applying more pressure, and taper your strokes by lessening the pressure and lifting up at the end. Practice the techniques demonstrated on these pages on a separate sheet of paper (cold-pressed water colour paper works well) or a canvas sheet to see what effects you can produce. Have fun experimenting with colour mixtures and drying times; you'll soon come to your own conclusions that will contribute to your creation of beautiful acrylic paintings and your own unique painting style!

**DRYBRUSHING**  Drybrushing is great for creating texture in paintings. First paint an even layer of colour and let it dry. Then load your brush with a new colour, remove excess paint with a paper towel, and stroke lightly over the first layer, allowing the underlying colour to show through.

**BLENDING**  To create soft blends, use a soft, flat brush and gentle brushstrokes. Paint even, overlapping layers, varying the direction of your strokes to evenly blend the colours and hide your brushstrokes.

**DRAWING WITH THE BRUSH**  Use the tip of your round brush to render simple lines and dots with precision. For maximum control and precise strokes, be sure to remove excess paint from the brush before drawing.

**CHANGING DIRECTION**  You can create a variety of widths with your flat brush by keeping your bristles at the same angle but stroking the brush in different directions. Practice with different brushes and angles to familiarize yourself with the different effects you can achieve.
Washes

A wash is a layer of colour thinned with water so that it is transparent and flows easily. You can make the colour lighter or deeper depending on how much water or flow improver you add. Keep in mind that washes flow better when applied to a dampened surface, as this gives you more time before the paint dries. Many acrylic painters like to begin their paintings by toning the entire support with a wash and then building up the tones of the painting by adding transparent layers over the initial wash, or underpainting.

Exploring Techniques

You can use acrylic paint straight from the tube or dilute it with water to produce an array of different effects—from thick impasto applications to transparent washes. Another popular acrylic technique is painting wet-into-wet, or brushing fresh paint over a still-wet layer of paint and allowing the colours to blend. The samples below and on the following pages show just a few of the many exciting effects you can achieve with acrylic by varying brushstroke, colour, and technique.

FLAT WASH  A flat wash is an easy way to cover a large area with a solid colour. Load a flat brush with diluted paint, and—holding your support at an angle—sweep the colour evenly across in successive strokes. Add more paint to your brush between strokes, and let the strokes blend together.

GRADE WASH  A graded wash graduates from dark to light, which makes it a perfect technique for depicting water and skies. Use a flat brush and paint horizontal strokes across a tilted surface, just as you would for a flat wash, but add more water to each subsequent stroke to gradually lighten the colour.

THICK STROKES  To create texture and variation in your paintings, apply thick paint with a large brush, creating small peaks with the paint. This is called “impasto.” Many acrylic artists use impasto to call attention to a specific area of a painting, as thicker paint has more of a noticeable presence on a support.

THICK BLENDS  You can achieve interesting effects by mixing thick acrylic paint directly on your support with a flat, wet brush. For example, in the demonstration above, blue and yellow gradually blend to form green, creating a soft, loose blend. This type of gradual blend is great for painting subjects in nature.

THICK ON THIN  Another way to texturize your acrylic paintings is to add a thick layer of paint over a thin layer. First apply a thin, transparent wash to establish your “ground,” or base colour. Then paint thickly on top, leaving gaps to let some of the underlying colour show through, which creates the illusion of depth and texture.

DRY ON WET  To create a grainy texture, pull a dry brush with very little paint over damp paper. This will make the colours separate, leaving spots of white paper, and will make the strokes of the individual bristles visible in your brushstrokes. This technique is especially useful for depicting rough textures like wood grains, bark, and stone.
Special Techniques and Effects

SPONGING  You can create an interesting effect by dabbing a kitchen sponge in paint and lightly patting it on the painting surface. For pattern variation, use different colours of paint and turn the sponge as you dab. Sponging is great for painting foliage, or—if done with white paint and light, soft dabs—for puffy clouds.

STRAIGHT LINES  Place the metal ferrule—the band below the bristles of the brush—against a straightedge and pull along the edge sideways. To make jagged, crooked lines, start and stop as you pull. Use straight lines when painting human-made structures, such as buildings, fences, and tables.

SCRATCH STROKES  To scratch out colour as shown above, first wet the surface with water. Brush on a thin wash of yellow; then do the same with brown. While the washes are wet, use the end of the brush handle to scratch out diagonal lines. This technique is suited for painting fine lines for grasses (see page 11), fur, and hair.

CREATING TEXTURE WITH PLASTIC  For this unusual effect, wet the surface, and apply a dark wash of burnt sienna and phthalo blue. While still wet, press crinkled plastic wrap into the paint. Remove the plastic when dry. Use this technique to create background textures and to depict water.

KNIFE PAINTING  Practice painting with a palette knife, using the flat blade to spread a thick layer of paint over the surface. Each knife stroke creates thick ridges and lines where it ends, mimicking rough, complex textures like stone walls or rocky landscapes. You can also use the edge of the blade and work quickly to create thin linear ridges that suggest and define shapes. Even the point of the knife is useful; use it to scrape away paint to reveal whatever lies beneath.
Creating Skies

CLEAR SKY Create this effect with a blue wash along the top left merged with a mix of brown on the right. Add more water toward the bottom (a graded wash) to make the colour appear weaker.

STORMY SKY Paint this simple sky by wetting the surface with clear water and then pulling several strokes of colour across it. Use blue, brown, and white, and allow the water to create soft blends.

Painting Grass

STEP ONE Wet your painting surface and apply a wash of yellow to the top. Quickly add a wash of brown in the center. Then wash in a mixture of brown and blue along the bottom.

STEP TWO While the colours are still wet, use the edge of a flat brush and make vertical, sweeping strokes to indicate blurred blades of grass. These less distinct blades will appear to recede.

STEP THREE Use the end of the brush handle or a toothpick to scrape out lighter grass blades. Letting the undercolour show through the subsequent layers of paint adds interest and texture.

STEP FOUR Mix brown with a little blue. Use the round brush and stroke upward, lifting up at the end of each stroke to create a tapered end. The light and dark grasses create the illusion of depth.

Suggesting Foliage

DISTANT FOLIAGE Paint dark strokes with a round brush on a dry surface. Dab at the surface with short, quick movements, layering the colours over one another.

FOREGROUND FOLIAGE Use a flat brush and layer dark colours with short, single strokes. To lighten the background layer of foliage and create depth and distance, dilute the paint with water.