

Choosing & Taking Reference Photos for More Success in Painting Skies & Clouds in Watercolor

Common Challenges to Watch For

- Rapid, soft-edged transitions between colors that are complements or near-complements (blue and orange, red-orange and turquoise, yellow and violet are some common ones)
- Rapid, soft-edged transitions in value, such as dramatic light at the edge of clouds with the sun just peeking out, or about to peek out
- Other soft-edged transitions in color or value that must occur within a specific shape, such as a narrow band of color at the horizon or the colors in a rainbow
- Soft, subtle lighting involving precise changes in value (esp. within a small area)
- Multiple overlapping layers of clouds, possibly of different types, shapes, values, colors

Strategies for Building Skills Step-by-Step (and Having More Success)

- Use “silhouette” paintings to practice laying graduated washes and explore color combinations and value transitions
- When learning to paint clouds, begin with scenes where the clouds are mostly one color and/or one value
- If the scene is complex, crop or zoom in to an area of the sky that is less-complex but still captures some of the mood or feel of the overall scene
- Take photos at multiple exposures (and angles and zoom) to capture more information and detail in the sky and in the landscape
- Paint multiple paintings, each using a different portion of the sky, as a way to practice the techniques you will need to paint the entire sky (bonus: you can get more mileage out of your reference photos this way!)