



**Refreshingly Cool**  
(10x8)

# MAKING WAVES

Ongoing observations of the ocean have led a Massachusetts artist to many discoveries that enhance her paintings of water and shore. Here, she walks us through her creative process step by step.

BY AMY K. SANDERS



**RENDERING WATER REALISTICALLY IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES** for artists, regardless of medium. Certainly it has been the case for me, particularly in the depiction of water. Yet, I live along the coast and the ocean is what fuels my artist's soul, driving most of my painting inspiration. So I have been compelled to work it out. Hundreds of hours of observation and practice have resulted in several fundamental discoveries that guide my work in this area.

#### The Changing Face of Water

One of the most important discoveries I've made through observation of moving water is that water isn't blue. It is, in fact, devoid of color. The colors it takes on are the result of light interacting with what's beneath the water (rock, sand, etc.); what's within the water (seaweed, air, plankton, etc.); and what's above the water. The first probably makes the biggest impact for water seen at a distance. The others are most important when you're looking down into water from a steeper angle.

Look carefully, and you'll find water contains a myriad of colors. Pay attention to several factors. First, note the weather: Is the sky gray or blue? Second, consider the region: Due to biomass, the

water of the Northwest coast is greener than the coastal waters of the Northeast, for example. Observe, too, the amount of movement: The activity of the water affects the amount of air churned into the water and changes both the number of facets and the angles of the facets that are reflecting the surrounding light. There's no need to turn these factors into complicated mathematics; it's a matter of awareness. Consider the surroundings, and then paint what you see.

#### Oceanic Depths

As with most subjects, value has a critical role to play in painting water. If you choose five colors but only two values, you'll likely fail to capture the intricacy of the environment around the water (unless it's a very calm day with clear, even-toned skies over a flat bottom with no movement). The most common "error" among artists struggling to render water is the failure to put in a wide enough range of value. They instead stay close to the middle values when, in actuality, they need at least three value variations to create any sense of depth.

I tend to have a range of near black to full white in virtually all my water paintings. The extent of the range isn't obvious; I blend the colors



subtly, but the interactions between values gives the impression of form.

#### Sure Strokes

My final discovery concerned the direction of my strokes. I quickly learned how important it is to keep the stroke in the direction of the water, or things will look very wrong. When water is calm, keep the strokes short and horizontal, because water is laid out horizontally. A light puff of a breeze doesn't raise the surface of the water enough to make any appreciable angle.

When waves pick up, look at the angle and curves at the front, and then mimic it in your stroke. Whitewater is water chaos, so let chaos reign. The wilder the water, the less you want to control your stroke. Allow shakes, twists and curls. Vary pressure on strokes, and be messy; I sometimes even look away from the painting. It has to look random, and that's harder to accomplish than you might think. So, when you're done, look to see if there's pattern. If you detect even the slightest pattern, mess it up.

With lots of practice, focused observation and careful attention to colors, values and strokes, you'll be well on your way to portraying more realistic water.



**VIEW A GALLERY OF MORE PASTEL SEASCAPES BY AMY K. SANDERS AT [WWW.ARTISTSNETWORK.COM/MEDIUM/PASTEL/PAINTING-WATER](http://WWW.ARTISTSNETWORK.COM/MEDIUM/PASTEL/PAINTING-WATER).**



1



2 (detail)



3

### **Low Tide, Shore Break: A Demo**

In terms of resources, I have thousands of photos of water and waves, so there's never a shortage of inspiration. For this painting, I selected an image that featured water in a variety of forms—from distant deep blue water to water thinly swirling over a sandy beach.

To begin, I put down a rough drawing on my paper (UART 400 grade paper, mounted on Fome-Cor) using a few pastel pencils.

**1** To start a water painting, I work in small sections at a time, from top to bottom, and left to right (for the most part), beginning with a base layer of tone that's nearly as dark as the darkest dark I expect to see in the finished painting. Here, I put in a base color of a Rembrandt blue-green, a very dark green/almost black Sennelier, and two Mount Vision shades of medium-dark blue. I then layered dozens of strokes for varied reflections—primarily two shades of Rembrandt phthalo blue and a Winsor & Newton cerulean blue.

**VIEW THE ARTIST'S COMPLETE COLOR CHART ON OUR WEBSITE AT [WWW.ARTISTSNETWORK.COM/MEDIUM/PASTEL/PAINTING-WATER-COLOR-CHART](http://WWW.ARTISTSNETWORK.COM/MEDIUM/PASTEL/PAINTING-WATER-COLOR-CHART).**

It's important to keep these strokes largely horizontal (no more than a 10-degree slant for water this calm). You can see in the wave where there are fewer strokes of other colors, that there is less surface facing upward to reflect sky light. I do no blending here except with the pastels themselves.

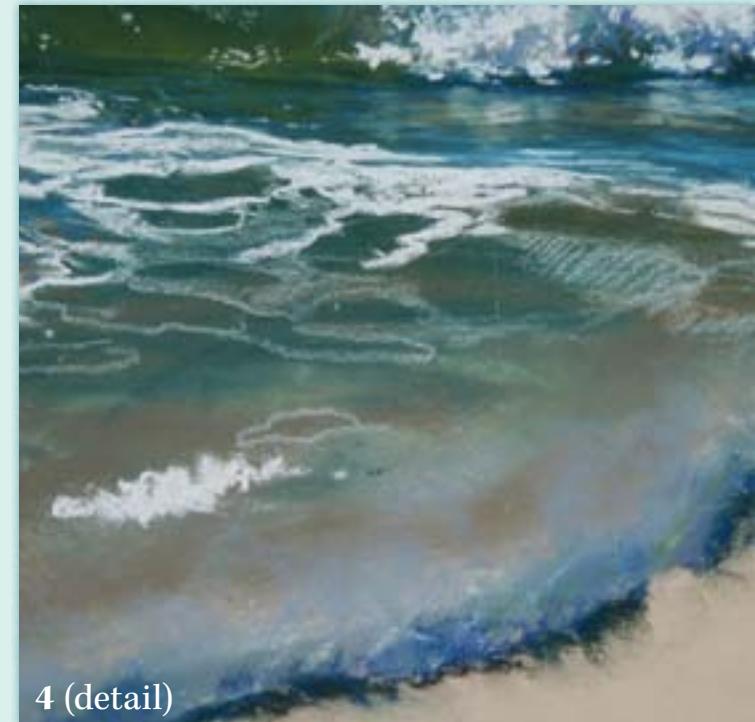
**2** The greener the water becomes (with less sky reflection), the closer it moves to the foreground. My base colors are Rembrandt's permanent green deep, chrome green light and bluish green. Working these colors together in multiple layers forms the body of the wave.

On the wave front, you can slant those strokes, as the water is slanted. I used a light sea green (spruce) and two light shades of navy by Great American to apply the base colors for the foam. Rembrandt soft white forms the highlights. I do use some Rexel pastel pencils—in a blue, blue-violet and green—for rendering detail in the whitewater of a wave.

**3** Next, I lay in the base of the whitewater, which shifts from the greener water near the base of the wave to the brown, wet sand in the foreground. I lay in a base, rather messily, using Great American's grumber, Rembrandt's turquoise and bluish-green, then move to the Great American navy and spruce, with a bit of Rembrandt's raw sienna and olive green. I make these strokes haphazardly, rubbing in the color well. I want to retain as much tooth as I can before I start the whitewater. I keep more control in the area at the right, where I finish off some of the calmer water in front of the approaching wave.

**4** I define the front edge of the whitewater which creates a distinct shadow. I make no effort to draw this, just putting in the color about where I want it; it'll form it later. Now I have my hands full, creating all that whitewater. I loosely draw (with pastel pencil) where I want to preserve calmer water spots, and then throw in random splashes of white. The randomness is key here. Surrendering control of the stroke is important to achieve the sense of tumult.

**5** Although I've finished the whitewater, I go back now and get rid of any areas in which I detect a pattern. I either brush off areas and redo them, or go over them with new strokes of the lighter whitewater colors (spruce, navy and bits of the sandy colors and a few splashes of reflected sky color). Remember, whitewater is turbulent, so I don't want any impression of order in it.



4 (detail)



5



6

To paint the water over sand in the foreground, I choose a base of Rembrandt's gold ochre and Great American's grumber, and rub it in well. Next, I lay in a light "drawing" of white foam floating on this backwash. On the left, I've gone one more step, laying in a darker shadow color (Rembrandt's burnt umber) and a highlight for reflected sunlight (Rembrandt's yellow ochre). I blend these strokes to a smooth finish, using finger cots and Colour Shapers. I highlight the foam where it's heaviest using varying pressures of white.

Once I complete the remaining foam, and determine that the painting effectively evokes the scene I remember, I know I'm done. ■

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AMY K. SANDERS ([www.amyksanders.com](http://www.amyksanders.com)) lives in Massachusetts, on the Outer Cape, where pine woods, bay views, beaches and sand dunes offer ongoing inspiration. Her work is represented by Addison Art Gallery in Orleans, Mass.

*Low Tide, Shore Break* (10x9½")

