

Stretching Watercolor Paper

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Many watercolorists stretch their paper to avoid the bends and buckles associated with wet paper. Paper expands and contracts with moisture or even humidity and paper that is wet with a watercolor wash can have large hills and valleys.

The bends in the paper can be a problem while painting because the pigment tends to run down and accumulate in the valleys, making an even wash impossible. Different weights and types of paper will take the moisture differently and some papers are more prone to problems than other papers.

In general the heavier the paper the less it will buckle when wet. Papers are sold by weight and a 300 pound paper is nearly twice as thick (and heavy) as a 140 pound paper. When wet, the heavier paper will bend into fewer but large hills and valleys. The lighter paper will have lower highs and lows but more of them when wet.

Remember that watercolor paper has a front and a back and the front has the better painting surface. If you look closely at the deckle (rough) edge of the paper you will notice that there is a slight step down from the body of the paper to the deckle on one side. That is the back of the paper. The front side will be even from body of paper to outside edge of deckle. It is often a good idea to mark the front of a paper lightly in pencil so you will not be confused. The back of many papers also have a slight texture of the screen that was used to make the paper.

Artists often develop their own system for dealing with the characteristics of paper, but there are three general methods of stretching or preparing watercolor paper:

Total Soaking

Lay paper in a large basin (some artists

use the bathtub) and soak the paper for 30 minutes, turning once during that time. (Note: be sure you know the quality of your water supply! It does no good to soak paper in water containing iron or other minerals.)

Carefully remove the paper and lay it, right side up, on a heavy gator board or similar. Use a wide brush and clear water to brush out any bubbles, moving from the center of the paper outward. While the paper is thoroughly soaked and laying flat, staple the edges of the paper to the board. Go all the way around the edges about every 2 inches. When you finish with the first row of staples, go around again with a second row outside the first, alternating the staples for a secure stretch.

After the paper is dry and stretched quite flat, go over the staples with a wide white or clear tape to keep your brush from catching on the stapled edges.

Some artists use heavy staples and glue (at the edges) to adhere the watercolor paper to a plywood board that has been covered with plain paper. When dry, the edges are also covered with tape.

Dry Stretching

For paintings that will not require a lot of washes or if buckling is not a severe problem (especially with 300 pound paper) artists often stretch paper dry. This easier method calls for some core or other lighter backing board and wide plastic tape.

Simply lay the paper on the board and, while dry, tape the paper to the board all the way around. While the paper may buckle a little during painting, it will lay flat again when the paper is dry.

NOTE: In all cases of stretching watercolor paper, if you use a plastic tape to cover staples or to stretch dry, be sure to wipe dampness off the tape when you complete a wash. If you leave water beads on the tape, they may run back into the painting and ruin at least the edge of the work.

Plexiglass Stretching

While a sometimes riskier process, this method is simplicity itself: Have a piece of acrylic or plexiglass somewhat larger than the paper. Spray the paper on the back and use a brush to even out the water all the way to the edges. Turn the paper over and lay it on the dry plexiglass. The paper will adhere to the plexiglass from the water. Using a wide wet brush, wet the front and brush out any buckles toward the edges. You can pick up an edge and pull it from each side to pull out any buckles too. In most cases (depending on the paper) the paper will adhere to the plexiglass fairly evenly.

After you paint on the paper and complete your washes, leave the painting to dry on the plexiglass. It will stay flat and when dry, you will be able to pick it right up off the plexiglass. If you need to further wash layers, just repeat the process. Spray or paint plain water on the back, lay it down on the plexiglass

and spray clear water on the front to begin painting.

The plexiglass method is especially useful when painting on papers that have unusual shapes or when you want to paint all the way to the edge since it does not damage the edges with staples or tape.

Considerations

No matter the method you decide to use to prepare your paper for painting, remember that the paper is going to expand and contract when the painting is finished and matted and framed. Paper itself is made of water and will normally absorb and release moisture from the air. Tape (with acid free tape) to the top of the mat or backing so that it hangs freely. If you tape it all the way around it will be stressed and could tear the painting.

If you have an older painting that will not lay flat enough to mat, you can spray the back with plain water, lay it face down on a clean surface and cover it with piece of foam core or acrylic. Then put books or other weights evenly over the whole area and leave it to dry and flatten for several days.

A certain amount of buckling is normal and should be expected, especially with lighter papers in humid weather