

THE POWER OF SUGGESTION

COLORADO ARTIST STEVE GRIGGS USES ENERGETIC BRUSHSTROKES AND BOLD COLOR TO EVOKE A SUBTLE SENSE OF PLACE.

By John A. Parks



There are times in painting when suggestion is more powerful than careful and complete description, when a brushstroke can serve as a whole tree, or an area of loose, watery wash can summon an entire ocean. Instead of engaging in a meticulous account of the world, the artist presents an array of hints and simplifications, relying on the viewer to complete the vision.

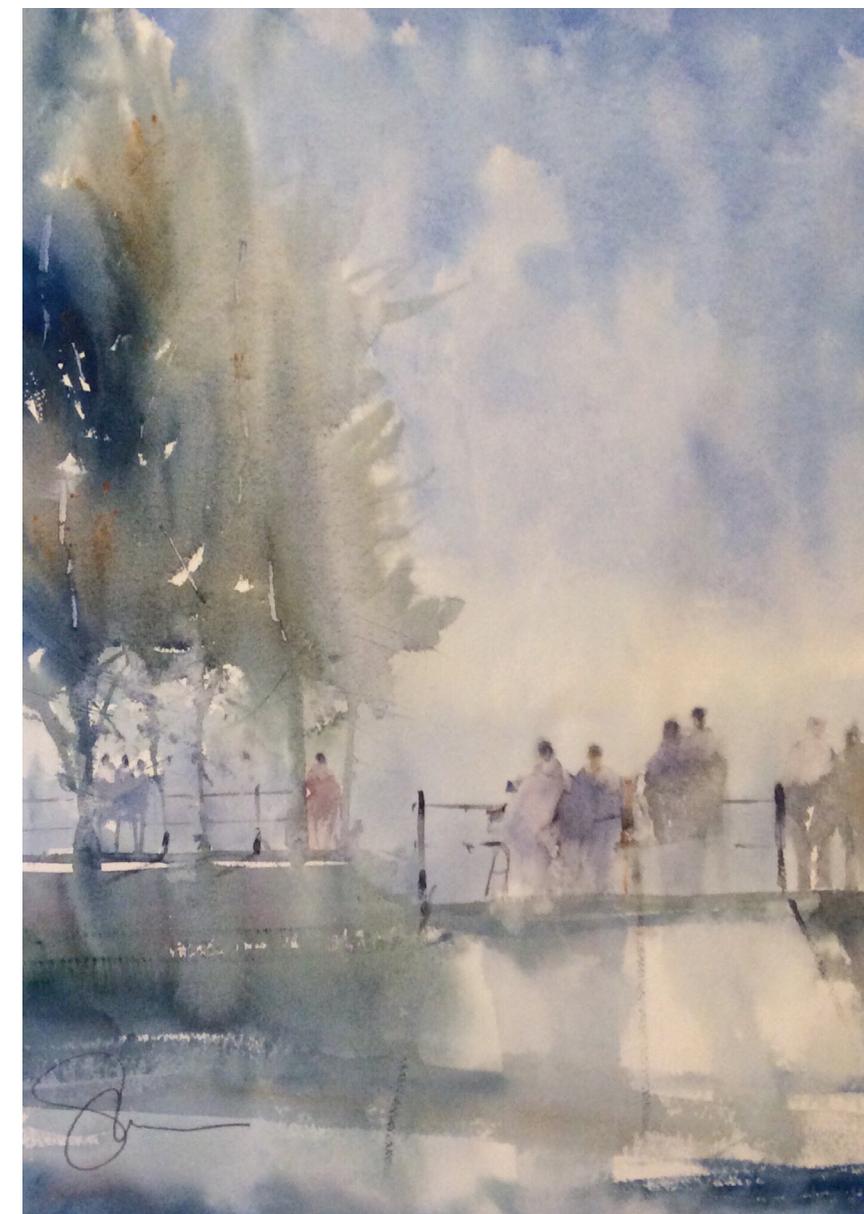
To do this, the artist must find exactly the right set of clues to trigger the appropriate response, something that requires a deep understanding of the properties and possibilities of the medium. The viewer, meanwhile, generally interprets and reads sense into the image.

This approach is central to the watercolors of Steve Griggs, a Colorado-based artist whose work is composed largely of cues and suggestions that, when taken together, add up to highly evocative—and extremely satisfying—pictures.

“I keep ‘viewer completion’ in mind and allow just enough information for viewers to know what’s being expressed,” says the artist. “I allow them to enter into the scene and bring their own images and experiences to complete the painting. I believe this is what helps to create a painting that’s alive and that can tell many stories to many people.”

A Painter of Places

Griggs divides his work into landscapes and cityscapes, and he’s equally at home with throngs of people as he is with forests and mountains. “Essentially, I’m a painter of places,” he says. Gifted with an almost-photographic memory, Griggs says that sometimes he’ll just glimpse a scene from a car and then be able to recall it in its entirety when he goes to work in the studio.



He collects other images in the more traditional fashion on painting trips, which he then records in sketchbooks or on canvas.

Along with his commitment to visual brevity, Griggs is a master of atmosphere, imbuing his work with a sense of narrative. Many of his paintings evoke watery gray light and project a reflective moodiness that can be highly affecting. Feelings produced by the work often emerge from the story behind the image.

ABOVE
Saturday in the Park
(watercolor on
paper, 28x20)

OPPOSITE
Shape Shifter
(watercolor on
paper, 10x13)



At Rest (watercolor on paper, 13x10) and its value study

Sailing Boldly

In *At Rest* (above), for example, we're presented with a pared-down view of a sailboat floating in an expanse of water. "It's a painting about the end of the sailing season," explains Griggs. "It's about knowing that continuing to sail is risky because hazardous winter storms arise quickly. But, choosing not to sail means missing the absolute beauty of autumn. This sailor has found a place of peace and rest amid the fall color and still water."

With this information, the painting takes on a new dimension. The moody, autumnal light carries with it the threat of bad weather, and the presence of the sailboat indicates a sailor who's chancing his luck. To reinforce this feeling, Griggs has engaged in a very physical bit of painting. "The background was applied aggressively: wet-into-wet with rich, thick paint strokes," he says.

"Despite the way I approached the background, as the paint settled and melded together, it became placid and retained the chroma and beauty of each color," the artist continues. "I wanted the boat to be off-center, not as



the focal point, but as a participant in the magic happening around it, with sails down and secure, as it floated on the glassy, warm-gray water. It reflects the momentary peace of this part of the season and the oneness of the moment."

Griggs also notes that *At Rest* carries with it a more personal meaning. Now in his early 60s, the artist is committing himself to painting full-time after a career as a designer. "The painting expresses where I am in my own life journey: entering the fall of life, but at rest and in love with the rich colors of my world. I know winter is coming, but I'm sailing boldly, and I don't want to miss a moment of the spectacular fall I have ahead of me."

Powerful as this narrative is, Griggs says that it's an invention, essentially a work of fiction. "The background washes were a continuation of some washes I'd been working on in other landscapes, and the boat was drawn from some sketches I did in Egg Harbor, Wis.," he recalls. "The tree marks were scratched in with my pen knife. I do lift sometimes, with tissue or a sponge, but rarely. Mostly I choose to scratch back to the white paper or a warmer wash beneath the dark, heavier glaze while it's still damp."

Griggs keeps other techniques in his arsenal, including the use of granulation medium to create more

A Sketchy Vibe

Although his paintings are often achieved at a fast pace, Griggs develops ideas and images over long periods of time, often working them up in sketchbooks and then making multiple versions of a finished piece.

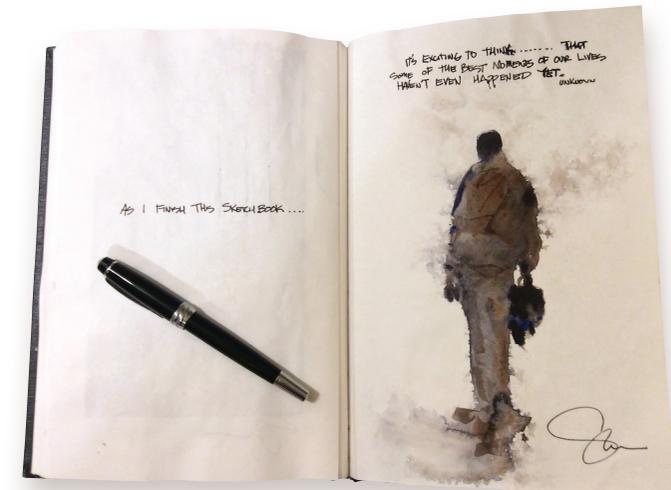
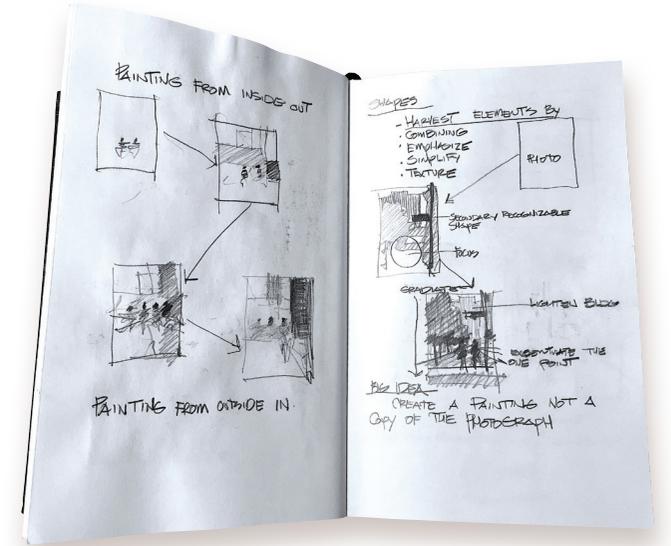
"I love my sketchbooks," he says. "I 'live' in them and have done so for most of my life. I usually go through a book about every two months or so, sometimes even one in a month."

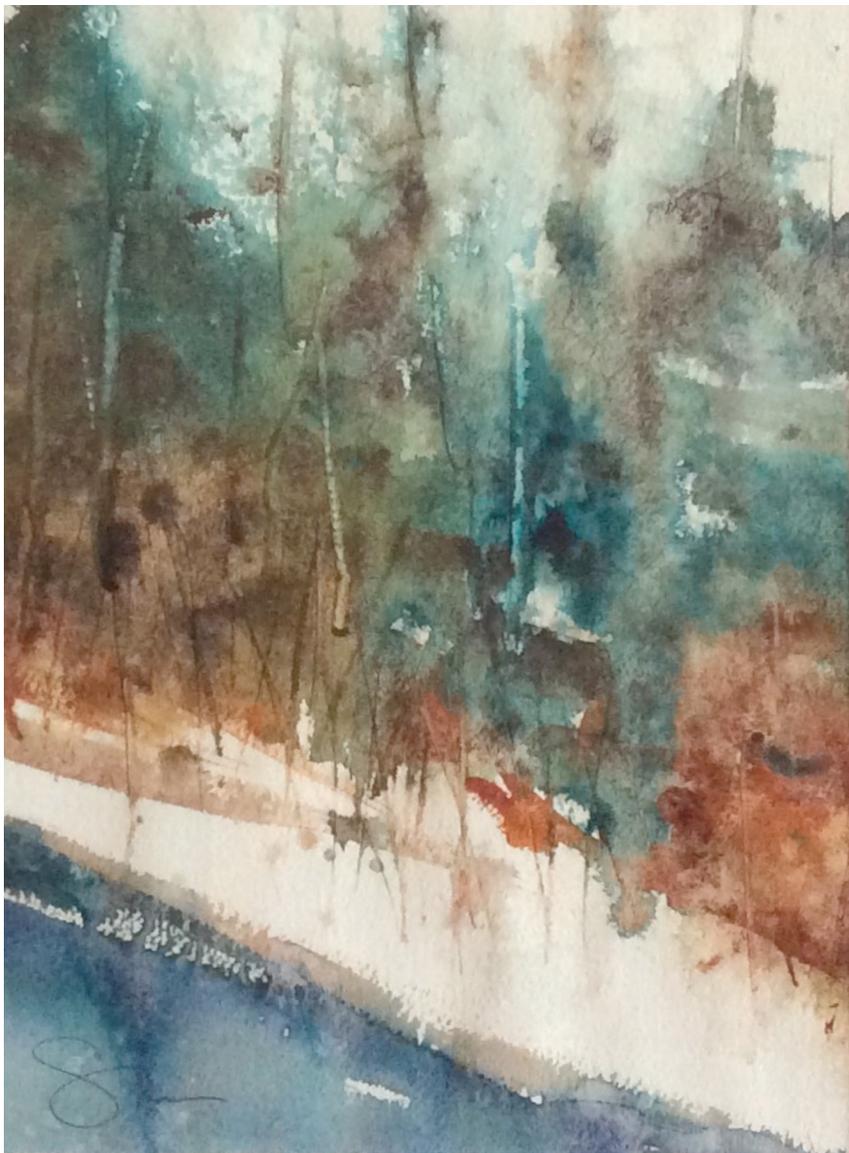
"I make it a practice of putting the date on the first page, so I have a reference point for where I was and what I was doing during that period of the year," Griggs continues.

"I include everything from quotations, inspirational statements and my own thoughts, to exercises for working on a new way to make a painting or explore a new theme. I do a lot of practice paintings and drawings in the pages as well. And, sometimes I'll even jot down a stray phone number or grocery list in them."

Griggs stresses the importance of continuous work and engagement. "I believe it's important to do something every day to keep the muscle memory at a high level. Sometimes I'll draw or paint figures or groups of people in a social setting to keep these skills sharp. I work out things like format, composition, color and value by painting and drawing in my books, so many of my final paintings have a direct link to my sketchbook."

One example of this is *Benevolence of Nature* (on page 42), a painting that began as an experiment in a sketchbook. "I had bought two new colors—turquoise and quinacridone sienna," he says. "I wanted to see what I could do with them." From his first free sketch, augmented with a little ultramarine, Griggs eventually developed a final painting.





Sage Advice

Griggs, who's an enthusiastic workshop teacher, offers advice and inspiration to beginners.

"I like to encourage others to look to their artist within and begin to explore and free their talent," he says. "At the end of a workshop, my hope is that each individual will leave with paintings that are expressions of his or her own voice, not a copy of my work."

"On a practical level," Griggs continues, "at the beginning of a workshop, I encourage the participants to stand up instead of sitting to paint; this frees them to move."

"I also tell beginning painters to take risks, to avoid comparing their work to other artists' and to have fun."

LEFT
Beneficence of Nature
(watercolor on paper, 13½x9½)
and its sketchbook beginnings

OPPOSITE
Impossible Dreamer
(watercolor on paper, 9½x16)

textured surfaces. He also has a spray bottle that he has altered so that it emits an uneven, spattering spray. This can give a lively, variegated texture to an area of painting. Both of these techniques incorporate an element of chance, something the artist embraces. "Sometimes I find myself just watching the paint as it dries," he says. "It's always exciting."

Working Through the Challenges

Because Griggs adopts an open style and assertive techniques, he's able to establish a lively rhythm of work. "I generally paint quickly," he says, "which keeps the subjects as simply expressed shapes. Over the years, I've let go of the usual methods of painting. While I know how to paint in a 'traditional' watercolor style, I've

developed my own style of painting that pushes the boundaries of traditional or step-by-step methods. I love exploring what watercolor can do—and how simple brushmarks can affect people."

Griggs finds that his major painting challenges are more cerebral than technical. "At times I find it challenging to control the critical voices in my head that are constantly trying to define for me what's good, acceptable and worth submitting for exhibition or sale," he says.

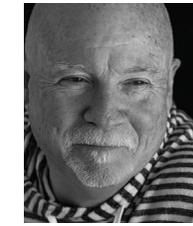
"I also find it challenging to work through the moments when I seem to be stagnating," Griggs continues, "but every painting seems to have a turning point where it begins to finally come together. I have to remember to trust the process and keep going until things fall into place. I find it difficult, sometimes, to stop painting at that moment when I've said just enough. If I keep going, I've said too much."

A Personal Connection

In the end, Griggs is clear that what's ultimately important to him is the connection to others that he achieves through his painting. "The most rewarding response to my work is for the viewer to have an immediate reaction to the story or the beauty expressed in my paintings," he says. "People who've purchased my paintings tell me they see something new and different in the work each time they look."

John A. Parks (johnaparks.com) is a painter, a writer and a member of the faculty of the School of Visual Arts in New York.

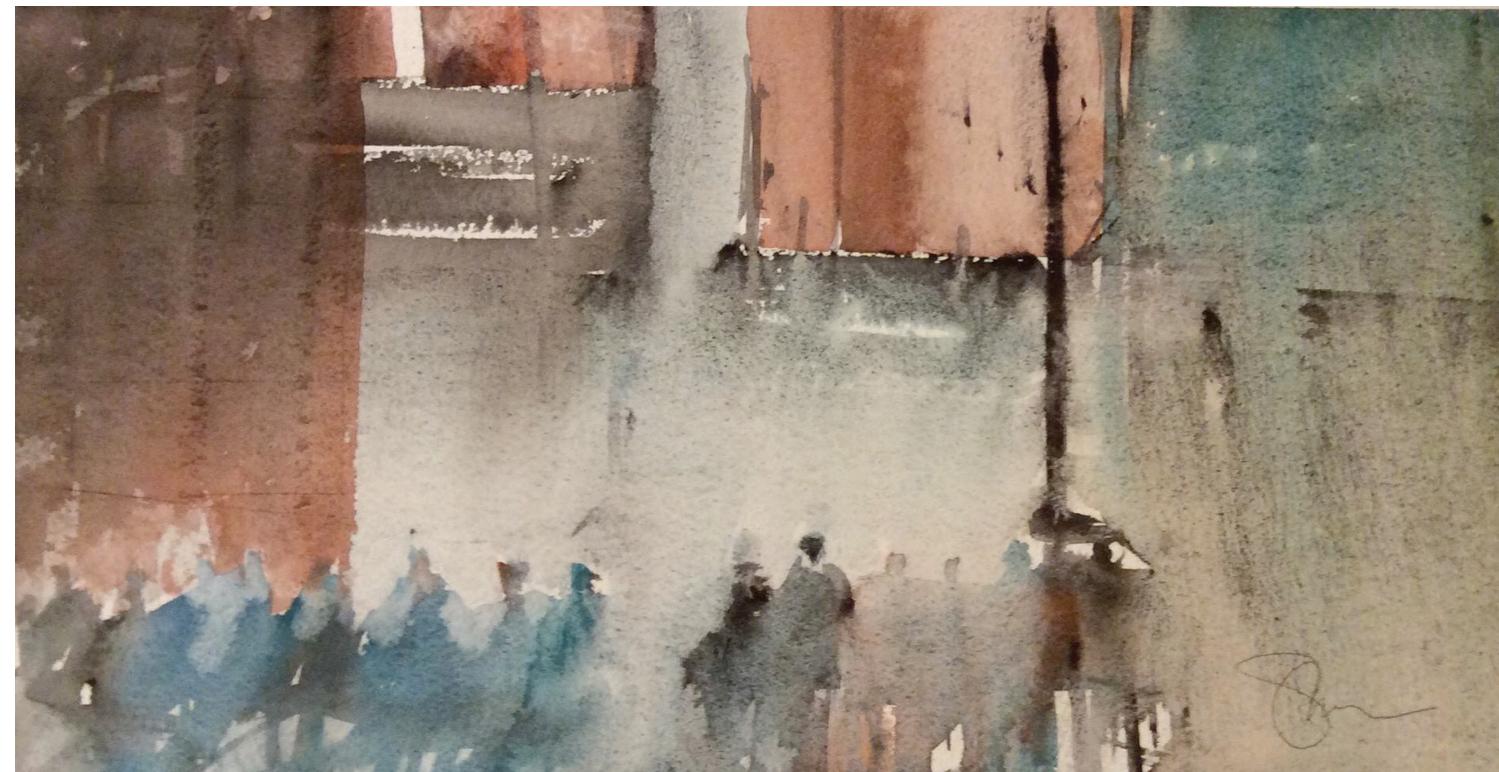
Meet the Artist



Steve Griggs (stevegriggswatercolor.com) was born in Detroit and studied product design at Michigan State University. Taking courses in painting and drawing as part of the program, his interest in watercolor developed. He studied further at Art Center

College of Design and then took up a career in the design world, eventually working in interior design. His work took him to Denver, where he now lives, although many of his paintings remain inspired by his native Michigan. His watercolors have been exhibited widely, and he has garnered many prizes, including the Colorado Watercolor Society State Exhibition Best of Show award in 2017. He's currently transitioning into life as a full-time painter. He's a signature member of the Rocky Mountain National Watermedia Society and the Colorado Watercolor Society.

Turn for a demo



The Long Road to a Painting

Steve Griggs shares his process for creating a work that offers a personal connection for each viewer.

No matter what type of artist one is, there's no denying that it takes discipline, practice, tenacity and commitment to develop not only the technical skill, but also the artist's try to make a piece effective. Of course, not everyone is attracted to the same thing, which makes art wonderful and exciting.

I don't paint using a realistic style, although I find great beauty in realism and have tremendous respect for what it takes to represent a scene as realistically as possible. I choose, instead, to paint in a style that's loose and evocative, in a medium that can be unruly and unforgiving.

Painting in this way isn't without its challenges. So many factors can influence whether a painting is captivating or just ordinary, and whether the viewer enters the scene or simply sees it from the outside. I'm never the master of the paint. In this style of watercolor painting, the paint and the artist agree to a respectful relationship. I often have to practice a painting several times before I get it just right.

Sometimes people ask me how long it took to do a painting. My tongue-in-cheek response is "62 years." While not entirely true, I've been painting for the majority of my life, either on my own or as part of my formal education. Each painting is influenced by those years of practice and schooling.

This is a series of practice sketches and paintings I used to create *Coming Home*. Although I started with a photograph, the intention was never to re-create the scene as much as to "infer" it, changing the perspectives slightly and letting the viewer complete the story. —STEVE GRIGGS



Photo

I took this reference photo on a cloudy autumn day in northern Michigan. As you can see, the trees were just beginning to change. I was particularly taken with the red tree in the center.



Sketches

I mused in my sketchbook, contemplating the painting's composition. Should I move the trees to the right side of the road? Should I crop horizontally or vertically? Tightly or loosely? What type of brushstrokes should I use? I also explored values and color—and even the painting's title.



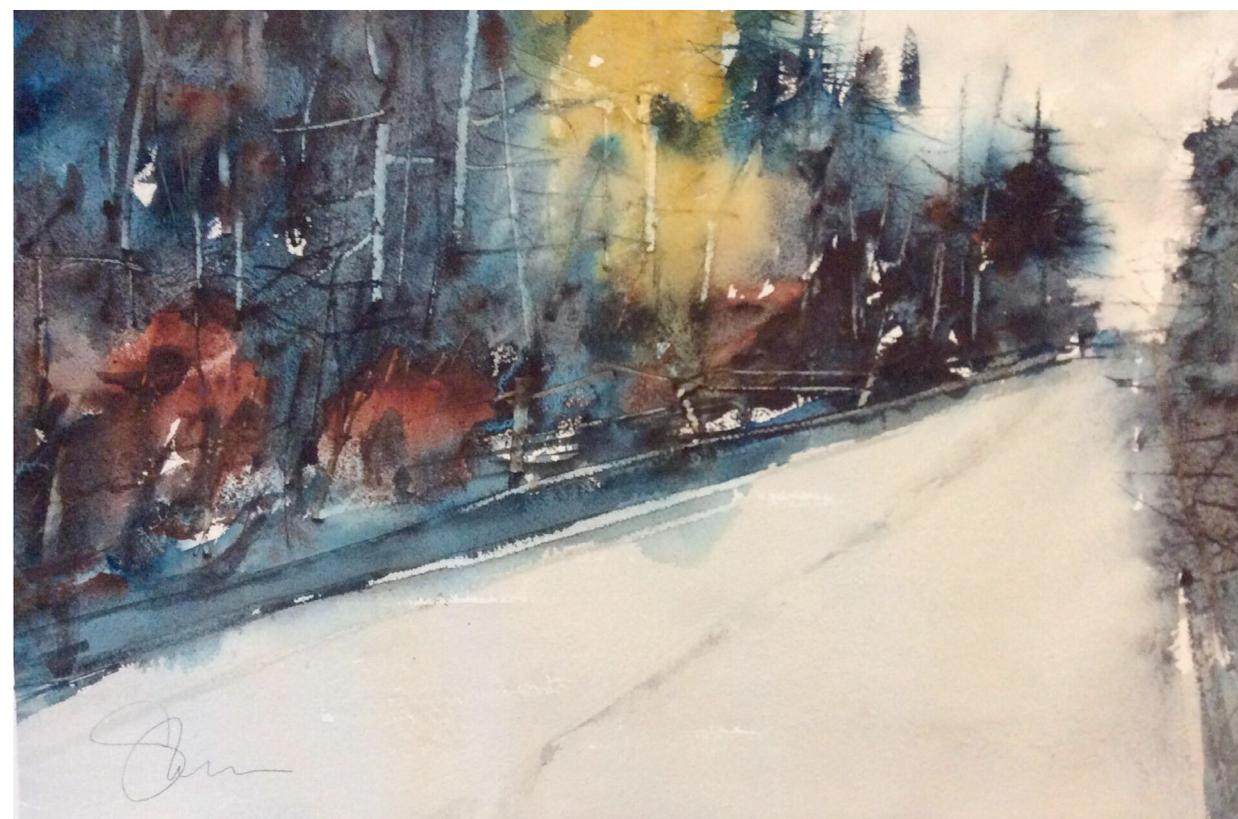
Preliminary Studies

Next, I did a few quick painting studies to help me determine how I wanted to paint the perspective of the road. I wanted the viewer to think about where the road was headed. What's just beyond what can be seen? In the sketch on the right, I left the red tree obscured by the others, with just a hint of color peeking through.



First, a Test

In this practice painting, I focused on the road in order to draw the viewer's eye all the way to the horizon line.



Final

In the final painting, I slightly adjusted the road's perspective, offering more than the photo showed and letting the colors of the trees come forward with their beautiful dance. I named this painting *Coming Home* (watercolor on paper, 14x21½); I grew up in Michigan, and whenever I'm there, it feels like home. The viewer, however, might have an altogether different experience when looking at this painting. That's my goal: to paint a scene that allows viewers to connect with whatever story it's telling them. *WA*

Artist's Toolkit

PAPER

- Arches or Fabriano 90-lb. and 140-lb. rough

WATERCOLOR

- Winsor & Newton Cotman for sketching and preliminary studies; Daniel Smith and Holbein for paintings

MOST-USED COLORS

- French ultramarine blue, cobalt blue, cerulean blue, manganese blue, cadmium red light, alizarin crimson, burnt sienna, cadmium yellow light, pyrrole red, quinacridone sienna, green turquoise light, cobalt teal blue, neutral tint, sepia, indigo

BRUSHES

- Princeton Neptune and Escoda Versatil