

A Three in One Sky

With Stephen Martyn

Just about any watercolour landscape artist wants to be able to tackle a big, dramatic, sky. There's nothing difficult about them, but there's more to it than just sloshing on a load of water and paint and hoping for the best. In this step-by-step demonstration I've created the sky in three stages. At the end of any one of them you can just stop and say, that's it, I like that and I'm not doing any more to it. Or, you can work on. A three in one sky!

1. I don't do a lot of preliminary drawing, just a horizon line. The landscape can be put in later, once the sky is in the bag. Tape your paper to a board using a short piece of masking tape at each corner, then load a large flat brush with clean water and thoroughly dampen the whole sheet, not just the sky.

While the water is soaking into the paper prepare a wash of Raw Sienna, not too strong. We'll also need a medium strength grey mixed from Ultramarine with a little Burnt Sienna. Starting with the Raw Sienna apply a broad band of it above the horizon, clean the brush and apply the grey mixture from the top of the paper down so that it just overlaps the top of your band of Raw Sienna.

2. Add more Ultramarine and Burnt Sienna to your palette to strengthen the grey mixture and brush some of this stronger paint into the upper part of the sky. Try to create some swirls and bands of differing strengths of paint. If you've properly dampened the paper you'll have plenty of working time, so don't rush it!

3. If you're happy with the look of the sky and don't want to do any more, just let it dry naturally. This is our first sky, wet into wet. But if you're feeling bold then we can carry on and create some harder edged clouds to add a bit more drama to the scene. While the paint is still damp, use a piece of kitchen roll scrunched up into a ball to lightly wipe off a few areas starting in the top left hand corner. Then it's definitely time to let it all dry.

4. I like the look of the sky at this point, with some softer clouds underlying the lighter, lifted out clouds which appear to drift across the sky. This is the end of stage two and you could certainly regard the sky as finished, but I feel it could benefit from a little warmer colour, particularly to the top right hand corner. Make a mixture of Burnt Sienna and a little Ultramarine, quite watery, to give a warm brown. Using the corner of the 1" flat brush and a light touch create some cloud shapes in that top corner and, with even more water in the mix, in a few other places across the sky. Now the sky has more depth to it and a good combination of warm and cool colours, so let it dry thoroughly and relax, you've done all the hard work!

5. Now, we need a landscape to compliment our sky. If the sky is busy keep the landscape simple makes a useful rule of thumb, so I've chosen the skyline

of the city of Norwich, not too far from my West Norfolk studio. Viewed from Mousehold Heath, the magnificent cathedral spire provides a good focal point. Draw in the most important shapes in a 2B pencil and paint them with a number 6 round brush, using a strong mix of Ultramarine and Burnt Sienna. For the more distant buildings dilute the mix a little to give recession. Add more Ultramarine and more water, and loosely suggest the remaining buildings, leaving plenty of white paper. Use the large flat brush for this to prevent any fiddling! Let the eye of the viewer fill in the detail for themselves, it's much more effective than trying to paint everything.

6. Complete the foreground by adding some Primary Yellow to the greys that you've made earlier. By varying the amount of Ultramarine, Burnt Sienna and Primary Yellow, and by using the large flat brush, it's very quick to just suggest the foreground grass and bushes of Mousehold Heath. An important feature of the composition is the brighter green in the right hand corner, which draws the eye in to the cathedral and nearby buildings before allowing it to escape out through the sky. Finally, I leave the painting to rest in the studio overnight and look at it with fresh eyes the next day, when I tidy up the lines of one or two buildings and lift out a few highlights on the cathedral.

So that's my three in one sky, and any one of those three can be used above a simple landscape to give atmosphere and drama to any scene, whether it's town, countryside or coast. Use plenty of watery paint, a big brush and most importantly – have fun!

MATERIALS

Brushes:

1 inch (25mm) flat

Number 6 round, both sable/synthetic mix such as Daler-Rowney Sapphire or Pro Arte Connoisseur or SAA Gold.

MaimeriBlu watercolour tubes:

Ultramarine Light

Burnt Sienna

Raw Sienna

Primary Yellow

Paper:

Arches rough 140lb/300gsm half-imperial

Also:

Large ceramic palette

Kitchen roll

Masking tape

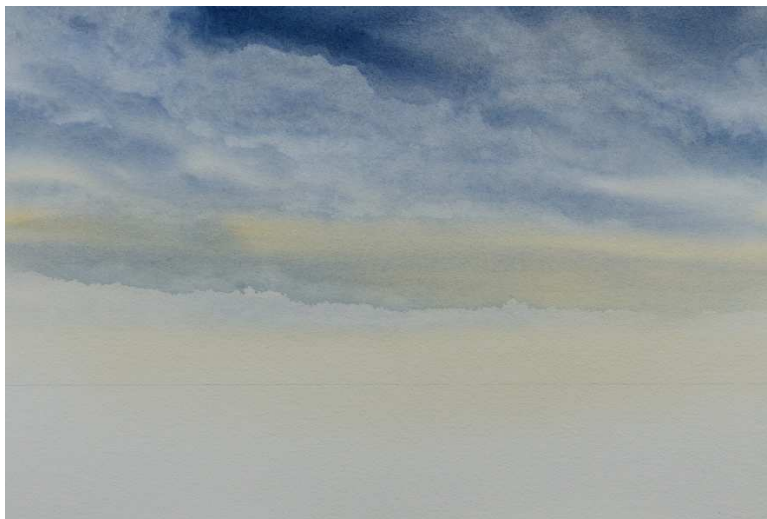
Photos of the six stages of the painting can be found below:



Stage 1



Stage 2 above and Stage 3 below





Stage 4 – more work on the sky



Stage 5 – the buildings go in.



The finished painting – “Big Sky over the Fine City, Norwich”

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