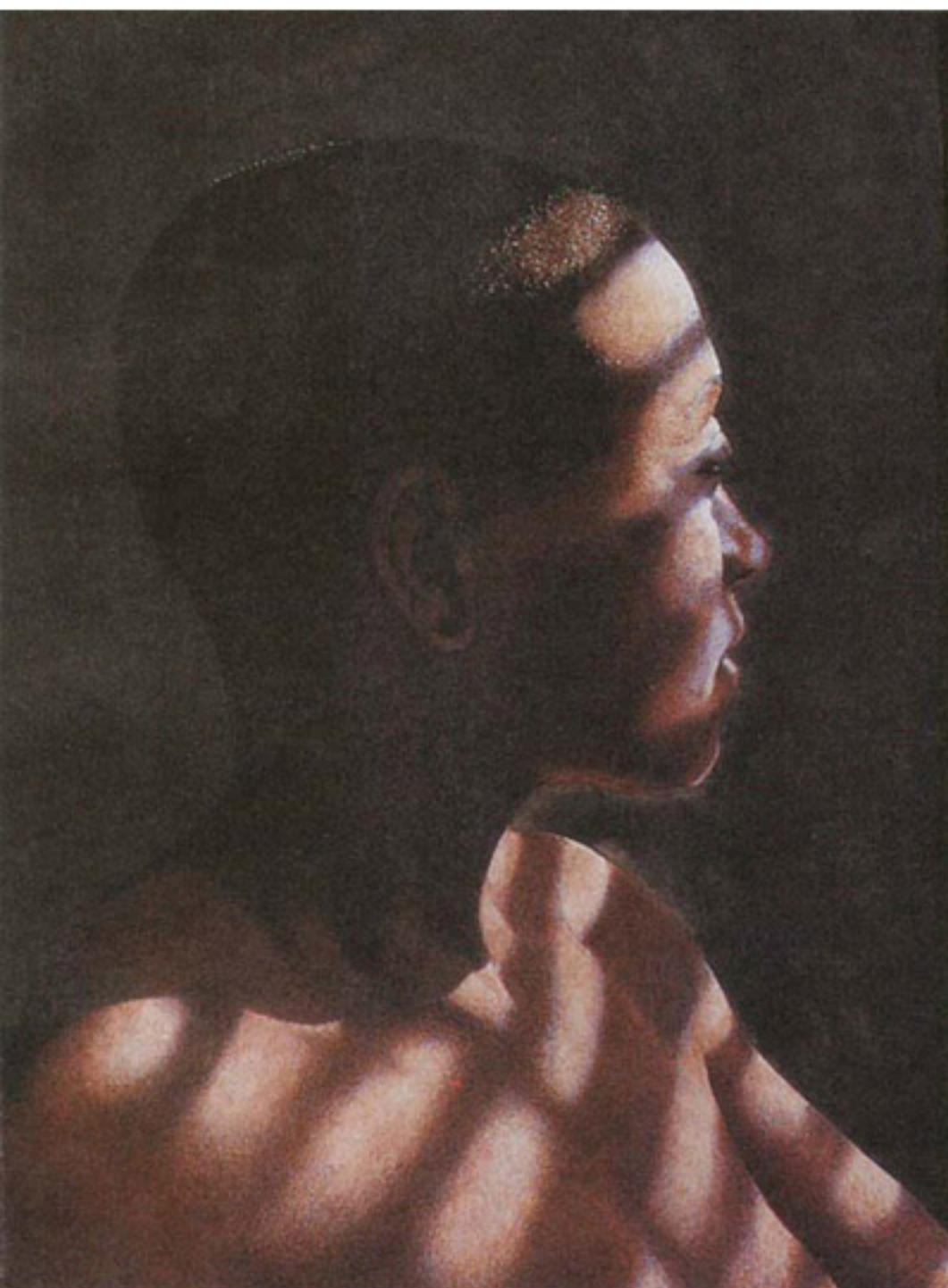


# Watercolor with Drybrush

## How to Achieve Hair and Skin Textures. Demonstration by James D. Brantley



One of the most difficult things to do when painting portraits in transparent watercolor is to make skin and hair look like skin and hair. While I often use loose washes, drips and splatters in watercolor, I also like to use the drybrush technique to achieve perfect textures. It is a little bit of work but the results are startlingly realistic.

First, I start with a real person. My model for this painting is a beautiful woman named Krista Hurley. I love the contrast between the texture of her short hair and her smooth brown skin. My paintings are done using Daniel Smith Extra Fine Watercolors.

Like every painting I do, **Study for American Girl** was something of a struggle. I don't do this to relax. There is no magic formula to making a work of art. I have described the basic Steps that I go through and if you want to do this, you can. But you must be willing to pay the price. You have to devote a lifetime to hard work, to recovering from failures, and to learning.

**"Without intensity, focus, passion, love, and an almost desperate urge to create art, all the mastery of technique you can learn will produce at best, only a mediocre work of art."**

### **Roughing in the Color**

I like to cover the entire surface of the painting with an approximation of the colors and values that will be seen in the finished piece. In the initial washes, however, the darks will not be as dark, and the colors will not be as intense as the final painting. Since we are working from light to dark, and using no white but the white of the paper, it is important not to put on too much paint too soon. It's a lot easier to add color or deepen shadows than it is to remove paint.

In the next step, using a #6 brush, I have painted the hair in with dark brown washes and the skin with purple washes in the shadow areas only.

Following this, I

paint in transparent washes of burnt sienna and raw sienna in the areas that do not receive the brightest lights. Although I am reasonably careful where I place my washes, I don't worry about any extreme details. The drybrushing will take care of any fine details and subtle shadow transitions that I want to show. I will leave the lightest areas unpainted until the painting is nearly finished.

### **Painting Hair**

The first area I will take to completion will be the hair. With the bristles spread out in a fan shape, I make short crosshatch marks in a random pattern that produce the perfect texture of the hair. I'm still using a #6 brush for most of the work, but occasionally use a #2 brush to make some of the finer marks.

Some of the highlights in the hair are created by painting around the white areas, while some of them are scratched out with a hobby knife and a #11 blade. Some of these scratched out areas need to have a little color put back in since the highlights are not always pure white.



### **Painting Skin**

Next, I'm ready to begin working: my way down the face. But first, a note about colors. One question that I hear from students all the time is, "What colors do you use to make skin?" It's really no big mystery, I use pretty much the same colors every time I paint skin and rarely attempt to reproduce any color exactly as I see it. I feel free to use reds, yellows and purples as much as I like. It doesn't matter whether I'm painting dark-skinned or light-skinned people - I just adjust the ratios for the complexion I want to paint. Artists know that everyone comes in some kind of brown. It may be light brown, dark brown, red-brown, pink-brown, blue-brown, or yellow-brown, but it's always brown.

To make all this brown skin, I use the following colors: raw umber, burnt umber, raw sienna, burnt sienna, yellow ochre, ultramarine blue, ivory black, ultramarine violet and quinacridone rose. In transparent watercolor, the paper provides any white that you will need. And it's exactly that reflected white light from the paper that gives watercolor the beautiful glow that I like so much. I usually begin, as I did here, with purple and blue washes in the shadows, followed by browns, reds, and golds in the middle and highlights. It's best to keep the shadows cooler with more blues and greens, while the middle tones and highlights lean more toward the warmer reds and yellows. But that's a rule that I break if I feel like it.

Above all, don't just pick a color and paint a person in

various shades of that one color. That is so boring! A painting should be like beautiful music. A piece of music played on the piano with one finger would probably not be very interesting after the first couple of bars. We like to hear it with all ten fingers! And so it is with painting. Use your colors to produce tonal variations that will make the observer want to keep looking and looking, as if enjoying a fine concert. Your talent and your experience will determine how well you can do this.

As I continue to paint the face, I want to establish the proper relationships between the darks and lights. This will give me the foundation for the drybrush work that gives me the textures and subtle shadows that I like. Using mostly liquid washes, I paint the shadows using alternating washes of purple, red and brown. Now you can see the dark areas of the head begin to take shape. I continue this procedure until I am satisfied that I have the darks nearly as dark as I want them to be.



### **Completing the Painting**

After finishing with the head and neck, I'm ready to finish the shoulders and the breasts. I finish the body in the same way as the head. I increase the the purple in the shadows, and then add washes of Burnt Sienna before getting started with the more controlled work in drybrush. I am having a lot of fun experimenting with these unusual bands of light and shadow on Krista's face and body. I got this started by having her sit next to a window with sunlight coming in through the blinds. Since the light moves very quickly, you must make a very quick sketch and draw in the light patterns before they move. Then you can spend more time with the drawing and painting, using your sketch as a reference. If you forget something, do it again tomorrow at the same time. Of course, you can use photographs but don't become too dependent on them. Eventually it will all come together. This study is part of my plan to do a full-length painting. I made a detailed drawing to serve as a reference for both this painting and for later ones.

### **Daniel Smith Extra Fine Watercolors**

- [Ultramarine Blue](#)
- [Raw Umber](#)
- [Burnt Umber](#)
- [Raw Sienna](#)
- [Burnt Sienna](#)
- [Yellow Ochre](#)
- [Sepia](#)
- [Ultramarine Violet](#)
- [Ivory Black](#)
- [Quinacridone Rose](#)



### **About the Author**

James Brantley has been painting and drawing the people and places of Alabama and Georgia since the early '50's. He is a signature member of the American Watercolor Society (AWS), National Watercolor Society (NWS) and Southern Watercolor Society (SWC). To see more of his work, visit his website at [jamesbrantley.net](http://jamesbrantley.net)