

A Master's Tips for Using the Power of Contrast

# Watercolor *artist*

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DECEMBER 2020



# Painting *the* Moment

***THE ESSENCE OF RACHAEL GRIMM'S WORK  
LIES IN CAPTURING PASSING MOMENTS.***

by Michael Chesley Johnson



**Bridge Street, City Island, The Bronx**  
(watercolor, 15x18½)

**R**achael Grimm grew up in a village outside of Liverpool, in England. She lost her mother when she was 12. Her father, despite having to raise the family on his own, made time to support her artistic interests by providing her with an abundance of art materials. An avid drawer, young Rachael enjoyed copying illustrations from books and creating imagined portraits of the characters. Today, as a mother of three, she continues the tradition with her youngest daughter.

Despite her early leaning toward art, Grimm chose to study English literature and art history when she attended the University of Glasgow. At the time, she felt an academic degree would be more useful but hoped to paint in her spare time. One year, she became an exchange student at the University of Toronto, where she met her future husband, Stephen, who is American. During her final year at Glasgow, the couple became engaged and, after graduation, moved to New York.

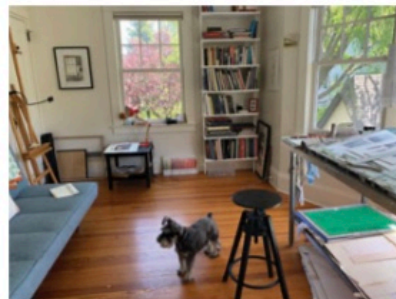
Eager to get back to making art, she enrolled in figure classes at the Art Students League of New York, where she finally realized she wanted to be a professional artist. But a series of life events, including raising a family and a move to Indiana so her husband could work on his doctorate, put those ambitions on hold for a while. It wasn't until they moved to Providence, R.I., where Grimm took her first watercolor class at the Rhode Island School of Design, that she found her path back to art. Although she thought the medium difficult, she fell in love with it. "I liked the way it felt, and I knew I would come to grips with it one day."

In 2008 the family moved back to New York, to a beachside town in Westchester County. With her youngest daughter in kindergarten, Grimm suddenly found herself with a lot more free time. She converted a spare bedroom into a studio and started enjoying the benefits of the local art community.

Since then, she has been showing, selling and winning awards with organizations such as the American Watercolor Society, the National Watercolor Society and Allied Artists of America. As an adjunct instructor at Fordham University, she teaches a course on watercolor techniques, where she's also preparing to teach the class online. "My studio has become a space for recording video demos and Zoom sessions. I've learned some very useful skills, and it has helped me to be more articulate about the skills I teach," Grimm says.

## A Comfortable Studio

Grimm's studio occupies the middle story of her three-story house. "In this room I can be as tidy or messy as I like. When I'm there, I immediately go into an artist's frame of mind. With three teenagers in the house, I often have my 'mom hat' on, but in my studio, I can just be an artist."



Windows placed south and east bathe the studio in sunshine all day. So much light, though, can

be a detriment. "Sometimes it's too bright for me to see color accurately," she says, but good paper blinds filter out the bright light as needed.

"I always paint during the daytime, usually in the morning, so I never need artificial light." If she's painting a portrait or a still life, she closes blinds on all but the east window for a more dramatic, less diffused light.

## Tools: Paper, Brushes and More

Grimm's main work surface is a drawing board that rests on a John

Boos work table, which has a butcher-block surface, plus a shelf beneath for storage. Besides the drawing board, the table hosts a John Pyke palette with a large, rectangular mixing area edged by a number of wells for color, a roll of watercolor brushes and other miscellaneous tools. For portraits or still lifes, she prefers a large, upright studio easel, and for painting outdoors, a Winsor & Newton aluminum watercolor field easel.

Like many watercolorists, Grimm is a fan of Arches paper, noting that it can take a beating and is a pleasure to work on. "When I'm teaching, I use student-grade paper because of the expense. As a result, I appreciate the better paper even more when I get back to using it for my own work," she says. She tells students that if they become serious about watercolor, they should use the best quality

OPPOSITE  
At the  
Breakfast Table  
(watercolor, 19x13)

BELOW  
Homework on  
the Porch  
(watercolor, 16x23)



***"WHEN I'M FOLLOWING MY OWN RULES AND TRYING TO BE AS THOUGHTFUL AS I CAN WITH MY BRUSHSTROKES, THINGS JUST SEEM TO FALL INTO PLACE."***

—RACHAEL GRIMM



## CULTIVATING CREATIVITY

Since moving to Larchmont, NY, Grimm has become interested in gardening.

Daydreaming in the winter about what she will plant in the spring is, to her, akin to painting. "Creating a garden is a lot like composing a painting in that you have to think about structure, color and variety. Tending to it and helping it thrive is also a great complement to my time spent painting in the studio—just when I'm getting frustrated with a tricky painting, I can walk out into my back yard and lose myself in flowers," says the artist. It's a welcome change, and a welcome enrichment for her art, as well.

Grimm considers brushes to be some of her most important tools. Her inventory includes two Isabey Siberian blue squirrel quill mop brushes (Nos. 12 and 8) that have held up for years. She has a 1¾-inch Ron Ranson goat hair hake brush from Pro Arte that she finds useful for large washes. Recently, she has fallen in love with inexpensive, long-handled Chinese calligraphy brushes. "They hold lots of paint, and they keep their points. I put these to use more often than my sable brushes," Grimm says. The most

fun brush she owns is also one of the least expensive, a synthetic sword liner by Pro Arte. "My students love to play around with it, and it's my secret weapon for painting trees," she says.

### Letting Watercolor Do Its Thing

Grimm finds inspiration in simple, everyday things and the mood of a passing moment. Beach houses, hydrangeas and village streets are all subjects that occupy her paintings—as do people. "I love to paint my family going about their daily lives and places that I know well," Grimm says. "The years are flying by so quickly."

She often paints landscapes from reference photos, at times pasting several together to get the right effect.

paper they can afford. "Using good paper takes a lot of the frustration out of watercolor painting, and the finished painting is always better."

Although Grimm may experiment with unusual formats, she usually starts off with 22x30 sheets of 140- or 300-lb. Arches bright white paper, or 18x24, 140-lb. paper blocks. (She prefers cold-pressed paper.) She has a large roll of 156-lb. Arches paper for larger paintings, but she's reluctant to use it because it must be stretched beforehand.

While she prefers professional-grade Winsor & Newton watercolors, Grimm uses other brands as well. "But I find Winsor & Newton paints are reliable. It's important to know that my paintings will look the same years from now, and I know this paint will hold up," says the artist.



Grimm used a viewfinder as an aid to adjust the cropping in *King's Parade, Cambridge* (18x6½), which was originally twice as large.

She prints the photos in black-and-white and, before starting a painting, often makes a color study based on these and notes from her sketches. Her still lifes start from life, but if she can't finish a painting in a few hours, she'll take a photo and work from that.

Even before putting brush to paper, Grimm spends a great deal of time exploring ideas in a series of thumbnail sketches, often while resting on her studio couch. "If the composition isn't right, no amount of good painting will make the piece work," she says. Still, she doesn't shy away from changing horses in mid-stream. "If I'm in the middle of painting and something doesn't look right, I'll use a viewfinder to play around with cropping." She did this with her painting *King's Parade, Cambridge* (left), which was originally twice as wide.

Grimm considers color and tonal values to be just as important as design. "Beyond subject matter, capturing the quality of light is a powerful way to express the mood of a passing moment," she says. Particularly poignant to her is the mood evoked by twilight, which she depicts in her painting *The Beach is Closed* (opposite), a piece inspired by an evening with her children at the beach. To create these expressive effects, she often starts a painting with loose washes of paint, letting watercolor "do its thing." These first layers, which contain only a tiny amount of pigment,

are either flat or graded washes.

She often covers the whole sheet with these first washes so that they'll shine through later layers, unifying the whole.

Preferring not to use masking fluid, Grimm avoids areas she wants to keep as her lightest value. If they're small areas, like

highlights on leaves, she scribbles over them with a wax resist crayon to preserve them. "I've tried to do this with masking fluid, but have found that wax resist works best for my purposes," she says. The wax stays on the paper, becoming part of the painting. Also, though she tends to work in layers from light to dark, sometimes she has a feature that needs to be established early on, such as figures.

Once these washes dry, she lightly sketches in shapes with a Derwent 2B pencil. But rather than form a detailed drawing, the lines serve as boundaries. "They're there to let me know where the paint can and can't go." Then she dives in happily with big brushes, swirling around color, developing a sense of movement. Generally, she puts warm tones in the light areas and cool tones in shadows, pushing the contrast to convey mood. Sometimes, she drops paint right into the wet wash, as in the area of grasses in *Early Evening, Block Island* (page 24).

As she moves to darker layers, the painting starts to resemble her original vision. She then adds more detail, as necessary, with smaller brushes. Finally, she runs a dry brush with just a touch of paint over areas to enhance the feeling of texture.

Like many artists, Grimm struggles to remember to stop when she's ahead. "I've ruined more paintings than I care to admit through overworking them," she says. "When I'm

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**ABOVE**  
**The Beach is Closed**  
(watercolor, 18x25)

**LEFT**  
**Late Afternoon at the Beach**  
(watercolor, 18x25)

following my own rules and trying to be as thoughtful as I can with my brushstrokes, things just seem to fall into place. If the full range of values is there, all it takes are a few finishing touches, and then I can put down my brush. This is easier said than done. The good news, however, is that I do learn from these experiences, and I do my best paintings—often quite quickly—after I have spent hours laboring over a bad one.”

### **An Alternate Medium**

Besides watercolor, Grimm also works in charcoal. She finds it therapeutic to switch between the two. “For everything to go right for me in a watercolor painting, I really have to be

focused. Even after years of practice, I still sometimes feel frustrated,” she says. For a break, she turns to more easily controlled charcoal. “I can just keep erasing and adjusting until it’s right.” She notes that one medium informs the other. In charcoal, she works from light to dark, with her lightest lights being the white of the paper, and just as she does in watercolor, she uses the full range of tonal values. “The first stages of a charcoal piece are similar to my initial washes

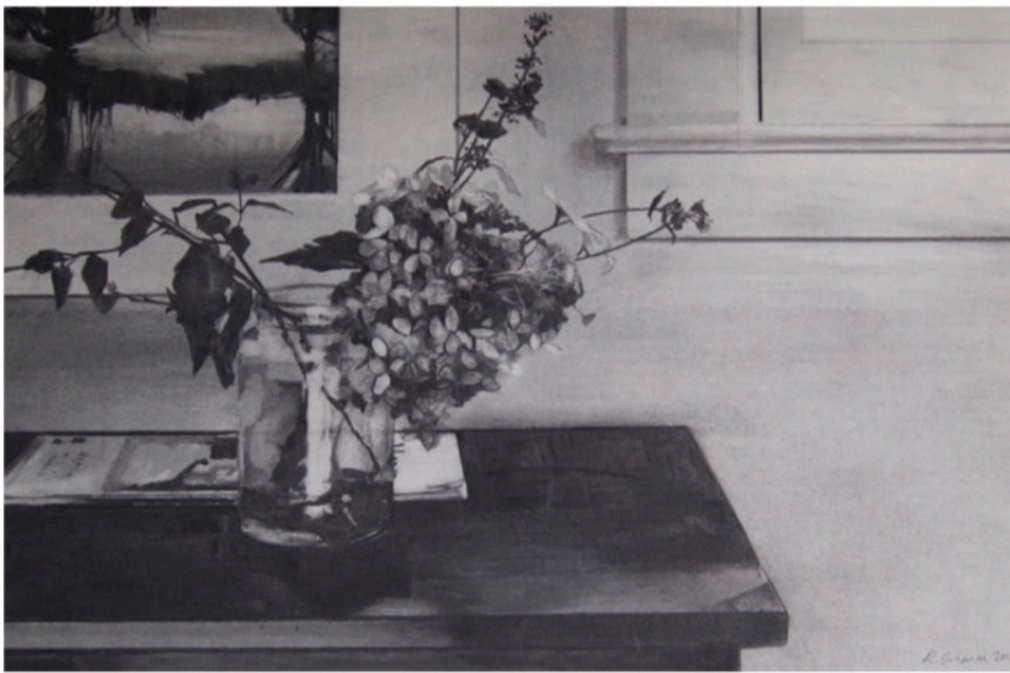
OPPOSITE TOP  
**Winter Flowers**  
(charcoal, 15x23)

OPPOSITE BOTTOM  
**Winter Flowers**  
(watercolor, 17x21)

BELOW  
**Early Evening,  
Block Island**  
(watercolor, 15½x18)







## Meet the Artist



**Rachael Grimm** ([rachaelgrimm.com](http://rachaelgrimm.com)) is an award-winning watercolor artist who grew up in the northwest of England and moved to the U.S. in 1996. She trained at the Art Students League in New York from 1996–2000, specializing in figure painting in oil.

In addition to watercolor, Rachael loves to use charcoal. Sketching from life has always been an important part of her art practice. She attends life-drawing sessions at the Spring Street Studio in New York and sketches and paints outdoors regularly.

Her paintings are in numerous private collections both in the U.S. and overseas, and one of her portraits is permanently installed in the main library at Fordham University.

in watercolor. Instead of paint, though, I grind up charcoal to a fine powder, spread it over my paper and rub it in until it's the correct value," she says. Then, using willow sticks of different widths, she builds up layers of charcoal, using the tips for details and the sides for broad areas.

As to which medium to choose for a particular subject, Grimm uses charcoal if she's interested in structure but watercolor if she's interested in light and color. "I've only done a painting and charcoal drawing of the same subject once (see *Winter Flowers*, above), but the things I chose to highlight in each piece were quite different. I happened to have a jar of old hydrangeas sitting on a table underneath

a window. The way the flowers and glass jar caught the sun made me want to paint them in watercolor. After I finished, I was still interested in the structure of the papyery flowers and thought charcoal would be a great way to explore this. So my intention with the charcoal was more about wanting to do a detailed drawing than capturing the effects of light." **WA**

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*Michael Chesley Johnson is a Signature Member of the American Impressionist Society, the Pastel Society of America and the Pastel Society of New Mexico. He's a long-time contributor to Pastel Journal and Artist's Magazine.*