Paper

What paper to use? Is any one manufacturer creating a paper with a consistent surface?

Questions I find I cannot answer well.

I would prefer to use paper that I can trust to 'act' in the same manner each and every time I begin a painting. If I can trust my tools then all – and that is enough – I have to concern myself with is technique, how the paint will be applied.

However more and more these days paper has become a problem.

What I need is a paper that is internally and externally sized, but not too much of either, 300lb Hot with a smooth surface that will take many glazes while still permitting some movement of the pigment before being completely absorbed. I do not want a paper that sucks the paint out of my brush too fast – not enough internal sizing. Nor do I want a paper so slick that the paint stays on the surface – too much external sizing.

I want a paper that is just right. (My 'Goldilocks syndrome' very familiar to anyone who knows the story of the three bears!)

A lot to ask? I do not think so.

For years I used only Lanaquarelle, the paper received the paint from my brush at just the right rate, in fact I was so comfortable with the paper I never gave it much thought, it did what I needed it to do consistently. Then I had trouble with the surface sizing, there were

Dime and quarter sized areas that were under sized where the paint got sucked into the internal fibers of the paper. Or over sized areas where the paint would not take at all. There was no correcting either of these problems. (I am about to try this one again after three years – I will let you know my thoughts.)

So I tried other manufacturers.

300lb HP *Windsor and Newton*: I could not handle this paper at all, simply too absorbent.

300lb. HP *Saunders*: I have the same feeling about this paper as I do with Windsor and Newton paper.

300lb HP *Arches*: the surface was not smooth enough so I rejected this paper without even trying to paint on it. I would advise anyone NOT to buy this paper as I have experienced students having MAJOR problems with it. With all pigments, but especially Ultramarine Blue, the pigment settles into a grid like pattern on the surface causing a pattern of small dark dots that do not disappear when dry.

I had a number of complaints when using this paper while working on board a boat on the Amazon. The air was humid, and the paper smelled caused I assume by the gelatin sizing. To some it was so strong they would not come close! Did not work to keep mosquitoes away however. A friend who works in Vienna told me she had to switch to Fabriano because she was allergic to the sizing in Arches. Her hand swelled and itched where it contacted the paper.

300lb HP *Fabriano*: this paper comes in two color biases: Traditional, biased slightly toward yellow, and Bright White, biased slightly toward blue. These papers are VERY sized and smooth on the 'right' side of the paper. The paint slid all over the surface. So I turned it over and have much control on the 'wrong' side. I use the 'right' side when painting very small very detailed images, when I use mostly dry brush techniques.

I have an additional problem with the size of the watermark on Fabriano, it is just too big and I am not willing to give that much space up to someone else's' advertising! Another advantage of working on the 'wrong' side - the watermark does not show!

Also I do find this paper is effected by humidity, it paints better on the 'right' side when the humidity is up the paint is more likely to be absorbed into the paper rather than resting on the surface.

Be cautious when working on papers that have a strong bias toward either blue or yellow the bias can and in fact does effect light glazes of pigment. For instance if you are working toward a clear delicate purple, or pure bright pink do NOT try working on a paper that has a bias toward yellow, this bias changes the purity of the pigment color, dulls them considerable. I have been suggesting this in my teaching for some time, but recently actually redid all my color charts – I was avoiding getting started on a large commission – the difference is very obvious. I worked on Fabriano Bright White and Fabriano Traditional. The violet charts in particular are clear pure violet on the blue biased (Bright White) paper, while they tend to be muddier on the yellow biased (Traditional) paper.

Picky? Yes. But if you are going to spend an extensive amount of time working on a painting, you can relieve some of the frustration by choosing the right ground to work on.

My advise is, buy a number of different papers that feel good to the touch, name them when in the store or immediately on returning home, in each corner, that way when the paper is torn into smaller pieces you still have the manufacturer's name. Test the papers on BOTH sides and record the effects, both likes and dislikes. Unfortunately this needs to be done every few years as paper companies change their method of manufacturing, or they get bought over resulting paper changes. Do not get too connected to just one paper, that way panic does not set in when your favorite changes.

Be cautious of working with blocks of watercolor paper, the paper is not always loaded in with same surface up all the time, you might well experience one or two not painting as expected, this is because the surface side has changed.

How can you tell which surface is the 'right' one? First see the watermark, if it reads correctly then that is the side the manufacturer considers 'right'. When you have this side up tilt the paper slightly in very good light compare the 'tooth' (the very slight texture), it will be less obvious on the 'right' side than on the 'wrong' side. Also the feel will be different front to back. Very gently glide your fingers over the paper's surface, one side will feel smoother, the reverse will feel hairier. For detailed work it is preferable to work on the smoother side. In the case of Fabriano Artistico, the 'right' side feels VERY SLICK almost plastic, the 'wrong' side is hairier but not too much so.

Smooth good for detail. Hairier good for texture.