

Creating a Watercolor Effect from a Photograph

By Stan Ashbrook

STEP 1: OPEN FILE

1. Choose File >- Open (Ctrl+O PC, Cmd+O Mac) to display the Open dialog box. Select your file and click to open.

STEP 2: DUPLICATE LAYER

2. Because both a watercolor painting and a "pen and ink" sketch are needed, you need two layers. Duplicate the background layer by choosing Layer > Duplicate Layer. When the Duplicate Layer dialog box appears, type in pen-ink to name the layer and then click OK.

STEP 3: TRANSFORM ONE LAYER INTO A WATERCOLOR PAINTING

Adobe Photoshop CS and Elements 3 does have a watercolor filter, but in most cases, I find that it makes the images too dark with too many odd-looking brush strokes. Therefore, let's use another approach.

3. Click the Background layer in the Layers palette to make it the active layer
4. Click the Layer Visibility icon in the left column in the pen-ink layer to hide the top layer.
5. Choose Filter >- Artistic > Dry Brush to get the Dry Brush filter in the Filter Gallery dialog box. Click in the preview window and drag the image around until you can see what you want to view.
 - a. Begin experimenting with the settings for Brush Size, Brush Detail, and Texture. I used 2, 8, and 1. Click OK to apply the settings.

Creating a "Pen and Ink" Sketch with a Watercolor Wash To soften the brush strokes and make them look more like a watercolor wash, use a blur filter.

6. Choose Filter >• Blur >- Smart Blur to get the Smart Blur dialog box.
 - a. Try using a Radius of 10 and a Threshold of 50. Also, make sure you have Quality set to High and that Mode is set to Normal before clicking OK to apply the settings.

For my image, these few steps produced a realistic-looking watercolor. After using many images and trying many different techniques to create watercolor paintings, I've concluded there are many variables and settings for each of many different techniques; what works on one image, may work poorly on another. In general, these steps work well on images that are about 1,600 x 1,200 pixels in size and have been taken with a digital camera.

On larger files, and when photographs have been scanned with a flat-bed scanner or negatives or slides have been scanned with a film scanner, the same techniques work well if you first apply a light Gaussian Blur to the image. The larger the files, the better this technique seems to work provided that you're working with a good-quality image with minimal grain.

Sometimes, you may also find that an image can be made to look more like a watercolor painting if you apply some of these filters more than once. Experimentation is the key to getting what you want.

STEP 4: TRANSFORM SECOND LAYER INTO A "PEN AND INK" SKETCH

The next step is to turn the "pen-ink" layer into a "pen and ink" sketch. While many Photoshop experts use and recommend the Find Edges filter to make line drawings, I find I usually get much better results with a hidden option in the Smart Blur filter. The results, as you'll see, can be quite outstanding.

7. Click the pen-ink layer to make it the active Layer.
8. Choose Enhance >- Adjust Color >- Remove Color to remove all color.
9. Choose Filter >- Blur >- Smart Blur to get the Smart Blur dialog box. This time, set Quality to High and Mode to Edge Only.
 - a. Try setting Radius to 25 and Threshold to 35.
 - b. Click OK to apply the settings. Have patience as the Smart Blur filter can take some time to process. Y
10. You may be surprised to see what now looks like white lines on a black ink scratchboard, but this is okay—
11. Choose Filter> Adjustments > Invert (Ctrl+I PC, Cmd+I Mac) and you see black lines on a white background sketch.

STEP 5: BLEND LAYERS

At this point, you have learned two techniques and you have two entirely different images made from the same digital photo—a watercolor-like image and a "pen and ink" sketch. We now want to combine these two layers.

12. Click the pen-ink layer to make it the active layer.
13. In the Layers palette, click in the Blend Mode box and choose Multiply. Leave Opacity set to 100.

STEP 6: MAKE FINAL COLOR ADJUSTMENTS AND ADD YOUR SIGNATURE

Now is the time to make a few creative color adjustments by creating a "Pen and Ink" Sketch with a Watercolor Wash

14. To lighten the image, use an Adjustment Layer so that you can go back and make changes if desired. Choose Layer >- New Adjustment layer >- Levels to get the New Layer dialog box.

15. Click OK to display the Levels dialog box. Set Input Levels to 5, 1.50, and 170. Click OK to apply the settings.

The final step is to adjust the colors as you'd like them. You have Adobe Photoshop Elements and an artistic license to create as you'd like to create, use a Hue/Saturation and change the values.

16. Once again, to allow you the opportunity to go back and change your settings use another Adjustment Layer to make changes to the colors.
17. Click on the pen-ink layer and choose Layer >New Adjustment Layer >- Hue/Saturation to get the Hue/Saturation dialog box. Make changes to the settings to suit.

Because we used Adjustment Layers, you can now go back and double-click the Levels 1 or Hue/Saturation 1 layers and make changes to the settings until you get the results that you want.

18. To bring out more in the sky I clicked on the Levels Adjustment Layer and with Brush and a soft edge and low opacity, about 25% I painted with black in the sky to bring back some blue.

Also, don't forget to add your signature — it adds a nice touch to your painting. You also may want to put a soft edge on the image by using a soft eraser on both the ink layer and the painted layer. Save your file and it is ready to be printed.