

Lesson unit plan 2: Paint Washes, Effects & Colour Perspective, Composition

This is a series of activities that will take more than one lesson. These activities are for skills and knowledge progression rather than creating a final painting.

Outcome: Children learn how to use paint to create smooth washes of colour across a larger area. These painted pieces are then used to explore how Claude Monet uses colour fading to show distance, helping landscapes feel deep and atmospheric rather than flat. Pupils move on to begin to understand how composition choices affect the structure of a landscape painting and finally how objects appear smaller the further away they are.

Purpose: BIG Book Award 2026 Art Competition.

Audience: The Art Competition Judging Panel will be made up of representatives of The Arts Society, Shrewsbury.

Lesson objectives:

- Control of water, transparency and layering paint
- Explore wet-on-wet, wet-on-dry, graded wash, salt texture
- Understand atmospheric perspective: colours fade and become paler with distance

Resources:

- A3 paper (one per child, to cut into four equal pieces) or 4x small A5 pieces per child
- Watercolour or other paints (blue + natural green from previous lesson). Thick paints such as acrylics will not work for the painting techniques.
- Brushes (use thicker brushes for covering larger areas with paint), water pots (cream cheese tubs are great for avoiding spillages and you can use the lids when carrying to tables/ sinks), salt
- Paper towels
- Copyright-free Monet images (links below)

Preparing the Paper

- Fold A4 into quarters
- Cut to create four equal pieces

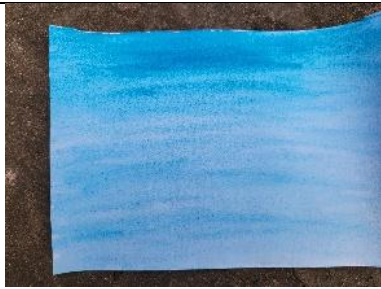
Each piece will be used for a different paint technique

Technique 1 — Blue Graded Wash

Focus: wet paint on dry paper, smooth fading

- Use blue paint to create a gradient from dark at the top to pale at the bottom
- Encourage control of water and brush pressure

This becomes the sky/background.



Technique 2 — Natural Green Wash

Focus: flat wash – wet paint on dry paper

- Use the natural green mixed previously
- Paint the second piece fully

This will become the darkest, closest hill.

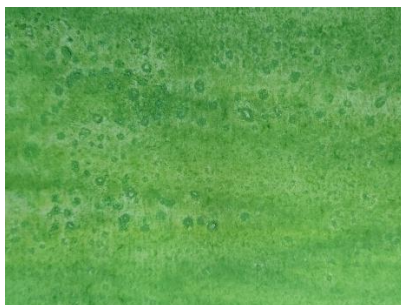


Technique 3 — Watered Green + Salt Texture

Focus: dilution, texture

- Water the same green down slightly – aiming for a medium tone
- Paint the third piece
- While wet, sprinkle salt lightly
- Leave to dry

Explain that salt effects vary depending on pigment strength and salt grain size. Please note that the textured effect may be very subtle. It can depend on the paint.



Technique 4 — Wet-on-Wet Exploration

Focus: soft edges, waterline effects

- Wet the top half of the final piece
- Leave the bottom half dry

- Paint green onto the wet area and observe how it spreads
- Paint onto the dry area and compare
- Notice the “waterline” where the paint meets the wet edge

This helps children understand how artists create soft, distant shapes vs. crisp, close ones.



Creating Perspective With Colour

Once all pieces are dry:

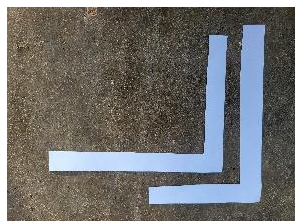
1. Keep the blue graded wash as the background
2. Put the three green pieces in order from lightest → darkest
3. Draw a hill across each piece (each hill slightly different)
4. Cut out the hills
5. Layer them on the blue background:
 - Lightest green at the back
 - Mid-green in the middle
 - Darkest green at the front



Children see how colours fade and become bluer/paler with distance — atmospheric perspective. This is not about creating a picture. The activity is designed to develop understanding of how to show depth in their painting. The technique of using paler colours for things that are further away can be used in their final competition piece if they wish to.

Composition

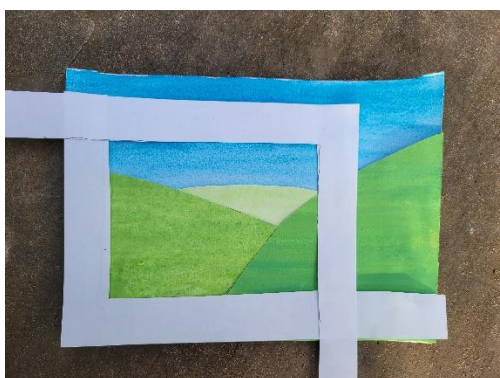
Cut two L-shaped pieces from a sheet of scrap A4 paper to make an adjustable viewfinder. Using two separate pieces means you can slide them to change the size and shape of the rectangle you create, though a pre-made rectangular viewfinder works just as well.



Place the viewfinder over different parts of the hill composition they created earlier. Each position will create a new composition. Ask pupils to choose the composition they prefer and explain why it works best.



1



2



Possible reasons for composition decisions.

1. In only showing a small amount of sky, and placing a character bottom left of the picture, the artist may want to show that the character still has a long way to travel.
2. If an artist wanted to highlight a storm, they may decide to show more of the sky in the painting to emphasise the importance of the weather in the picture.

Compare With Monet (Copyright-Free Images)

These Monet paintings are in the public domain and safe to use in class:

1. The Seine at Vetheuil

[Monet w527 - Category:The Seine at Vétheuil by Claude Monet - Wikimedia Commons](#)



2. La Seine à Vétheuil (1881)

Public domain — Wikimedia Commons

[File:Claude Monet - La Seine à Vétheuil \(1881\).jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)

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Discussion prompts:

- How does Monet make the background feel far away?
- Where do you see colours fading?
- How does water affect the colours?
- What similarities can you spot with your own layered hills?

Using Monet to Show How Distant Objects Appear Smaller

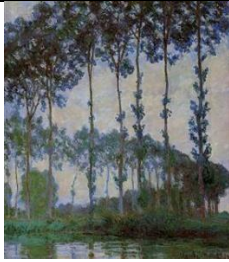
1. Start with a simple observation prompt

Show pupils the Monet paintings. (They are public domain although you may be able to search for better quality.):

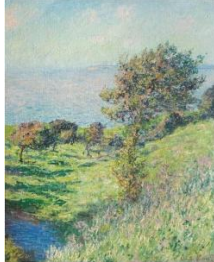
[File:Monet - landscape-at-port-villez-1.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)



[File:Monet - poplars-on-the-banks-of-the-river-eppte-overcast-weather.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#)



[Search media - Wikimedia Commons](#)



Banks of the Seine at Jenfosse – Clear Weather 1884 is also a good example.

Ask pupils to look closely at:

- The trees on the far bank
- The boats on the water
- The hills in the distance
- The reflections

They'll quickly notice that the things furthest away are tiny, soft, and pale, while the things closest are bigger, clearer, and darker.

Guide pupils to notice size changes

Use questions that help them see the pattern:

- Which trees look the biggest
- Which trees look the smallest
- Are the small ones actually small in real life, or just far away
- How does Monet show that the river goes back into the distance

Children often have an “aha” moment when they realise that Monet hasn't painted tiny trees — he's painted distant trees.

Link size to distance explicitly

Explain:

- Objects shrink as they move further away from the viewer.
- Artists use this to create depth in a flat painting.
- Monet combines size, colour fading, and soft edges to show distance.

You can even sketch a quick example on the board:

- Big tree at the front
- Medium tree in the middle
- Tiny tree at the back

Ask pupils: Which one is closest? How do you know?

Connect this to their own layered-hill activity

When pupils layer their hills:

- The closest hill should be largest and darkest.

- The middle hill should be medium-sized.
 - The furthest hill should be smallest and lightest.
- This mirrors exactly what Monet does.

A simple comparison activity

Give pupils a strip of paper divided into three boxes:

- Box 1: Draw a big tree (foreground)
- Box 2: Draw a medium tree (middle ground)
- Box 3: Draw a small tree (background)

Then show Monet again and ask them to match their drawings to parts of the painting.

Why this works

- Monet's landscapes are gentle, atmospheric, and easy for children to decode.
- The size differences are subtle but clear once pointed out.
- It reinforces the idea that artists don't just copy what they see — they make choices to show depth.

Vocabulary

Composition:

In art, **composition** means how an artist arranges the different parts of their painting. Think of it like your classroom: your teacher has decided where the tables, chairs, whiteboard and bookcases should go because those places work best. Artists do the same in their artwork — they choose where to put trees, hills, buildings, objects and sky so the picture looks balanced, interesting and tells the story they want it to tell.

Perspective:

In art, **perspective** is the way artists show distance in a picture. It helps a flat painting look like it has a front, a middle and a far-away background. Things that are close to you look bigger, clearer and brighter. Things that are far away look smaller, lighter and sometimes bluer. Artists use perspective to make their landscapes look deep and real, just like the world around us.

Pick and mix success criteria:

Success Criteria for Watercolour Washes & Colour Perspective

I can use water carefully to control paint

- I created a smooth graded wash from dark to light using blue.
- I changed the strength of my green by adding more or less water.
- I noticed how paint behaves differently on wet paper and dry paper.

I can use different watercolour techniques

- I used wet-on-wet to make soft, blurry edges.
- I used wet-on-dry to make sharper, clearer edges.
- I experimented with salt to create texture while the paint was still wet.

I can mix and apply natural greens

- I used the natural green from the previous lesson.
- I created lighter and darker greens by adjusting water, not just adding white.

- I painted three different green washes that clearly show different depths.

I can show perspective using colour

- I ordered my green papers from lightest (furthest away) to darkest (closest).
- I drew and cut hills that layer neatly to show depth.
- I placed the palest hill at the back and the darkest at the front to create distance.

I can compare my work to Monet's landscapes

- I can explain how Monet uses fading colour to show distance.
- I can spot where colours become lighter or bluer in his paintings.
- I can describe how my own hills use the same idea of atmospheric perspective.

I can show perspective using size

- I made my furthest hill smaller and my closest hill larger.
- I can explain that objects look smaller when they are further away.
- I used this idea in my final layered landscape.

I can compare my work to Monet's landscapes

- I spotted where Monet painted small, pale shapes to show distance.
- I noticed how his trees, boats, and riverbanks get smaller the further back they are.
- I can explain how my own painting uses similar ideas about size and colour to show depth.