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Soft, gentle and really tough

Watercolour painters master their medium

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Northern News Services

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SOMBA K'E/YELLOWKNIFE - Many watercolour paintings are admired for their soft colours and gentle contours. Looks can be deceiving.



Pattern and Illusion is a watercolour painting of an Indian woman hanging fabric. Calgary artist Brittney Lintick will use her work to help Yellowknife painters learn watercolour techniques later this month. - photo courtesy of Brittney Lintick

"It's a medium that can't be pushed around," said painter Lynn Trudeau.

Trudeau and other members of the Yellowknife Watercolour Society plan to gang up on the medium during a workshop at Northern United Place later this month.

"Watercolour can be difficult, but only if you let it be," Trudeau said.

The society is bringing in a heavyweight to help tackle the medium.

Professional painter Brittney Lintick of Calgary will provide hands-on instruction as participants take on a two-and-a-half-foot canvas from Oct. 30 to Nov. 1.

Lintick will introduce principles related to colour mixing and expressing light and shadow.

"If there are any problems she is there to teach new ways of dealing with mistakes that can be made," said organizer Shawna Lampi-Legaree.

Because watercolour features pigments suspended in water, the paints do not behave as predictably as thicker oils or acrylics. Watercolour paints are also very unforgiving.

"With oil painting, if you make a mistake you just scrape it off and start over again," Trudeau said.

Not so with watercolour. The paint's transparent qualities, which give the work its ethereal quality, is no good for concealing missteps made along the way. One defence against creative catastrophe is careful planning.

"You have to plan everything out ahead of time," Lampi-Legaree said. "Most people can't come to watercolour with no idea what they are going to do and just have it happen. You need a fairly structured plan."

Lintick has taken care of that. Painters will develop their own renditions of one of Lintick's large watercolours, titled Pattern and Illusion, which depicts an Indian woman in a sari, hanging fabric on a line. The painting showcases the vibrant colour and intricate texture watercolour is capable of.

Another challenge presented by watercolour work is the need for patience. If paint is added too soon, colours may bleed together, producing uneven shades.

"Sometimes you have to walk away and let it dry," Lampi-Legaree said.

If a painter works too slowly, however, the paint may dry unevenly and present problems, as well.

"The challenge is to move fast enough so the watercolour doesn't dry up," she added.

Despite the steep learning curve that faces new painters, watercolour offers rewards for those who stick with it.

"It's an awful lot easier to clean up," Trudeau said. "You don't have to mess with turpentine and linseed oil and things like that. It's just water. And it's fairly inexpensive, which is always a plus."

The artistic qualities of the medium offer distinct advantages, as well.

"I like the subtleness of water colour," Trudeau said. "I like the mood or atmosphere it suggests. It's not overstated. There are techniques you can get with watercolour that you can't get with acrylic."

Lampi-Legaree remains a fan after working in watercolour for the last four years.

"When I go through any art magazine, I'll look at the oils and I'll look at the acrylics and they do nothing for me," she said. "When I look at a watercolour painting it has a life of its own that is fascinating."

Even the fact that watercolour is such a challenging medium is among its appealing characteristics.

"You're always going to learn something," Trudeau said. "It's a continual learning process. Every painting is a learning experience. I would say if you're the least little bit interested it would be worth exploring."

Lintick will present a public lecture on watercolour painting in room 205 at Northern United Place at 7 p.m. on Oct. 29. All are welcome to attend. The workshop runs from 1 p.m. to 8 p.m. on Oct. 30 and from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. on Oct. 31 and Nov. 1.



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