

First Snow

An acrylic painting project by Kaaren Poole



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Warm-Up Project

We'll paint a small, loose winter landscape. We'll use color blending in the sky and create hazy distant trees. Also, we'll add a more close-up version of one of the pine branches. All of these things are elements in the main lesson, so in a sense, this is a practice session to introduce a few of the techniques we'll be using there. But our warm-up piece can, if you like, be more than just practice. You could frame it and hang it or display it on an easel. Or you could make prints for a greeting card.

Our scene is the "First Snow" in an open landscape dotted with pine trees. The scene is late fall, but an almost magical snowfall heralds the coming of winter. The snow hasn't gathered anywhere yet, and the sky, because of its colors, at first glance seems incongruous with the idea of falling snow. But imagine that the snow is moving in from behind the viewer. The sky we see in the painting is the last remnant of the clear sky that the coming storm is pushing away.

Generally, we'll paint the landscape in sections, beginning at the far distance (towards the top of the paper) and progressing closer to the viewer (and downwards). There are a few exceptions to this, and I'll explain why when we get there.

The landscape has several gentle rises. Their crests are pleasing diagonals which add interest to the scene. These diagonal lines define the sections by which we'll paint.

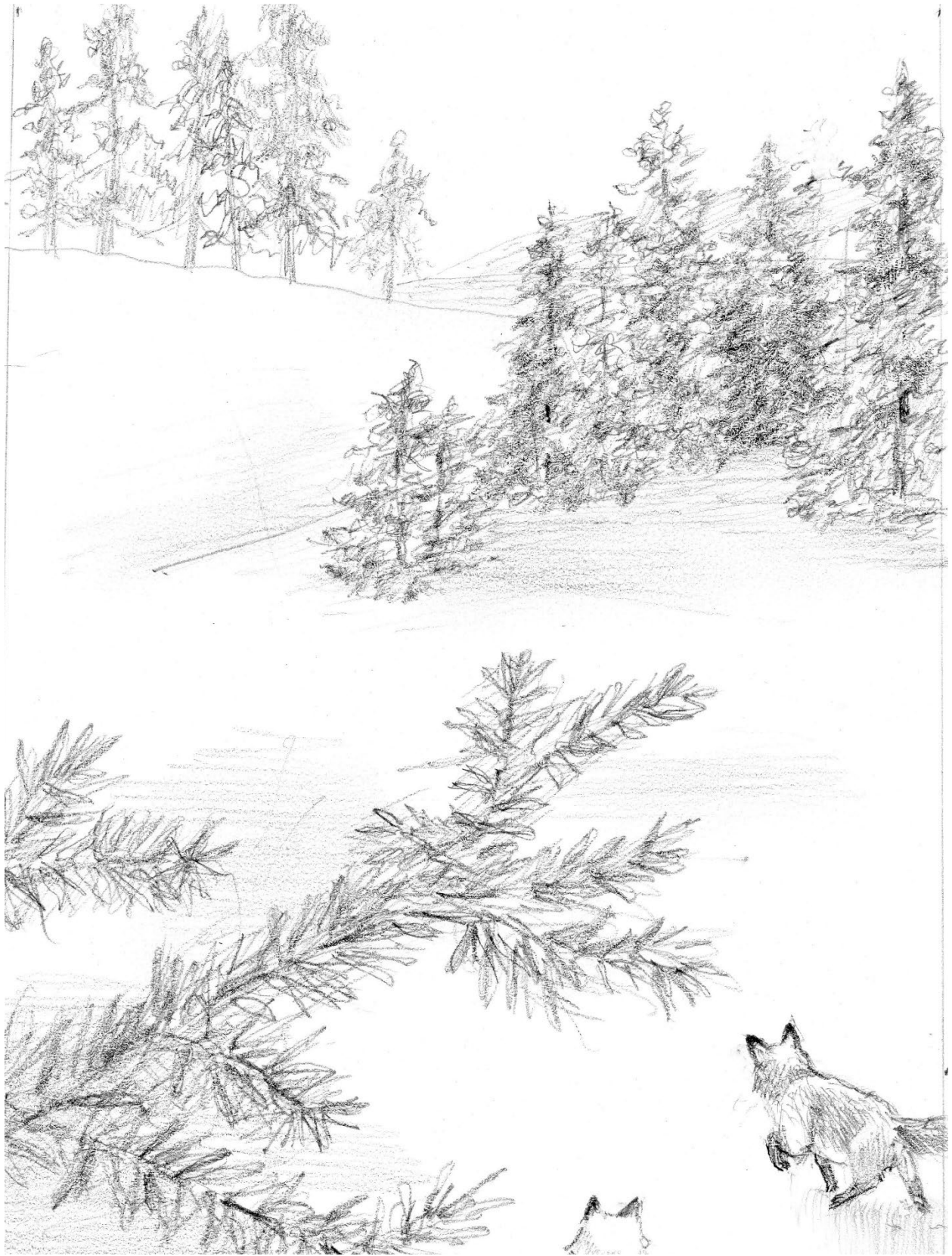
What's in This PDF

I sincerely hope the information in this PDF helps you complete your little "first snow" scene. You'll find a list of materials and supplies, a description of the step-by-step process to accompany the video, the sketch I used to loosely design the scene, an image of the finished piece, and images of some of the steps along the way, a palette of the colors I used, and an extra page for your notes. Also, at the end, you'll find a table summarizing some of the things we'll learn about aerial perspective, which is an important element in our painting and which you'll find useful in any artwork you do in which you portray objects at different distances.

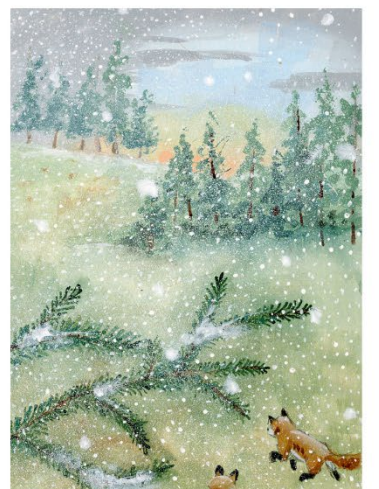
I began by drawing a simple pencil sketch of my landscape. This would serve as a guide for my painting. As I worked, I was careful to keep in mind that I was working towards a background for something else rather than a painting to stand on its own.

However, I don't much like practicing for its own sake. As an animal painter, I couldn't resist adding the two foxes in the bottom corner to bring a little more life to the piece. An alternative would be to add a bird or two on the foreground branch and perhaps a flock flying in the distance.

For your reference, here's the sketch I worked from. But feel free to create your own rather than copy this one.



Progression Slideshow



These six images show the progression of our project. Sometimes, when we don't have a good idea of where we're headed, the painting is more difficult. I hope you find these helpful!

Materials and Supplies

Surface: 5" x 7" or 8" x 10" piece of mixed media paper or a board primed with a coat of white gesso

Brushes: 6 and 8 flats, small rounds, script liner, old small round that no longer holds a point or a number 1 small round stiff bristle brush

Water container, paper towels, pencil, palette

Old Toothbrush

Paints: I used acrylic craft paints. I've included a palette of swatches of the colors I used, each labeled with the name and brand. "D" denotes a Ceramcoat paint by Delta. "A" denotes an Americana paint by DecoArt. The important thing is the color, though, and not the brand. (Note: These paint company introduce new colors each year and retire others, so the exact paint that I've used may no longer be available.) In addition to black and white, you'll need colors in four categories, or five if you paint the foxes:

Sky and Snow Colors:

A few light blues (Blue Heaven A and Blue Chiffon A), a light grey (Grey Sky A), a pale warm colors (Light Parchment A), a soft, warm peach (Peachy Keen D). White

Ground Colors:

A few dull, light to medium greens (Cactus Green D, Village Green D, and Wedgewood Green D), and a light warm brown (Honey Brown A)

Tree Trunk and Branch Colors:

Varying values of browns (Burnt Umber D, Pebble A)

Tree Foliage Colors:

A selection of cool greens ranging from light to dark: Village Green D, Cactus Green C, Green Mist A, Colonial Green A, Teal Green A, Hauser Dark Green A

The Foxes:

Burnt Sienna A, Raw Sienna A, Honey Brown A, Burnt Umber D, Manganese Blue (optional) Black, and White

A Note on Transferring, which you will possibly want to do with the foxes. I usually transfer by tracing the design, rubbing the back of the tracing with graphite, and then going over the design with a stylus to push the graphite onto the piece. But sometimes, if you've already done some painting and then want to transfer a design onto the painted surface, the graphite won't show. You can get transfer paper in various colors, including white. One type is the Saral Paper Corp Wac Free Transfer Paper Sampler Pack. This pack is reasonably priced and includes one 8 1/2" x 11" sheet of red, blue, yellow, white, and graphite. One sheet will last you for several transfers. I found it on Amazon, but you can find it several other places as well.



Healthy Green
(D)



Light Parchment
(A)



Blue Chiffon
(A)



Blue Heaven
(A)



Grey Sky
(A)



Village Green
(D)



Cactus Green
(D)



Green Mist
(A)



Wedgewood
green (D)



Colonial Green
(A)



Teal green
(A)



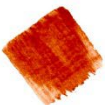
Hauser Dark
Green (A)



Honey Brown
(A)



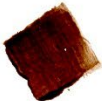
Raw Sienna
(A)



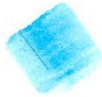
Burnt Sienna
(A)



Pebble
(A)



Burnt Umber
(A)



Manganese Blue
golden Fluid
Acrylic

Prep

If you're using mixed media or watercolor paper, mark a 5" x 7" rectangle for your painting area. If you're using a 5" x 7" gesso'd board, you're all set.

Use a pencil to lightly sketch the line of the far distant hill, the outline of the hill with the farthest trees, and the line of the line with the mid-ground trees.

General information about painting the ground, trees and the falling snow. We'll be painting the landscape by working section by section far to near (or top to bottom). Keep these guidelines in mind.

Painting the ground

No snow has accumulated yet, so the colors of the ground are muted greens and browns—dull and light far away, grading to brighter and lighter closer to the viewer.

Painting conifers

Technique: painting loose texture with an old, round brush or a small round bristle brush. Sketch in the trunks with a liner brush. These are just a guide for placing the trees with differing heights and different spacing between them. The sky should show through here and there for interest. Slight differences in value add a hint of dimension.

A little about falling snow

Distant and near falling snow are different in a few ways. First, far away, the flakes look very tiny. In a heavy snow, these distant flakes are more like a pale wash of off-white. Though we're sticking to white in our painting, far away snow is blue/gray rather than pure white. Close falling snow is white and the flakes are larger. Large, near-ground flakes can be painted one by one with a tiny brush. Mid-ground flakes can be spattered with a toothbrush. When spattering, keep in mind that the wetter your paint is, the larger your spatters will be.

Now, let's begin!

Begin with the sky



The colors we use in the sky are the colors we often see in autumn and early winter skies: grayish blues with muted oranges and golds towards the horizon. We'll be painting wet in wet for smoothly blended colors (except for the clouds which can be more distinct). Note that I've cropped the photo to mainly show the sky.

Use your flat brushes for this part. Begin at the center of the horizon with Peachy Keen. Paint Light Parchment above and around it. Then, on the right, blend into Blue Chiffon then Blue Heaven. At the left, blend into Grey Sky. Pull a few horizontal strokes of grey into the clearer part of the sky for thin clouds.

Paint the ground



This section consists of the ground on all three hills and the snow falling in the distance.

First, paint the farthest hill in the distance on your right. Use your bluest ground colors in this section. The lowest part should be slightly darker than the rest, tucking the far hill behind the one in front of it.

Paint the far hill on the left in the same manner, using slightly lighter colors. It's nice to avoid a hard line across the left portion of the bottom of this section. At a distance, the colors will blend into each other more than in sections which are closer. This is because distance blurs detail.

Now for the nearer hill on the right. Note that the ground of this section—beginning with the hilltop—extends all the way to the bottom of the piece. Begin at the top of this section with slightly brighter and darker colors than you used before, but on the left side use the same color as you did at the bottom of the top section. This will indicate that the slope of the rise to the right is nearly flat here. In other words, the middle rise doesn't extend all the way to the left side of the scene.

You can begin to scumble (messy, irregular strokes laid down in all directions) the colors here, showing a little more "detail" of the ground dotted with patches of differently colored and shaped weeds. As with everything else, this effect should become more distinct the lower you are working in the sections, as the top of the piece is farthest from the viewer while lower down is closer.

Since this section is so deep, when you're about halfway down, switch to even darker and brighter ground colors as well as scumbling is larger strokes.

Paint the Far Trees



Now sketch the tree trunks with a liner brush and the lightest brown. Vary their heights and the spacing between them. Because these trees are lined along a ridge, there will be some distance between where the trunks meet the ridge and the lowest branches. In other words, we'll see the sky peeking through the trees but *also* showing beneath the lowest branches. Because the trees are along the ridge line, we won't see any shadows.

To paint the needles on the trees, use your small, round bristle brush or old round brush and a light dabbing motion to fill in the shapes of the trees overall. I find it helpful to begin at the top then work my way down. Use various of your lighter tree colors to suggest the shapes (lighter at the top and darker lower and to push one tree behind another).

Add falling snow over what you've painted so far. Dip the tips of the bristles on your toothbrush into slightly thinned white paint and spritz snow over this top. Don't add too much water to your paint. The more water, the larger the dots.

Paint the middle section trees



This section, like the previous one, includes the trees, and the falling snow. (I was inspired to add the gray cloud at the right side of the sky.)

For the trees, use slightly darker colors than for the rear line of trees. Also, use a range of color that has more contrast. Value contrast is another characteristic that increases towards the foreground and decreases towards the distance. Otherwise, paint these as you painted the others, dabbing with a round bristle brush or an old round brush whose hairs don't hold together. The lighter load you have on your brush, the whispier your strokes will be. Add shadows beneath the trees.

The overhanging branch



Before we begin the branch, use your toothbrush to spritz snow over the entire piece. You'll have a double layer of spritzed snow over the top section, but that's fine because as we look farther into the distance we're looking through more snow.

Now use your pencil to lightly sketch the branch (but not the needles) which overhangs the foreground. We are looking down on this branch, as the eye-level for this scene is at about the height of the top of the far ridge. (For the same reason, we're looking down at the foxes.)

Because this branch is nearest to the viewer, paint it in more detail than you did the far trees. Use a small round brush for the branches themselves and a liner brush for the needles. For the needles, pull your strokes from the tips of the needles to the branch. Use brighter colors than for the other trees and also use more contrast.

To my mind, every landscape needs an animal! Mine will be a pair of simple little foxes running into the scene. If you want to include the foxes, sketch them in or transfer them, then paint them loosely with White to provide a base for the colors.

The brown parts are Honey Brown in the lightest areas, Raw Sienna and Burnt Sienna in the midtone areas, and Burnt Umber in the shadow areas.

The legs and feet are black. The belly, muzzle, and inner leg are white.

I used a very light wash of Manganese Blue on the fox's belly, but this is optional.

Be sure to leave highlights on the back of the heads and on the back and haunch of the right fox. Try not to stress! We're just suggesting the foxes, and you can leave them out if you prefer.

Finishing



For the snow, use a small round brush or the tip of a liner brush and paint each of the larger flakes falling nearest us. These larger flakes should cover the whole piece, not just the overhanging branch. That's because snowflakes will be falling in the near-ground over the entire scene, though distant flakes are only falling over sections that are in the distance. For the largest flakes, paint a larger dot but then immediately tap it with your fingertip to smudge it.

Thank you!

Thank you for joining me on this little painting adventure. I hope you enjoyed yourself and are happy with your piece. Now we're ready for the main course—the raccoon gathering holiday greens. Onwards!

Bonus—About Aerial Perspective

In this warm-up lesson, we have learned some painting techniques for backgrounds and also created a small piece which we might put to use as a greeting card or a little painting displayed on an easel on a shelf. But we've also learned the basics of aerial perspective.

Aerial perspective is a group of truths by which the presence of the atmosphere shapes our perception of objects at different distances.

Characteristic	Near	Far
Color	Warm, bright, saturated	Cool, dulled, less color range
Value	Little contrast	More contrast
Detail	Little detail	More detail
Lines and Edges	Fuzzy	Distinct
Size	Smaller	Larger
Relative position	Towards the top	Towards the bottom

Notes: