



Article: The Basic Materials of Watercolour Part 1: Paper

I think one of the most important things that can be said about paper is: never underestimate it! In all respects. Don't underestimate its importance in the painting process, and don't take its benign, unassuming appearance for granted. Watercolour paper is funny stuff; the best papers are rigorous and can take almost anything you throw at it, whilst some are downright temperamental.

So if you're just starting out and don't know what to buy when you go down to your local art supplies store armed with a stash of cash, it's a good idea if you have some knowledge of what papers are available, how their properties differ and whether to buy it in sheets or in books.

WEIGHT

You'll notice, whether you buy in sheets or in books, that papers are graded according to weight. 90lbs, 140lbs, 200lbs and 300lbs are common configurations. Most pre-packed paper also gives you its weight in metric, which of course is a larger figure, so be careful when making your selection. I've known students proudly announce that they'd picked up a pack of 300lbs paper for a bargain price only to discover that, in fact, they'd read the metric measurement (GSM or Grams per Square Inch) and only had 140lb paper in their possession.

The metric/imperial equivalents are as follows:

- 190 gsm (90 lb)
- 300 gsm (140 lb)
- 425 gsm (200 lb)
- 640 gsm (300 lb)

So what does the weight refer to? Surely, you're asking yourself, it's not that heavy? The weight of paper refers to a ream (which is 480 sheets), so a ream of 140lb paper weighs, not surprisingly, 140lbs.



Label from a pack of Arches 300lbs Rough (640gm²), which comes in a sealed pack of 5 full imperial-sized sheets.

SURFACE

Weight is not the only factor to consider when stocking up on paper. Another thing you have to consider is its surface or 'Finish'. Paper comes with a range of surfaces which broadly fall into three categories:

Hot Pressed has a Flat surface

Cold Pressed or **Not** surface - has a slightly textured surface ■ has a roughly textured surface.

There are probably as many different types of watercolour paper, with different properties, as there are manufacturers, so it's a good idea to test different makes for yourself.

Here are some examples of how the surface can differ from paper to paper:



Arches 300lbs Rough



Arches 140lbs Rough



Saunders Waterford 200lbs Rough

Many good art shops will offer sample packs containing a selection of different makes (if your local supplier doesn't, then it might be worth suggesting it to them?). This is an excellent concept, since it gives you an ideal opportunity to road-test what's available without having to spend an absolute fortune in the process.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES WEIGHT MAKE?

Paper soaks up water, and when it does so, it expands. It's one of those simple facts of life. What this means is that watercolour paper will almost certainly cockle when it has a heavy wash applied to it, creating a potentially difficult surface on which to work. There's a balance here, between how much water you use in your work, and how heavy your paper is. The heavier your paper, the less susceptible to cockling it is likely to be. Since cost is likely to be a major factor when you start painting, it is likely that you'll opt for slightly cheaper, lighter paper. May I recommend that you don't buy anything less than 140lbs? To be blunt, 90lbs paper is about as close to useless as can be without actually having any useful properties whatsoever (how much plainer can I put it?).

STRETCHING PAPER

If you do use 140lbs paper, and you are likely to be using a lot of water, the solution is to prepare it by a method known as stretching. To do this, you need to soak the paper thoroughly and attach it to your board using Gummed Tape. As it dries, it contracts, resulting in a flat, drum-like surface which is easy to work on.

(note: A full explanation + video of the paper-stretching process is featured on Peter Woolley's Watercolour Studio CD-Rom which can be ordered from the on-line Shop)

SIZING

During the manufacture of paper, a gelatin-type substance is added to it, called sizing. This is vitally important, since it is the ingredient that will stop the paper acting like blotting paper. Without it, paint would soak straight into the paper and be completely unworkable (try painting on blotting paper and you'll see what I mean). The thing is, different manufacturers 'size' their papers in different ways, some are 'sized' throughout the whole of the paper (added to it when it's still a mulch), while some manufacturers coat the surface of the paper at a later stage.

What this means to us mere mortals who just want to slap paint on the stuff is that all these different makes of paper have subtly different properties. Some are more absorbent than others, and some are hardier than others. If you want to paint fresh washes over the top of earlier ones, beware: some papers will just not let you do that. In some instances, the laying on of a second wash will disturb the earlier one, resulting in mud-city!

At this point, I think it's probably worth repeating one of the things I said at the top of the article: 'the best papers are rigorous and can take almost anything you throw at it, whilst some are downright temperamental'. Papers can also react differently under different conditions. Room temperature is a factor that may alter how your paper performs. Believe me, temperamental is putting it lightly!

If you can try different papers, do it! And if you find a paper that you like (bearing in mind preference is a personal thing, here - a paper raved about by one person can be scorned upon by another), stick to it!

SHEETS OR BOOKS?

Whether you buy your paper in sheets or books is going to depend more on what size you want to work on than anything else. It's all basically the same stuff. Sheets can be cut down to whatever size you want, while books can sometimes be more convenient. Pre-stretched pads are also available; they're like books, but are gummed together along all four sides. After painting, sheets are removed by slicing through the gummed edge with a craft knife.



Cover from a Langton pad of watercolour paper, containing Bockingford 140lbs paper.

IS THERE A RIGHT OR WRONG SIDE TO PAINT ON?

Most papers do have a front side on which you are meant to paint. Quite often, if it is rough textured, then the chances are that the texture will be slightly more pronounced on that side than the flip-side.

Having said that, I'm a great believer in using both sides. If a painting goes wrong, turn it over and start again; it's too expensive to waste!

If you're unsure which is the front, look closely along it's surface, near the edges. There is usually a watermark, carrying the name and make of the paper.



The Arches watermark can be seen on its front side.



The Saunders Waterford watermark is visible on its back side (its appearance in reverse tells you; you should be painting on the other side!)

TINTED PAPERS

It is possible to buy papers that are slightly tinted, usually in pale, pastel colours. I have to put my hands up here and admit to having a great dislike of such stuff. Whilst they can be effective in helping to create a particular mood, it must be remembered that any white, or light highlights are going to have to be produced using opaque alternatives, such as gouache. Not that there's anything particularly wrong with that, I just think I'm a teensy bit purist when it comes down to it.

MY RECOMMENDATIONS

[1] If you are going to be painting landscapes, buy Rough paper. It will provide you with the ability to create textural effects (dry-brush) not available on other papers.

[2] Compare prices between books and sheets before buying. Prices vary widely from shop to shop, so it pays to check all the art shops out in your area.

[3] If you've signed up for an art course, mention this when purchasing materials. Many (though not all) art shops will offer an instant discount to students.

[4] Watch out for paper that has been reduced in price. Old paper can sometimes be more trouble than it's worth. Check it's in its original packaging (sheets of paper should be vacuum-packed in plastic); when paper is exposed to the atmosphere for a long time before painting, the sizing can actually break down and make it unworkable.

[5] If you're trying to keep cost down, buy BOCKINGFORD. It's consistent and perhaps the best paper available in the cheap-and-cheerful range. It is also probably the most commonly-used paper amongst students.

[6] My favourite paper is ARCHES, 300lbs ROUGH. It's tough and rigorous, but also very absorbent (which isn't to everyone's liking). Personally, I'd name it the 'Rolls-Royce' of papers.

[7] Number 2 in my top-ten list of papers would have to be SAUNDERS WATERFORD 200lbs ROUGH. It's very similar to Arches in many ways, but a tad cheaper.

[8] Handle watercolour paper with care. Hold it around the edges so as not to leave greasy finger-marks on its surface (trust me; even if you consider yourself to be an extremely clean and fastidious person, and in no way having greasy digits, you'd be surprised at what fingers can do to an otherwise perfectly good wash).

[9] If you're looking to buy materials on-line, I recommend the following two sites:

[Heaton Cooper Gallery, Grasmere](#)

[The SAA \(Society for All Artists\)](#)

[Ken Bromley Art Supplies](#)