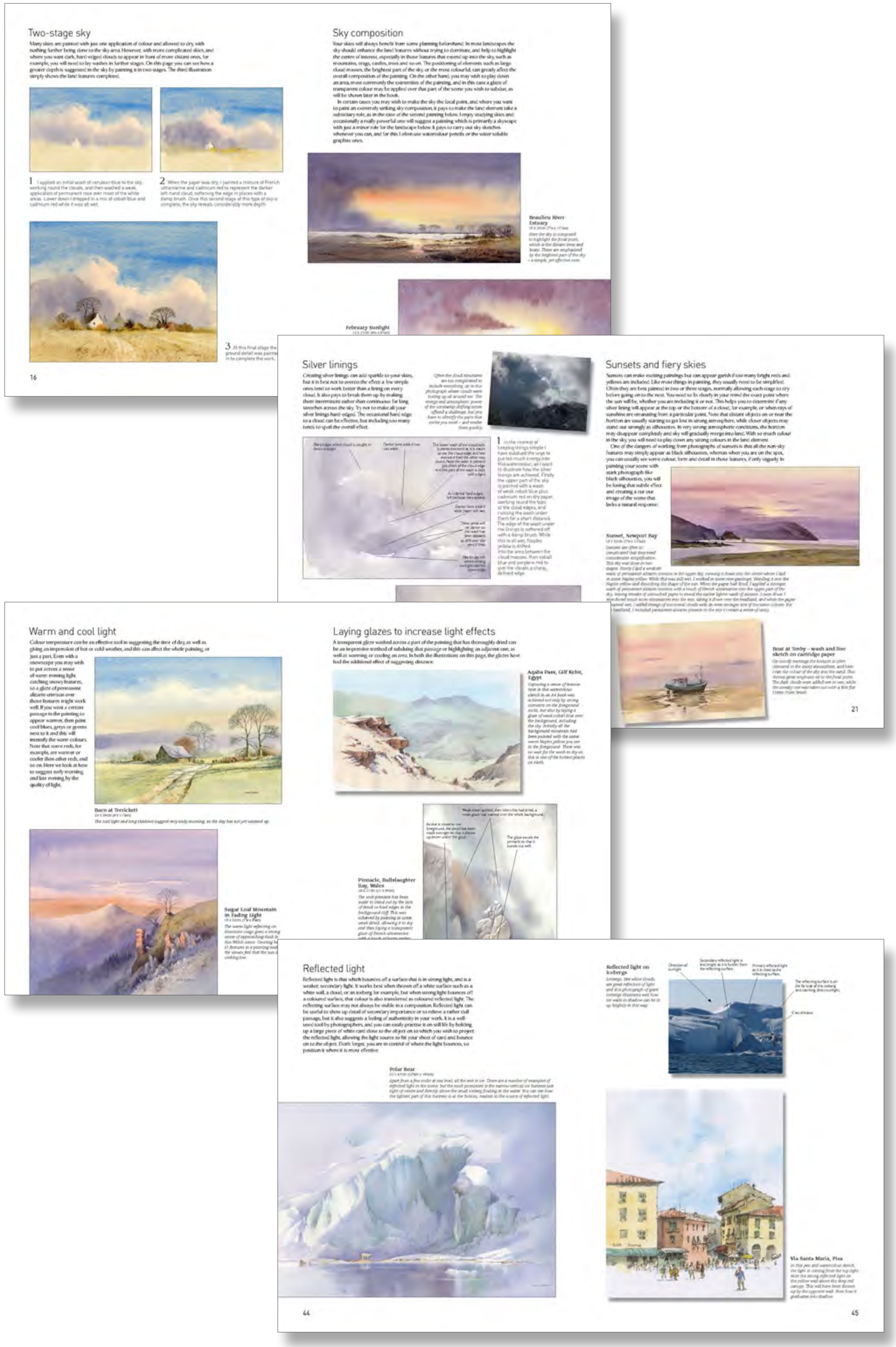

Two-stage sky

Many skies are painted with just one application of colour and allowed to dry, with nothing further being done to the sky area. However, with more complicated skies, and where you want dark, hard-edged clouds to appear in front of more distant ones, for example, you will need to lay washes in further stages. On this page you can see how a greater depth is suggested in the sky by painting it in two stages. The third illustration simply shows the land features completed.

1 I applied an initial wash of cerulean blue to the sky, working round the clouds, and then washed a weak application of permanent rose over most of the white areas. Lower down I dropped in a mix of cobalt blue and cadmium red while it was all wet.

2 When the paper was dry, I painted a mixture of French ultramarine and cadmium red to represent the darker left-hand cloud, softening the edge in places with a damp brush. Once this second stage of this type of sky is complete, the sky reveals considerably more depth.

3 At this final stage the ground detail was painted in to complete the work.

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Sky composition

Your skies will always benefit from some planning beforehand. In most landscapes the sky should enhance the land features without trying to dominate, and help to highlight the centre of interest, especially in those features that extend up into the sky, such as mountains, crags, castles, trees and so on. The positioning of elements such as large cloud masses, the brightest part of the sky, or the most colourful, can greatly affect the overall composition of the painting. On the other hand, you may wish to play down an area, most commonly the extremities of the painting, and in this case a glaze of transparent colour may be applied over that part of the scene you wish to subdue, as will be shown later in the book.

In certain cases you may wish to make the sky the focal point, and where you want to paint an extremely striking sky composition, it pays to make the land element take a subsidiary role, as in the case of the second painting below. I enjoy studying skies and occasionally a really powerful one will suggest a painting which is primarily a skyscape with just a minor role for the landscape below. It pays to carry out sky sketches whenever you can, and for this I often use watercolour pencils or the water soluble graphite ones.

Beaulieu River Estuary

Here the sky is composed to highlight the focal point, which is the distant trees and boats. These are emphasised by the brightest part of the sky – a simple, yet effective ruse.

February Sunlight

Silver linings

Creating silver linings can add sparkle to your skies, but it is best not to overdo the effect: a few simple ones tend to work better than a lining on every cloud. It also pays to break them up by making them intermittent rather than continuous for long stretches across the sky. Try not to make all your silver linings hard-edged. The occasional hard edge to a cloud can be effective, but including too many tends to spoil the overall effect.

Often the cloud structures are too complicated to include everything, as in this photograph where clouds were boiling up all around me. The energy and atmospheric power of the constantly shifting scene offered a challenge, but you have to identify the parts that excite you most – and render them quickly.

1 In the interest of keeping things simple I have subdued the urge to put too much energy into this watercolour, as I want to illustrate how the silver linings are achieved. Firstly the upper part of the sky is painted with a wash of weak cobalt blue plus cadmium red on dry paper, working round the tops of the cloud edges, and running the wash under them for a short distance. The edge of the wash under the linings is softened off with a damp brush. While this is all wet, Naples yellow is drifted into the area between the cloud masses, then cobalt blue and permanent red to give the clouds a sharp, defined edge.

Sunsets and fiery skies

Sunsets can make exciting paintings but can appear garish if too many bright reds and yellows are included. Like most things in painting, they usually need to be simplified. Often they are best painted in two or three stages, normally allowing each stage to dry before going on to the next. You need to fix clearly in your mind the exact point where the sun will be, whether you are including it or not. This helps you to determine if any silver lining will appear at the top or the bottom of a cloud, for example, or when rays of sunshine are emanating from a particular point. Note that distant objects on or near the horizon are usually starting to get lost in strong atmosphere, while closer objects may stand out strongly as silhouettes. In very strong atmospheric conditions, the horizon may disappear completely and sky will gradually merge into land. With so much colour in the sky, you will need to play down any strong colours in the land element.

One of the dangers of working from photographs of sunsets is that all the non-sky features may simply appear as black silhouettes, whereas when you are on the spot, you can usually see some colour, form and detail in those features, if only vaguely. In painting your scene with stark photograph-like black silhouettes, you will be losing that subtle effect and creating a cut-out image of the scene that lacks a natural response.

Sunset, Newport Bay

Boat at Tenby – wash and line sketch on cartridge paper

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Warm and cool light

Colour temperature can be an effective tool in suggesting the time of day, as well as giving an impression of hot or cold weather, and this can affect the whole painting, or just a part. Even with a snowscape you may wish to put across a sense of warm evening light catching snowy features, so a glaze of permanent alizarin crimson over those features might work well. If you want a certain passage in the painting to appear warmer, then paint cool blues, greys or greens next to it and this will intensify the warm colours. Note that some reds, for example, are warmer or cooler than other reds, and so on. Here we look at how to suggest early morning and late evening by the quality of light.

Barn at Trerickett

The cool light and long shadows suggest very early morning, as the day has not yet warmed up.

Sugar Loaf Mountain in Fading Light

Laying glazes to increase light effects

A transparent glaze washed across a part of the painting that has thoroughly dried can be an impressive method of subduing that passage or highlighting an adjacent one, as well as warming or cooling an area. In both the illustrations on this page, the glazes have had the additional effect of suggesting distance.

Aqaba Pass, Gilf Kebir, Egypt

Pinnacle, Bullslaughter Bay, Wales

Reflected light

Reflected light is that which bounces off a surface that is in strong light, and is a weaker, secondary light. It works best when thrown off a white surface such as a white wall, a cloud, or an iceberg for example, but when strong light bounces off a coloured surface, that colour is also transferred as coloured reflected light. The reflecting surface may not always be visible in a composition. Reflected light can be useful to show up detail of secondary importance or to relieve a rather dull passage, but it also suggests a feeling of authenticity in your work. It is a well-used tool by photographers, and you can easily practise it on still life by holding up a large piece of white card close to the object on to which you wish to project the reflected light, allowing the light source to hit your sheet of card and bounce on to the object. Don't forget, you are in control of where the light bounces, so position it where it is most effective.

Polar Bear

Reflected light on Icebergs

Via Santa Maria, Pisa

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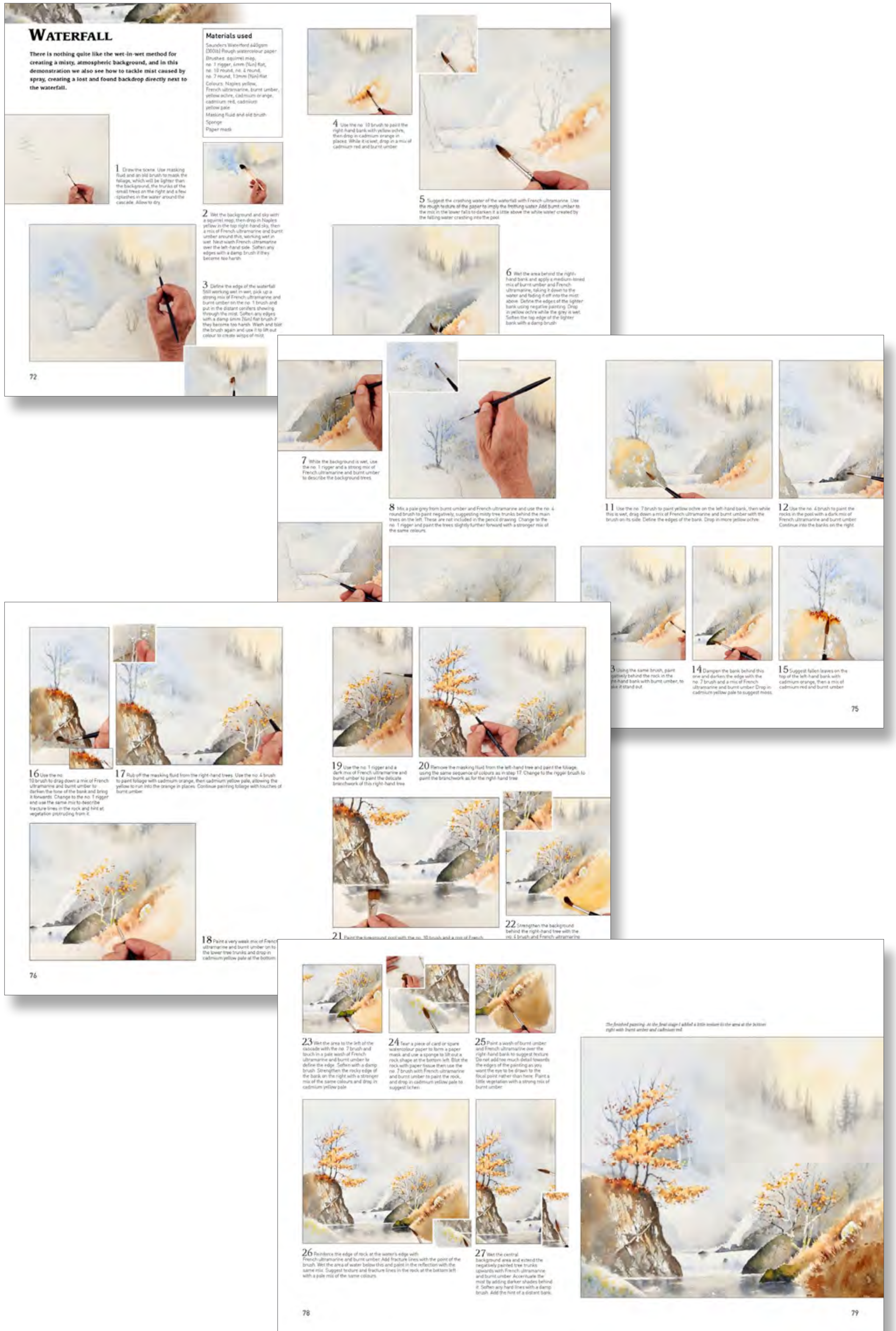

Waterfall

There is nothing quite like the wet-in-wet method for creating a misty, atmospheric background, and in this demonstration we also see how to tackle mist caused by spray, creating a lost and found backdrop directly next to the waterfall.

Materials used

Saunders Waterford 640gsm (300lb) Rough watercolour paper
Brushes: squirrel mop, no. 1 rigger, 6mm (¼in) flat, no. 10 round, no. 4 round, no. 7 round, 13mm (½in) flat
Colours: Naples yellow, French ultramarine, burnt umber, yellow ochre, cadmium orange, cadmium red, cadmium yellow pale
Masking fluid and old brush
Sponge
Paper mask

1 Draw the scene. Use masking fluid and an old brush to mask the foliage, which will be lighter than the background, the trunks of the small trees on the right and a few splashes in the water around the cascade. Allow to dry.

2 Wet the background and sky with a squirrel mop, then drop in Naples yellow in the top right-hand sky, then a mix of French ultramarine and burnt umber around this, working wet in wet. Next wash French ultramarine over the left-hand side. Soften any edges with a damp brush if they become too harsh.

3 Define the edge of the waterfall. Still working wet in wet, pick up a strong mix of French ultramarine and burnt umber on the no. 1 brush and put in the distant conifers showing through the mist. Soften any edges with a damp 6mm (¼in) flat brush if they become too harsh. Wash and blot the brush again and use it to lift out colour to create wisps of mist.

4 Use the no. 10 brush to paint the right-hand bank with yellow ochre, then drop in cadmium orange in places. While it is wet, drop in a mix of cadmium red and burnt umber.

5 Suggest the crashing water of the waterfall with French ultramarine. Use the rough texture of the paper to imply the frothing water. Add burnt umber to the mix in the lower falls to darken it a little above the white water created by the falling water crashing into the pool.

6 Wet the area behind the right-hand bank and apply a medium-toned mix of burnt umber and French ultramarine, taking it down to the water and fading it off into the mist above. Define the edges of the lighter bank using negative painting. Drop in yellow ochre while the grey is wet. Soften the top edge of the lighter bank with a damp brush.

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7 While the background is wet, use the no. 1 rigger and a strong mix of French ultramarine and burnt umber to describe the background trees.

8 Mix a pale grey from burnt umber and French ultramarine and use the no. 4 round brush to paint negatively, suggesting misty tree trunks behind the main trees on the left. These are not included in the pencil drawing. Change to the no. 1 rigger and paint the trees slightly further forward with a stronger mix of the same colours.

11 Use the no. 7 brush to paint yellow ochre on the left-hand bank, then while this is wet, drag down a mix of French ultramarine and burnt umber with the brush on its side. Define the edges of the bank. Drop in more yellow ochre.

12 Use the no. 4 brush to paint the rocks in the pool with a dark mix of French ultramarine and burnt umber. Continue into the banks on the right.

13 Using the same brush, paint negatively behind the rock in the left-hand bank with burnt umber, to make it stand out.

14 Dampen the bank behind this one and darken the edge with the no. 7 brush and a mix of French ultramarine and burnt umber. Drop in cadmium yellow pale to suggest moss.

15 Suggest fallen leaves on the top of the left-hand bank with cadmium orange, then a mix of cadmium red and burnt umber.

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16 Use the no. 10 brush to drag down a mix of French ultramarine and burnt umber to darken the tone of the bank and bring it forwards. Change to the no. 1 rigger and use the same mix to describe fracture lines in the rock and hint at vegetation protruding from it.

17 Rub off the masking fluid from the right-hand trees. Use the no. 4 brush to paint foliage with cadmium orange, then cadmium yellow pale, allowing the yellow to run into the orange in places. Continue painting foliage with touches of burnt umber.

18 Paint a very weak mix of French ultramarine and burnt umber on to the lower tree trunks and drop in cadmium yellow pale at the bottom.

19 Use the no. 1 rigger and a dark mix of French ultramarine and burnt umber to paint the delicate branchwork of this right-hand tree.

20 Remove the masking fluid from the left-hand tree and paint the foliage, using the same sequence of colours as in step 17. Change to the rigger brush to paint the branchwork as for the right-hand tree.

21 Paint the foreground pool with the no. 10 brush and a mix of French …

22 Strengthen the background behind the right-hand tree with the no. 4 brush and French ultramarine …

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23 Wet the area to the left of the cascade with the no. 7 brush and touch in a pale wash of French ultramarine and burnt umber to define the edge. Soften with a damp brush. Strengthen the rocky edge of the bank on the right with a stronger mix of the same colours and drop in cadmium yellow pale.

24 Tear a piece of card or spare watercolour paper to form a paper mask and use a sponge to lift out a rock shape at the bottom left. Blot the rock with paper tissue then use the no. 7 brush with French ultramarine and burnt umber to paint the rock, and drop in cadmium yellow pale to suggest lichen.

25 Paint a wash of burnt umber and French ultramarine over the right-hand bank to suggest texture. Do not add too much detail towards the edges of the painting as you want the eye to be drawn to the focal point rather than here. Paint a little vegetation with a strong mix of burnt umber.

26 Reinforce the edge of rock at the water's edge with French ultramarine and burnt umber. Add fracture lines with the point of the brush. Wet the area of water below this and paint in the reflection with the same mix. Suggest texture and fracture lines in the rock at the bottom left with a pale mix of the same colours.

27 Wet the central background area and extend the negatively painted tree trunks upwards with French ultramarine and burnt umber. Accentuate the mist by adding darker shades behind it. Soften any hard lines with a damp brush. Add the hint of a distant bank.

The finished painting. At the final stage I added a little texture to the area at the bottom right with burnt umber and cadmium red.

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