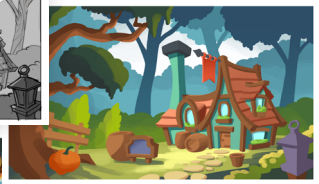

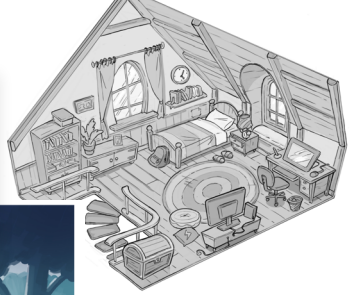

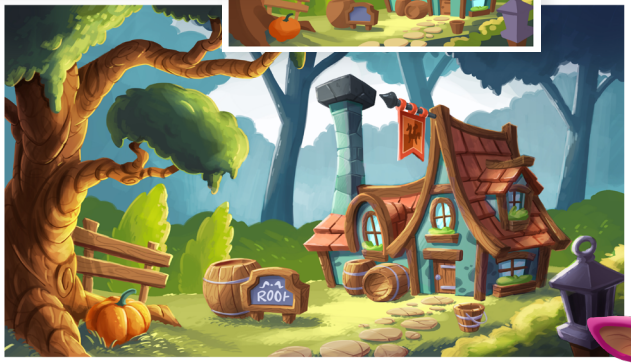

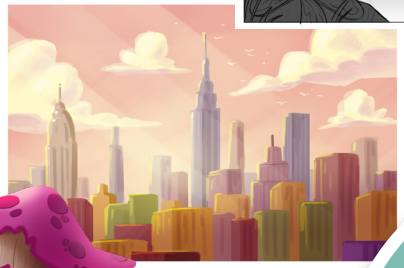

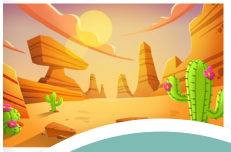

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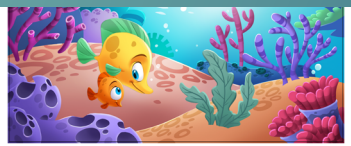
# How to paint BACKGROUNDS

By Mitch Leeuwe

## You'll learn:

How to digitally paint exterior, interior, nature and buildings



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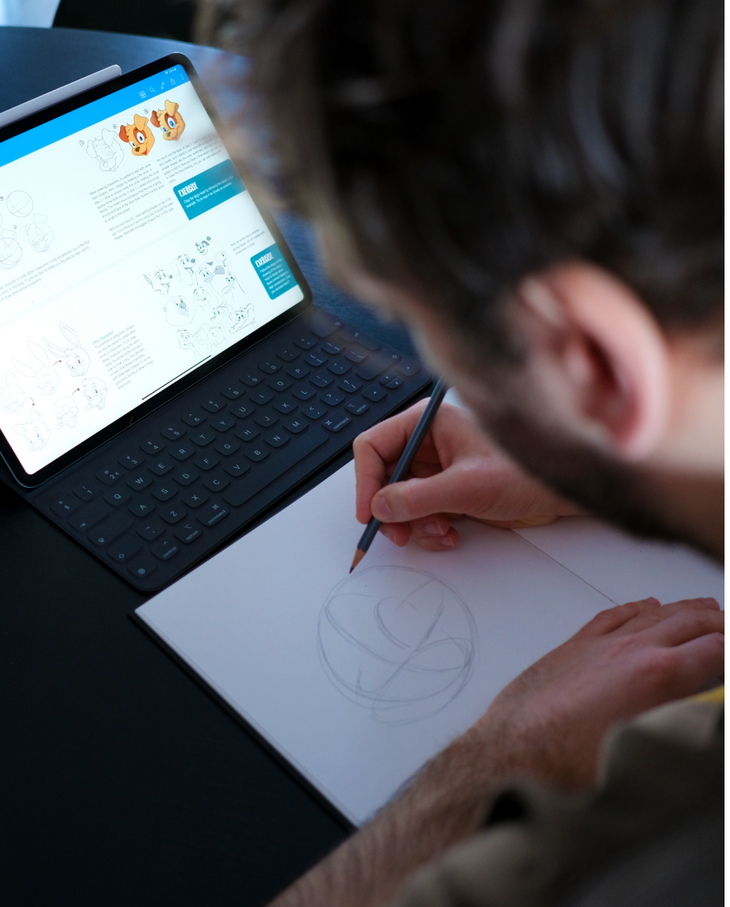
# HOW TO PAINT BACKGROUNDS

BY MITCH LEEUWE

# Hi THERE!

Let me introduce myself. I'm Mitch Leeuwe and am an illustrator from the Netherlands. I always drew a lot as a kid. I even had the childhood dream to become an animator at Disney. During my teenage years, I lost that dream. Luckily, I slowly started drawing more and more. When I was 19, I began to do some freelance work as a graphic designer, which made me consider picking up drawing again. I attended several drawing programs at schools, but I learned most from online resources. Now, I'm a freelance artist working on visual development. This means I design characters, props, and backgrounds for games, animation, and toys. However, you probably know me from my Instagram account, where I release tutorials and more. My goal is to create a place where people can learn what I wanted to learn when I started out.



## LET'S GO!

In this ebook, I'm going in-depth about painting backgrounds. You could learn from this book to take the sketches and color them as I did step by step. Also, watch the videos to see the whole process of some of the paintings. Another thing you could do is to study real life. For example, place an apple on your desk and put a light on it, see which parts are in the shadows and which elements in the light. How does the light reflect on the apple, and where are the darkest parts of the shadows? Paint it and try to understand it.

Knowing how to draw and paint backgrounds will increase your chances of getting work as an artist. Of course, you need to enjoy drawing and painting environments, because you will do it a lot. But generally, I would recommend every artist to learn how to draw and paint environments to a certain degree because there can always be a situation where it's helpful to have that skill/ experience, even as a character artist.

Because drawing and painting backgrounds can be very challenging when you are just getting started, this may demotivate you. However, as with many things in life (skateboarding, math, games, etcetera), the fun begins when you start to see progress, get more confident, and find out that you are pretty good at it. So, have fun and don't give up!

Best,
Mitch Leeuwe

### LEARN MORE!

CHECK OUT MY EBOOKS ABOUT
'DIGITAL PAINTING' AND/OR 'DRAWING ENVIRONMENTS'
ON GUMROAD.COM/MITCHLEEUWE

# THE BASICS

Let's start with a barrel! It's easier to start with a single object instead of a whole background for now. Such an object is also called a prop. If you want, it's an excellent exercise to follow this tutorial step by step.

1. I always start with a sketch. Some people like to jump straight into drawing shapes, but I prefer to start with a sketch. This one is very cleaned up. And that is useful because you already figured out the exact shape of the parts the barrel exists out of. But often, the sketch can be much rougher to safe time.
2. Main colors. I use the sketch to draw the biggest shapes beneath it. This is also often the time I figure out the colors. So first the shapes and then you can easily decide on the colors. I put these colors on separate layers so I can easily change them.
3. Once I'm satisfied with the colors, I start adding in the secondary colors. In this case, the light and the lines between the planks.
4. Now we can start with adding the lightning and shadow. First, determine the light source. Think about if it's a lamp or the sun and where it is. Once you have that, you can paint in the shadows. I always start with the biggest shadows, working my way down from big to small.
5. Once the shadow and light parts are added, we can start adding textures. Again, I start with the biggest lines and details. That way, you quickly get a good impression of how it's turning out and if it's working. I've also added a cast shadow at this step.
6. Now we can add more minor details like the highlights. These are spots that reflect the light. The places that are directly lit are the brightest highlights. Most of these highlights are added to the metal edges of the barrel.
7. Now the steps start to be tiny. It's funny that this stage can take a lot of time. Because I usually paint in all these details with hand. For example, some chips or marks on the metal. It could also be dirt, dust, or more textures.
8. We are now finishing it up. Adding some glows and extra colors. What I do in Adobe Photoshop® is adding overlay and multiply layers. Other programs also have these techniques. Most of the time, they have the same names. It also depends on the style you are going for how many of these finishing touches you want.

# A FACADE

You can use this sketch, or create a variation or create your design of a house. Once you have a drawing, you can block in the colors. Don't worry about the first colors you start adding. You can always change it.

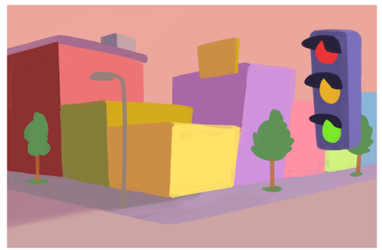
It's most easy to judge all the colors when you blocked in all the main colors. That's also because colors influence each other. For example, red and green have a great contrast because they are opposite from each other on the color wheel. In this case, and most of the time, I don't use too many different colors. I try to keep the colors in harmony. This is called color harmony.

Once those colors are put down, I add some details like the bricks. Then I begin to add the most basic shadows, but first picking the light source. The same steps as with the barrel. And that's why it's good to start learning to paint something basic and work your way upwards to something bigger. And finally adding some details, like the flowers, and giving the bricks different colors.

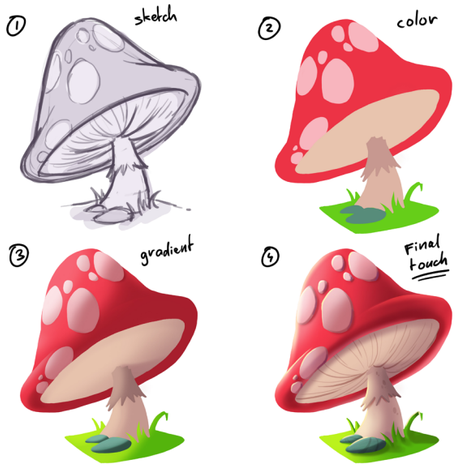
## EXERCISE

Try to paint something like this yourself after this tutorial

# A STREET



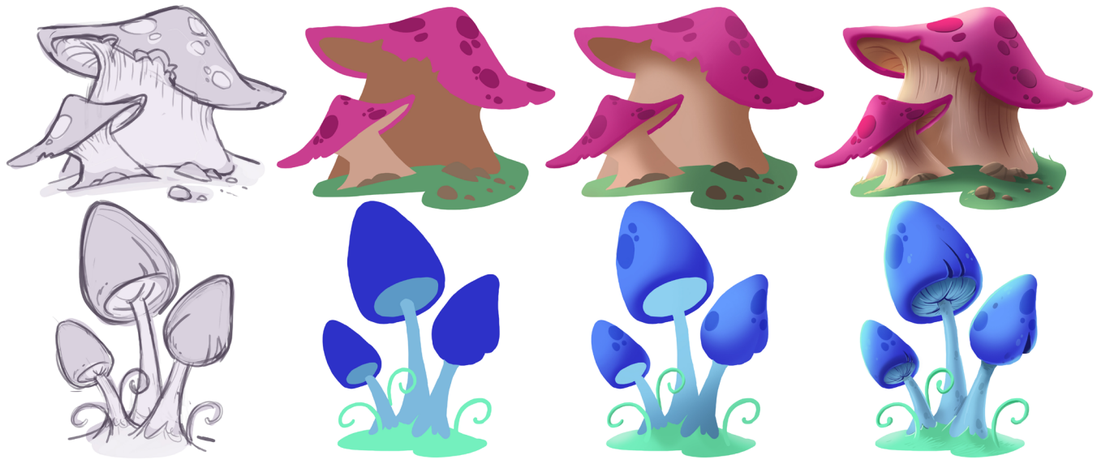
Painting a street is a little bit harder to do! But it comes down to the same process. In the second image, you can see the colors I picked. I tried to choose colors that match together and that there isn't a color that pops out too much. Once I have blocked in the colors, I start adding some shadow and the first details. When I'm satisfied with that, I start adding all the details. All these examples are pretty rough, but it's not always necessary to make something super polished.



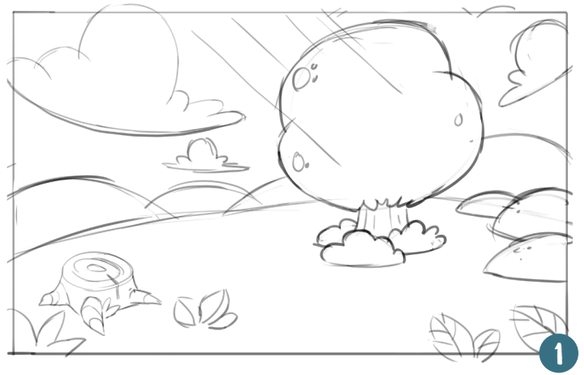

# TOADSTOOLS

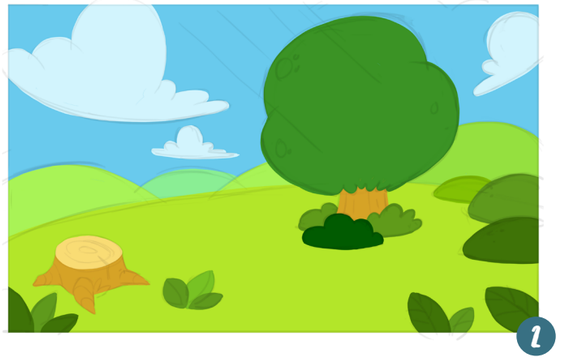
This are examples of toadstools. Actually, this process is also the same as for the barrel, only with a bit more colors. Pay attention to make sure the group of toadstools stays connected as a whole. You do this by using the shadow correctly. The best way to learn this is to copy these paintings or to observe real life. You can also use the internet to find a photo to study from.





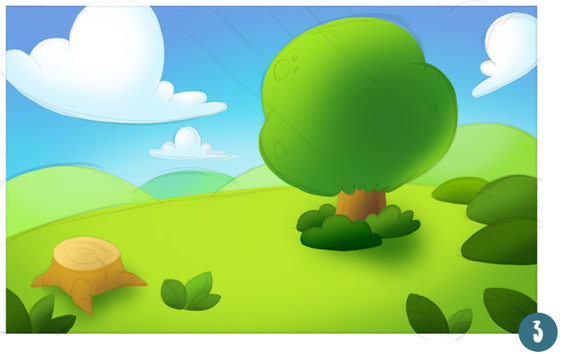
**EXERCISE** Go to the forest and find some toadstools. Make sketches in real life and paint them later on your computer or tablet. Going on a little field trip is always fun, right?!



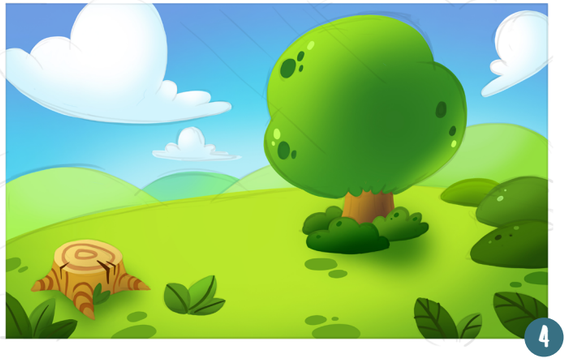



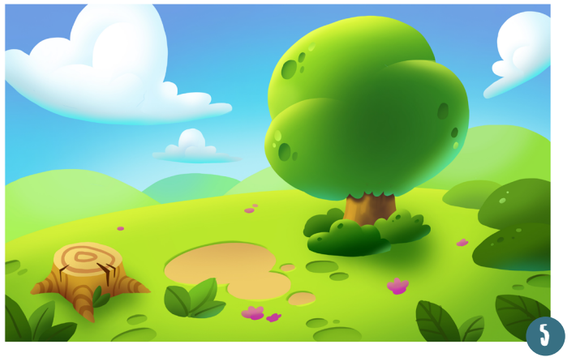

# SIMPLE BACKGROUND

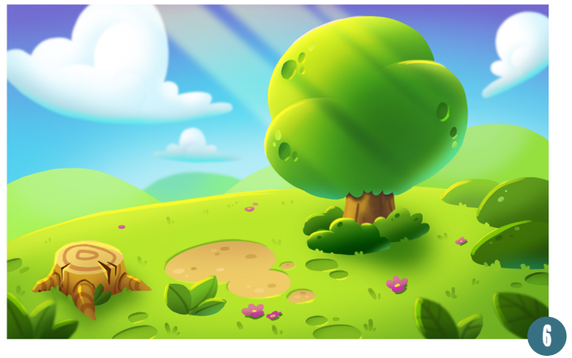
When you go painting environments, start practicing with something basic like this. Just a simple tree on a hill with a trunk and some bushes/flowers. This type of background is often used for games or children's shows/books. You don't necessarily need to make your artwork super-detailed and realistic for these kinds of purposes.



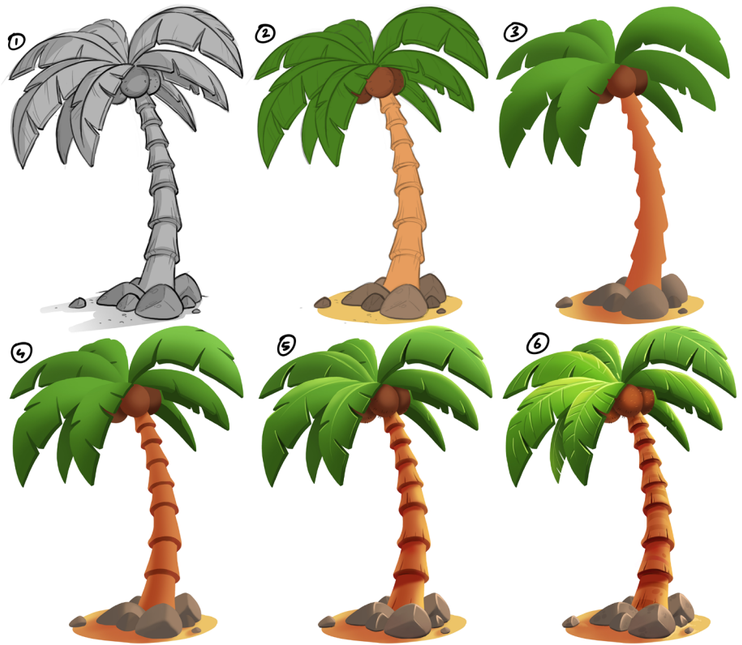


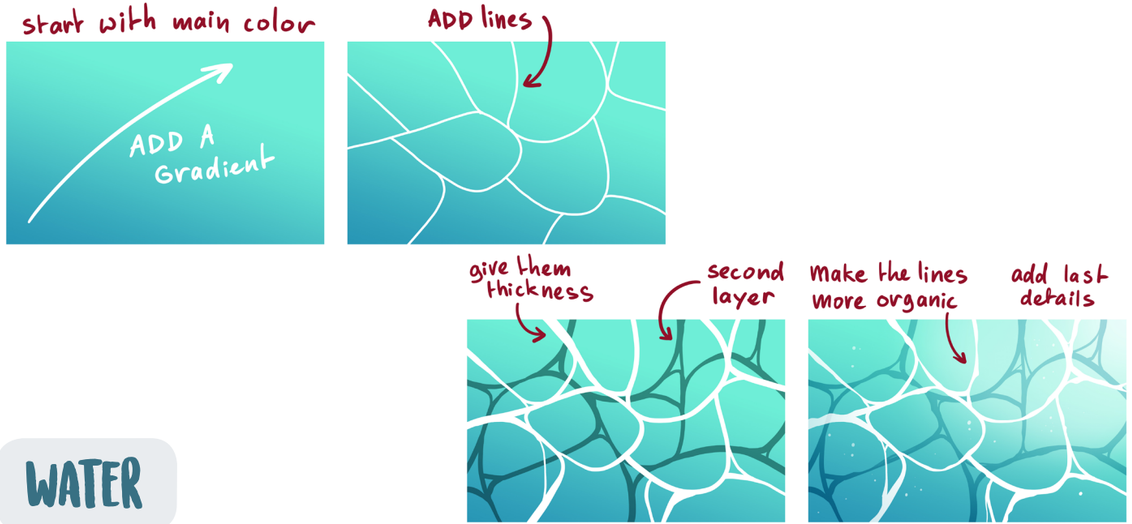

Before you start designing or painting the background, think about how the background will be used. Could it be made for a game, a tv-show, a book, or something else? The target audience can also influence the level of detail. When you have this clear for yourself, look up some examples and see what level of details you should aim for.
In the last panel, I added some extra effects like sun rays and some details. You can do this too, as long as it fits the purpose of your background.




## PALM TREE

Painting a palm tree! As you can see, I follow the same steps as for the barrel here. When making the transition from a line drawing to a painted drawing, make sure you remain the volume and textures as they were intended. Keep an eye on the details that can make a difference, like the shading of the leaves to create depth. Or the textures like the marks on the bark of the tree and the cuts in the leaves. This all has an influence on how the light behaves on it. You can see this clearly when you check the differences between step 5 and 6.






## WATER

Complicated things can be broken down to make it simple. Look at the last image; that looks quite impressive, right? But if you look more closely, I see that it's just a bunch of layers stacked on top of each other. I'm sorry to take that magic away ;) .

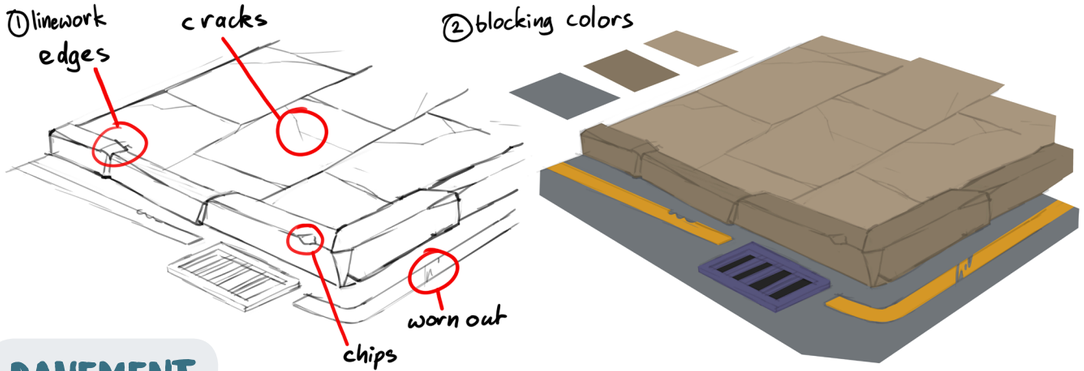
When you know this, drawing textures becomes way more accessible, like this example of water. Follow the 4 simple steps to create this impressive-looking texture.

# PiRATE BAY

A drawing like this has many objects, and it can be pretty daunting to color and paint. My trick is to break it down as simply as I can. You can see this in the second image. I also don't worry too much about the colors yet because I can fix that in the third or fourth stage.

The following steps (three and four) are to paint in the shadows step by step. Spot the difference between the soft and hard shadows. Check out the videos that come with this ebook to see how I do this and finally add the details.

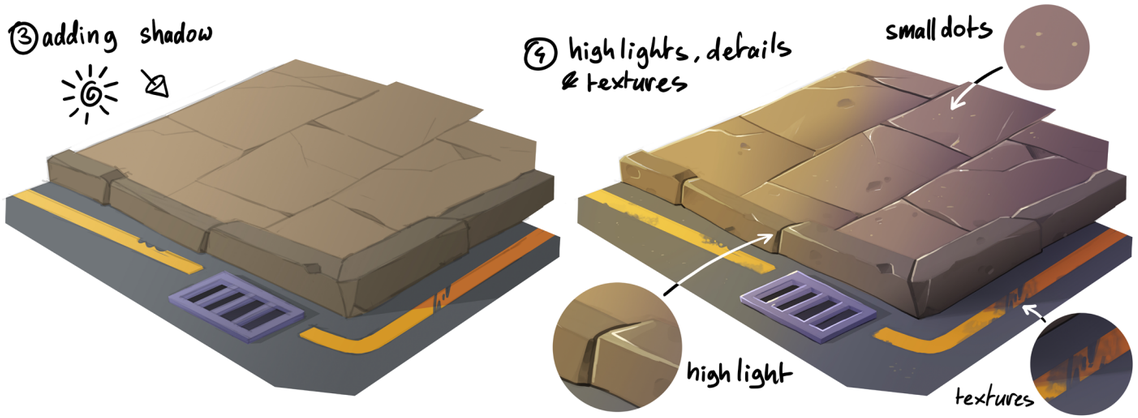
Tip: Objects close to the viewer or camera have more details, and the further away something is, the less detail it has.




# PAVEMENT

Here I'm using the same steps as I did for drawing the barrel. My first step is to create a drawing where I already think about all the surfaces.  The next step is to block in all the colors. Use the internet to find some references about what kind of colors you can use. You don't have to copy that exactly, but you can use it as inspiration.






Once I'm satisfied with the main colors, I pick the lightning (step 3), and start shading the whole object. After that, I add all the details and textures to finalize the drawing. For this last step, try to think about how the object is being used. Often the edges are damaged. Also, see the paint on the ground. When it's old, it's often damaged and worn out. Think about how you can tell a story with these details.

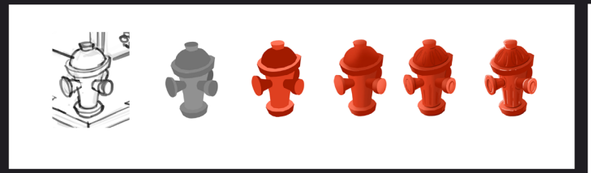
# A HOUSE

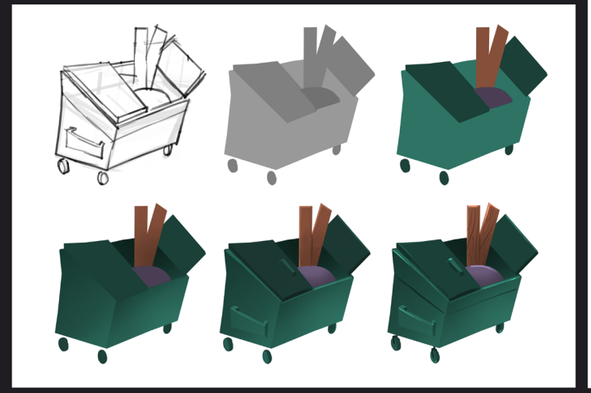
Let's paint a house. I've created the tutorial on the previous page to illustrate how to manage smaller textured objects. That's much easier to learn than this big piece because in this house many textures come together. If you've practiced it on a more concentrated part, like on the previous page, you can move on to his one.

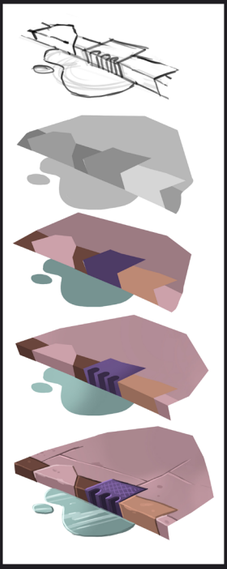
I started with setting up the design in linework, and after that, I painted it with the values (step 2). Values are the brightness and darkness of the color. I started here with the values because it's a drawing with many details. As you can see in step 2, this version of the drawing still clearly shows all the shapes because of the good contrast in values. The benefit of this is that your drawing becomes better readable to the eye.

This is the final version. I added some extra details and some new layers to add some additional shadows and light in this version. Sometimes I make some adjustments when the painting is finished. I'm doing that with extra layers on top of the painting. This is also the moment when I add some effects like the light glow on the lamp post.

I've also isolated some objects/props to see how I approached everything. You can see this in the right image. Paintings large, complex objects like this can be overwhelming and a lot of work. Take your time and trust the process. Again, this is why I earlier recommend practicing with painting smaller objects like barrels first. With smaller props, you can quickly go through the whole painting process and master that on that smaller scale before going for the big ones. But of course, at some point, you need to start with something more challenging, like this.

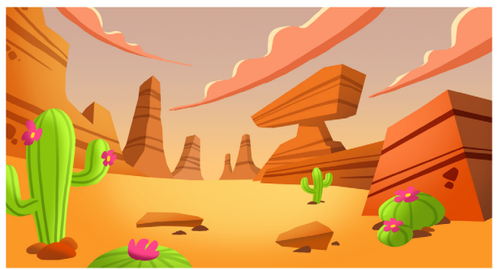






# A DESERT

Look at this peaceful desert landscape. Did you notice that all the colors are close to orange? Even the green color is a slightly little bit towards orange on the color wheel. This dusty orange look gives the setting this warm, sunny feeling.



Final painting. In this painting, all the edges are hard, and I used simple gradients for the shading. This gives everything a more stylized look. I also used a regular hard brush to paint in the highlights.

**EXERCISE**

Go ahead and try to make a alternative version of this dessert. Create a version with rocks in other shapes and sizes and a variaty of cactuses.

## SNOWY TREE

For this tree, I first set up the design in lines (step 1). After that, I added the main colors in simple plain color blocks (step 2). Each color on its own layer. You can do this quite quickly with the lasso tool. With a soft semitransparent brush, I paint in the shadows (step 3). And for the final details, I used a hard semitransparent brush to paint some extra shadows and highlights on the edges (step 4).

### EXERCISE

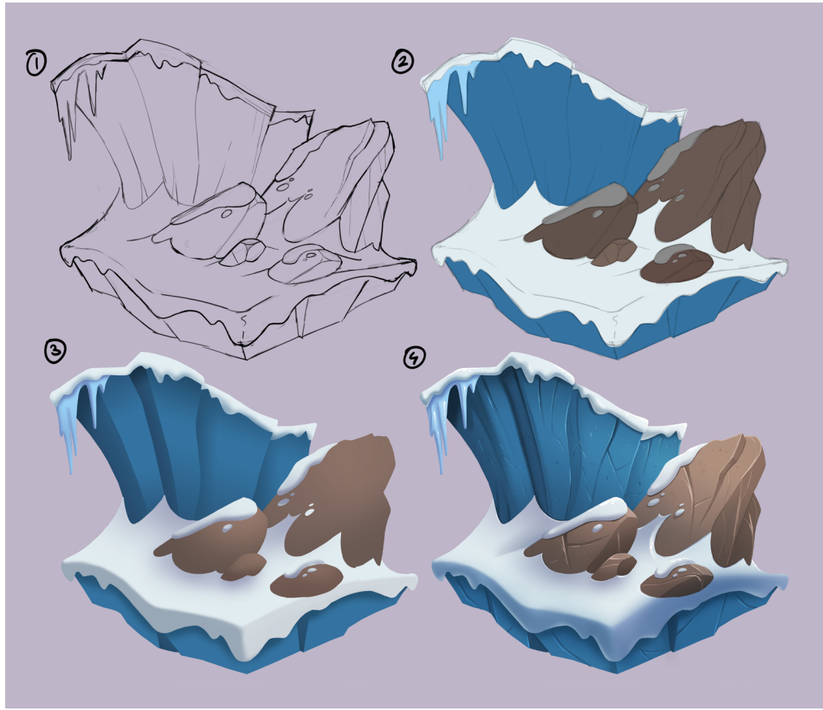
After you drew and painted this tree, try to create a can entirely different one with the same technique. How many different versions can you come up with?

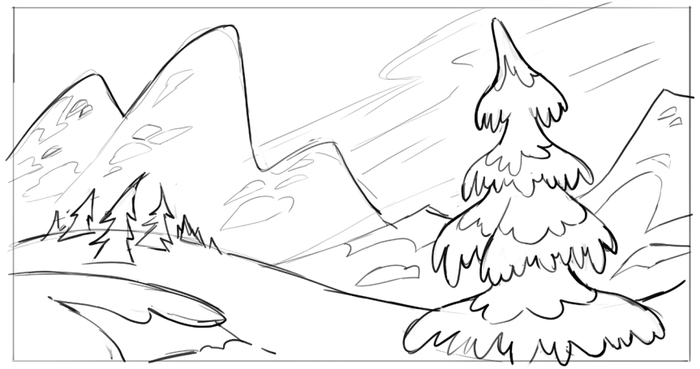


## ICE AND ROCKS

For this, I used the same approach as for the tree. Ice is transparent, so that means light travels through it. Something can be fully transparent, and something can be partly transparent. This ice is just a little transparent, and that's why I added a little bit of a lighter color in the middle.

Tip: You can look up some reference photos of ice for inspiration.

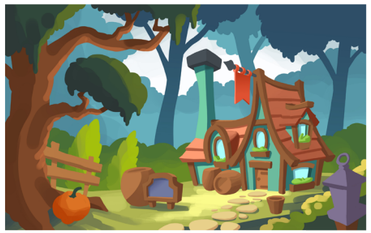




# SNOWY LANDSCAPE

Another quite 'simple' landscape sketch. These kinds of sketches are great to start practicing painting environments because they aren't too detailed or complex. To create the color blocks at step 2, I use a hard brush or lasso tool.
After that, I use a regular soft brush to paint in the shadows. You can also use a gradient tool, but I prefer the soft brush because that gives me more control over the position of the shadows.

# FOREST HOUSE



This is a more complex setting: A forest in the background, a tree in the foreground, and a building in the middle. Even when your drawing is more complicated – like this one -, the steps are the same as all the other paintings. For the final look, I made it a bit more painterly on end. You can see this in the rough brush strokes.

You can also try creating your version of a painting like this. Design a house, draw trees and arrange them in a different order and use slightly different colors. I always use the internet to find inspiration for buildings.

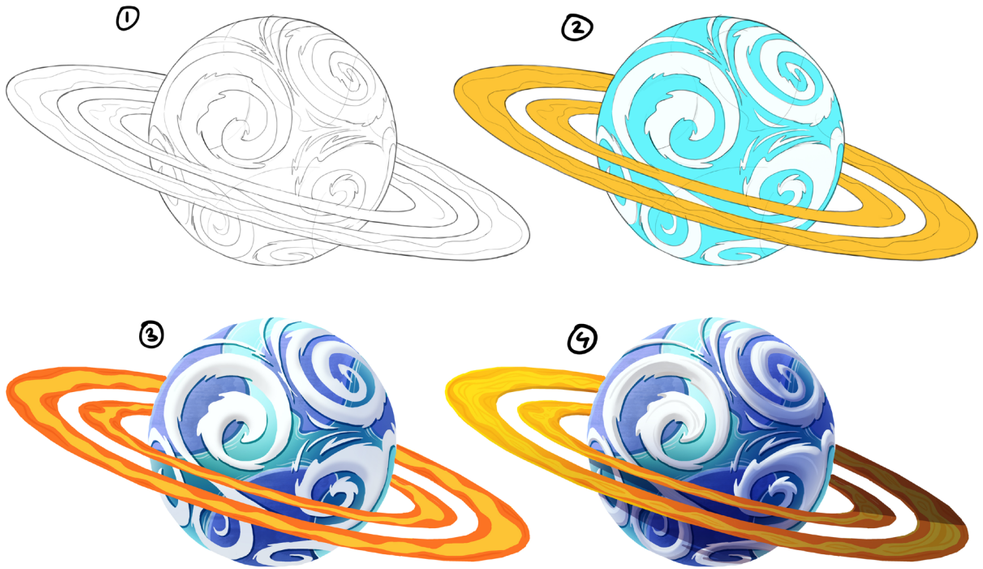
## SPOOKY TOWER

Instead of picking colors immediately, you can also start with the values. Colors exist out of three properties. Hue, saturation, and brightness. Brightness is the % of darkness and lightness of the color and is represented as the value of a color. The benefit of starting with values is that you can focus on the shadows and lights in your drawing instead of puzzling with colors immediately.



Once you are happy with the values, you can put a color layer on top. In this case, I've chosen purple because it fits with this spooky theme. Colors have cultural meaning. For example, purple also means 'expensive' or 'mysterious' and is often used for villains.

When the main color is added, I'm adding secondary colors and finally some glowing effects for the lights and other details.



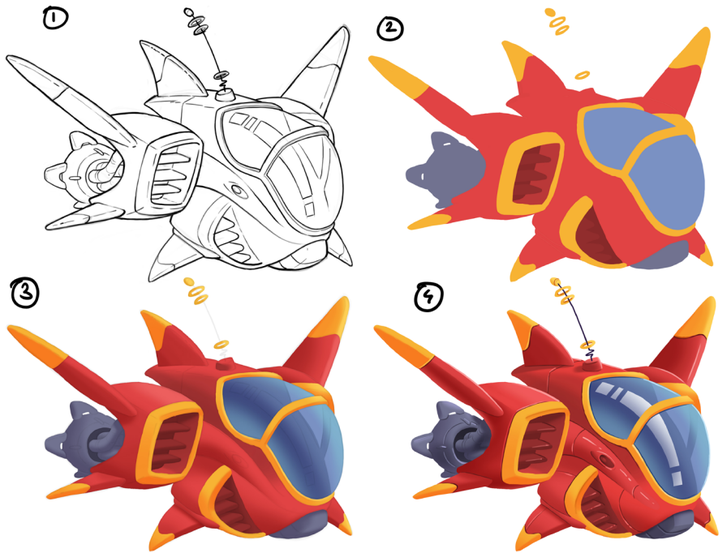

**EXERCISE**

First copy this planet step by step. After that try to create your planet. For example, a lava planet or a swamp planet. Be creative!

# A PLANET

With this method, you can paint almost anything you like! The line drawing is the fundament of your painting, and it's essential to practice that too. Also, don't forget it takes time to get experienced with picking the type of colors for your painting. Often, I see artists using too much black in their paintings. I like to keep my colors vibrant and fresh. That's also why I avoid 'muddy' colors.

I added the background color to this painting as one of the last steps. Actually, I wouldn't recommend that because colors influence each other. For example: When you put a light object on a dark background, the bright object seems brighter. This also works with the hue and saturation.



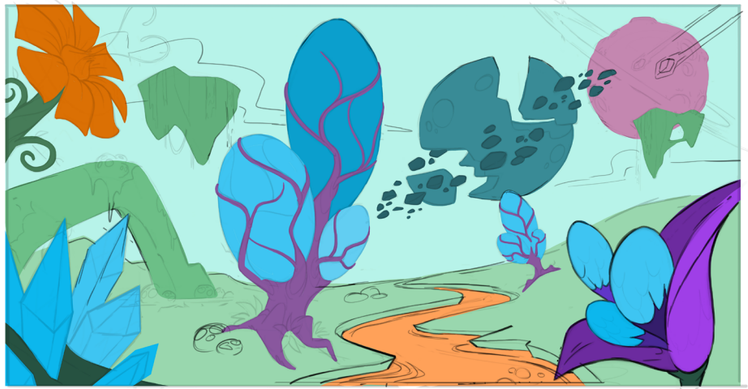

# SPACESHIP

Let's add a spaceship to the planet's universe. Again, think of the steps of the barrel. It's the same process! You could add a color layer on top of the ship to make it a little bit more purple to make it fit better into the environment.

When painting metal or any other material, think of how much it light it reflects. Especially when you paint an object with different materials. Look at the spaceship; the metal reflects differently than the glass parts. Every material has its properties and reacts differently to light.

## ALIEN LANDSCAPE

You don't have to stick to standard colors. You can also do something crazy like this alien planet. The process is the same as with the barrel.



## EXERCISE

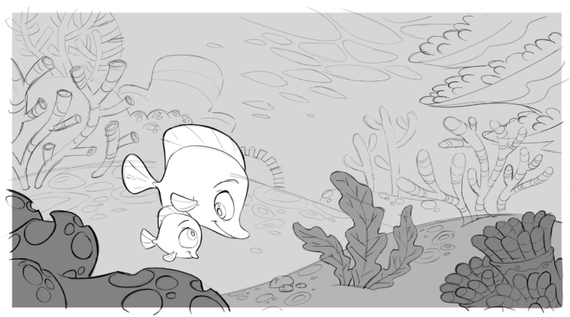
You can use this sketch and try to replicate this painting but with entirely different colors. There are a lot of other possibilities.

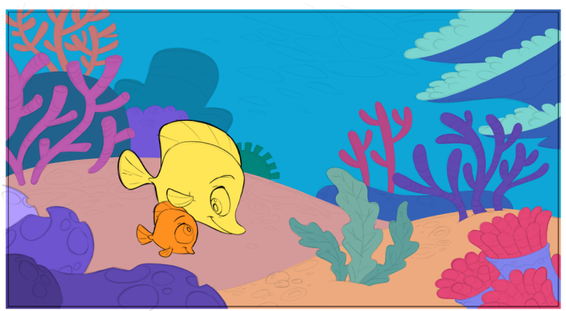
Or, of course, when you dare, try to draw your crazy space environment.

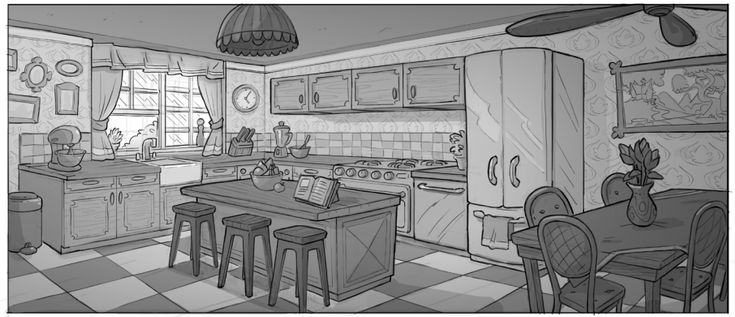
# UNDERWATER

For creating an underwater environment, I started with the sketch again. As you can see in the line drawing, most details are in the front. The farther away the objects are from the camera/viewer, the fewer details, and the lines become thinner. Try to understand it like this: The further away something is, there is more water between the viewer and the camera. So, things in the distance get vaguer and look bluer because of that.

Once the colors are put down, I start adding the shading. I always avoid pure blacks in the shadows by adding some tint of color in the shadows. Most of the time, an excellent color for this is purple or blue. For the light, I like to use warm colors like yellow or red.







# KITCHEN

Let's paint an interior! As you can see with the sketch of this kitchen, this drawing has many details. Like, the pattern on the wall, the buttons on the oven, and even the pages of the cooking book. When my sketch feels right, I start blocking in the colors. As you can see, I ended up with something completely different if you compare image 2 with 3. It's fine when you change the colors at this stage; it will cost you much more time when you do it later.

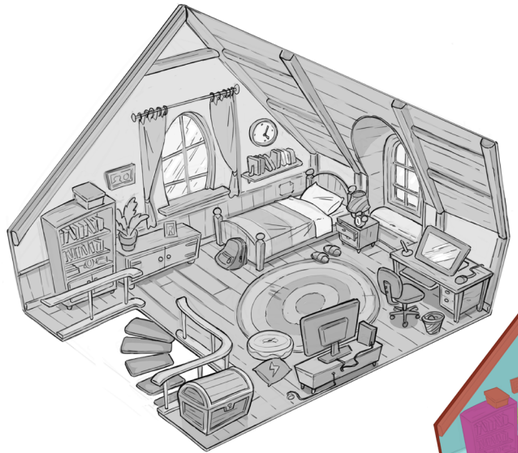


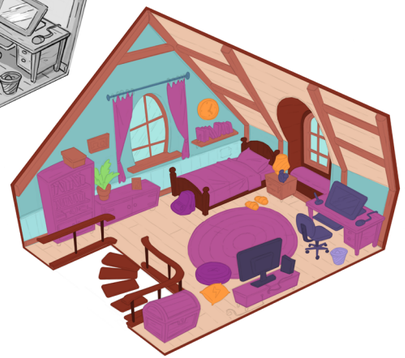
Once I'm satisfied with the colors, all on their own layer, I start shading all the separate layers/objects. Files get complicated this way, but later, you can always merge or group those layers when you're done with a part.

Tip: Always keep in mind where your light sources are.

Once the base is set up, I add textures like the wallpaper pattern and other minor details. I just designed one symbol for the wallpaper, and with the transform tool, I create a pattern of it in perspective. All these details are primarily drawn with a regular round brush. In this stage, you could also add some textures with a rough brush. Or use some textures from photos, bring those textures to your file, and with a multiplying effect, you could create some extra textures.

At the final step, I usually just add some extra shadows, highlights, and glows. I also add some final touches, again just with a regular brush.





## KIDS' ROOM

This is a drawing I use to show an overview of an area, in this case, a children's room. It's almost an isometric drawing but not entirely. There is still some perspective to make it a little more dynamic. To paint it, I'm following the same steps as all other tutorials: line drawing, color blocking, shading, more details, and final touches.

**EXERCISE**

A fun exercise is to make this kind of drawing of your own room. Try to look at the objects in your room and find a way to simplify them. Find a nice balance between making it recognizable and not too many details.

# THAT'S IT!

Thanks for reading this book. I hope you liked it and learned from it. Digital painting can take some time to learn. That's why I recommend the first start with something simple, like painting a barrel. With examples like this, you get to understand the steps without feeling too overwhelmed. After that, you could try to paint objects like an apple in from life. After you practiced painting small, simple objects you could start stepping up to more complex objects (with multiple materials) or even complete scenes.

The best way to learn how to paint is to observe the real world and get inspired. When you practice with the examples from this ebook, simply follow the steps as I

show them. When you feel confident enough, maybe alter some things to make it a bit more challenging for yourself. Also, try to discover what kind of workflow works best for you: Do you prefer to start with values, or do you like to work straight away with colors?

Painting backgrounds is a great skill to have. Because it is quite hard to master, it can give you many opportunities once you've put the effort in and learned how to paint. Many studios are looking for people who can paint awesome stuff! You are hired to create concept art or in-game art, for example.

I believe everyone can become an artist. Of course, talent can help you to get there faster, but hard work and experience are more critical. Take your time to learn how to draw and paint. On this road, don't forget to have fun too. You can't keep it up for so long if you don't have fun. People overestimate what they can do quickly but underestimate what they can do over a longer period.

It took me years to get where I am now, and when I started, I doubted a lot. I'd like to advise you not to worry too much about whether you will make it or not. And when you do worry, use that as an extra motivation to keep working and don't give up. This has worked for many other artists and me, so why not for you?