

# Negative Painting in Watercolor

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## ASPEN LEAVES



A PAINTED PRISM TUTORIAL

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**“If the empty spaces are right, the whole body is alive,  
and the more such places there are,  
the less boring the whole thing becomes.”**

- Ch'ing master

For every positive shape, there is negative space surrounding it. That is the space that we are going to concentrate on in this book.

Paying attention to this negative space is as important to the overall success of your composition as is the subject. Our goal, our job, in these drawing exercises and painting projects, will be to turn that negative space into interesting shapes. We will focus on that surrounding space and see the positive shapes emerge, almost effortlessly.

# Negative Painting of Aspen Leaves

In this negative painting project, you'll be painting layers of transparent color to create depth and dimension.



You will be adding one layer of leaves and branches behind another layer. Each layer of negative painting will take you further into the background, behind the first foreground leaves and branches.

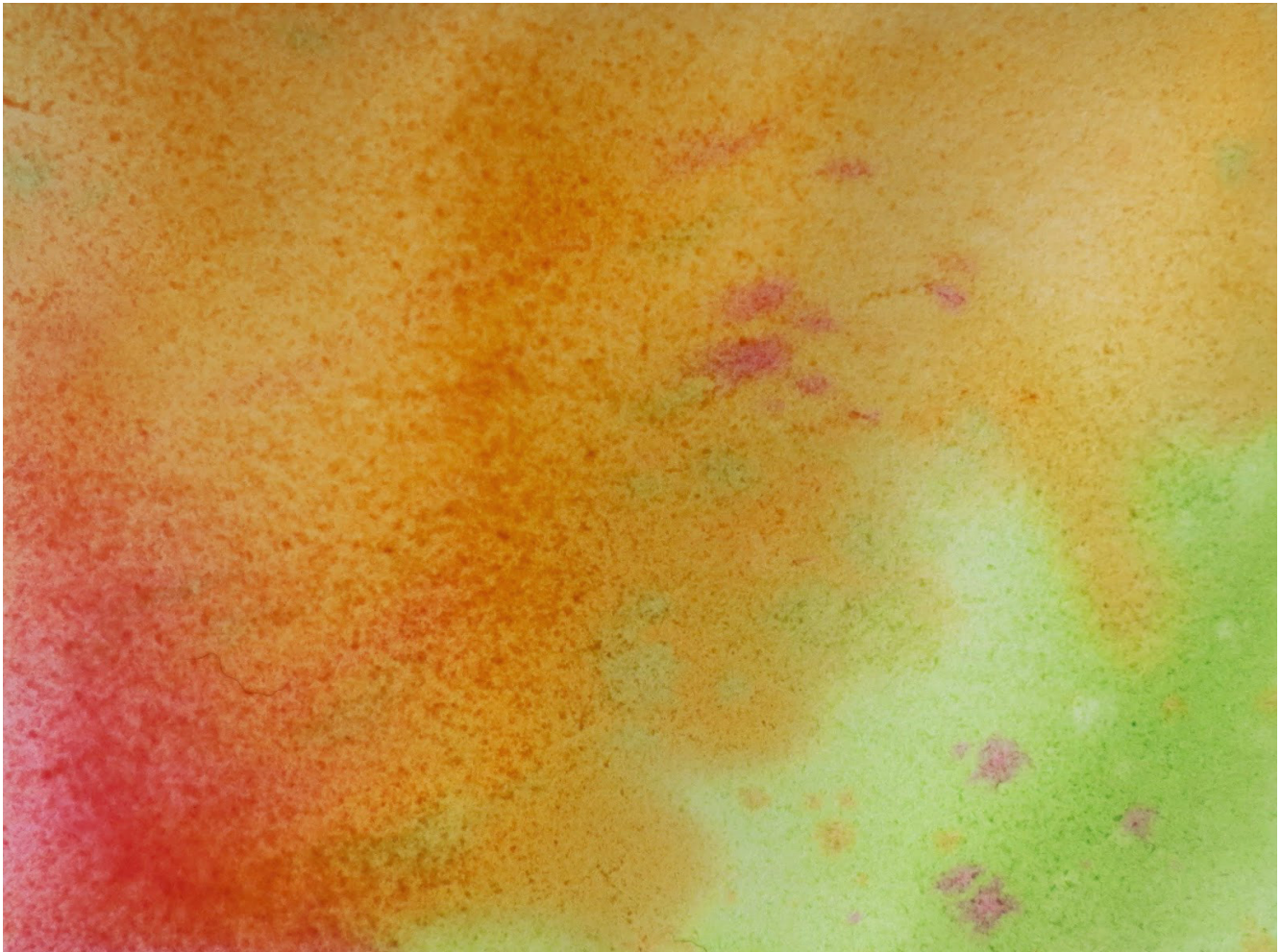
In negative painting, you do not paint the subject itself—at least not directly. The positive shapes are drawn, in stages. You will paint the negative shapes, which are the shapes around, between, and behind the leaves, stems, and branches.

For this project, you will need the following:

- a piece of watercolor paper (about 7' x 9'), mounted on a board
- a pencil for drawing
- various sizes of round watercolor brushes (#2, #4, #6)
- a flat brush for wetting your paper
- Watercolors. You will start with a secondary triad of colors—SAP GREEN, QUINACRIDONE GOLD, and QUINACRIDONE MAGENTA. You will be adding some blue (FRENCH ULTRAMARINE) later in the project.

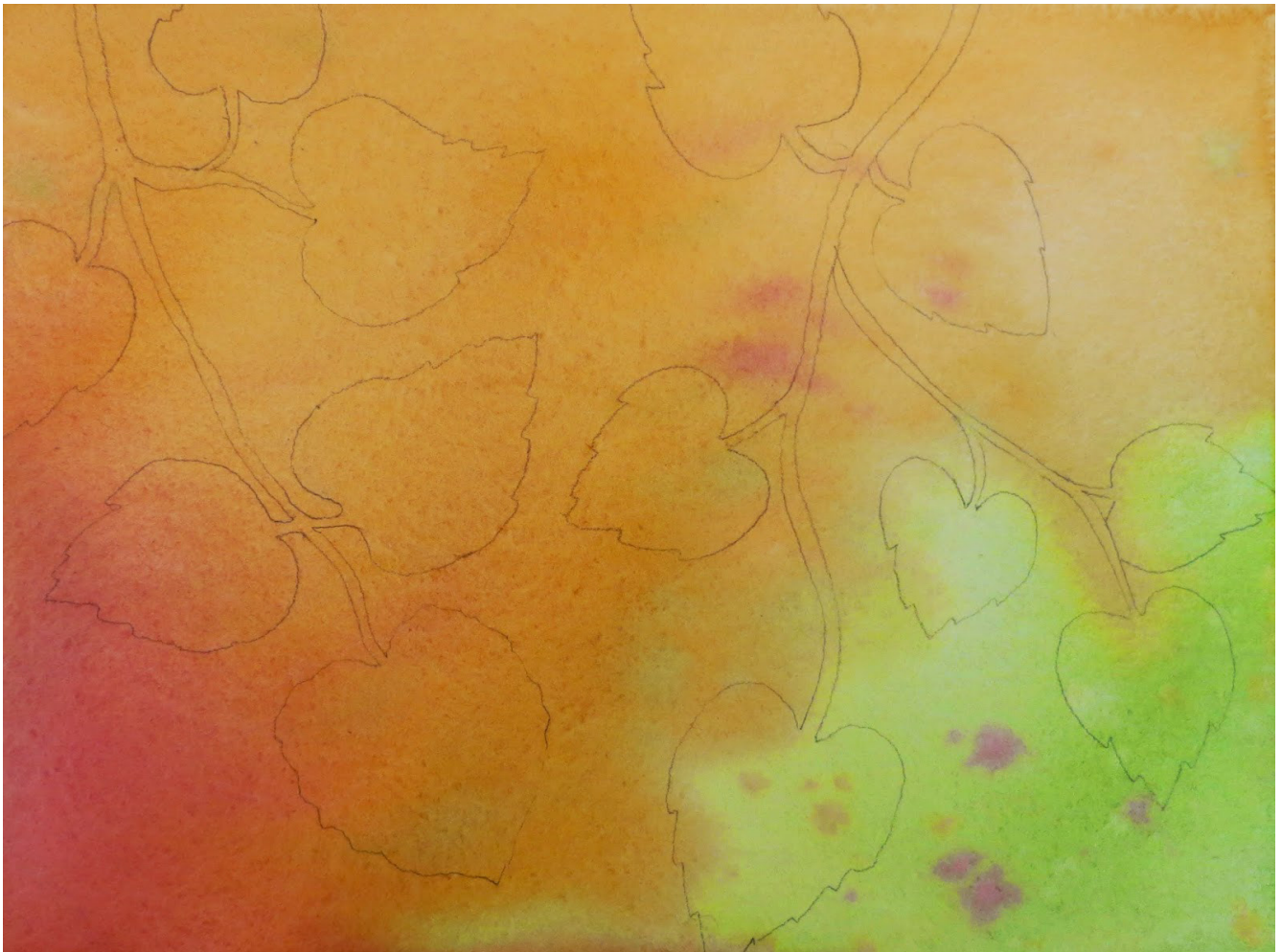
## 1) **Begin your painting with a wet-in-wet underpainting.**

Prep the three colors first on your palette—by bringing each of the colors into the middle, and adding a little water to each color. Then, wet the entire paper with clear water. Make sure that it is evenly wet. Add the three colors to the paper, with a brush, so that they mingle a little on the paper. Add the MAGENTA to the bottom left, the GOLD to the top and diagonally down the middle, and the GREEN to the right side. Pick up the board and move it around, to help the colors mingle -- then, lay it flat and let this settle for a minute. Then, spatter those same three colors onto the underpainting. Let this dry completely, while lying flat.



**2) In pencil, draw a few skinny branches, with stems and heart-shaped aspen leaves attached.**

This will be your foreground. (Make sure the paper is completely dry, before drawing with the pencil.)



### 3) Paint the negative shapes, only, with transparent color.

Use the same three colors, but mix with a little more water because you will be painting the negative shape, wet-on-dry. Use the underpainting color to guide you as to what color to paint on top. And, remember—paint AROUND the leaves and branches.

Paint a GOLD wash on top of the gold negative shapes . . .

*(continued)*



When you come to a shape that is two main colors, like gold and green, start painting the GOLD, and then transition to the GREEN . . .

(continued)



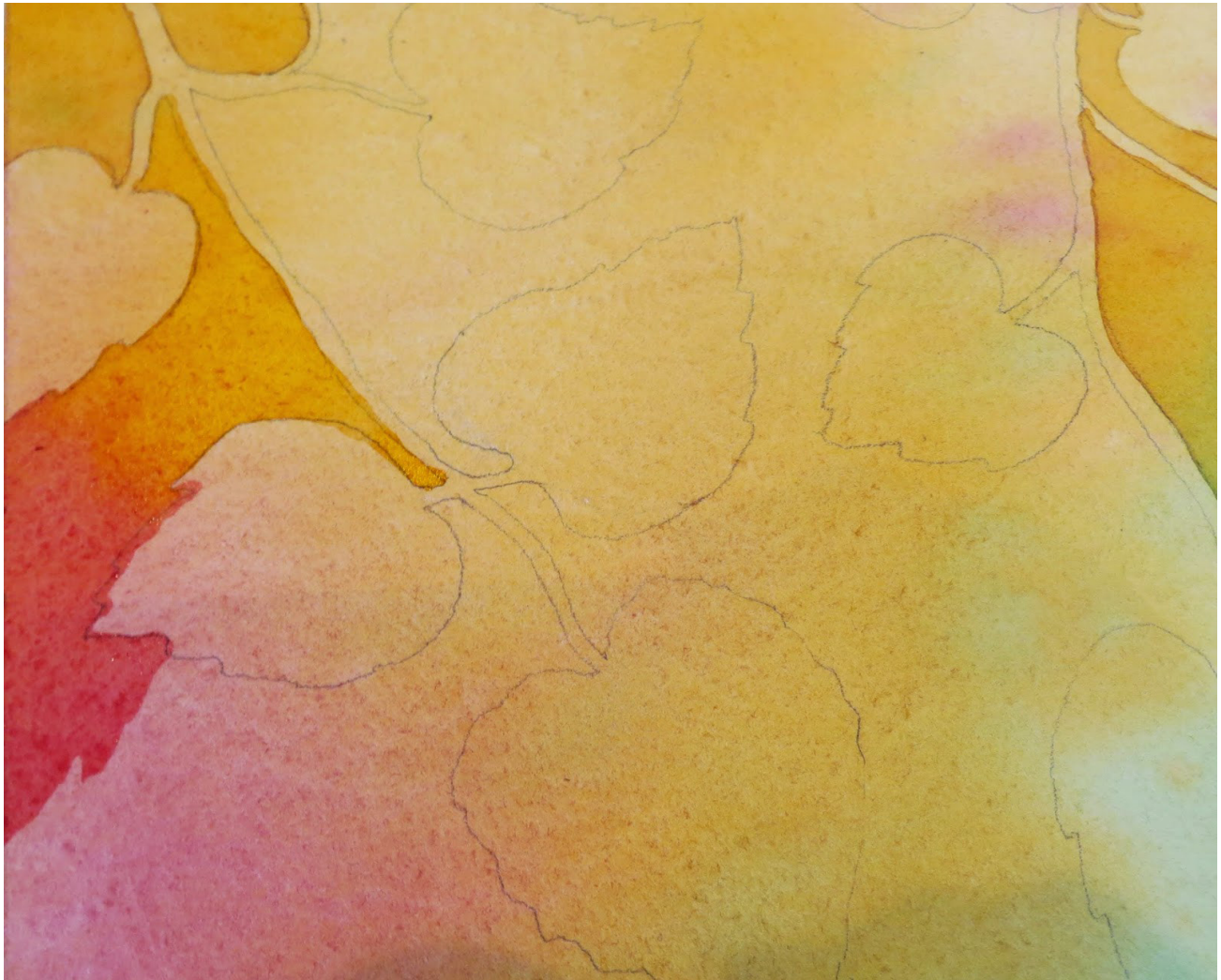


And then, finish painting the shape with the GREEN wash . . .

(continued)



On some of the negative shapes, you will start with the GOLD and then transition into the MAGENTA . . .



No need to go very dark with this layer—it just needs to be a little darker than the first layer. And, be sure to stay transparent (by using enough water). You want to ALTER the color below it, not totally cover it up. This will be true for each subsequent layer.

Continue this way until all the negative shapes are painted with the appropriate washes of transparent color.

#### 4) Draw more skinny branches, stems, and leaves behind the 1st layer.

Start by drawing three meandering lines, to indicate branches. Then add a few stems coming off the branches, and draw heart-shaped leaves at the end of the stems, “underlapping” the foreground shapes.



**5) Mix up two new colors, using the three colors that are now in the middle of your palette.**

Mix the SAP GREEN + QUINACRIDONE GOLD to get a warmer, darker GREEN. Mix the QUINACRIDONE GOLD + QUINACRIDONE MAGENTA (or PERMANENT MAGENTA) to get an ORANGE mixture.

**6) Paint the new negative shapes with these two “new” colors.**

With the GREEN wash, paint a transparent layer on the negative shapes that are already green, and on half of the gold shapes.



On those negative shapes that are part GREEN and part MAGENTA, start with one color and transition to the other . . .

*(continued)*



Continue painting all the negative shapes. Paint the ORANGE wash over the MAGENTA shapes, as well as over the other half of the GOLD shapes . . .

*(continued)*



Continue in this way until all the negative shapes have been painted.



## 7) Draw some more branches, stems, and leaves.

Once again, you may find it helpful to draw the skinny branches first, behind the existing ones. Then, draw the stems in various places, and then, draw the leaves at the end of the stems. Make sure to “underlap” these shapes, rather than try to squeeze entire leaf shapes within the negative shapes.





## 8) Mix two new “cooler” colors.

Clean off the middle of your palette. Now, mix two new colors, using the GREEN and the MAGENTA, but cooling each of them down a bit with a little BLUE. Mix SAP GREEN + FRENCH ULTRAMARINE, to get a cool GREEN. Mix QUINACRIDONE MAGENTA + FRENCH ULTRAMARINE to get a RED-VIOLET.



## 9) Paint the new negative shapes with these two colors.

Be sure to switch to a little brush, like a #4 or even a #2 round, to paint the smallest negative shapes. You're not painting any detail at all, inside the leaves, but with each layer, the negative shapes will get smaller—so you need to adjust the size of the brush you use, accordingly.

*(continued)*



Use the RED-VIOLET mixture to paint half of the negative shapes (the upper left half of your painting). Paint the other half with the BLUE-GREEN mixture. Remember to paint only the new NEGATIVE SHAPES around the leaves and branches—never the leaves themselves. That is how you achieve the feeling of depth.



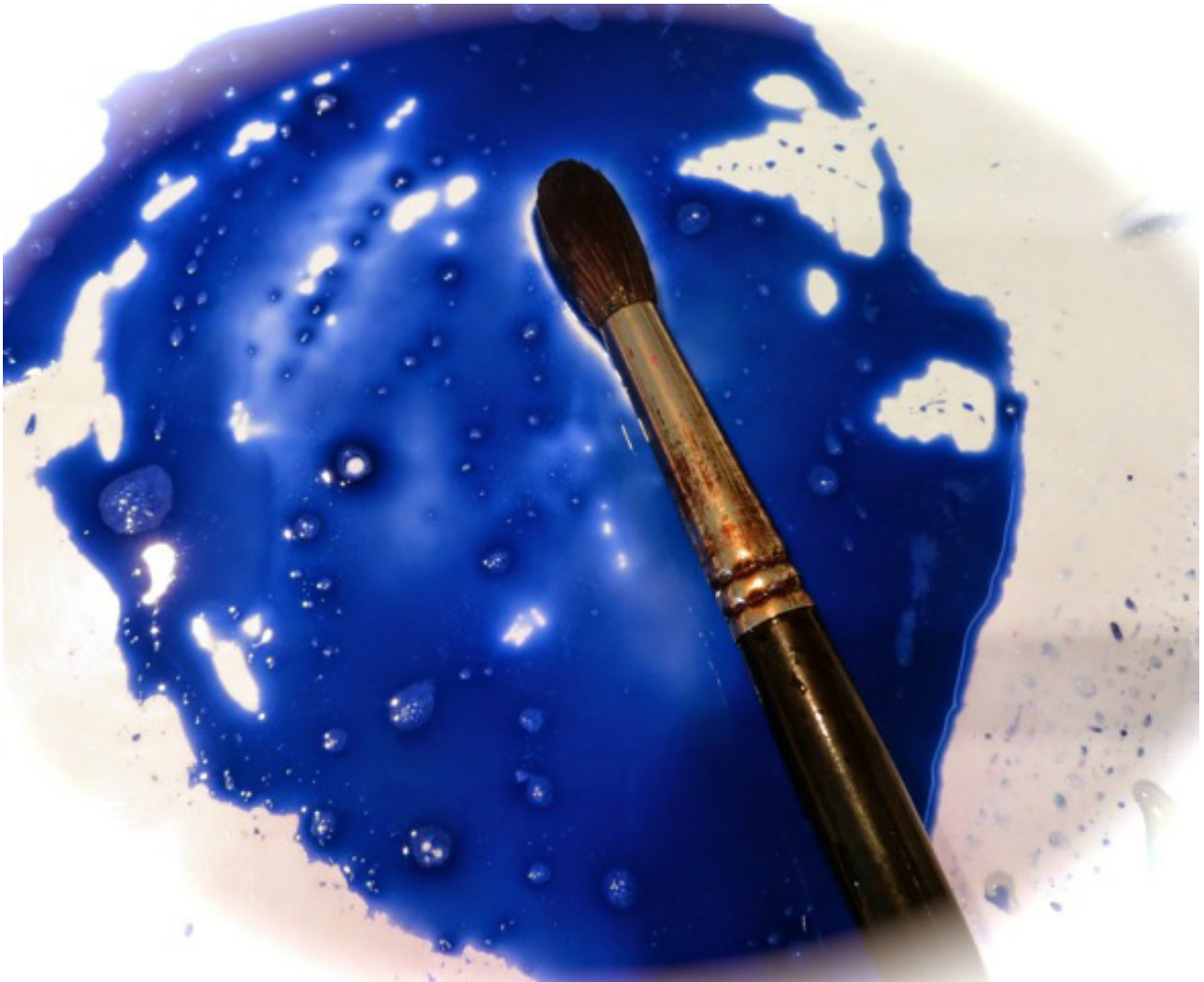
**10) Draw your last layer of branches, stems, and leaves.**

If it's too hard to see what you are drawing, try using a light colored pencil.



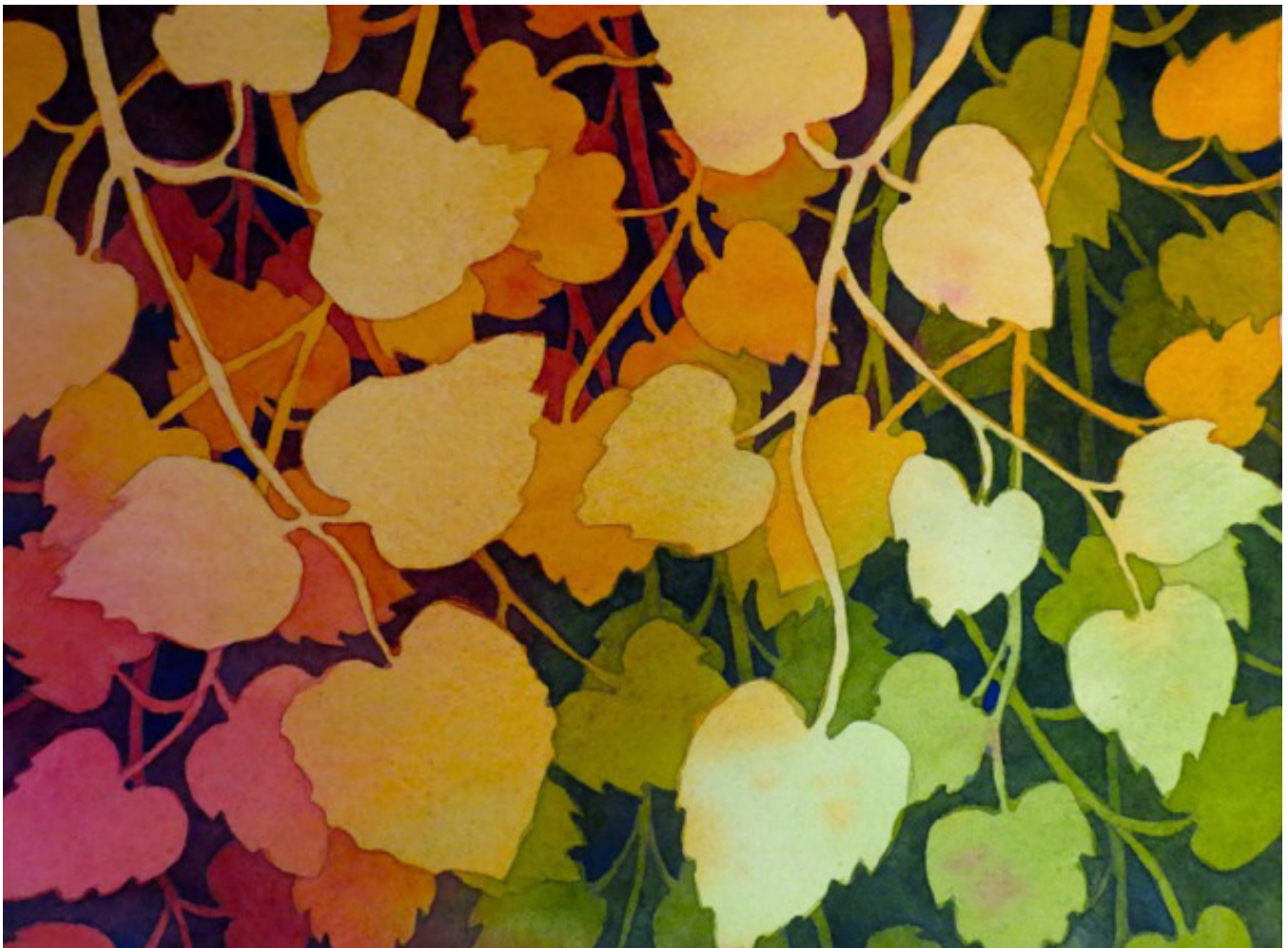
## 11) Mix up a Blue wash for the final layer of negative painting.

Clean off the middle of your palette, and then mix up a wash of French Ultramarine.



**12) Paint the negative shapes that you've just created, using this Blue wash.**

To finish your painting, this BLUE wash is painted over all the new negative shapes. This will darken that last layer, and create even more depth in your painting. Be sure to use a small round brush, that comes to a nice point, in order to better paint these little shapes.



And, voila! You are finished!