

In the Flow with Ione Harrison

3 Creative Warm-Ups for Watercolour Artists



Loosen up and set the tone for expressive, joyful painting.

In watercolour, every brushstroke is a part of a dynamic process involving pigment, water, and paper. These exercises help you tune into that process, exploring techniques, textures, and moods without pressure or outcome. They're perfect for starting a painting session, recharging creative energy, or simply playing for the joy of it. And we all need more play, don't we?

Whether you're a seasoned artist or just beginning your journey with watercolour, these warm-ups will help you:

- Build confidence and loosen up
- Develop intuitive mark-making
- Explore materials and techniques with curiosity
- Cultivate a mindful, joyful painting practice

Use them as you like – to get ideas flowing, as a mindful daily practice, or simply when you have no idea what to paint today. There are no rules - just invitations to explore, feel, and create. Some of your most exciting work might come from them.

Each of these warm-ups takes **5-15 minutes**, uses minimal materials, and is suitable for all skill levels.

In the examples below, the paints I have used are Cotman Winsor & Newton watercolour tubes. The paper is St Cuthberts Mill Bockingford 140lb (300gsm) cold pressed (not) 100% cotton acid free.

I hope you enjoy exploring these playful, mindful warm up exercises 😊

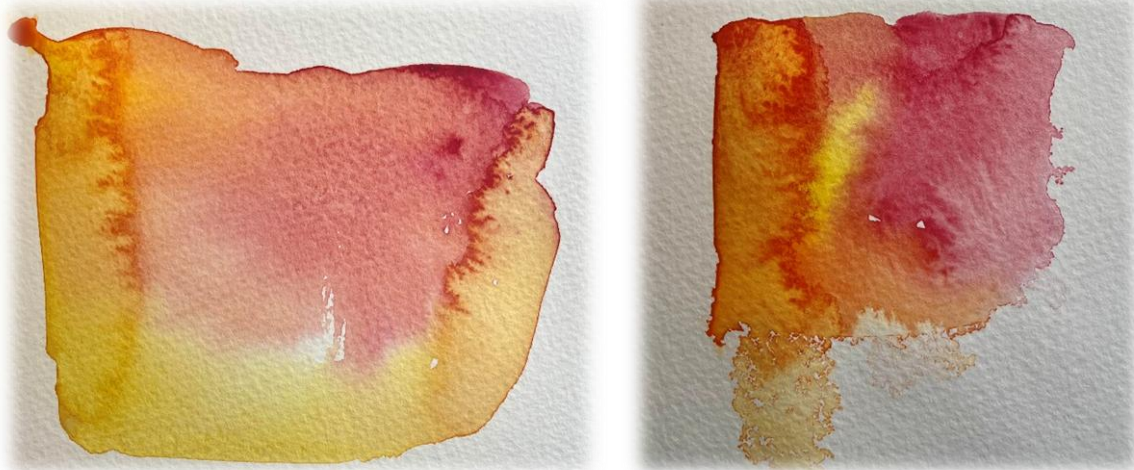
1. Colour Flow

Purpose: Learn how your paints flow and interact on wet and dry paper.

What to do:

- Wet a section of your paper with clean water.
- Drop in 2–3 different colours and let them bleed into each other.
 - Detail: Choose 3 colours that are next to each other on the colour wheel – for example: crimson, orange, yellow or cobalt blue, purple lake, viridian green. If you are using tubes, wet the paint in your palette first so you have puddles of paint you can drop in.
- Tilt the paper to guide the flow.

Focus on: watching how colours merge and edges form. No outcome needed—just flow and observe.



These two examples use alizarin crimson, gamboge hue and cadmium orange with round no 12 brush. For the painting on the left, I wet the paper section first, not worrying if there were some bits still dry. Then I dropped in colour to 3 of the corners. Tilting the paper made the colours run together. As the paint dries, interesting run backs and textures emerge.

The second on the right was painted wet on dry, using the same colours. Then I sprayed a little water to diffuse the paint.

2. Water-Only Painting

Purpose: Practise brush control and focus on movement before adding pigment.

What to do:

- “Draw” a shape or design onto your paper using only clean water.
- Watch the sheen of water to see your invisible shapes (you may need to tilt the paper to see the water).
- Now, load up your brush (round no 12 for example) with paint. Touch the edge of your wet marks with paint and let the colour bleed in. Tilt the paper so the paint can flow freely.

Focus on: subtlety, and understanding how water behaves.



This example uses alizarin crimson, cadmium orange and gamboge dropped into the clean water shape. Notice the lovely run backs and the crisp edge that has formed.

3. Paint to Music

Purpose: Free up expression and connect with emotion.

What to do:

- Put on a piece of instrumental music (classical, ambient, jazz, etc.).
- Let your brush respond to the rhythm, tempo, and mood.
- Use any colours and shapes that feel right.
- Don't stop until the song ends.

Focus on: spontaneity, movement, and feeling over form.



This example uses alizarin crimson, gamboge, cadmium orange with a touch of turquoise acylic ink. Round no 14 brush on A5 paper. The music that inspired it is *Melody* by Shaku Kanneh-Mason.