

STEPHEN QUILLER

# A BIG ARTISTIC VOICE IN A SMALL TOWN

This acclaimed watermedia painter influences artists worldwide with his color theory and painting technique in acrylic, watercolor, gouache, and casein.

— BY BOB BAHR —

So you don't live in Carmel, New York City, or Santa Fe? Stephen Quiller is proof that your impact on the art world can still be broad — international, in fact. Quiller lives in Creede, Colorado, which swells with tourists during the summer months but has a permanent, winter population of around 400. From this vantage point, which



has been the artist's home since 1970, he has watched the little mining town grow into a Colorado destination for the arts. He has grown as well. His 2008 Watson-Guptill book *Watermedia Painting with Stephen Quiller*, one of seven he's written, remains popular and in print. His influence on painters around the world, especially with regard to color theory, extends to workshops and multiple videos, too.

His deep dive into color culminated in a color wheel, printed in gatefold layout in his book *Color Choices: Making Color Sense Out of Color Theory*, that not only shows the standard colors of painters' palettes, but many additional

**STEPHEN QUILLER** has painted in many parts of the world, but is primarily known for his depictions of the beaver ponds, snow shadows, water patterns, wild iris, and mountain rhythms near his home in southern Colorado.  
[quillergallery.com](http://quillergallery.com)

**Cabin Along Cinnamon Pass Road**  
2012, watercolor, 29 x 21 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air





**Snow Slide Patterns, Ouray**  
2008, watercolor, 28 x 20 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air



## WATERCOLOR

- is easily transportable when hiking a good distance to paint
- has a gum arabic binder
- is soluble when dry so the paint can be lifted
- dries lighter than when it's first put on.
- Sedimentary granulation (as seen in the detail at left) can give beautiful effects.
- Cleanup is easy.
- Paintings need to be displayed with glass.

hues. This approach allows him to discuss in depth complementary colors, color triads, split complementary colors, and analogous colors, allowing an artist to precisely mix hues to create careful and subtle grays. The precision of this approach enables painters to optimize their use of color both vibrant and modulated. Today, he continues to push further in his exploration of all paints that are water-soluble. The way he mixes and matches watermedia methods in his plein air paintings, in particular, deserves a closer look.

Although Quiller often paints in the studio in the winter, and enjoys that scenario, he clearly cherishes painting outdoors. “They complement each other,” says the artist. “I do a

lot in the studio in the winter and I love that, but I love the plein air experience, too. I like it because I want to feel like I’m part of the whole thing. I want to connect with nature. After setting up my easel on location, I take a short time to meditate and visualize the interaction with my subject. Yes, it takes a while to get used to painting outdoors. You have changing light conditions, bugs, weather, spectators interrupting, and other distractions. But the more you paint on location, the more addicted to it you become. At some point you can just get lost in the experience of interacting with nature. Early on, if people wanted to watch, I found it very distracting. But I soon realized that if I was going

to teach all over the world, I needed to get used to it. I’ve learned to enjoy this aspect of plein air painting. People are honored that you see beauty in the places where they live. Knowing that and letting that get into your painting is a good thing.”

## ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ACRYLIC

Quiller uses four kinds of watermedia in the field: acrylic, watercolor, gouache, and casein.

“Acrylic paint is pigment suspended in an acrylic polymer,” explains Quiller. “Basically plastic, it is the most permanent medium we have today — of course, we won’t know for sure for 500 more years. Acrylic is vibrant and brilliant and will give you exciting, luminous color with great impact. You can work on any surface — paper, watercolor board, canvas, canvas board, almost anything. Acrylic is by far the most transparent medium we have. (Transparent watercolor painters have a heart attack when I say that.) Once I put a transparent wash in acrylic down and let it dry, I can paint over that with a transparent glaze of acrylic and it won’t lift like it would with watercolor. I can use 30 or 40 glazes for luminosity; you cannot get that many glazes with any other water medium. It is so versatile.”

Quiller continues, “The disadvantages are that it dries very quickly and isn’t soluble when it dries, so you need to soften the edges while the paint is still damp. In humid places such as British Columbia or Hawaii, I have all day to work with acrylic without the paint drying too quickly. But in dry areas, I have to work fast and use an atomizer to keep my palette moist. That can be a



### Ouzel Bird & Hidden Falls

2014, casein, 23 x 32 in.

Collection the artist

Plein air and studio



**Falling Leaf Contrails, Cathedral Woods**

2003, watercolor and casein, 34 x 22 in.

Private collection

Plein air and studio

challenge. For that reason I work in the morning in dry climates, when there is more humidity. It's important with acrylic to place the palette away from the sun to keep it from drying faster."

The artist points out that if one thins acrylic paint too much, the polymers may not bind properly, but that when applied to the right surface, acrylic can be built up just like watercolor, with thinner washes yielding to subsequently thicker paint applications. "On canvas, it's better to use a matte or gloss medium," he says. "Acrylic, if thinned out a lot, will not bind well with canvas. That's one reason why I work on 300-lb. watercolor paper, watercolor board, or Aquabond, which is Masonite with a coating of kaolin clay. Even the thinnest, most transparent wash of acrylic will work on watercolor paper because the pigment absorbs into the fibers and holds very well. It is the gesso on a canvas surface that is the problem."

In acrylic, he can work from transparent to opaque, and, unlike with watercolor, he can work from light to dark or dark to light because of acrylic's variable opacity. "I can also put down a dark underglaze and build up the lights as a pentimento so the layers show through," he says. "You can take acrylic any way you want to go."

### COMBINING WATERCOLOR AND GOUACHE

Quiller is likely best known as a watercolorist, but he's far from a purist. "I love the way watercolor paints work, especially certain pigments like cobalt violet that are called granulating," he says. "Granulating colors have a heavy pigment as opposed to finely ground and light pigments like the phthalocyanine colors. Granulated pigments sink into the valleys and pockets of watercolor paper. You can't get that effect with other media. I also appreciate that watercolor will lift once it's dry. I can come back with a round or flat brush and pull an area back to white paper, then glaze over the top with another color and get a type of mark I couldn't get if I used a positive mark of paint over paint."

One example of this technique is *Cabin Along Cinnamon Pass*. "The spring aspens and the reddish tone of the rocks at the top are what attracted me to this scene," Quiller says. "I try to make sure that everything I paint adds to the composition. I don't put something in the composition just because it's there. I don't have to make it look exactly like what I see. If I'm inspired by a color and want to push it a little further, then I do so. The aspens are simple washes and an example of my lifting of the



**Douglas Fir & Aspen**  
2008, acrylic, 30 x 20 in.  
Private collection  
Plein air and studio



## ACRYLIC

- has a poly-resin (plastic) binder and “the most brilliant color of all the watermedia”
- is ideal for subjects with intense color and for working in layers
- can be applied transparent, translucent, and opaque
- can be used on any non-oily support
- is insoluble once dry so beautiful transparent glazes can be applied one over another.
- Edges must be softened before drying when working transparent.
- Quiller uses older brushes and makes sure to clean them well.
- Cleanup is more difficult.
- He uses acrylic when working close to his studio or his car.
- Paintings can be shown without glass.

undertones — if I had painted all the leaves in there, that would have competed with the cabin. I washed back the shapes of the aspens and then glazed in those yellow greens. I liked the soft shapes against the harder edges of the cabin. Having simpler, quieter areas will attract the eye to the area I want to emphasize. I treated the red rocks at the top very simply, and similarly, lifted and repainted the area as I did the trees. The warm rocks balanced the warm of the cabin. I thought that contrast was so beautiful. It was part of my inspiration, and I loved how that area of the painting worked.”

He admits transparent watercolor is hard, though. “I see a lot of overworked, muddy transparent watercolors. Gouache lets me add lights to a watercolor painting. Gouache is basically watercolor paint with a white, precipitated chalk added to make it opaque. I like adding touches of it to a watercolor painting to create lights. If you use gouache, or body color as it used to be called, just keep in mind that there will be people who criticize

this. A third of my paintings are transparent watercolor, and I love that, but the other media add to my vocabulary.”

The artist also likes a watercolor and gouache setup because it’s easy to transport. “I spent my life trying to make it easier to work so it is less difficult to make a good painting. I can take that setup in the high country and capture anything I want. I can get water from a stream or lake — I’ve even used ocean water when I’m traveling. There’s no turpentine or linseed oil, so watercolor is not harmful to the earth.”

## A CASE FOR CASEIN

The other water-based medium Quiller regularly uses is casein, a paint that uses milk protein as its vehicle. Casein is not new; it was used in Etruscan murals as far back as 4000 BC. Still, Quiller’s interest in the medium helped rescue casein from obscurity. Jack Richeson & Co. is the only manufacturer of casein paint, and the company found an excellent ambassador in Quiller, who has used casein since the early 1970s. The artist worked with Richeson to develop five new colors specifically to allow him to use casein with his round palette that uses his color theory.

“Casein is like acrylic paint in that you can paint light colors over dark ones, and it is water-based,” says the artist. “It lifts reasonably well when it dries. After two weeks it cures and becomes insoluble like acrylic. Casein can be thought of as falling in between gouache and acrylic. It is relatively fast-drying and yet also workable in terms of opacity. Casein has a velvety matte



## GOUACHE

- uses the same gum arabic binder as watercolor
- has a white precipitated chalk added to the pigment to give it body or opacity
- is soluble when dry and has a chalky, matte visual quality
- can be used transparent, translucent, and opaque
- is ideal for small studies but not for large paintings
- should be painted on a rigid paper support such as 300-lb. watercolor paper or watercolor board
- works well in combination with watercolor.
- Quiller uses with watercolor when hiking distances.
- Paintings need to be displayed with glass.

look. It is similar to gouache but not as chalky. Many of my award-winning paintings are casein. Back in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, casein was a major medium for illustration, color, and design courses in art school. Acrylic developed in the late '40s and '50s and took over. Casein got lost, but it's gradually coming back — and it's accepted in watermedia shows.

“I asked Jack Richeson for five new colors, and those new colors made it easy to write my book *Casein Painting with Stephen Quiller* and emphasize my color theory. I gradually started using it for detail over underpaintings and washes. Now I often use casein as the primary medium over a transparent acrylic underpainting, as can be seen in *Ouzel Bird & Hidden Falls*. The blue underlay is transparent acrylic, while the rest of the painting was done in casein.”

### FINDING THE BEAT IN NATURE

With this variety of tools at Quiller's disposal, he can work at capturing the soft colors of aspen leaves and the sharp warmth of Colorado's red rock. The artist speaks passionately about the beauty all around him at his home at the headwaters of the Rio Grande River near the Continental Divide. It can be a busy landscape near Creede, but Quiller is as adept at simplifying cluttered compositions as he is at gauging and using vibrant color. Consider *Snow Slide Patterns*, *Ouzel*.

“The snow slide patterns are the key to this painting,” Quiller says. “Just once every four or five years, the snow will hang on long enough in crevices and vertical shapes to set off the aspens that are just starting to come out and bud in the spring, and you get these wonderful light greens against the snow. In the actual scene, there were a lot of rocks and craziness, but the simplicity of the snow shapes helped me to focus in on the pattern of the snow and the tree forms and rock forms. When I am composing a painting, I think much more abstractly than during the finishing part of the process. I am not looking at objects. I am looking at a geometric motif, the repetition of shapes and lines in the composition, and the positive and negative shapes. I'm focusing on rhythm, pattern, repetition, and transition [the interplay of quiet and active areas]. I am looking for the beat in nature, something that is pleasing to the eye.”

Quiller readily finds these beautiful beats in nature where he lives, and he argues that this is a prime reason to live where you are inspired to paint, regardless of the population of the community. “Creede is

#### **Autumn, Pond by Sunnyside**

2012, acrylic, 36 x 21 in.

Private collection

Plein air and studio





## CASEIN

- is a milk-based paint that uses the protein of the curd for the binder, giving it “a beautiful, velvety-matte visual quality”
- should be used on a fairly rigid, non-oily support; when working thickly, 300-lb. watercolor paper, watercolor board, Aquabond, or wood panels are recommended.
- When first applied, the paint is semi-soluble and edges can be softened, but overpainting is still easy.
- Within about two weeks’ time, the paint cures and becomes insoluble.
- As with acrylic, Quiller uses older brushes and takes care to clean them well after use.
- Work can be displayed without glass.
- Cleanup is a little more difficult.



### August Wildflowers, San Juans

2019, watercolor and gouache, 18 x 12 in.

Private collection

Plein air

like an Aspen or Telluride that hasn't been discovered yet,” he says. “Fifty years ago, I didn't know any better and paid \$100 a month to start a gallery in Creede's downtown, which was totally vacated. This was a declining mining town before tourism attracted as many as 15,000 people to it during summers. There's still not a year-round economy here, but Creede is now considered one of the top towns for galleries in Colorado.

“I live in a beautiful place. Most painters say they need to live where the market is. My feeling is you need to find a place that you are inspired by and then develop your market from your inspiration. I have developed a clientele that has helped me survive in this beautiful town. If you love what you do and can't wait to get up every day to see the landscape, then you will see it totally differently each time — even if you have lived there and seen it for years. And don't forget: being a member of the community and participating in it adds to your life, too.

“I developed my own approach here. I'm not sure I could do that in a large city. It has helped me to see uniquely and paint a little differently. In a large city, one may paint in a certain way and just blend in. Here, in quiet and solitude, I am working on my own, pushing ideas that I'm excited about. Creede has given me the opportunity to experiment with different watermedia and push in directions I wouldn't have been able to pursue otherwise.”

Quiller points to the example of Jules Bastien-LePage, who became incredulous when he moved to Paris and got second place in a painting competition. In 1876, after considerable success (but no top prize), Bastien-LePage disgustingly moved back home to the country and painted pastoral scenes. “He started a trend that spread through northern Europe of living in small villages and painting local life around him,” Quiller says. “I was following his direction without knowing it. I find an integrity in being a part of this community, and that has added to my life so much. I'm surrounded by nature, and in the afternoons I go cross-country skiing. I still get to go to beautiful places and get inspired by visiting the finest museums. But this is home.”



**BOB BAHR** has been writing and editing articles about art instruction for more than 14 years.