

Over three centuries later, the Pre-Raphaelite artist *Marie Spartali Stillman* painted her watercolours in layers, using a combination of transparent and opaque watercolour on paper that had been hot-pressed to give it a satin-smooth finish. When re-wetted with another layer of wet paint, watercolour usually becomes liquid again, resulting in the layers mixing. Great care and skill is required to apply wet watercolour on dry paint in the way that she did. Even then some paintings simply don't work, the layers mix and that attempt has to be discarded. When successful, the end result can resemble layered oil paints, which don't suffer the same problem when dry paint is overpainted.

*Love's Messenger* (1885) is probably the finest of her single-figure paintings, and was her most successful 'problem picture'. The woman stands by her embroidery at an outside window. On her right hand is a messenger dove/pigeon, to which a letter is attached. She clutches that letter to her breast with her left hand, implying that its contents relate to matters of the heart. The dove is being fed corn, which could either be its reward for having reached its destination (thus the woman is the recipient of the message), or preparation for its departure (she is the sender). Despite being exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1885, and elsewhere, this painting didn't sell until after she had reworked the background in the 1890s, which must have been a feat in itself, without cattle in it.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Winslow Homer earned his place as one of the greatest watercolour painters of America during a period spent in a fishing community in north-east England. The advanced techniques which he used are shown well in *The Watcher* (1882), and include both transparent and opaque paints, rewetting and blotting to remove paint for highlights, scraping, application of wax to resist the adherence of paint, and the use of pure gum solution as a glaze. In this case, his paper is only lightly textured, though.

One of his most unusual techniques, used extensively here, is wax resist. Before applying paint, Sargent scribbled over areas intended to be vegetation, using a soft wax crayon, probably made from beeswax. On fairly rough paper, that wax is deposited unevenly, and when painted over using watercolour it shows the white paper through. This creates disruptive patterns of near-white in the midst of the greens, and a superb textural effect, as shown in this detail.