

CHOOSING THE RIGHT FABRICS

The fabrics you choose for a landscape can either make or break the quilt. When I teach or lecture about designing pictorial quilts, I encourage students to look at fabrics differently than the traditional quilter does. Learn to look beyond the obvious when fabric shopping. Don't just look at what the fabric graphically represents but at what it's underlying potential is. I can look at a print covered with veined leaves and see a horse's mane or fish fins. A speckled batik can become a spotted trout or a leaf covered with dewdrops. A finely pebbled geometric print can be the scales of a sea monster then find a second role as the tiled roof on a Japanese temple. Some fabrics have limited personalities; able to fill only one role while others can play many different parts. Keep this multiple role identity in mind when you shop. It's a shame to buy just enough of a fabric to make the fur on a kitty only to discover it was the perfect fabric to make the pine needle strewn floor of a forest if only you had enough.

It also helps to learn to think poetically. We live in a world that has reduced this type of thought to bare efficient information only. Our society rations creative verbal expression by the miserly distribution of just enough language to convey the message without frills or embellishment. By today's standards, Shakespeare would be considered frivolous. If selecting a fabric for a stormy sky don't think only in terms of color but in colorful adjectives. Words like 'ominous' or 'threatening' will give you a better foundation to select a fabric that conveys 'stormy' as opposed to a misty or foggy sky.

The Japanese have a wonderful grasp on poetic thought. There is a term 'Yugen' in the Japanese language that roughly translates to 'mysterious beauty that lies beneath the surface'. It describes the subtle as opposed to the obvious. To ponder the destination of wild geese winging across the sky and disappearing in the distance, to note the fading brilliance of the last few autumn leaves clinging to a frosted tree, to wander a woodland path among the trees and feel their quite strength and age, these are all examples of 'Yugen'. It expresses a heightened state of awareness of the world around you, that of an active participant and not a mere spectator.

This is the concept I want my students to achieve in their pictorial quilts. The feelings that you could step right into the picture and wander around. To see a little teahouse perched on the cliff overlooking a waterfall and wonder what the scene would look like if you were seated within that teahouse looking out or hear the hollow roar of the waterfall as it plunges deep into a canyon and feeling the cool misty breeze that rises from the base of the waterfall. When I create a pictorial quilt, I want to touch all of the viewer's senses. If it is to be a daybreak scene, will it be a midsummer morning, cool after a balmy night but with the promise of a hot day to come? Or a frigid winter morning when you can just look at the pink, dawn-kissed grass and know it's going to crackle underfoot?

In reality, the picture is flat and two-dimensional so the only way that you can create this sense of depth and wonder is by careful selection of the fabrics. Any quilter who has studied color theory knows the importance of value. For those who have a hard time grasping the concept of value, I urge them to think of taking a black and white picture of a wall of fabrics in a quilt shop. You would not see yellows, greens and purples, only varying shades of gray. This light to dark

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range of any color is its value and we are encouraged to use a good contrast of values when composing a design for the best results. This is not necessarily so when composing a landscape design. Though it is true that you want some contrast to define the elements in your composition, the careful manipulation of value will contribute greatly to the atmosphere of your quilt. Think of the shadowy subtleties of a landscape at dusk or the soft indistinct details of a scene viewed through mist or snow. These effects would be impossible to achieve with high contrast graphic values. A scene viewed in moonlight will have some contrast for the elements highlighted by the moon but most of the composition will not be as bright or sharply defined as the same scene would be in sunlight. At night under the moonlit sky, colors fade and shadows blend with things not directly illuminated by the moon. The highlights that are visible are grayed and devoid of any bright color.

You can see that many subtle differences must be taken into consideration to create the image that appeals to all the senses. I tell my students that their powers of observation are their best tools when creating a landscape. We are prone to make assumptions based on knowledge as opposed to observing what is actually before us. Sometimes Nature provides us with startling color changes. My favorite example is Bryce Canyon. Most of the rock formations close in are pink, orange, rose and salmon colored, while the farthest distant canyon walls might be rich turquoise and purple. We all know that snow is white. In attempting to recreate a snowy mountain scene, some might struggle to find a variety of white textured fabrics to give their mountain definition. But is snow really white? Take a look at a photograph of a snow-covered peak. You will see many shades of blue or gray some of them actually very dark tucked into the contours of the mountain. Snow is white but it is also reflective. Up here in the Pacific Northwest I have seen Mt. Hood turn golden, pink or purple in the late afternoon sun. Under certain light conditions, the snow on a mountain may even be a darker shade of gray or blue than the sky. Water is not always blue and grass is not always green. I advise my students to study books or magazines on landscape photography to pinpoint those details that differentiate seasons, times of day and atmospheric conditions. Though you can also teach yourself to be more observant of the natural world around you, often it's easier to look at time frozen in a photograph where light is not constantly changing. If you do choose to study from nature, take notes. Jot down color combinations with picturesque terms that will help you recall the exact color and sensation at a later date. The color 'ivory' is vastly different to me than 'vanilla'. My mental images of those colors may not resemble the exact colors that you would find on a color chip card but I know what they mean to me. Use descriptive adjectives such as frosty, crisp, raw, biting... to remember the way a frigid winter morning made you feel.

Now it's time to go on the great fabric scavenger hunt. When selecting fabrics for pictorial quilts you have to view the fabric through different eyes than those of a traditional quilter. More often than not, we are drawn to fabrics that strike us as pretty. We may be attracted to particular colors or textures and have a tendency to buy those fabrics that appeal to us. Choosing fabrics for a pictorial quilt calls for a different approach. Some fabrics that will be perfect for individual parts of

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the design might be downright ugly at first glance. Remember that you are judging a fabric on it's potential, not it's outward beauty. Ugly ducklings can become beautiful swans. I find it helpful to have a checklist of design elements I am looking for when I go shopping. I first decide what kind of a feel I want the scene to have and then search for the fabrics that best convey that feeling. Sometimes I might change my mind in the middle of the hunt because I stumble across a fabric that would be perfect if I change the scene from a morning to evening one. I then have to go back and replace some of the fabrics I already bought but the rejected selections simply go into my stash for another project.

With those thoughts in mind and notes in hand, begin to assemble your palette of fabrics for your quilt. Search your stash if you have one or shop hop. Don't expect to find all the perfect fabrics in one shop or collect them all in one day. I have occasionally spent months searching and collecting for what I hoped would become a masterpiece. I have found it helpful to build a swatch book for projects that I am actively seeking fabrics for. I cut 1 ½" squares of the fabrics I already have and paste them on a sheet slipped into a plastic sheet protector in a folder. Sometimes I might clip a photograph to the page to try and match colors and textures or stick a Post-it note with a shopping list; "need something for the rocks in pond" or some other such reminder. This swatch book has proved invaluable in several ways. Before creating it, I would sometimes get a fabric home only to discover that it wasn't quite the right color to go with the others I had already bought. Other times I might find a fabric that I really, absolutely loved and had to have only to get it home and discover that I really loved and had to have it the last time I saw it too.

Often I am asked how much fabric I buy and my standard reply is "never enough". I don't know if I quilt because I like to collect fabric or if I collect fabric because I like to quilt. I try to visualize all the potential uses for a fabric when determining the quantity to buy but often end up discovering additional uses as time passes. Many a time I have used up the last of a particular fabric that is no longer available berating myself for not having the foresight to have bought more. If it's one of those multiple personality fabrics my rule of thumb now is to figure out how much you need for a particular project then double it.

Over the years, I have made a concentrated effort to build a good stash of landscape-appropriate fabric to have on hand. This provides a good starting point, as I will only have to supplement it by shopping as opposed to walking into a shop and feeling overwhelmed by all the choices. I have also discovered that fabrics like fashion are transient. If I find a perfect sky, I buy some when I see it because it probably won't be available when I go to look for it months later.

Another important consideration is to have fabric understudies for your project. Sometimes a fabric that looked perfect on the bolt just isn't working when you actually begin to lay out your design or your plans on size changed somewhere along the line and now your mountain ridge fabric is three inches too short. It's good to have some alternate choices rather than put the project on hold while you go shopping again. If you are an avid quilter these extra fabrics will get used in another project.

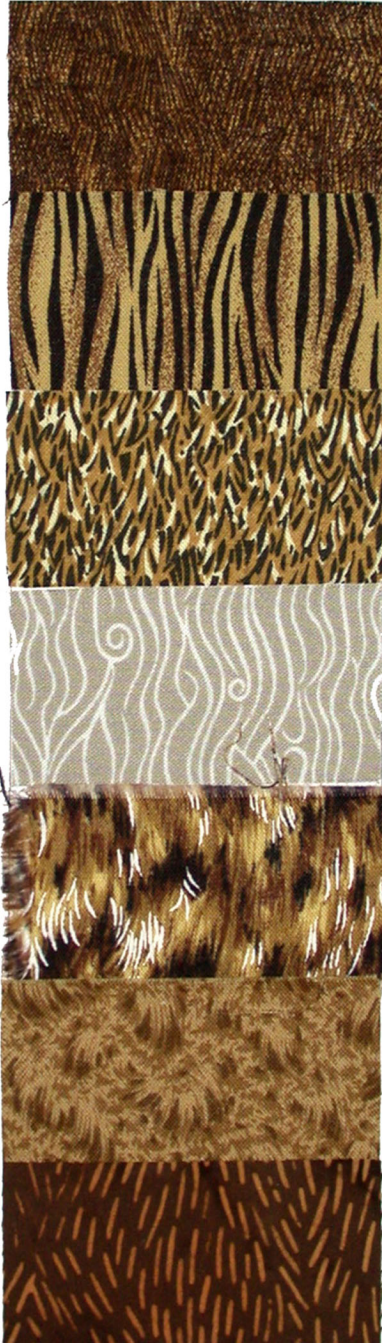
Fabrics for Landscape/Pictorial Quilts

Birds, Fish or Animals: Look for textures and colors that mimic fur, feathers or fish scales in a variety of fine, medium and coarse textures. Landscapes with Seagulls or Swans will require a variety of bird fabrics

Birds



Animals



Fish

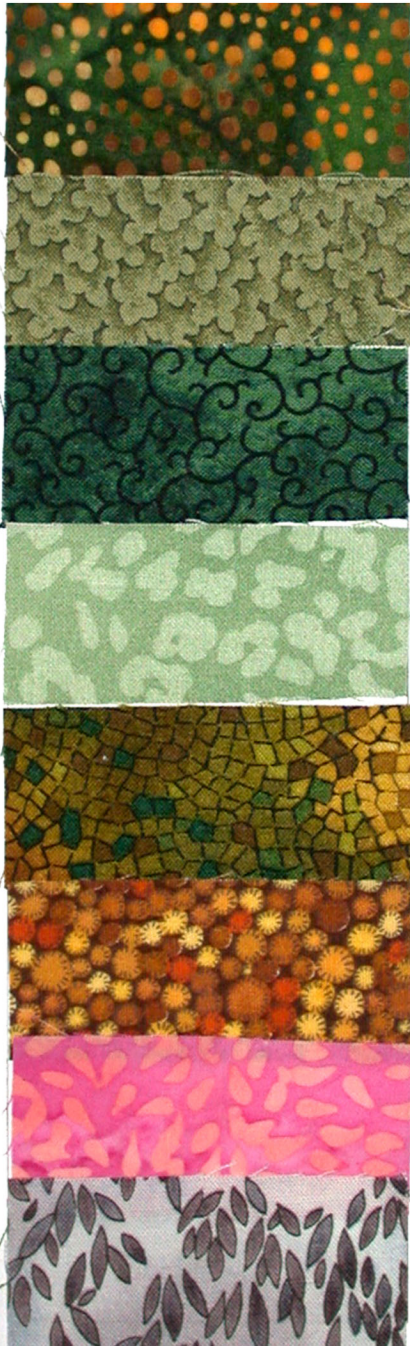


Trees and Shrubs: A variety of frizzy, fluffy and/or speckled textures ranging from fine to medium and coarse. Colors should encompass the four seasons; spring: light to medium greens, pinks, apricots, creams (for flowering trees/shrubs); summer: rich greens; autumn: fall colors and olive greens; winter: dark evergreens, bare twiggy textures or textures reminiscent of snow covered foliage. Include some darker colors for nighttime scenes. Keep scale in mind. Large leafy prints usually are not suitable though the very fine ones may work. Both Landscape quilts and my Postcard quilts will require some tree/foilage fabrics.

Fine



Medium

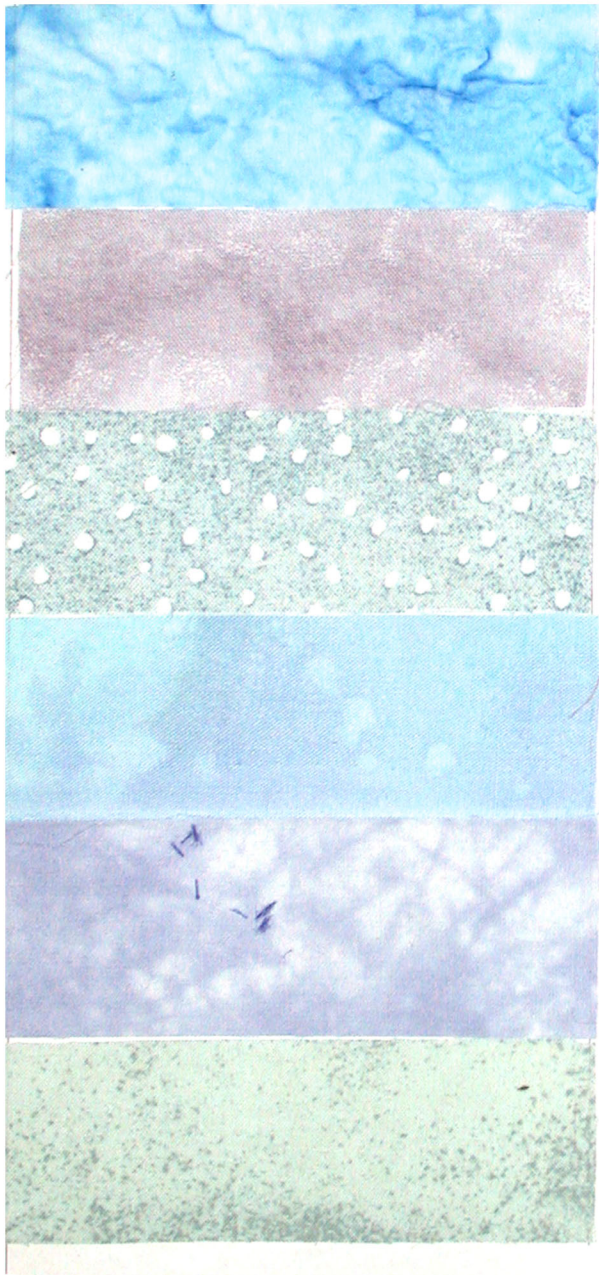


Coarse



Skies: Soft pastels-pinks, yellows, apricots, greens, pale blues are suitable for morning skies. Gold, oranges, reds and purples are moe representative of sunsets. Soft blues should be chosen for clear daytime skies (avoid saturated or intense blues) or grays for cloudy/foggy daytime skies. For nighttime skies, select dark blues, indigo or charcoal. Choose fabrics with some texture. Flat solids have no depth and look artificial. Batiks, Fossil Fern and Moda Marbles all make excellent skies. Avoid fabrics that are cute.

Daytime Skies



Sunrise/Sunset & Nighttime Skies



Rocks and Foreground: Browns through grays in various textures from fine through coarse. Base colors can be highlighted with touches of other colors as long as they appear natural. Texture should be chunky, blocky and/or stratified and appear somewhat random, not too regular, to avoid looking like a manmade object. For land or ground in the immediate foreground, select fabrics that have an obvious texture. The ground can look mossy, grassy or pebbly, but the scale should not be too large. Have a variety of light through dark if possible. The "Oregon Seascape" quilt will require 4-5 different rock textures/colors. The "Windswept Tree" or "Bridge" Postcard quilts will need 1-4 foreground textures.

Rocks



Foreground

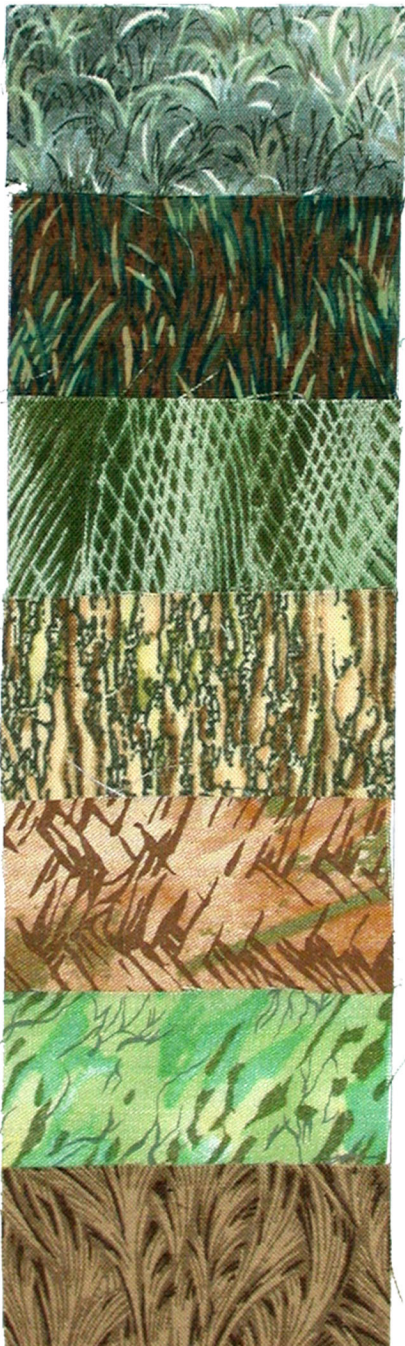


Reeds and Meadows: Grassy textures ranging from fine through medium to coarse in a variety of greens and earth tones. The "Swan" quilt will need three varying textures of reeds and some of these fabrics will be useful as foregrounds in my Postcard designs that call for foregrounds.

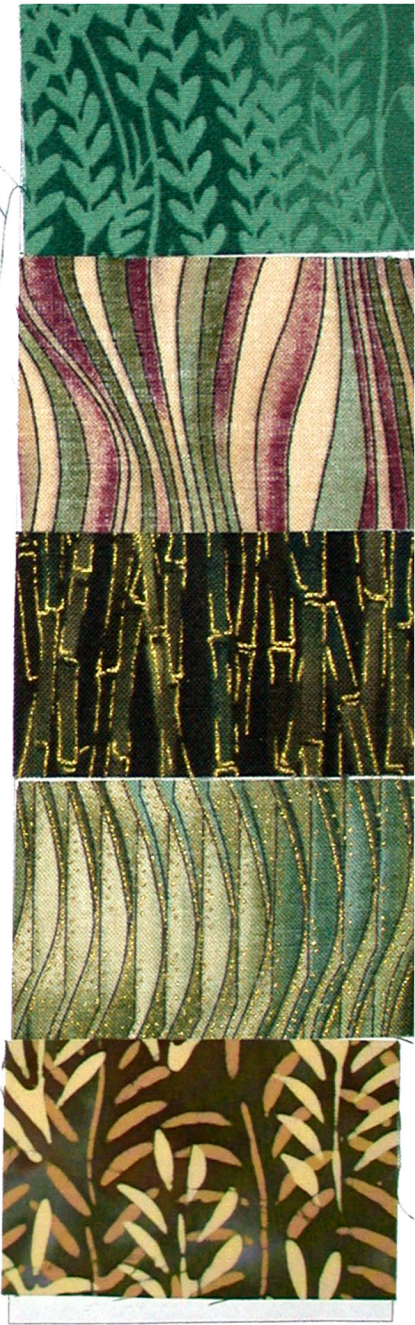
Fine



Medium

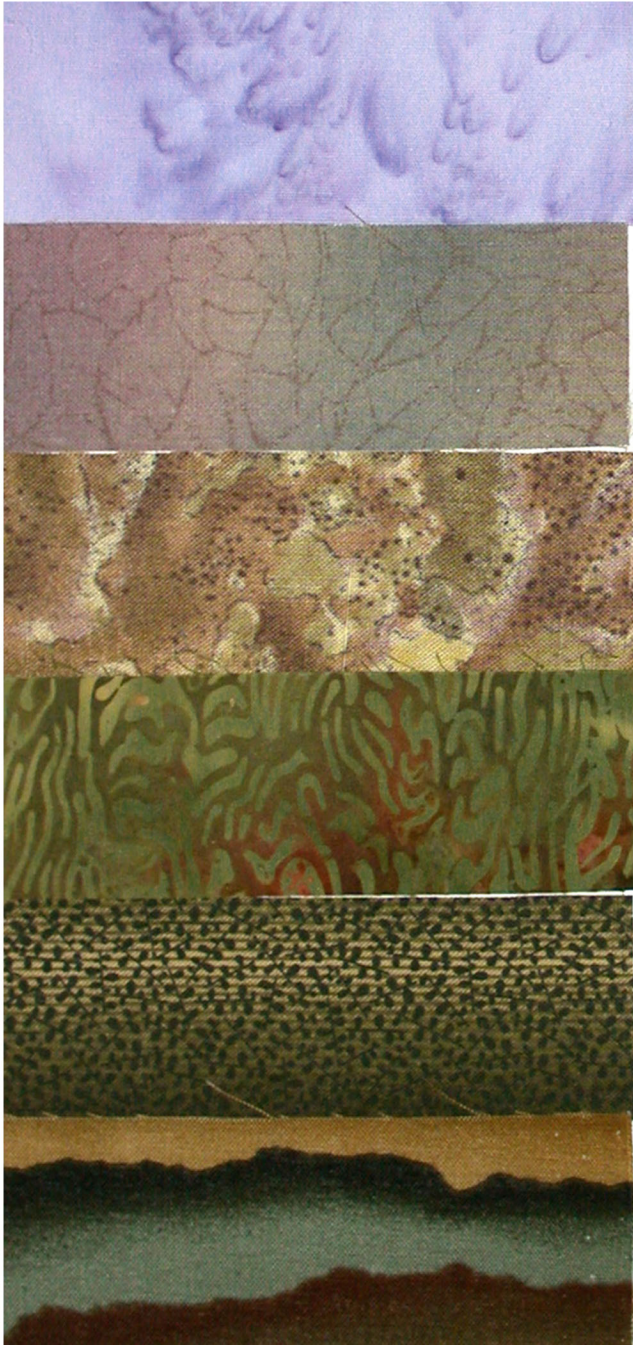


Coarse

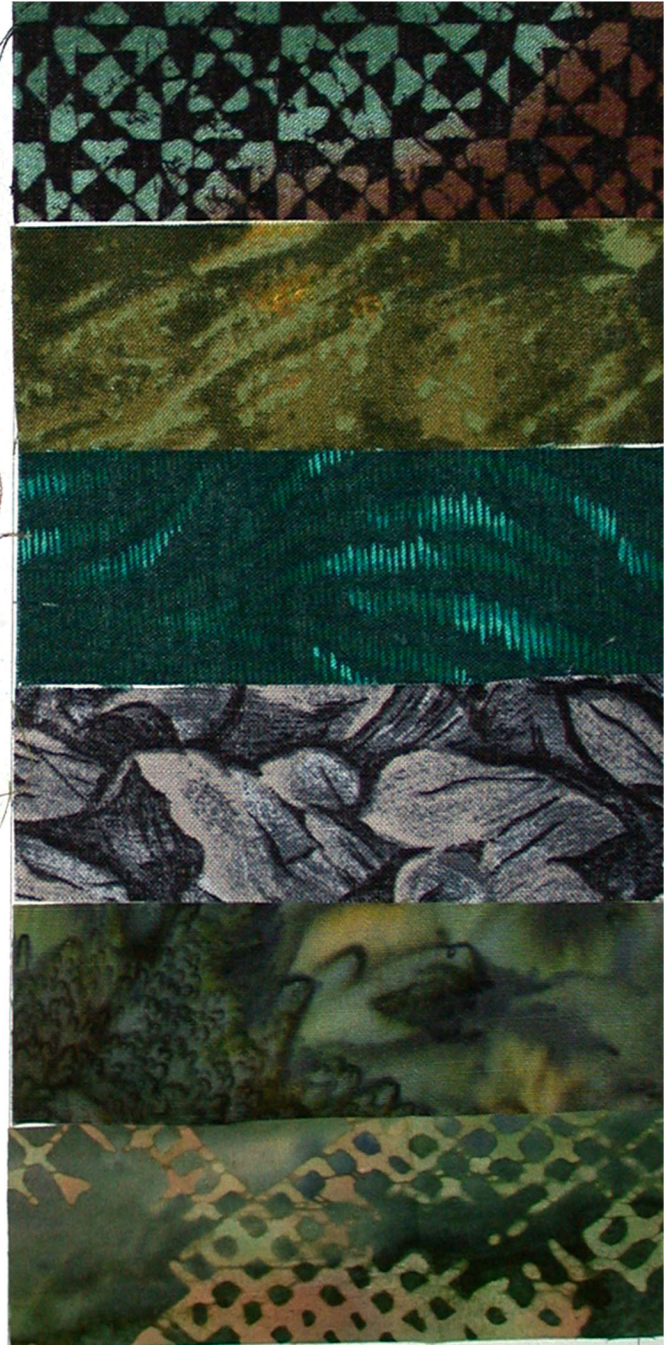


Mountains and Hills: Small-scale indistinct textures in a variety of colors to mimic various times of day. Choose muted, less saturated colors in a range of brown, purple, smoke blue, rust, khaki, olive, and ochre earth tones. Batiks and Moda Marbles (or fabrics with similar textures) are good choices for distant land forms. As land forms advance (as in the "Oregon Seascape" quilt) coarser textures mimicking tree covered or rocky hills are appropriate. Four Fabrics in varying degrees of color and texture will be needed for the distant bluffs in the "Oregon Seascape" quilt, and several of the Postcards from Japan designs call for distant mountains.

Distant Mountains/Hills



Close-in Mountains/Hills



Manmade Objects: Roads, paths, walls, bridges, fences and/or houses. Textures should display some regularity and resemble wood, masonry, roofing, windows, rock walls, and gravel or dirt roads. These fabrics should stand out in marked contrast to the ones representing natural objects. (Note: for Shoji windows, small-scale homespun plaids or checks are superior choices or any other small-scale fabric that reads like a grid.)

Masonry



Wood



Roofs and Windows



Cliffs and Waterfalls: Cliff fabrics should have a rocky texture that is somewhat linear or stratified in nature. colors can range through all the earth tones. The "Waterfall" Postcard calls for two overlapping cliff fabrics and some of these fabrics may be useful for the rocks in the "Oregon Seascape" quilt. Many people think of blue when they think of water, but waterfalls are not reflective of the sky and therefore are never pure blue. Linear "frothy" textures in colors ranging from off-white to gray and bluish-gray are suitable for waterfalls and the splash on the "Swan" quilt.

Cliffs

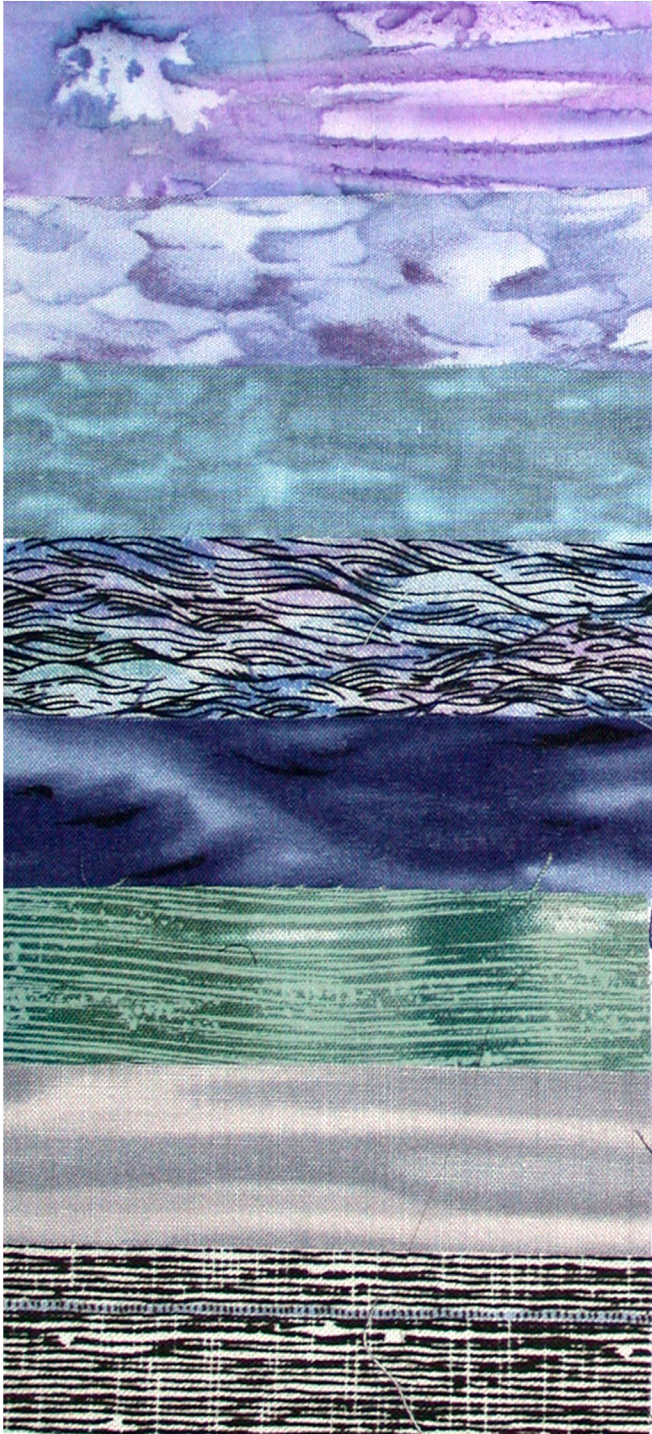


Waterfalls



Water: with rare exceptions, color of water should reflect the sky color but slightly darker. Select a color range appropriate to the sky fabrics you have available. Texture should be linear, striated or reminiscent of ripples. For Landscape Quilts, a variety of linear textures ranging from coarse to fine will enhance the sense of depth to scenes. I usually recommend that you have a variety of 5-7 color-coordinated fabrics for the water in these quilts. For my Postcards quilts, the water in any one scene will be created with one piece of fabric and the maker should be able to find an appropriate fabric from the same selection as those for Landscape Quilts.

Daytime Water



Sunrise/Sunset & Nighttime Water

