



THE SECRET

“If you shut your eyes and are a lucky one, you may see at times a shapeless pool of lovely pale colors suspended in the darkness. Then, if you squeeze your eyes tighter, the pool begins to take shape, and the colors become so vivid that they must go on fire. But just before they go on fire, you see the lagoon. This is the nearest you’ll ever get to it on the main land, just one heavenly moment. If there could be two moments, you might see the surf and hear the mermaids singing.”

- James M. Barrie, Peter Pan

In older mythologies, mermaids were not benevolent creatures. Quite the contrary. The log book of the real life pirate, Black Beard, records that he commanded his crew on several voyages to steer away from “enchanted waters” where he and his crew had previously sighted mermaids. These sightings were often recounted by sailors who believed that mermaids would bewitch them and drag them to a watery grave.

These stories inspire this drawing of a cheeky mermaid who listens dreamily to the tales of her companion. Whether she dreams of mirth or mayhem is for you to decide.

My approach to coloring this drawing was informed by the legends. If mermaids were indeed death to all who fell under their spell, they would be feared and hunted. It stands to reason then, that some degree of natural camouflage would evolve. Scales the color of the sea and hair that flows like water would give these fem fatals the ability to be almost invisible. Until it was too late...

Chapter One: Flesh Tones



One of the questions I get asked most often is, “What colors make good flesh tones?”

More often than not, the person asking the question is wanting a simple list of earth-colored markers or pencils, thinking that somehow these will do the job.

The truth is, you can use nearly any color when coloring flesh. Blues, greens, and purples all have their place.



Whenever I begin a drawing that includes a person or figure, I always start with the face. In a work like this, if I don't get the face right, the rest of the drawing will suffer.

Using the practice pages helped to determine the overall color relationship, but if I don't get her face just right, I will start over and try again.



I begin by laying in a flat wash of E51. I chose this color because it's a relatively cool yellow-orange that will work perfectly in this drawing.

As you can see, I make no real effort to lay this color on smooth. By the time I'm done, there will be so many layers that an even color application is unnecessary at this stage.



Next, I indicate the plane change of the head with W2. This line represents where the front of the face begins to round back towards the ears. I'll also use this color on the hollow of the eye sockets and at the edges of her cheeks to help make her face look round and three dimensional.



In this step, I'm using a YR02 to color the sides of her face and the shadow of her hairline.

I chose this color for contrast.

Generally, a good rule of thumb is to use warm colors for your shadows if you've used cool colors in the light areas, and vice versa.



I'm beginning to indicate the "blush" of her complexion with an R20. I lay this color on rough across her cheeks, nose, chin, and in her ears.

No blending needed at this point.

In real life, the reason the face appears pinker in these areas is because the skin is thin and stretched tightly across the bone of the skull, which makes the blood vessels underneath more visible, and consequently the skin in these areas appears more red. When someone blushes, the vessels get engorged with blood which make the redness even more prominent.



Blending - In this step I color over all the colors I've used in the previous steps with my original E51 base color.

I lay this color on heavy, really soaking the paper until I get the blend I want.



See? Smooth as a baby's butt.



I color in a base for the lips with R20.



I add E07 to the bottom lip, bottom of the nose, and around the eyes to indicate shadows and lash line.



I add RV13 to these same areas to blend.

I also use it to strengthen the blush on the cheeks and to weaken the color on the side of her face.



I blend it all out again with the E51, soaking the paper with as much ink as it will take until dry again.

She's starting to come together now :)



I add B0000 to the edges of her face and chin, and around her eyes, on the side of the nose, and at the shadow edge of her forehead.

Cool colors appear further away than warm colors, so I add this color anywhere her face "rounds away".



Up to this point I've used mostly lighter colors, so it's time to add some darks.

Here I'm using a dark brown, E39, to strengthen the shadows around her eyes and to color in the opening of her mouth.



I add a bright, clean, grass colored green, YG07, to her irises.



In this step I add a soft light pink, R20, to her cheeks.

Are you keeping count? This is at least the third time I've put color in this area!

If you are using any brand of alcohol markers, the secret to great results is layers!

I also use this color to "dot" in a texture all over her face. The R20 is light and will all but disappear under the final layers, but its presence can still be felt which adds life and variety to the overall effect.



I add a very dark green, G28, to the top portion of her irises.

In real life, the lids of the eyes cast a shadow on the eyes themselves, so the area where the eyes and eyelids meet at the top of the eyes, including the irises, is always darker than the lower part of the eyes.

Confession time...



When I started this drawing, I thought I was going to color her hair pink! I thought wrong! Sometimes a drawing takes on a life of its own and the colors go a different direction than the practice page. Let it! The practice page is just practice, you should use them before you color, but good God, you're not married to them!

So in this photo I make a mistake and color her eyebrows pink. No worries, I'll fix it later. I included this photo so you could see that everyone makes mistakes on every drawing. Relax, don't stress, and color on :)



More cools around the eyes with a W2. Layers and layers and layers...



For the most part, her face is done, at least as far as I can finish it at this stage.

When I get the rest of the drawing colored I'll come back in to her face one more time and add some of the colors I used in the background on her face to make sure everything works together as a whole.



So here's the deal – I'm going to go ahead and add highlights to her face. I always do this at this stage. The reason? It makes it look awesome, and if the face looks awesome, it encourages me to finish the rest of the damn drawing! Positive reinforcement baby!

The white I use is M. Graham Titanium White Gouache. It goes on with a small paint brush, is opaque, and removable with water after it's dry (which is awesome because I have a tendency to get crazy with the cheeze wiz.)



I simply dip my brush into the tube and....



Add it to all the places!

*Often times I'll put my finger through the wet gouache to soften it out after I've painted it on.



Catch lights in the eyes and.....



Done! She could drown me anytime!



Moving on to her arms and torso.

I'll be using the exact same colors and techniques I used to color her face.

In this step, I've used the E51 for the base color, and the pale light blue, B0000 on the areas of the form that are rounding away.



Next, I lay in the YR02 for the shadow base.



Then I blend it out with the E51.



I add R00 to brighten and warm up the base color and to add some pinks to the fingers.



Then I blend again with the E51.



I restate my darks and add texture dots with the YR02.



I then restate my cools with the B0000.

Are you beginning to see how this works?

Notice how I reuse and restate every color. That's the secret to vibrant marker drawings!



The result of all those layers is a complex skin color that appears translucent and more like real skin.



Now I'll do it all over again.

I start with the E51 and again, notice how splotchy and uneven the color is.

Notice how I color in each section individually. I never lay a base color over the entire skin area. I treat each area enclosed by lines separately.

This is very important and why my colors look so smooth! It's easier to color one small area at a time!



Cool B0000 is added to make the forms round.



R00 is added for "blush".

Notice how raw, rough, and unblended it is! That's fine, I'll blend later!



I add YR02 to the shadow areas.



Then I blend the hell outta all of that with a layer of E51.

Notice I said layer. I'm coloring the E51 over the entire area and all the colors I've used on her arms and chest.

I lay it in heavy and scrub hard, putting a lot of pressure on the nib and really saturating the paper with ink!

See how well that works?



Add texture dots....



Blend one more time...

And done with her arms and chest.



Base – E51



Cools – B0000



Warms – YR02



Blend



Add blush



Add texture



In this step I'm using an E33 to add texture dots to all the skin areas.

Adding the last few colors in different spots to each area helps tie everything together.



After a final allover blend with E51, the skin areas are complete.



I'll color the shell with E40,



E33,



And E39.



Here is the finished render for her skin.

Chapter Two: Scales



I wanted to give her tail a “natural” look to go with the overall camouflaged predator theme, so I'll be coloring it in shades of green.



I lay in a base color of YG11 on the bottom part of her tail.



Next, I add a strong yellow, Y06, to the area between where the colors will change from light to dark.



I add BV00 to the top edge to indicate reflected light.



I then add the YG14 to the middle section.



Next, I add some W4, a warm greenish gray, to begin to define the scales.



I then add W6 to some of the scales to add variety.

Notice I don't color the whole scale here. I leave the base colors showing through on the "round" edge.



I use the Y06 to restate and enhance the yellow tones.



Then I add some W9 to indicate the shadow edge and the break between the lighter “underbelly” and darker “local color” areas.



I'm using the exact same procedure and order of application for this section of her tail.



Here I have completed the basic color structure for her entire tail.



Now I'll come back in and rework the tail as a whole, adding darks and lights of the colors I've already used until I get it just right.



Her tail is now ready for highlights.



White gouache is used to add a slick “wet” look to her tail,



and to create highlights.



Finished scales :)

Chapter Three: Background Water



For the background areas of water behind her, I'll be working dark to light, from bottom to top. I want the lighter colors at the top since the sun would be shining down from above.



I start with a dark, relatively dull blue, B18.



Then I add B26.



Then I add B12.



Finally, I add a light B00.



In this step, I begin to add texture. I'm using a really awesome "dissolve" technique.

By dipping a paint brush into a small container of 0 Colorless Blending Fluid and "dripping" it one drop at a time onto the background base colors....



I can create an interesting "bubble" effect in the water behind her.

Colored pencil users

You can create a remarkably similar effect in your drawing by using odorless mineral spirits exactly the same way as I've used the colorless blending fluid here.

Chapter Four: Hair



For her hair, I decided to create a liquid effect to go along with the “story” concept for this image.

Notice I still haven't corrected her eyebrow color! It's not unusual for the color concept to evolve as a drawing progresses. Let it evolve!

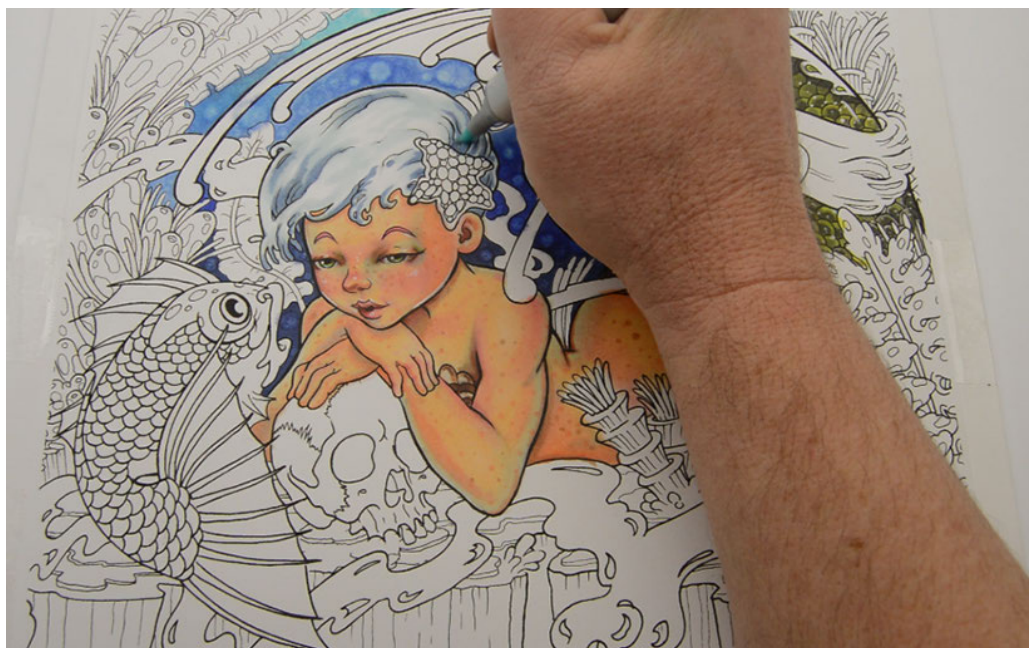


I start with a very light B0000 for the base. I'm using this color selectively and letting the white of the paper show through in a lot of the areas.



Next, I add some darks with a dull blue, B41.

I add the B41 only where I want to indicate the underside of the "wave".

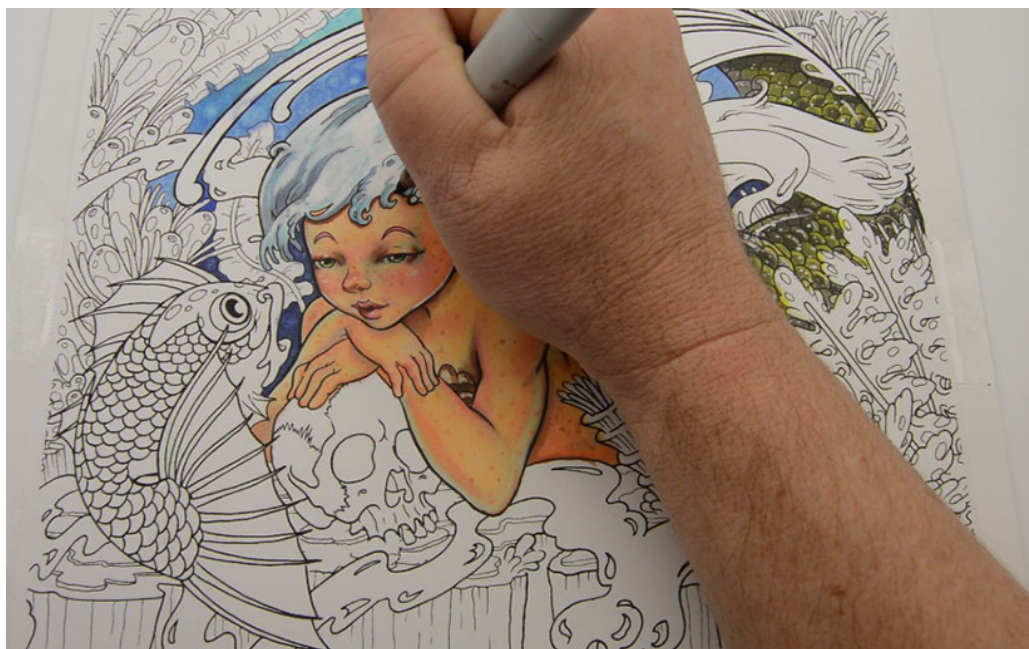


I blend the B41 with my base color, B0000.



Next, I add texture and dark areas with a cool gray combination of C4 and C6.

Then I blend everything together with a B01 light blue.



I restate the shadow that her hair makes on her face with a dark brown.



Then, I blend it out with an E51.



Finally, I add a dark B24 under the starfish.



For her ponytail, I'll use exactly the same colors and techniques.

Lights with B0000....



Darks and texture with B41...



Blend with B0000....



Add darker areas with C6.



And blend it all together with B01.

The ponytail is now finished to the same level as the rest of her hair.



I now take a look at the hair as a whole unit and make adjustments by adding darks in the shadow areas with W7.



With the hair complete except for the highlights, I turn my attention to the ribbon.

I lay in a base of R24.



I use a cool gray, C6, for the shadows.

Chapter Five: Ground Plane



My concept for the sea floor at the bottom of the drawing was to create the impression of a fissure or crack at the bottom of the ocean floor...

...sort of like a thermal vent where the heat and warmth from the Earth's core breaks through the murky darkness and illuminates everything in the vicinity with a warm glow.



I begin with a YR16, which is a warm “primary” orange.

I start at the top and work down, leaving the edge rough.

The reason for the rough broken edge is to facilitate later blending.



Next, I color in an area of YR14.

I haven't done any blending yet, but you can see the transition from one color to the next looks pretty good already due to the closeness in value of the two colors, and the rough blending edge from the previous step.



I finish the base layer with a YR16.



Next I add a layer of E49 to the bottom portion of the drawing, and to the areas I want to appear further away.



I blend all this together with the YR16 base color.

You can see that I still leave it a bit rough. It is ground after all.



Next, I strengthen the shadow areas and add texture dots with a dark brown, E27.



I blend again with the YR16.

For now this is where I leave off. I know I will address this whole area again towards the end of the drawing, but I needed to bring it this far along at this stage to help inform some of my other color choices.



I turn my attention to the ground above the fissure.

I will lay in my darkest colors further away from the fissure, and get progressively lighter the closer I get to the orange area.

I start with a W6 warm gray.



Next, I use a W4.



...and then a W5.

This area of the sea floor sits below the W4 section, so I color it just slightly darker.



For the area closest to the orange "drop off", I again use the W4.



I add texture dots with a dark W8.



In this step, I'm adding a dark "earthy" green, E87, to give some color to the grays and to create a mossy impression.

I use this color sparingly and only in spots.



I strengthen the color saturation in these areas with a YG14.



Next, I saturate the entire area I've been working on with a heavy layer of 0 Colorless Blender.

I'm not really trying to "blend" these colors together, it's more like "bleeding" them together.



You can see the results of the OCBF in this image. The “bleed” effect creates an impression of soft growths of moss.



To help tie the sea floor and fissure together visually, I add areas of YR14 onto the ground plane and skull.

This ensures those areas appear visually similar which is important since any light coming from the fissure would illuminate these nearby areas.



Finished ground plane -

As you can see, I leave this area very rough. I do this on purpose.

The contrast of highly detailed, highly finished areas next to rough, “unfinished” areas creates a variety of finish that keeps the eyes and brain engaged.

If every area of a drawing is “finished” to the same degree, the drawing becomes monotonous and boring.

Chapter Six: The Skull



I wanted the skull to look as though it had been sitting on the sea floor for a very long time.

How it got there is anyone's guess, but the secrets of its origins are known only by mossy growth that keeps it from being swept away by the tide.



I'll be working cool to warm on the skull, so I start with an E40, which is a medium value neutral gray color.



I add a warmer E53 to the shadows and transition areas on the side of the nasal opening and near the suture line between the temporal and parietal bones.

This color choice follows the rule of cool lights/warm shadows we used while coloring her skin.



I strengthen the shadow and transition areas and color in the bottoms of the eye sockets with an even warmer E33.

The difference is subtle but important.



Next, I add a dark brown, E27, to create areas of dark “cast” shadow, and to accentuate the suture lines.



I soften the E27 with the E33.

See? Told you it was important :)



I use E51 in a heavy layer to pull it all together.

You may have noticed that I'm repeating many of the colors I've used in her skin. I do this to keep the color scheme harmonious. With a relatively complex drawing like this, we must be careful to ensure everything works together for the good of the whole. Too many different colors would make the finished work appear gaudy and disjointed.



With the base colors laid in, it's time to strengthen the color relationships of the skull to the ground plane.

I add touches of YR16 to help relate the skull to the fissure.



I then add some W8 to the darkest hollows.



Blend it all out with another layer of YR16.



I restate the sutures and color in the cast shadow of her hand with a warm E09.



Then I soften the E09 with another layer of E33.

I use the E33 at the transition line only to help the blending in the next step.



I once again cover the entire skull with a blending layer of E51.



Next, I attend to the mossy areas beginning with YG03.



I add darker moss patches with an E87.

These are the same greens I used for the moss on the sea floor.



I blend and soften the E87 with a layer of YG03.



...and add texture with the E33.



I darken the tops of the eye sockets again with W8.



...and blend it out with YR16.



Finally, I blend everything together with E51.



The finished skull appears to be a part of and affected by the surrounding landscape.

Harmony, baby.

Chapter Seven: The Starfish



The starfish in her hair should be thought of as an adornment, like a barrette. I don't want it to draw attention away from her face, so I'll need to be careful not to add too much detail or interest here.



I start by coloring the exposed “fleshy” areas with RV04.



Next, I lay in a flat base of V04.



I add “shadow” areas to the bumpy nodes with a W7 warm gray.



I add areas of YG05 to provide color contrast and visual interest. Yellow-green and purple are split complementary colors and work well together to create a pleasing contrast.



I blend everything together with a layer of the V04 base color.



I add highlights with white gouache to bring the starfish to the same level of completion as her face.

When laying in highlights on an object I want to look translucent, I'll often lay a long "string" of white across the forms.

Crossing over multiple forms like the "bumps" this way gives the illusion of a shiny "film" that reflects light independent of the forms below.

Chapter Eight: The Fish



To color the fish in this drawing, I'll be using the same basic color scheme that I used for the mermaid.

Why? Because I want them to feel “related”. Think of it this way – we tend to “hang out” with people who share at least some common interests with us. Most often, these people share some “related” characteristics with us. Maybe they listen to similar styles of music or have a similar fashion sense, but whatever it is, there is usually some visual “cue” that is shared. This is why you can walk into a crowded room and very quickly determine who you'll most likely get along with. It's the same idea here. I want to give the impression that these two are friends, and the easiest way to do that in a drawing is to use similar colors on them both to imply they have things in common with each other.



I start with a dark green, G99, on the back of the fish near the dorsal fin.

I'm coloring over the scale pattern and treating the fish as a whole "unit" instead of coloring the scales one at a time.



I add a "band" of slightly lighter, slightly brighter green, YG95, below the first color.



I add a lighter green, YG03, below the YG95 I used in the previous step.

Notice that none of these greens are "bright" or "pure" colors. Instead, they are dull "desaturated" colors. If I were to use bright clean greens on the fish, it would draw attention away from the mermaid and disrupt the visual "flow" of the whole work.



Following the same sequence, I lay in an area of YG23.



I use a layer of Y13 over all the greens I put in previously to "blend" the transitions from one color to the next.



I use a very light blue, B0000 on the bottom portion of the scale pattern.



I then tie everything together with another Y13 blend layer.



I use a very light E000 "flesh color" for the fish's belly.



I then add a YR14 orange to indicate the warm light from the crevice in the sea floor reflecting off the bottom of the tail.



I emphasize some of the scales with a darker YG45, and then apply touches of the YG45 to the base of the spines of the tail fin.



I add YG03...



...and Y13. These are the same colors I used in the scales.



To finish off the spines, I add dark brown accents of E18 to the base of each.



Moving on to the “fleshy” parts between the spines, I lay in a base of E21, then tie everything together with darker areas of E11 and a bit of Y13.



The completed fins -

I used exactly the same colors and techniques for both fins.



I add Y11 to the sclera area of the fish's eye.



...and add areas of W5 to create depth.



I blend with a layer of Y11.



I add a YG23 “bright” green to the iris.



I use the same W5 I used in the eyes on the “skull plate”.



...then add a dull green, YG45.



For the spots on the skull I use a desaturated orange-ish brown, E99.



I add touches of G21 to the mouth area.



...and then finish it off with a layer of E21 and touches of RV04 in the nostril and open mouth.

Chapter Nine: Foreground Plant Life



In coloring the sea plants on the right side lower portion of the drawing, my goal is to make these plants appear to be in front of the mermaid.

Every color choice I make in these areas are in service to this primary goal.

I don't want my finished work to look flat!

So I'll be using darker colors to create separation and enhance the illusion of pictorial depth.



I lay in a base color of purple, V04.

This is the same color I used as a base for the starfish.



I add a darker purple, V09, to the inner areas of each leaf and near the stem, leaving the base color exposed only at the rims.



I add Y13 to the tops of the stems and then YR16 orange to the stem bases.

I also use the YR16 to indicate the light from the crevice on the plant's leaves.



I use the colorless blender to lift and lighten the original colors and to add textural variety.

Colored Pencil Users

You can achieve similar results with colored pencils by using odorless mineral spirits to lift and lighten your colors.



I add "highlights" with white gouache.



Technically, the way I've used the white here is not really "highlighting" at all.

Instead, I use the white simply to add variety and interest to this otherwise boring area of the drawing.



For the anemone plants in front of the mermaid's torso and behind her tail in the upper right hand corner of the drawing, I'll be using the same procedure and techniques.

I lay in a base color of W3 warm gray on the "stalks".



To contrast the hard appearance of the stalks, I want the rims to appear a bit more "fleshy" and organic, so I've used an RV21 pink.



I add a mid value brown, E37, underneath the pink rims to create contrast and separation.



I then add touches of YG13 green to help relate the stalk to the colors in the ground plane.



I darken the far edges of the rims with RV34, which is a darker, duller pink. I also use this color on the tips of the "fronds".



I use Y13 on the bases of the "fronds".



I then add texture “dots” with a dull red, E07.



For the plants behind her tail, I use the same sequence of color application.

The only difference between the two is that I used slightly duller colors in the background to ensure those plants appear further away and behind her tail.

Chapter Ten: Smoke



The “smoky” areas of this drawing are meant to do one thing only – create the impression of depth.

By placing the smoke in front of and behind elements of the drawing, it leads the viewer's eyes around and into the composition.

It makes no difference that the idea of underwater smoke is silly. We aren't concerned with reality here, and in a good drawing, every element works together toward some larger artistic idea like “depth”.



I lay in a base color of W4 warm gray at the “core” of the “smoky” motif, leaving the outside edges exposed.



I add a layer of light, dull green, G00, over the W4 and the exposed edges.



I soften the two colors together with the colorless blender.



I add darker areas and textures with a dark gray, W7.



I add touches of YG13 along the outline.



I then soften and blend everything together with an overall layer of Y00.

The finished effect is one of a misty, amorphous smoke or steam that weaves it's way in and around the composition, being boldly visible against the crevice and almost disappearing in front of her tail - just like real smoke.

Chapter Eleven: Tail Fin



In this drawing, the mermaid's tail fin is an important design element. The swooping lines of the fin serve the greater artistic purpose of lending the viewer's eye back to the mermaid's face.

The fin is both behind her body at the end of her tail, and in front of her shoulder. It's in the background and middle ground!

I'll be using darker colors at the front tips and lighter colors near the base of the scaly tail.



I lay in a base of E97, which is a darker warm Earth color.

It's similar in appearance to the colors I used in her skin, but darker and bolder to create contrast.



I add a very dark brown, E29, to the "ball".



I then blend the E29 into the E97 base color with a light YR02.

I use the same YR02 at the back of the tail.



...and then blend and soften it all together with a layer of light green, YG41.

I use green as the blender here to help keep all the colors harmonious. She is under water after all!



I repeat the same steps and colors for the rest of the spines.



...and then add texture dots with the dark brown, E29.



For the “webbing” between her tail spines, I use a similar procedure and color scheme as I did for the fish.

I lay in a base color of E11.



I then add the shadows of the spines and texture dots with E04.



I soften it all together with the E11, and then add Y13 at the edges to finish it off.

Chapter Twelve: Background Plants



Since these plants reside in the background, I'll be using lighter "desaturated" colors to enhance the illusion of depth.

It's a common misconception that things in the background should be dark. This is simply not true. If you don't believe me, think of a mountain far off into the distance.

Does it look dark?

Nope. The greater the distance an object is from the front of your picture, the lighter and grayer it should be.



I use an RV34 on the tips of the "fronds". This is a dull pink that will sit nicely in the background.



I use a lighter, paler pink, R11, on the lower portions of the fronds and on the sea sponge at the bottom.



Remember, I'm not going for contrast here. I really don't want the viewer looking in this area very long.

I use a dull, light BV00 purple for the sponge bodies. I leave the edges exposed.



Using the RV11, I color the outside edges.



I then add a darker V04 to the centers.



I use a YG23 on the tops for a touch of complementary contrast.



I add some “hot spots” with RV04.



...and blend it all together.



I address the plants below in much the same way.



I add a light, dull blue, B60, to the remaining sponges.



I then add R11 to the outside edges and touches of B00 at their centers.



I complete this area of the drawing by adding a dull purple to the spots, and softening everything with the colorless blender.

Chapter Thirteen: Finishing Touches

The final stages of completing a work are always the most important, and unfortunately, this stage is often overlooked.

Don't make that mistake. After you have “finished” coloring, take a break. A long break. At least a day! You want to rest your mind and be able to see your work as a whole with fresh eyes.

**The photo on the left is where we left off,
and the photo on the right is the finished work.**



Can you spot the differences?



I've changed the color of the bottom crevice area. The orange was just too distracting. It was a good *idea*, but it drew too much attention to itself.

I used W4 – W7 to darken and desaturate this area.



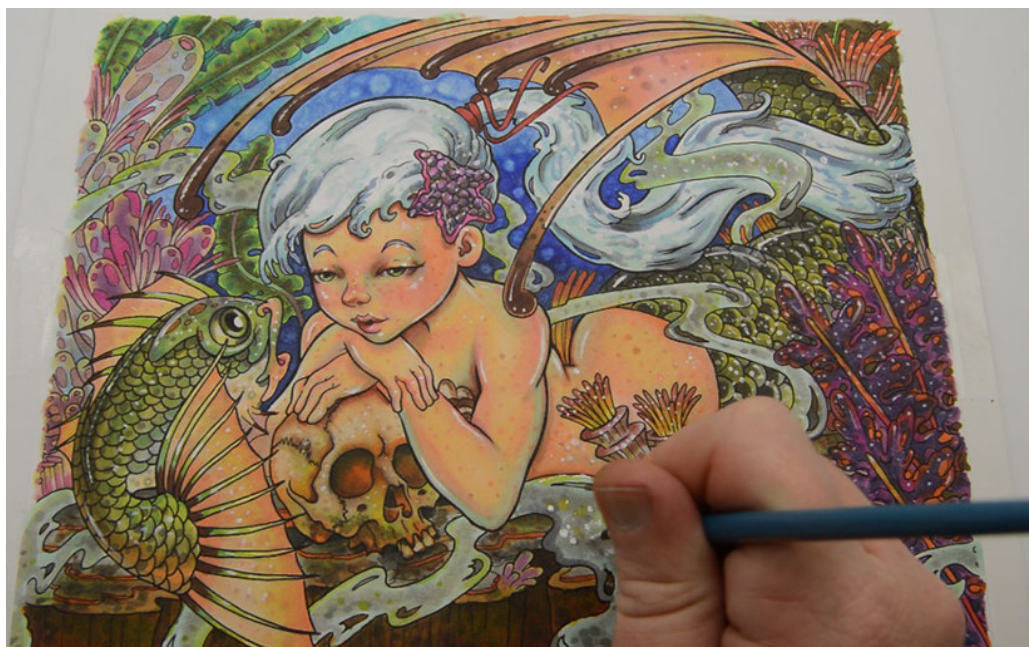
I've added stronger "lights" to the smoke and skull with Y06.



I've added texture dots to the fish with W5, and darkened and added texture to the smoke with W6.



I adjusted the “light” on her skin all over with B00 to work better with the new color at the bottom of the drawing and the color of the water above.



I add white highlights throughout, including the hair, the skull, the smoke, and the background plants.



The drawing is now complete.