A note…
on my methods, beliefs, and tools

The following are my methods, I don't claim that they are the greatest but they do work for me. I tend to think of stencils as the starting point for a project not as the end all tool. I use them kind of like a connect-the dots drawing in that the lines and details cut in the stencils are more or less guides and suggestions, not necessarily absolute limits on where I can or can't paint. I try to keep most of my stenciled paintings from looking like they were done with a stencil, so adding in shading and details that aren't in the stencil is a normal way of life for me, it leaves me more room to play, and tends to make the objects look more realistic, than just a block or blob of solid colors. While some of my tools are unconventional I'm a big fan of experimentation, trial and error, and saying "Wow, that turned out different or better than I thought it would!" You can take my tools and methods with a grain of salt and use or adapt them to meet your needs.

Have fun and enjoy your art, let the finished product show your spirit and feelings.
Please feel free to ask questions or make suggestions, There are also several great sites and forums for doing murals, faux finishes, airbrushing, and more that can help you on your way.

Tools and Materials Used

Watercolor pencils in the colors I intend to paint the headstone, this lets the lines disappear into the paint in the finished painting and it doesn't have any adverse effect on the paint like wax or paraffin based crayons, or pencils will, it also gives me reminders of what colors I intend to use in those areas. If in doubt on the colors or shades, choose lighter versions of the colors you intend to paint with. It's easier to cover a light line with a darker paint than it is to cover a darker line with a lighter paint.

A traditional painters brush or two, 1 - 3 inch should be fine but you can use what you are comfortable with. Different width brushes let you get different width strokes and effects.

A stencil brush to help push paint into smaller areas and details.
Small craft and fine art brushes for adding details and fine lines, they're also handy for doing touch ups.

A medium and a wide fan brush, these are great for feathering in subtle shading.

A cheap plastic ice cube tray or two. I use these as a kind of a pallet for small to medium quantities of various shades of my color(s). By putting the basic colors I want to use in the end cube spaces or with enough spaces between them so that I can do subtle mixes or shades in the cube spaces in between, it lets me have pallets of paint in small quantities ready to go. If I find a shade I need in larger quantities I can mix colors in disposable paper cups or cans.

Disposable coffee stirs are great for mixing up paint, and they let you hold up a sample of the color mixed next to your substrate before you actually apply the paint to it.

Rags and plastic bags for cleaning and paint application.

Synthetic and or natural sea sponges for paint application.

A sample or reference photo of the surface or object you want to depict. If you aren't good with designing stuff straight from your imagination then this will save you headaches and frustration. If I am using a reference photo or drawing I tend to put it into a plastic protective sleeve to keep it clean and easy to handle without worries of damaging the photo.

The stencil(s) you are going to use.
A stencil adhesive. I like 3M's 77 but you may use what you wish or are comfortable with.

Paints: I tend to prefer water based acrylics but the choice is yours. I used a Kelly green, a deep Forrest green, a white or ivory color, and small quantities of black, along with a **transparent extender or a transparent reducer.** The extender lets you make your paint as transparent as you wish without losing the viscosity or adhesive quality of the paint. The reducer lets me reduce/thin the paint and make it more transparent, Both of these are great for adding subtle shading, shadows, and subtle highlights to painted surfaces.

Blue or green painters tape for help in supporting pieces and making temporary masks, templates, or stencils

A marking pen to mark stencils or pieces of tape.

A clipboard or binder with paper, and writing utensil of your choice. This lets you keep notes,

Large pieces of newsprint, craft, or butchers paper. This gives you a place to set used sections of stencils, a place to test colors of paint, etc.

Make sure you properly clean and store all of your tools as soon as you are done painting.

First Step

Make sure the wall or surface is completely clean and free of any oils, waxes, or anything else that may adversely effect the paint, make sure the surface is completely dry before you draw or paint on it.

After using an adhesive on the back side of my stencil's pieces I place my perimeter stencil on the wall or surface I intend to paint. I do a thorough inspection to make sure stencil is sitting flat and smooth on the substrate then I use a watercolor pencil to trace all of the interior shape onto the wall. Once the interior of the stencil has been traced onto the substrate (work surface) I remove the interior pieces and carefully set them aside. I step back to see that the stone is where I want it placed. It's easier to redo pencil lines than it is to have to paint over a big, dark object and repaint it later. , this helps me avoid adding textures or color where I know I'm not going to want them in the finished piece. If the placement of the stone is okay I replace the outer section of the stencil and I use blue painters tape to broaden the outer area of the stencil to give myself some safety room. I'd rather waste a few feet of tape then have to clean up surrounding areas from spills or getting carried away with the next few steps. Why make more work for yourself?

I'm showing the stencil for the number ten headstone but you can apply these techniques to almost anything whether you are using a stencil or not. I'm showing the stencil in a light blue to make it easier for you to see what I'm parts I am using, and where I'm using them.

Second Step

Using the a mix of Kelly green mixed with a little bit of white to tone it down towards almost a mint green or milky Kelly green. I coat the entire surface of the stone. This lets me work without worry of leaving blank or bare spots in the finished painting. Now any textures or effects I add will be an added bonus rather than an absolute necessity. Let the base coat of the light green dry thoroughly before you precede to the next step. You can speed up the drying time by using a fan to increase the air circulation around the painting, a hair dryer can also help you speed up drying especially if your paint is thick or a slow drying paint.
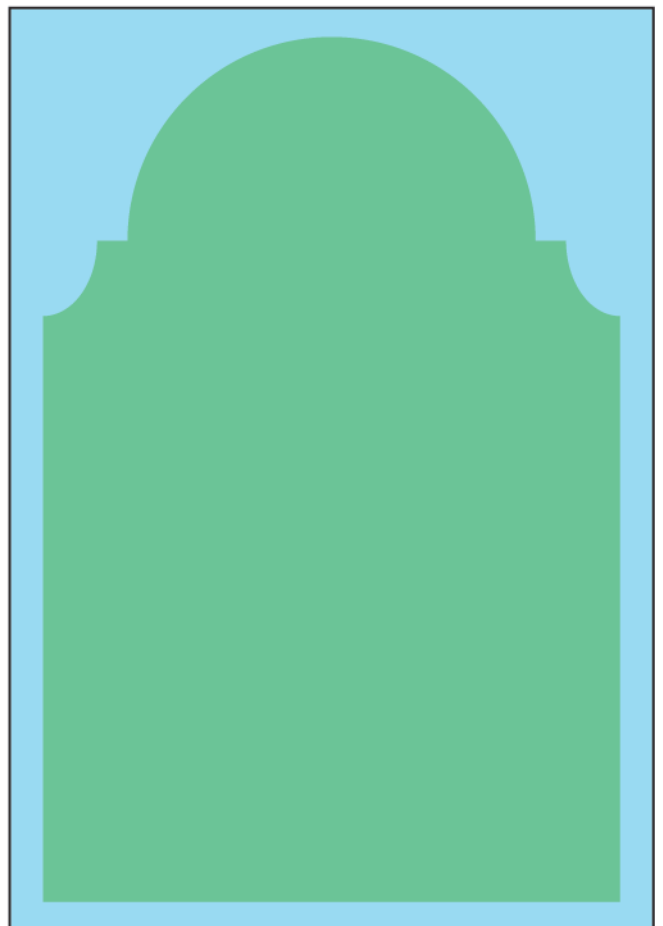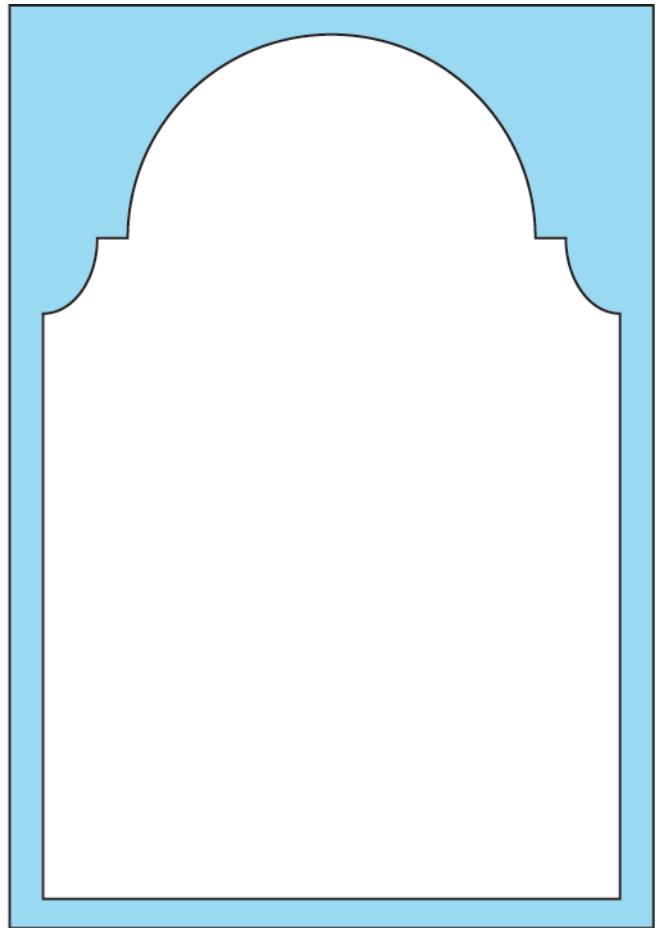
Third Step

With the base layer of paint completely dry I replace all of the interior pieces of the stencil, and use my water color pencils to lightly trace all of the shapes onto the "stone". With all of the shapes traced onto the "stone" I mix up some variations on my greens, making some lighter and darker shades. This is where I tend to use my ice cube trays. With all of my variations of greens I made I place blobs of the paint on the edge of the stencil. You may want to work with just one blob or puddle of paint at a time. I use sponges, rags, and various brushes and drag the colors to match the grain or figure of the stone. I try to avoid making the texture really busy or complicated where there will be fine detail in the stencil, like the intricate pieces of the skull or the rule/divider. This lets the texture of the stone compliment the design rather than compete with it. If I have recessed areas like the big center panel on this stone, I try to avoid making a straight line that crosses the borders between the recessed and raised panels, if anything I try to do a little stair step or zig zag, this helps fool the eye into thinking that the recessed area is actually sitting further away from the viewer. Using the sponges, rags and brushes I work my way through the colors and add the marbling 'til I'm happy with how it looks. Each of the different tools will give a different texture, and you may find some great combinations. Dabbing, twisting, light and heavy strokes, using a crumpled up plastic bag like a rubber stamp, and the variations in colors can give you a remarkable finish.

Fourth Step

With all of the major textures painted and dry, I add the interior pieces of the stencil that I want to look raised. If I have the pieces for the lettering and the brace/divider, and the skull I put them back on the substrate now, If I don't have those pieces then I have to paint a bit more carefully in this step. I mix small amount of my milky Kelly green with a tiny bit of the black, and a fair amount of the transparent extender or and or reducer. I mix my colors by eye, I want the effect to be realistic in the setting or area where this is going to be seen. If I know that the area will be very dark when the stone is seen then I don't want my mix to be so dark that all of my work disappears, if the are is going to be well lit then I tend to go a bit darker in the mix. The choices and possibilities are endless. I mix up about a half liter or a cup and a half of this tinting mix. What I want to make here is a fairly transparent shade that's just a bit darker than the base color of our stone. I use this mix to coat all of the area I want to look recessed (sunken in), because I have made this a very transparent layer it is really going to just tint the painted areas. If I don't have the lettering, the rule, and or the skull pieces then I need to carefully paint around them. The eyes, the sinus openings, and the mouth on the skull get painted with this mix, I apply this over all of the texture in the recessed areas letting them all get tinted darker so that they visually sink into the stone.

Here's the stone with the recessed areas tinted.

Fifth Step

With my recessed areas tinted and dried I mix up a couple of cube spaces with a medium transparent black, now I'm going to go in and add shadows cast onto the recessed areas. For this step and the next one you need to pick your light source/the direction your light is coming from. Shadows will always fall on the opposite side from the light source. That means that if the light is coming from above, then the shadows fall to the bottom. The highlighted areas will be towards the light source. Again, if the light source is above the stone, then the highlights will fall on the top edges or top facing surfaces. On my stone I've chosen to have the light come from above, slightly forward/towards me, and a little to the left. This will cast shadows below and slightly to the right. I've made my light source fairly bright so that you can see the shadows I've added. To paint the shadows I use a small fine are or craft brush and apply the black tint to the edges of the bottom facing edgesstencil, I then use my fan brushes to feather the black tint downwards. for areas like the eye sockets on the skull I feather the black tint from edge to edge/top to bottom. This tints the whole eye socket, but makes the upper portions of the sockets a bit darker than the lower portions If I don't have the stencil pieces for the raised areas then I either have to paint these areas carefully with smaller brushes, or I use the surrounding areas of the stencils to make my own skull, lettering, and rule masks/stencils from paper, painters tape, or card stock. Painters tape works great for this kind of thing. I use lots of light coats with the transparent black so that I can build up the shadows 'til I'm happy with the results.

Sixth Step

With my shadows painted I now mix up a fairly transparent white to add highlights to the surfaces and edges that would be facing the light source. These will not be as big and bold as the shadows, I want these to be just light enough to help define the shapes and make it look real. Remember you can always come back and add more highlights or shadows to tweak things if you wish. Try and avoid the use of an absolute solid white or black in your work, These colors leave you no room for shading, you can't get any brighter or lighter than white or any darker than solid black.

Seventh and Final Step

With all my shadows and highlights added I remove the stencil pieces and let the stone dry. Once it is dry I go back and do any touch up I want to, then when I am done fuzzing with it and it's completely dry, I've added some shading and additional highlights to the skull to sculpt it a bit more. Adding the shading helps make the skull look more three dimensional/less flat. I use a clear acrylic finish and give it a few good coats to protect it from the hands that WILL touch and feel it. Good faux finishes and Tromp L'oiel attract the curious like magnets.

Here's the stone with the stencils in place and the shadows and highlights added.

Here's the finished stone with the stencils removed before it gets cleared