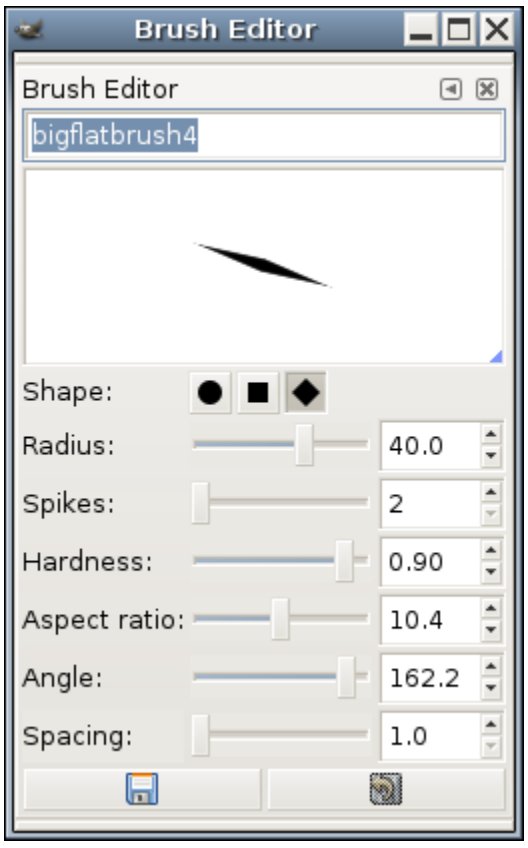
Digitally Painting a Basic Landscape

This is a GIMP tutorial based on the 'My First Landscape' project on http://www.bobross.com. It maps some of Bob's painting techniques to digital equivalents. On the right is the picture that we will be drawing.

Colors and brushes

The colors won't be an issue; we can pick them as we go, and if we don't like the result we can even correct them, layer by layer, later on.

As we want to simulate real on-canvas painting techniques, we will be needing to define a few brushes first. In addition to the default brushes, I like to have available a large round fuzzy brush, and a large, flat semi-fuzzy brush.



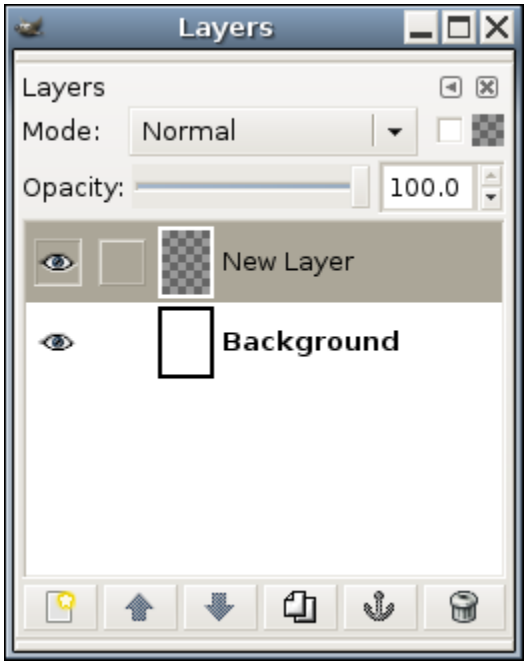
- open the brush dialog and create a new brush.
- I like to work with diamond-shaped brush, radius 40, 2 spikes, hardness 0.9, aspect ratio 10, spacing 1 for smoothness.
- I usually modify the angle and size of the brush as I work with it- but a few copies with different angles can be practical.

Some basic techniques

We'll be working multi-layer most of the time. To view all layers together, initially the layers will be transparent, whereas the background color will shine through. To blend the layers together, we would need a 'fade to transparency' functionality, but this doesn't exist. To work around this, in a few cases we will be creative and fade to white, then do a color-to-alpha to replace white with transparency.

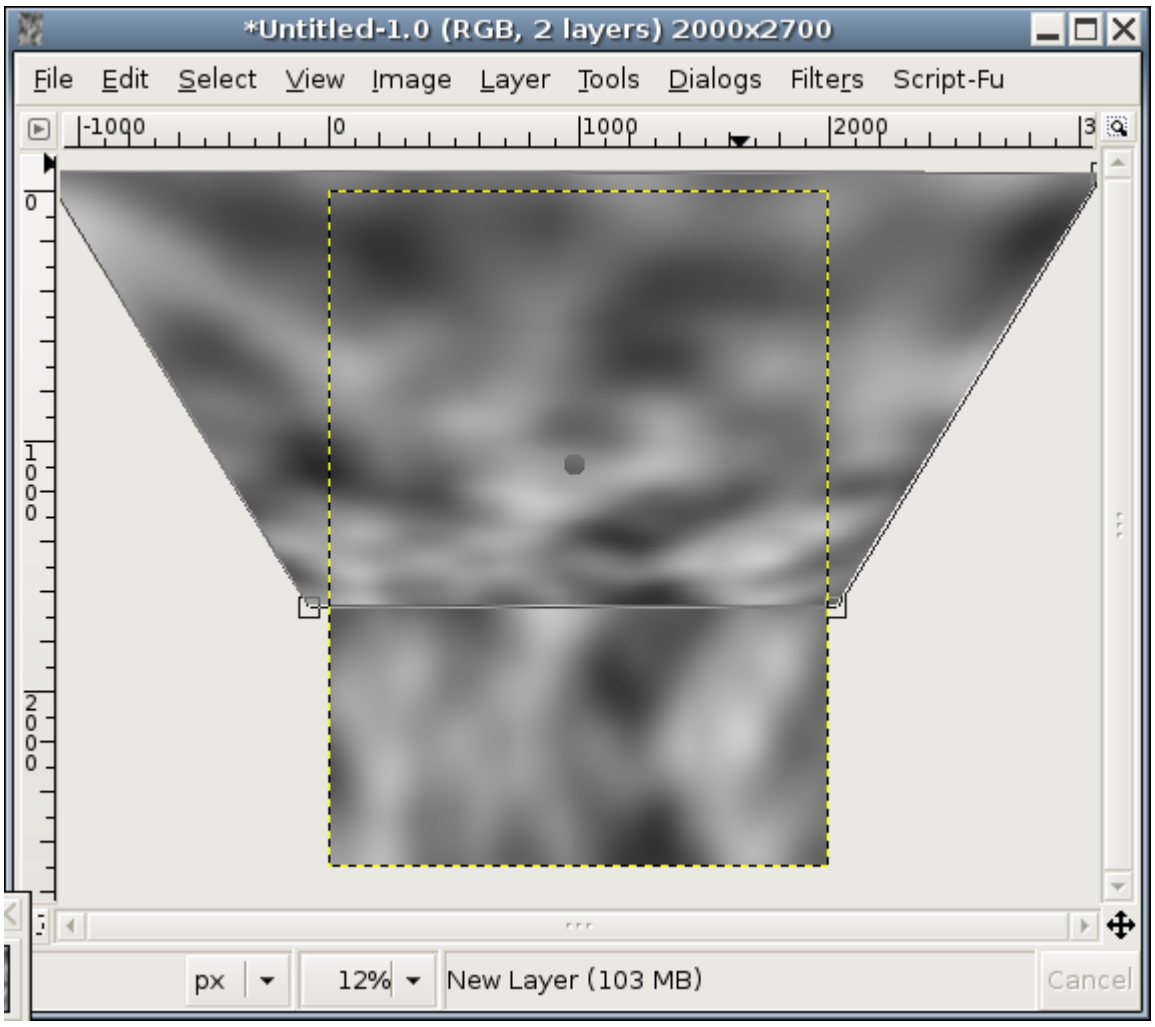
Getting started

Start a project. We'll be working on a canvas 2000 pixels wide, 2700 pixels high. Of course other dimensions are possible as well, we just use this size as it matches the proportions of the basic painting we're trying to duplicate. We'll use a white background for this project. We'll never paint on this background- we start by creating a transparent layer, on which we will paint.



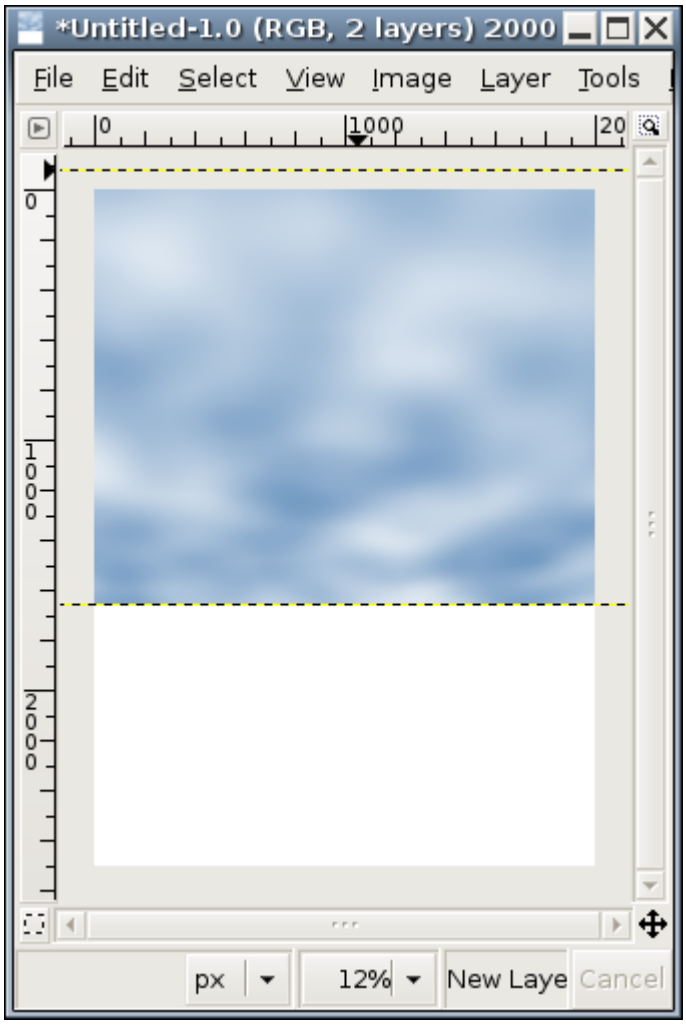
Let's call this layer 'sky'.

We'll add some clouds with filters->render->clouds->solid noise. Select X and Y size values which give you the result you want. Values of approx. 4 work well for me. To add the illusion of depth, change the perspective of the layer by stretching the top of the layer. Move up the bottom of the layer to approx 2/5 from the bottom of the image- this will be the horizon. Just before clicking 'transform', the image will look something like this:

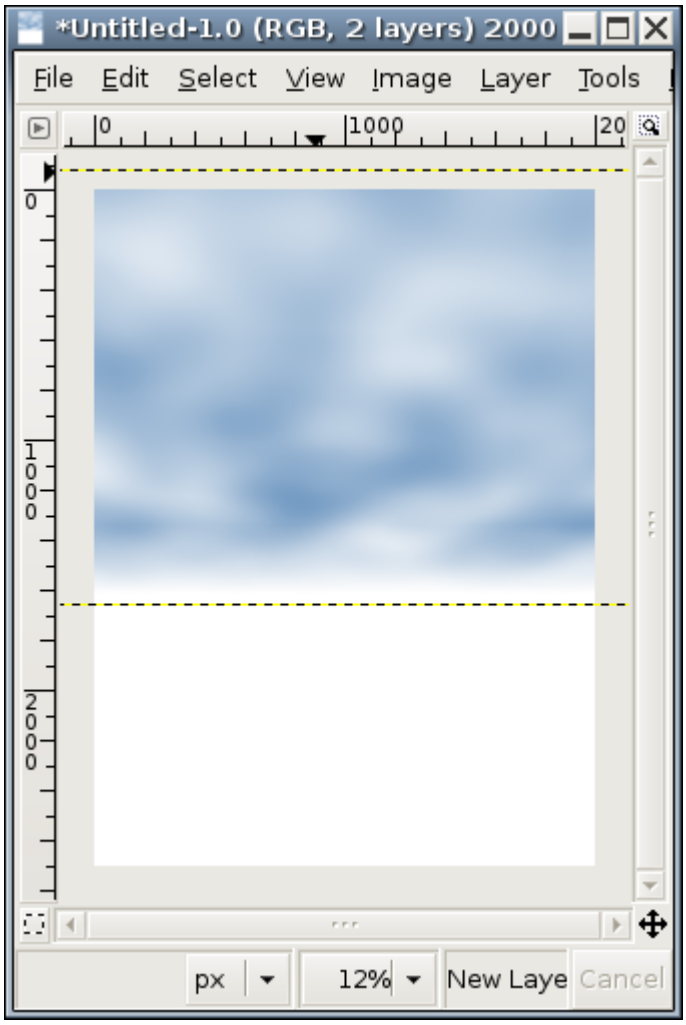


We'll turn the black into transparency and colorize the white.

Filters->colors->color to alpha; select a black color and apply. This will leave white clouds on a white background (which basically leaves the background invisible). We'll solve this by colorizing the clouds with sky blue. Select filters->colors->colorify and select a nice grey-blue custom color for the sky. I randomly ended up with 4F82B5, but feel free to experiment.



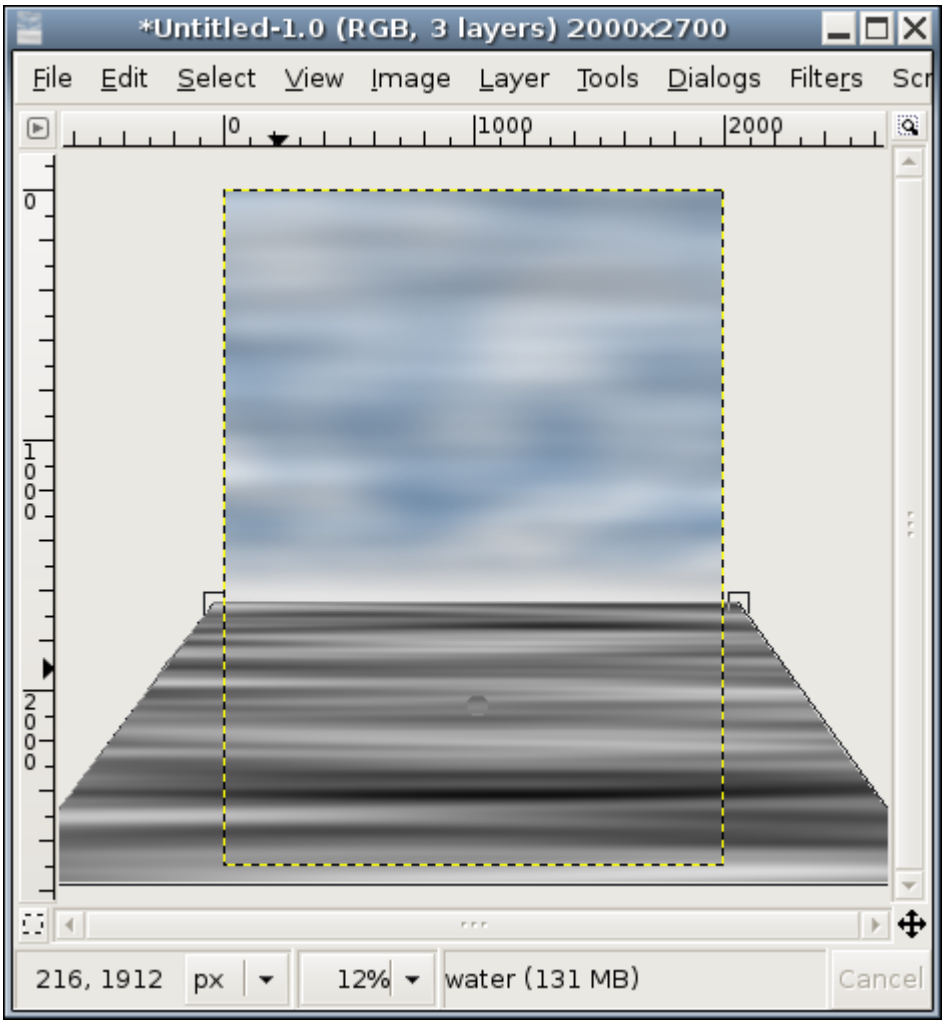
We will fade the clounds near the horizon to simulate a misty distance. Choose the “FG to transparent” gradient, and set the foreground color to white. Apply this gradient by pulling a short line over the bottom of the image only. After this, restore the transparency of the layer by Filters->colors->color to alpha; select white and apply. As a result, all white of the image is on the background pane; effectively we've only added blue to our sky layer. The result looks as follows:



The sky layer is done. I find that saving between layers is good practice- saving as the native GIMP format, xcf, will preserve all information.

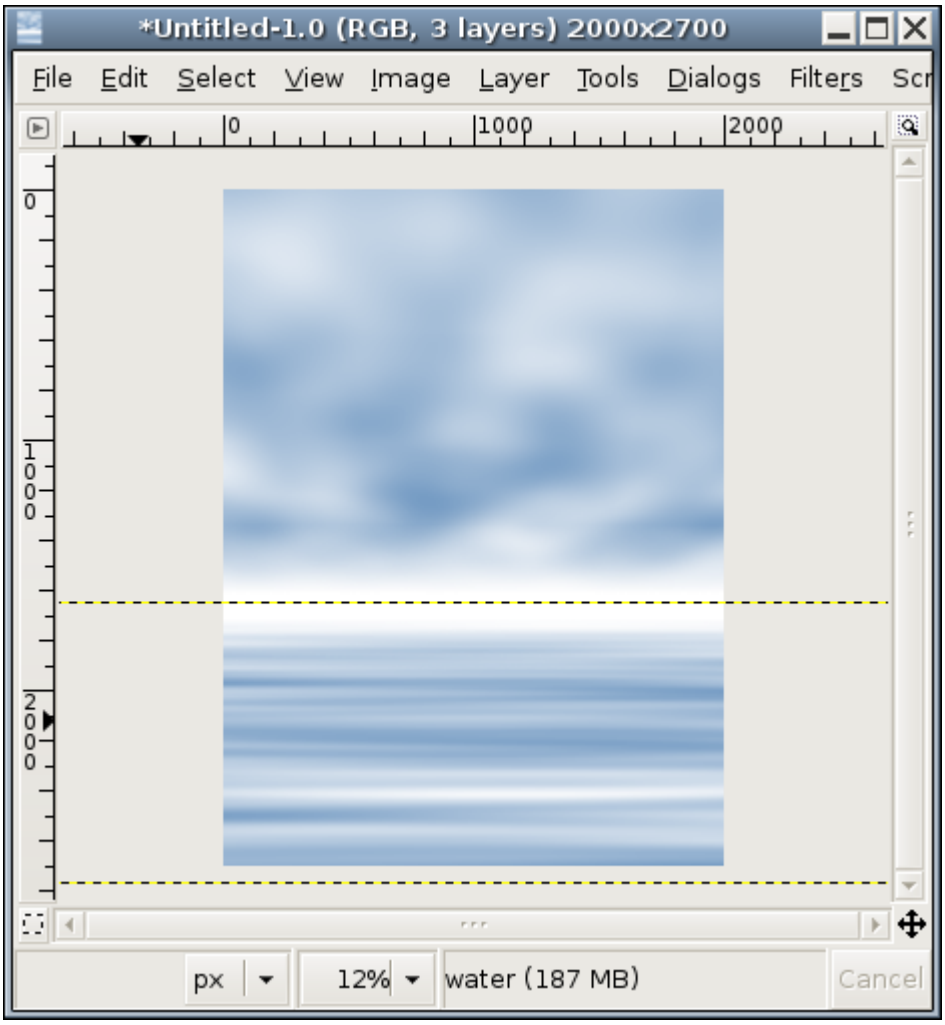
Now let's draw the water. This is similar to drawing the sky, with two main differences- we'll use different x-size and y-size values, and we'll add some shine. Let's make a separate layer for the water, as it will give us the flexibility to change just the water later on.

On the water layer, filter->render->clouds->solid noise with a small x-size and a large y-size. Apply perspective to the layer as before- it helps to make the water layer slightly transparent before attempting this, to get the height of the horizon right.



After this we can restore the transparency of the water layer. As we did with the sky, we'll remove the black and colorize the white water to blue.

Filters->colors->color to alpha; select a black color and apply. Colorize the water: filters->colors->colorify. with the sky color we used before. Using the white to transparent gradient, fade the horizon, and turn any white into transparent with a color to alpha again.

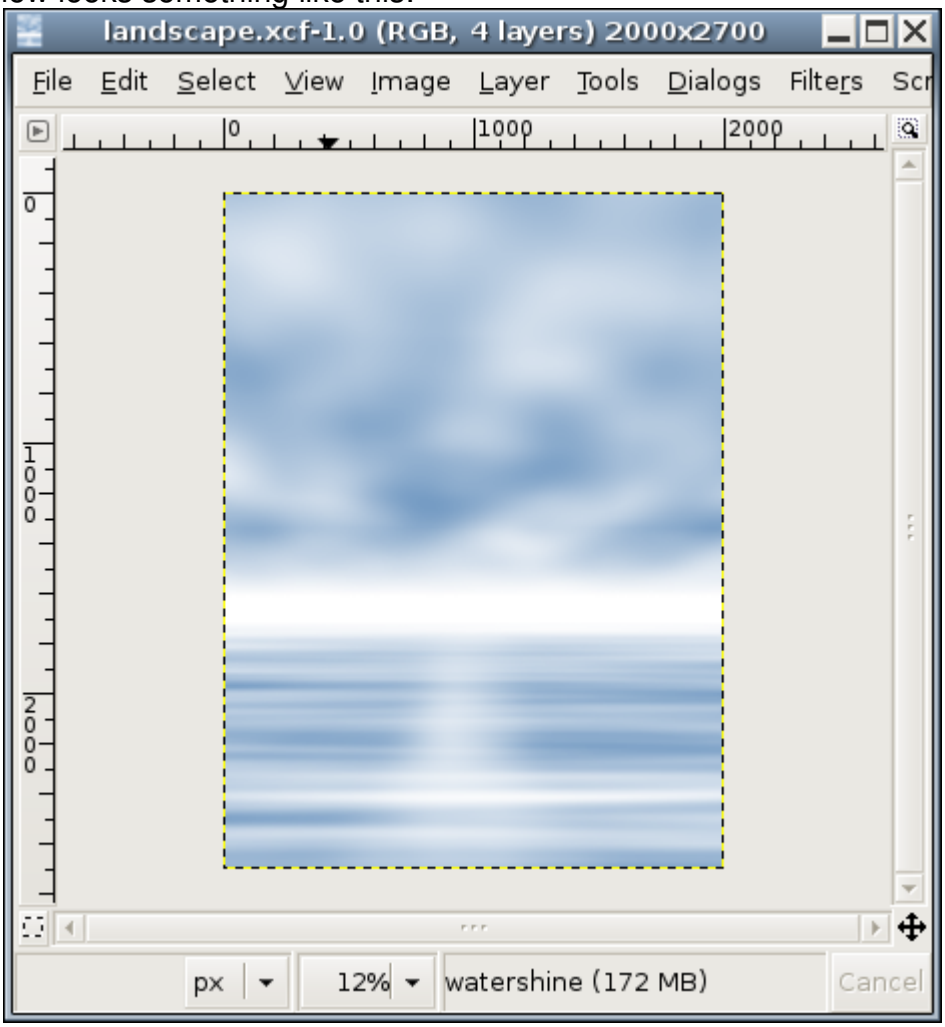


Now to make the water shine. Let's do this on a separate layer, watershine.

Select the paint brush tool with a big fuzzy brush. Size it up, if you want. Select a white color, low opacity, and draw some shine over the water with wider strokes in the bottom, narrower strokes near the horizon. Don't mind too much if it looks bad; you can use the eraser with low opacity to shape the shine as you wish. It's also possible to add a horizontal motion blur to the shine with filters->blur->motion blur. Choose a linear blur with angle 0 (horizontal) and make it as long as you think is appropriate. The longer the motion blur, the smoother the result. If you use very long blurs, you may want to blur halfway to both 0 and 180 degrees to prevent the blur to go off-center.

If you're happy with the shine on the water, you can merge it down the layer to the water (and color-to-alpha the white), or you can leave it as it is, which will allow you to retouch it later on.

Our painting now looks something like this:



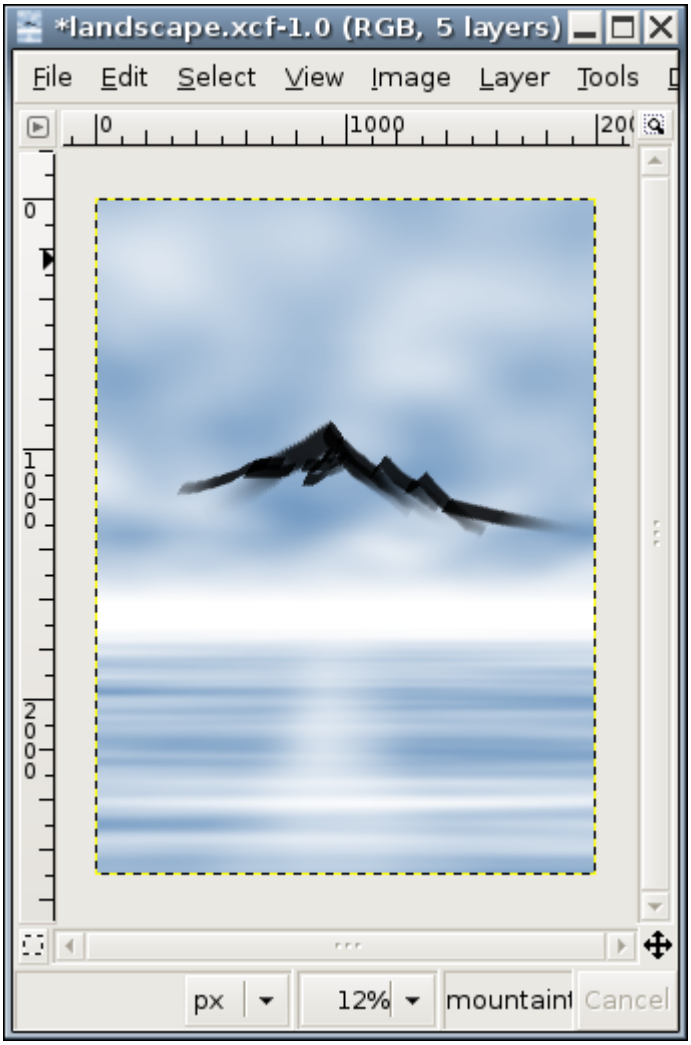
Adding some mountains.

This is the part where Bob Ross always creeped me out- He would have a nice painting and then would ruin the whole thing by painting something highly contrasting over it. Fortunately, we can afford to do this without worrying about mistakes, for three reasons:

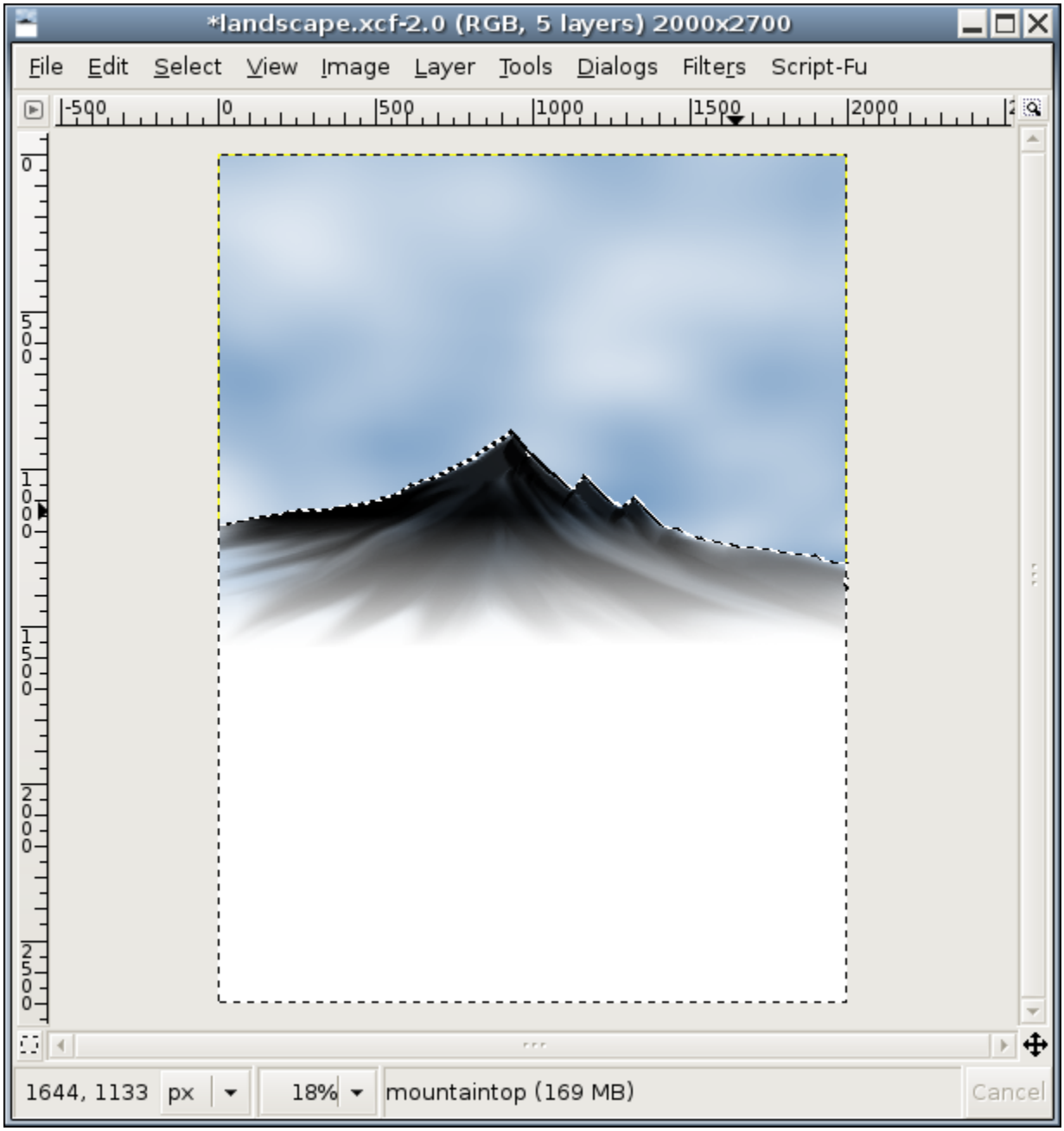
- We are drawing on a separate layer, so we won't change anything that was painted before;
- We can undo our changes, and of course,
- Because there are no mistakes, only 'happy accidents'.

Let's create a new transparent layer 'mountaintop', then select one of the big diagonal brushes that we created. and a very dark tone of color (black comes to mind). Make sure the spacing is 1, for the most natural effect.

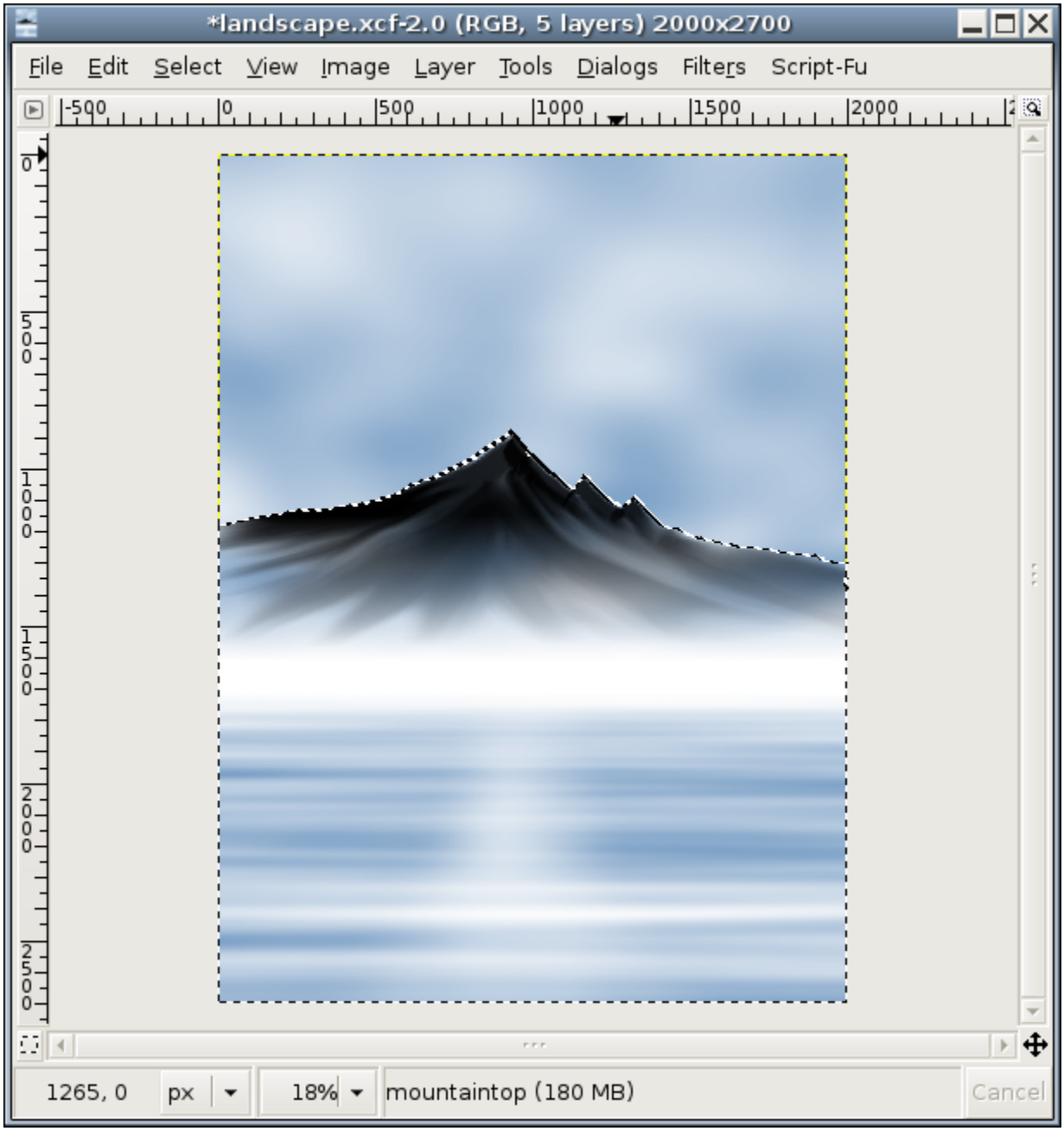
Maybe you want to size up the brush; this depends on the resolution of your image. We'll use 100% opacity, and to let it simulate an actual brush we'll use a fade out. Experiment with the fade out length; 800 may be nice. By varying the different predefined brush angles, we'll quickly come up with something resembling a mountain top. Do not worry if this doesn't look perfect at first. If at some places the brush strokes are too wide, we can make them thinner with the eraser tool.



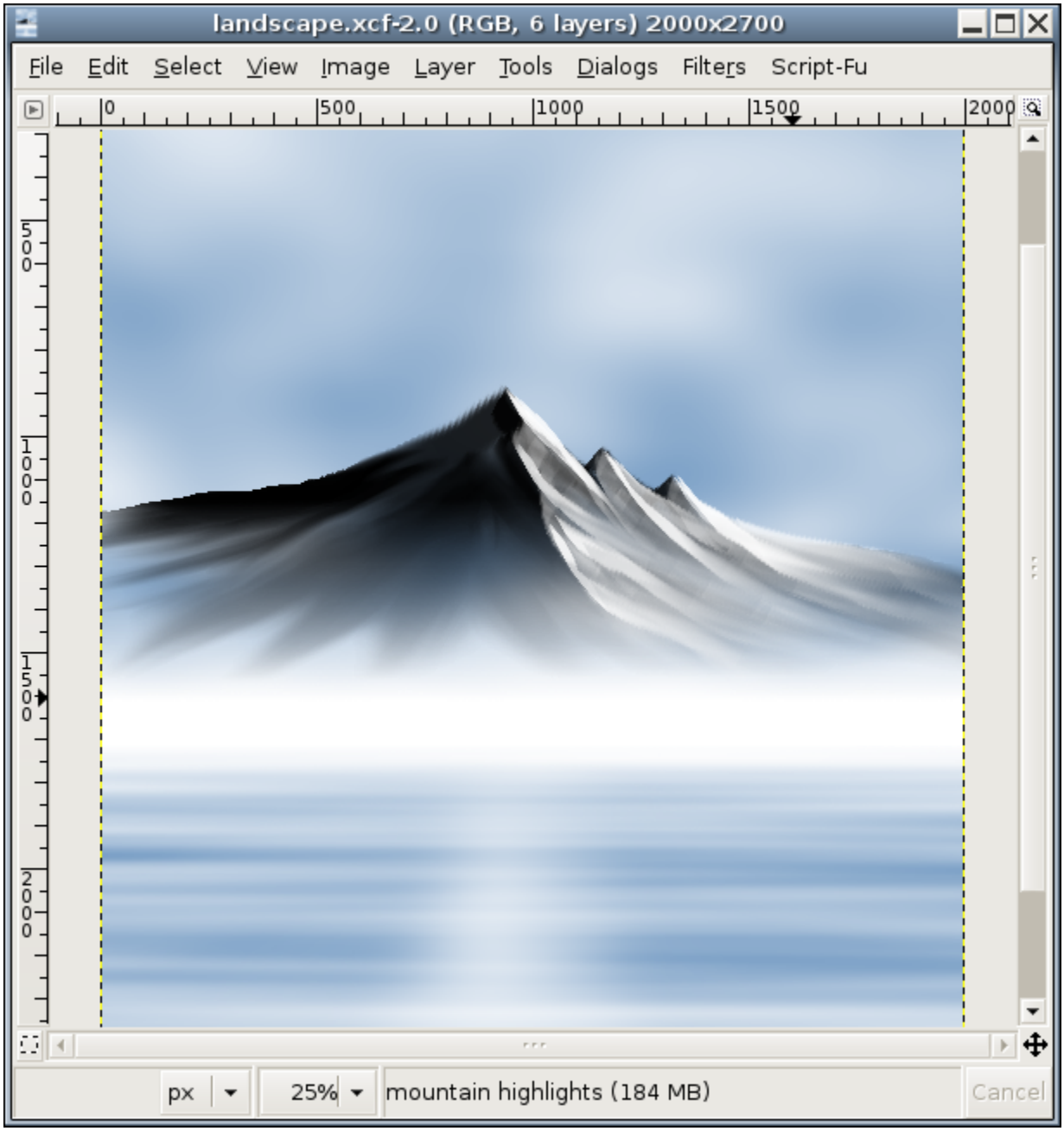
Use the magic wand to select the mountain shape and the lasso to select to the sides and bottom. Then select the smudge tool and a big fuzzy brush to 'pull' the paint to complete the mountain shape to the sides and bottom to complete the mountain shape. Use a white to transparent gradient to fade the bottom.



Finally, use color to alpha to turn white into transparency to re-reveal the water.



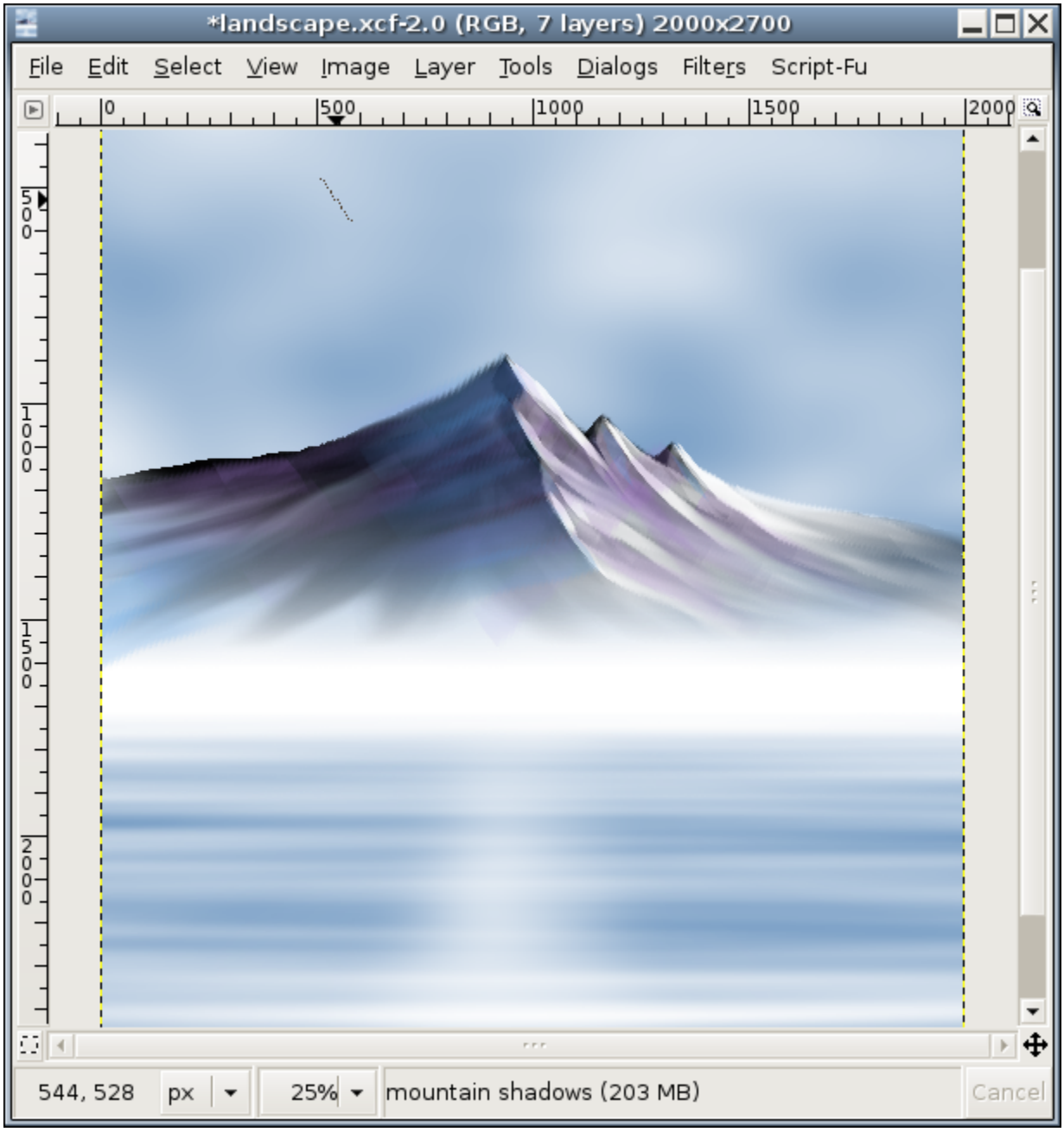
Create a new layer. We will use this new layer to highlight the sides of the mountain.
Select the diagonal brush with white paint, and set the opacity to around 80% - this will allow some variation in the highlights, giving the mountain some structure. This can be intensified by using the eraser with low opacity over the highlights, and then repeating the highlighting process.



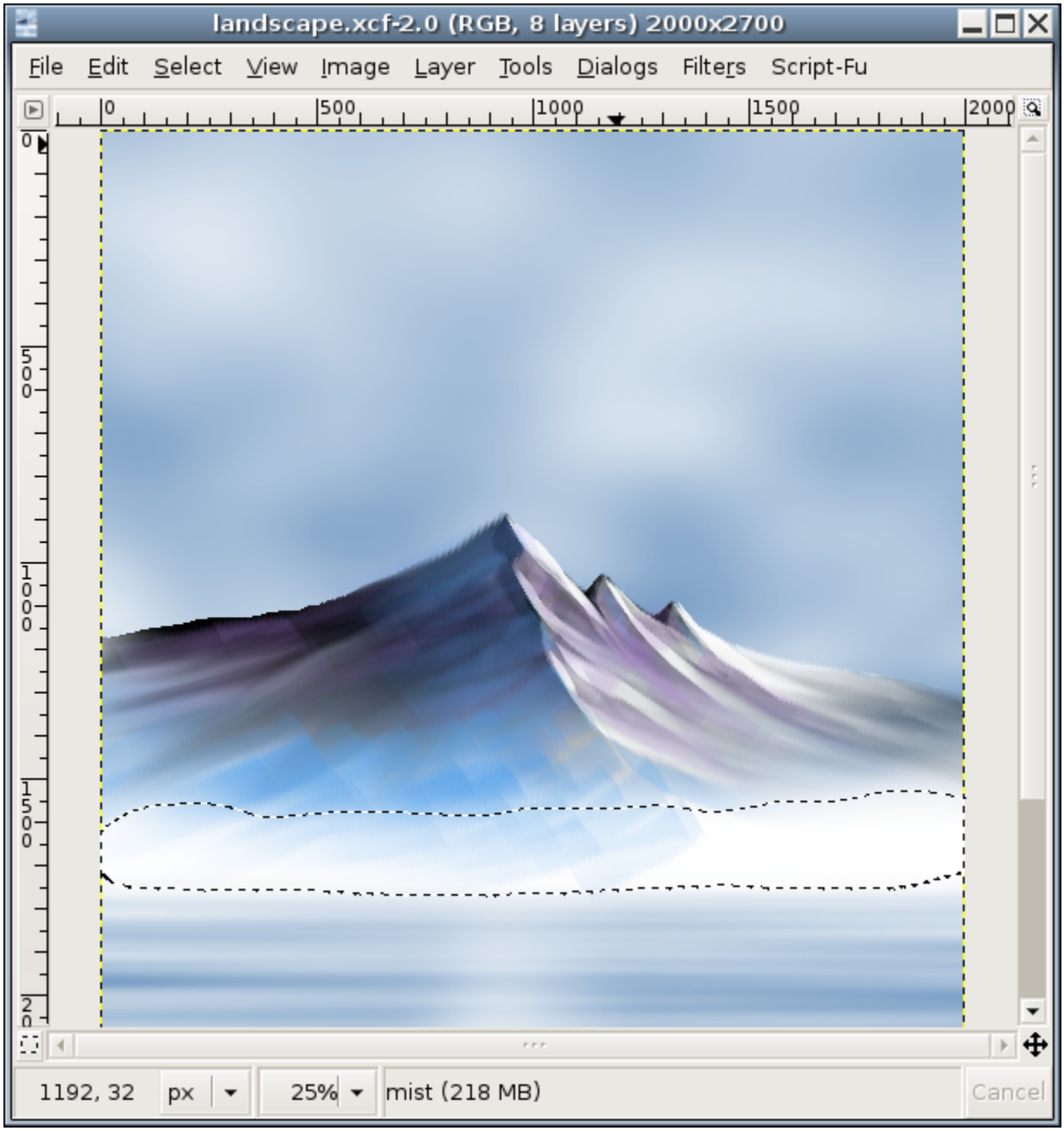
Let's add some color to the shadowed side of the mountain for increased contrast. As always, we'll do this on a new layer. I used a light purple color and a brush with low opacity. There's no need to be very precise with the edges of the mountain here; there are shadowy areas on both sides of the mountain.

As before, we increase the contrast by using the eraser, then by repeating the process- this time however we use another color.

The result so far is as follows (the line in the top of the picture is my diagonal brush):

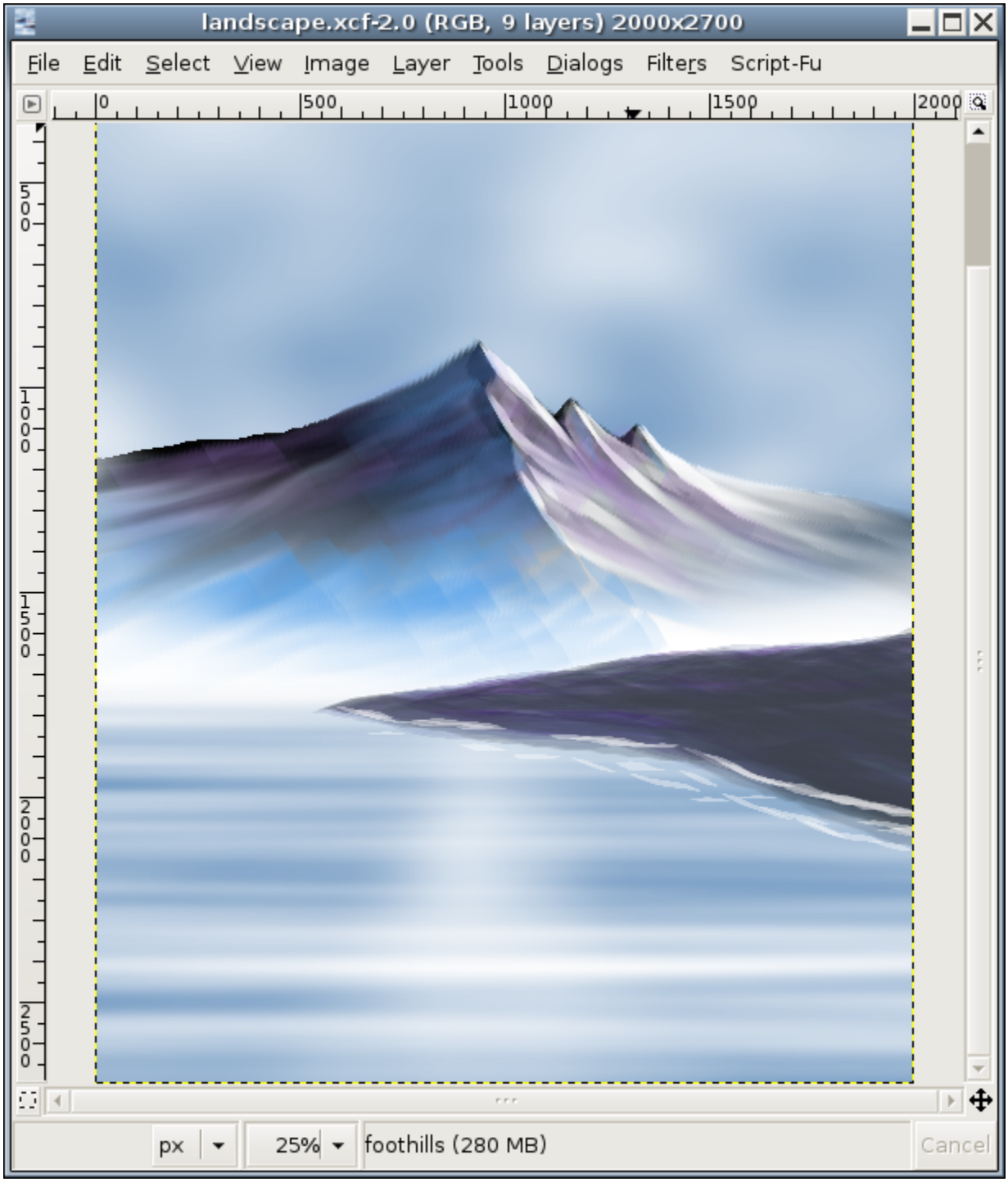


We can still extend the foot of the mountain to the water edge. Then we can create a new layer and use the lasso to select an area. Select->feather the area, then fill the area with white to create the illusion of mist. If you want, change the opacity of the misty area to get as much of the effect as you want.

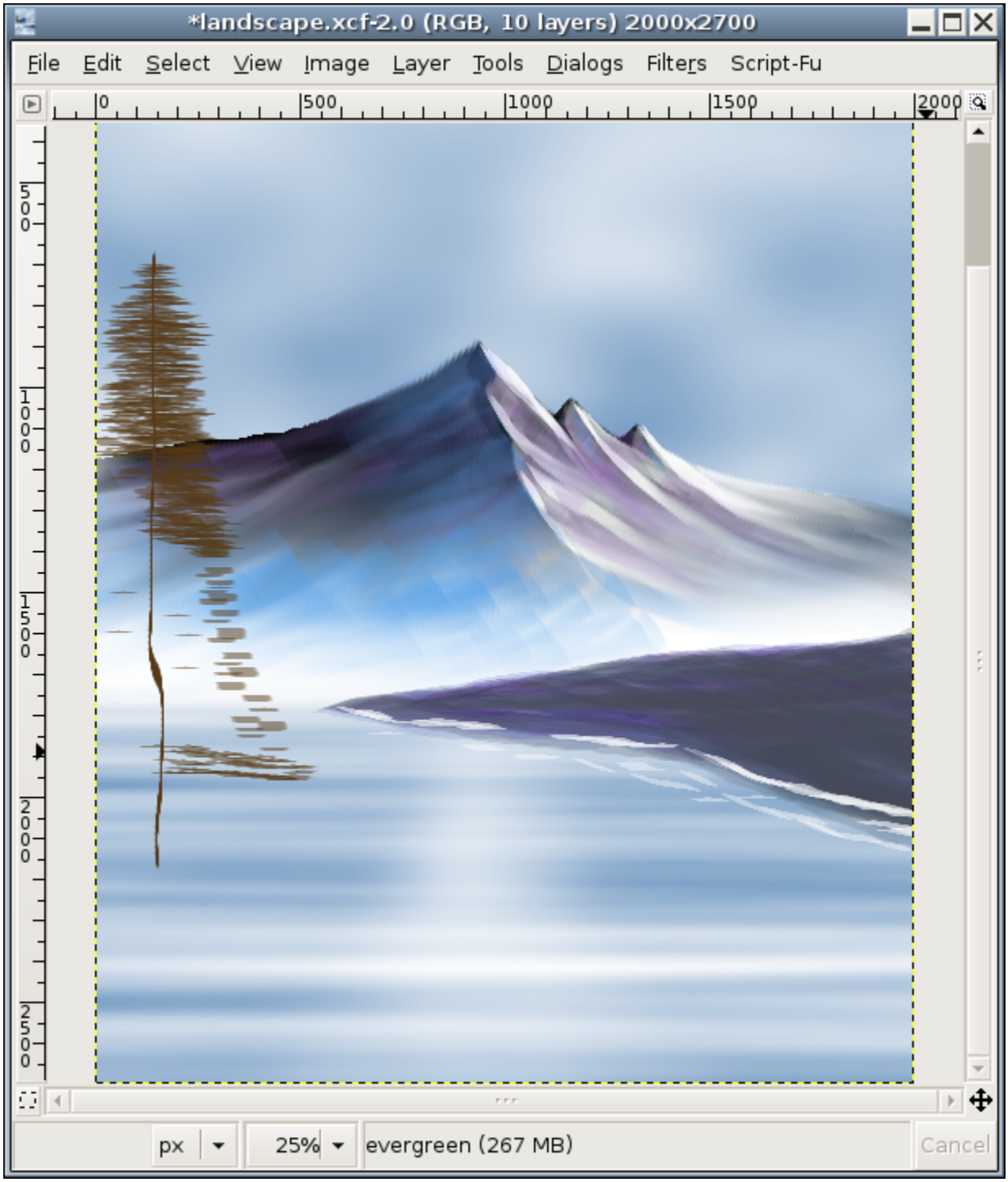


Create a new layer for the foothills. These are quite a bit nearer, and some vegetation may be visible.

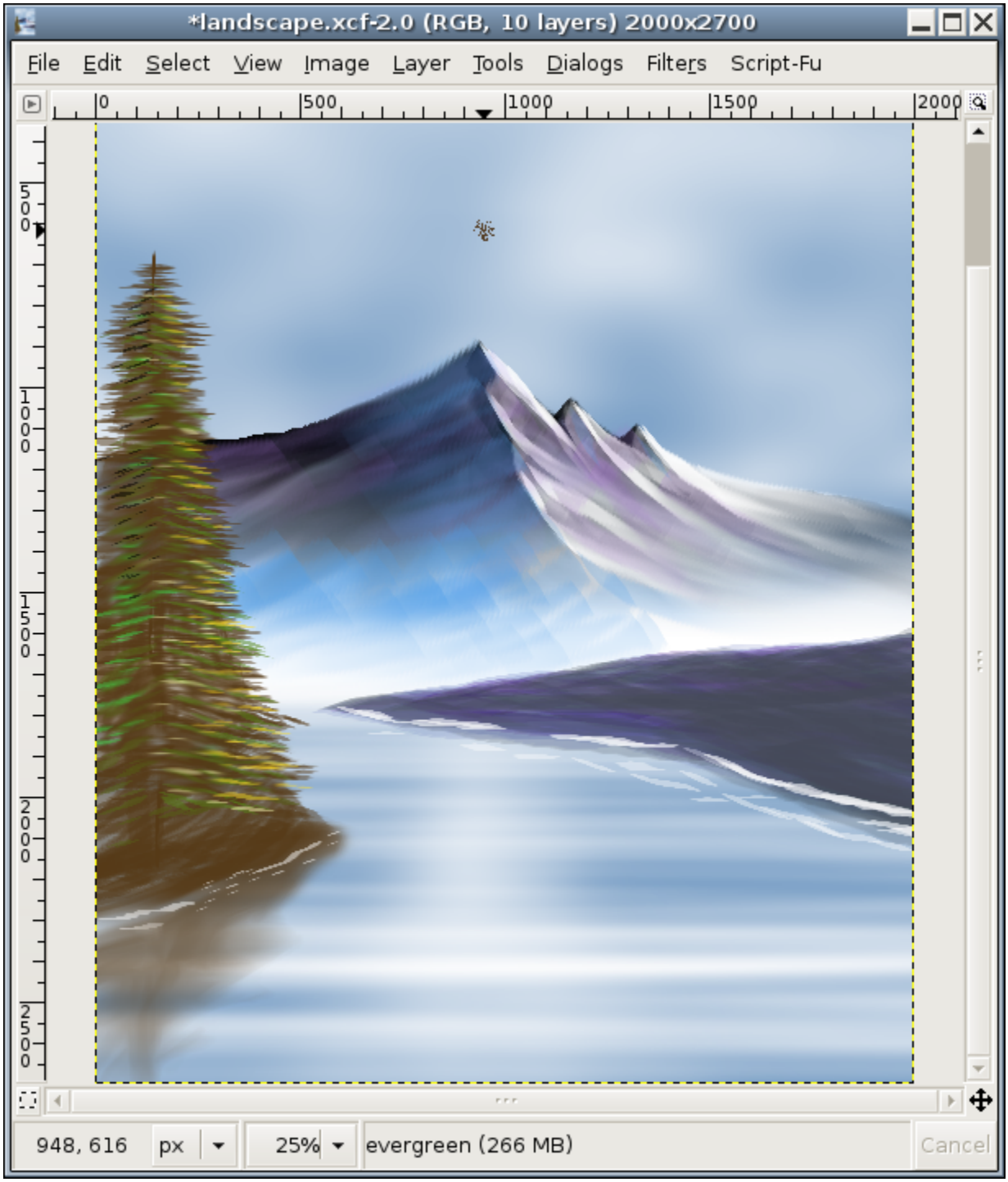
I use a diagonal brush with low opacity, so that i need many strokes to draw the foothills, so that they have quite a bit of structure. Also, near the waterline, they will be almost transparent, which will help the illusion of the hills disappearing under water. Use a thin brush with relatively high opacity to draw the waterline and ripples in white.



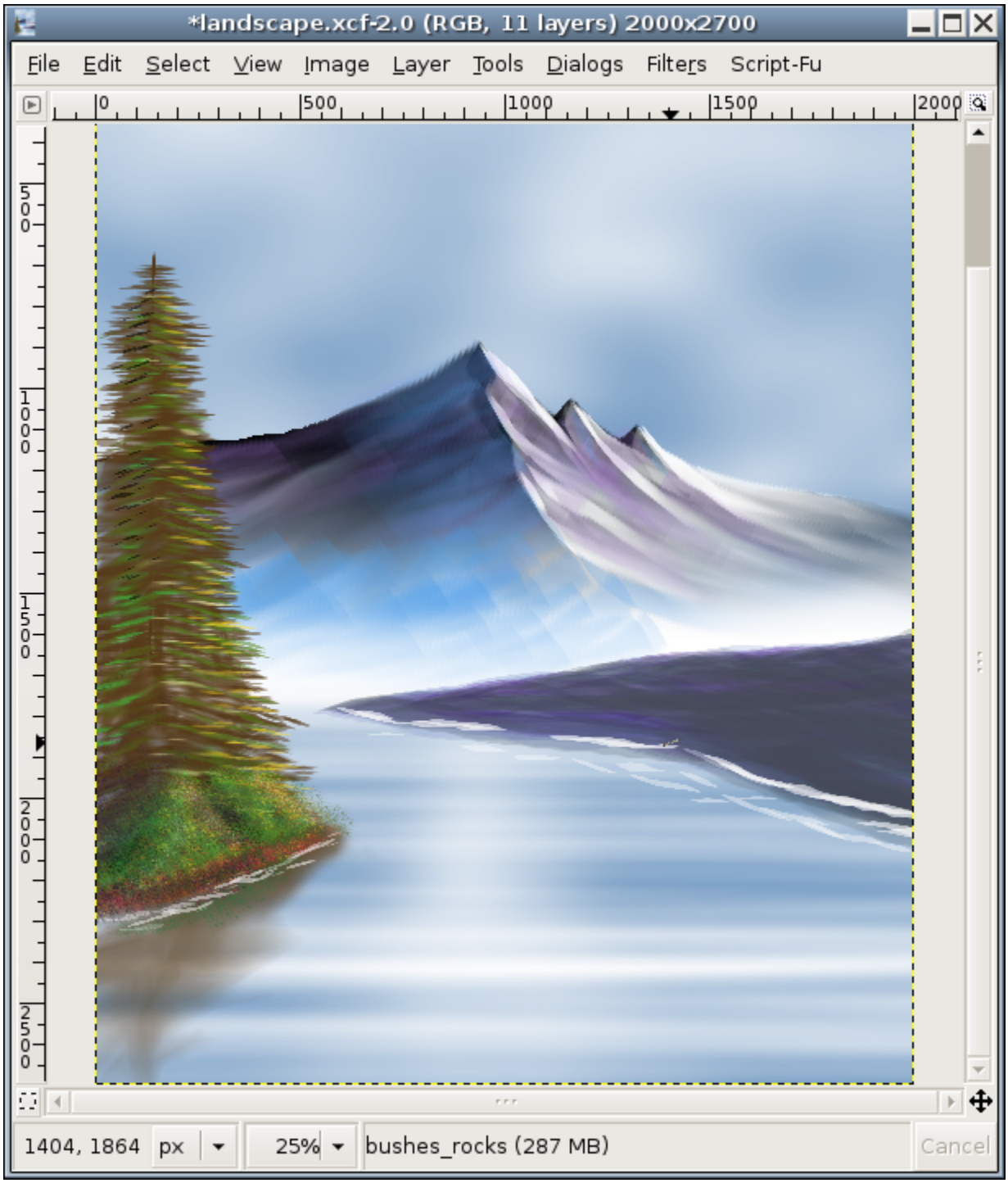
Turn the diagonal brush vertical and draw a vertical line with maximum opacity- the stem of the evergreen that we will be drawing. Reduce the opacity and then turn the brush horizontal. Use a small radius. Then start clicking the mouse to draw horizontal lines. As you progress towards the bottom, you may want to increase the radius and to turn the brush slightly more diagonal, as gravity impacts the long lower branches more than the short upper ones.



Afterwards, we do make highlights and shadows in the same manner. Cut some white on the waterline and use the smudge tool do make reflections on the water (I know, I forgot the reflexions of the foothills).



With the 'Galaxy' brush, we add some more vegetation (and highlights) to the bottom of the island. We'll add some highlight and shadows as before.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Well, that worked well enough-- Let's finish up the painting and add some vegetation in the front right of the picture. We use the galaxy brush again and move the mouse in circular motion with various shades of green, red and yellow. Drawing time is done, now of course we can still tweak the colors. Here is the final result:

“Happy painting, and God Bless!”