



Expressive Skies - Front Lighting

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/256-Expressive-Skies-Front-Lighting>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

Many landscape paintings miss this key ingredient Your first step to enhancing your paintings with expressive skies We'll focus on improving on photos for paintings, designing with your heart, understanding front lighting and painting towering clouds and warm light. This is a small lesson from a larger course that I'm building, which will be called Painting Expressive Skies. I expect that to take me 6 months or more. I'm already three months into it. I thought it'd be nice for you to see this one for free, just to whet your appetite for painting expressive skies, and also just to get some feedback from you. If you have any constructive criticism, I'd love to hear from you. This demo is in acrylics but it's fine for oils too. Just 6 steps I'll guide you all the way. Design Our job as artists is to bring people's attention to what we find beautiful. In order to do that you need to first identify what those things are for you, and then enhance or exaggerate them. In this one it was towering clouds and warm light. Preparing the surface It's worth putting in the time to get your painting surface ready to work on. This is an MDF board with 3 coats of acrylic gesso primer and a light toned base coat of yellow ochre plus white. This will help warm the painting and shimmer against the blue-greys. Sky The sky gradation is the first building block. We can add more warmth into the sky gradation to enhance the feel of the sunset light. Expressive Clouds Here's your chance to practice making more variety in your paintings, which makes them more interesting to paint and more interesting to view. Create variety in: Shapes - big vs small, complex vs simple. Colour - warm vs cool, vibrant vs greyed. Edges - soft vs hard. Texture - smooth vs rough, thin vs thick. You need all that variety to keep things interesting and expressive. Foreground Detail Adding small details in the foreground makes the clouds appear even larger. So by painting one, you're enhancing the other. If you want the style to remain painterly and expressive throughout, you can create the detail using texture, rather than tiny descriptive brushstrokes. Finishing Touches A fine signing brush can add a few crisp details like seagulls and floatsam on the beach to add a touch of realism and scale. I'll take you step by step through this whole rich process and you can choose which parts you'd like to try out in your own work. Enjoy!



Tropical Beach 12x12" Acrylic on Board



REFERENCE PHOTO

The scene as Richard found it.

Materials

Here's everything I use for this painting. Don't worry if you don't have the exact same supplies — use what you have and substitute freely.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Atelier Interactive Acrylics
- Phthalo Blue
- Ultramarine Blue
- Naphthol Red Light / Cadmium Red Light
- Brilliant Magenta
- Yellow Ochre
- Arylamide Yellow Light / Cadmium Yellow Light
- Titanium White
- Canvas
- 12x12" MDF Panel with 3 coats of acrylic undercoat.
- You could use a canvas panel or anything you prefer.
- Brushes
- [Rosemary & Co. Richard Robinson Brush Set](#)
- Palette knife
- Paper towels
- Stay-wet palette
- Water spray bottle

1 Tropical skies and lighting

What kind of clouds can be found in tropical skies?

In tropical skies, you can find amazing towering clouds that create beautiful imagery, especially during sunset.

What is 'vog' and how does it affect the sky's appearance?

Vog is volcanic fog, consisting of particulates in the air from volcanic activity. It enhances sunsets and sunrises by creating beautiful orangey, warm light.

How does front lighting affect the appearance of clouds during sunset?

Front lighting during sunset can create an opportunity to play with large bold flat colors, especially warm light, enhancing the beauty of the clouds.

2 Front lighting explanation

What is front lighting in painting?

Front lighting occurs when the light source is behind the viewer, causing shadows to be pushed to the sides of objects. This creates a subtle gradation from light to shadow as objects curve away from the viewer.

How do shadows behave in a front lighting situation?

In a front lighting situation, shadows are pushed to the outside of objects and appear on the edges of rounded forms. The transition from light to shadow is very subtle, with the darkest shadows on the sides of the object.

Does front lighting result in flat color on objects?

No, front lighting does not result in flat color. While the lighting is very light, there is a subtle gradation from light into shadow, creating depth and form.

Why is front lighting considered a nice light effect in painting?

Front lighting is considered a nice light effect because it creates a beautiful, warm atmosphere, especially during the evening with the yellow hues of a setting sun.

3 Design adjustments for emphasis

How can I emphasize a cloud in my painting?

To emphasize a cloud in your painting, make it larger so it takes up more space on the canvas. This allows the cloud to become the most spectacular part of the painting, drawing attention to it.

Why should I reduce the size of the foliage in my painting?

Reducing the size of the foliage gives the cloud more room to play, allowing it to stand out more prominently in the composition.

How can I enhance the warmth in my painting?

To enhance the warmth in your painting, add more warm colors to the cloud and the sky. Additionally, lighten and warm any large shadows to contribute to the overall warmth of the scene.

4 Preparing the canvas and base layer

What type of board is used for the painting?

The board used is MDF with two or three coats of acrylic primer on it.

Why is a warm base layer applied first?

A warm base layer is applied to accentuate the warm colors in the sunset frontlit scene.

What colors are used for the warm base layer?

Yellow ochre and white are used for the warm base layer.

What type of brushes are recommended for blocking in the base layer?

Big flat synthetic brushes are recommended for blocking in the base layer.

Why should brushes be dipped in water when using acrylics?

Brushes should be dipped in water to keep the paint workable, except when using a dry brush for softening edges or blending.

Why is a big brush preferred over a small brush for blocking in?

A big brush is preferred because it allows you to block in the base layer quickly, saving time compared to using a small brush.

What is the benefit of adding another coat of paint to the surface?

Adding another coat of paint makes the surface less absorbent, allowing the next layers of paint to sit nicely on top rather than being absorbed.

How does the warm base layer affect the final painting?

The warm base layer provides color harmony and creates a shimmering effect as it shows through the cool colors in the sky and water.

How long should the base layer dry before continuing?

The base layer should dry for about an hour before continuing with the painting.

5 Protecting the base layer

Why should I use gloss medium varnish on the base layer?

Using gloss medium varnish on the base layer protects it from being activated by the next layer of paint, especially when using reworkable interactive acrylics. This ensures that the layers remain distinct and do not mix unintentionally.

How should I prepare the gloss medium varnish before applying it?

You should water down the gloss medium varnish a little bit to help it flow better when applying it over the base layer.

Is this step necessary for normal acrylics?

No, if you are using normal acrylics, you do not need to apply gloss medium varnish because normal acrylics do not reactivate once dry.

What should I do if I'm using oil paints instead of acrylics?

If using oil paints, you can start with an acrylic base or an oil base and use a fast-drying medium like liquin to thin the paint. This helps the layer set up and dry quickly, making it ready for the next layer in a few hours.

Why should I avoid adding white to the oil paint mixture?

White is the slowest drying paint in oil paints, so avoiding it in the mixture can help the layer dry faster when using a fast-drying medium.

Can gloss varnish be used as a painting medium instead of water?

Yes, you can use gloss varnish as a painting medium instead of water when laying in the first layer of paint. This seals the layer similarly to applying gloss medium varnish afterward.

6 Palette and brush selection

What colors are included in the new palette for this lesson?

The new palette includes Phthalo Blue, Napsol Red Light, Brilliant Magenta, Yellow Ochre, Arilamide Yellow, and Titanium White.

Can I substitute any colors in the palette?

Yes, you can substitute Cadmium Red for Napsol Red Light, and use Cadmium Red Mid or Light. You can also use Magenta or Alizarin, which would be a little darker, and substitute Cadmium Yellow Light or Lemon Yellow for Arilamide Yellow.

7 Blocking in the sky

What type of brush is recommended for blocking in the sky?

A synthetic flat brush with a very crisp edge and nice long bristles is recommended. It holds a lot of paint, allowing brushstrokes to go further and creating a calligraphic effect.

How should I start blocking in the sky?

Start by blocking in where the horizon, foliage, and the line of the beach are. This gives you lots of room for the sky to do its thing.

What is the initial step in creating the sky's gradation?

Begin by creating a gradation from light to dark in the background. Use white, a little bit of yellow, and a tiny bit of phthalo blue to create a greenish color, and brush it on the canvas.

Why is it okay to leave bits of the canvas showing through?

Leaving bits of the canvas showing through is okay and is something to aim for in this painting. It adds to the texture and depth of the sky.

Why do we work from light to dark in this painting?

We work from light to dark to avoid dulling the colors. In this case, working from dark to light would dull the green color with blue, so working from light to dark helps maintain the vibrancy.

How do you achieve the gradation effect in the sky?

Achieve the gradation effect by adding very small amounts of color to the white and blending with softer strokes into the paint you've just put down. This creates a smooth transition from light to dark.

What direction is the sunlight coming from in this painting?

The sunlight is coming from behind us and a little to the side, making the sky a little lighter in that direction.

8 Painting the clouds

How do you start painting the clouds in the sky?

Begin by using a little yellow ochre and white to add warmth to the clouds at the bottom. This creates a foundation of warm clouds to build upon.

What colors do you use to create a mauve tone in the clouds?

To create a mauve tone, mix magenta, white, and a little blue. This combination gives you a nice mauve color for the cloud shadows.

Why do acrylic colors appear different when they dry?

Acrylic colors tend to dry a little darker than they appear when wet. With practice, you'll get used to this change and adjust your painting accordingly.

How can you soften the edges of the clouds?

You can soften the edges by smushing the paint with your finger, which helps create a more natural and less defined look.

How do you create a warm light feeling in the clouds?

Use a combination of red, yellow, and lighter values to create a warm light feeling. This half tone between dark and light helps achieve a soft, warm atmosphere.

What is the purpose of using impasto technique in cloud painting?

Using impasto, or thick paint, adds texture and depth to the clouds. Mixing white with a touch of yellow and yellow ochre, and applying it thickly, enhances the light and warmth in the painting.

How do you check if your mixed color is correct?

Check your mixed color on the palette next to the previous color. Compare both the value (lighter or darker) and the temperature (warmer or cooler) to ensure it fits your desired effect.

How does atmospheric perspective affect cloud color as they recede into the distance?

As clouds recede into the distance, they become a little more blue and slightly darker due to atmospheric perspective. Adjust your colors accordingly to reflect this change.

How can you create softer transitions in cloud colors?

Use a little water with your paint to create softer transitions in color. This helps the cloud colors blend smoothly and appear more natural.

What technique can you use to make clouds appear more dynamic?

By brushing softly over the surface and using darker tones from earlier, you can create dynamic clouds that roll into shadows and have a more interesting appearance.

9 Adjusting cloud colors and shapes

How can I add more color to a cloud in my painting?

To add more color to a cloud, simply apply the desired color to the area. Consider extending the cloud's shape if you think it will enhance the composition.

What should I consider about the color when painting clouds?

Keep in mind that the color you apply will dry a little darker, so adjust your initial application accordingly.

How can I add crispness and interest to cloud shapes?

To add crispness and interest, you can create hard edges and add darker accent clouds using a little blue and red. This will add depth and dimension to your clouds.

How can I soften the edges of clouds in my painting?

To soften the edges of clouds, you can spray a little water to keep the colors wet and then feather the edges softly. This technique helps create smooth transitions and soft edges.

10 Painting the ocean

How should I prepare the canvas if I want to use tape for painting the ocean?

If you're going to use tape, make sure the paint is dry before applying it. This prevents the tape from lifting any wet paint off the canvas.

What colors should I mix to create a dark green for the wave face?

Mix a little bit of yellow ochre with blue to create a dark green suitable for painting the wave face.

How do I paint the horizon where the water is calmer?

Use a slightly lighter mix of paint to depict the calmer water on the horizon, as it reflects more of the sky.

What technique should I use to paint the flat water on the sand?

Go slightly lighter with your paint mix to capture the flat water on the sand, reflecting the sky.

How can I add warmth to the foam in my ocean painting?

Add a tiny bit of either or both of the yellows to the white foam to warm it up, capturing the golden hour sunlight.

What can I do to add interest to the ocean scene?

Consider adding another little wave breaking and some whitewash to create visual interest in the ocean scene.

11 Painting the beach and shadows

What should I do before painting the trees in a beach scene?

Before painting the trees, it's helpful to add more clouds to the sky if needed. This sets the stage for the rest of the painting.

What is the first step in painting the beach?

The first step in painting the beach is to lay in a warm color as a base. This will be mixed slightly with the paint to create a thin layer.

How should I apply the light on the sand?

Apply the light on the sand using a synthetic filbert brush with chunky paint. This technique mimics the texture of sand and detritus, adding realism to the scene.

What is the purpose of using a cool gray for shadows on the beach?

A cool gray is used for shadows to reflect the surrounding environment, with some parts pushed towards green. This creates soft, light-filled shadows that match the airy feel of the scene.

How can I create texture in my beach painting?

To create texture, you can use a palette knife to drag out the paint, giving an impasto feel. This adds depth and interest to the painting.

12 Foliage painting technique

What colors do you start with when painting foliage?

Start with blue, red, and white to create the initial texture for the foliage. This combination provides a base that looks detailed from a distance.

How do you create a green color for the foliage?

To create a green color, start with a darker version of your initial mix and add yellow ochre to push it towards green. You can adjust by adding more green if needed.

What technique should be used to paint the base of foliage on sand?

Think about having a flat base for the foliage and then brush upwards to give the effect of growth from the sand, considering the angle of the sand dune.

How can you neutralize a green color?

To neutralize a green color, add red to it. This will grey it down because red and green are opposite each other on the color wheel.

Why is it important to vary the color and value in dark shapes?

Varying the color and value in dark shapes makes the painting more interesting. Breaking dark shapes into a variety of the main color and pushing it around the color wheel adds depth and interest.

How should you treat large light areas in a painting?

In large light areas, like the sky, avoid using a flat color. Instead, create gradations and push the color slightly around the color wheel to add variety and interest.

Why is variety important in a painting?

Variety is important because it keeps the painting engaging and visually interesting. Without variety, a painting may not hold attention for long.

13 Adding details and texture

How can I create a broken texture to imitate grass in my painting?

Use the paintbrush on its side to achieve a nice broken texture that can imitate grass, such as dune grasses.

What is a technique to make the painting look more natural?

Add little bits of flotsam and jetsam around the painting to make it look more natural.

How should I apply light and shadow in my painting?

First, warm up the shadow areas and then paint the lights on top to create depth and interest.

What is a technique for mixing paint directly on the canvas?

Under mix the paint on the palette and let it mix on the canvas to achieve more interesting paint effects and happy little surprises.

How can I adjust the shape of a tree in my painting?

If you don't like the shape of your tree, you can change it by going back in with the sky color and painting around it to carve out a new shape.

What should I consider when color matching with acrylics?

Acrylics dry a little darker, so mix your paint a little lighter than you think it will be to match the dry color accurately.

How can I keep acrylic paint from drying too quickly?

Use a stay-wet palette, spray your paint with water, or wet the back of a stretched canvas with a spray bottle to slow down the drying process.

What is impasto and how can it be used in painting?

Impasto means using thick paint. Apply it really thick to areas like the light sand to add texture and dimension to your painting.

How can I avoid making repetitive shapes in my painting?

Be aware of the tendency to make shapes the same size and shape. Try to vary them to create a more natural look, including the negative shapes of the sand.

14 Final touches and signing

What colors are suggested for adding final touches to the painting?

For the final touches, use white with a little yellow to add highlights and a bit of red for signing the painting.

How should I handle harsh lines in my painting?

If you notice a line that is too harsh, break it up to make it less noticeable and more integrated with the rest of the painting.

What is the suggested color for signing the painting?

Use a little bit of red to sign your painting, which will stand out nicely against the other colors.

15 Artistic expression and takeaway

What is the main takeaway from this lesson segment?

The main takeaway is to feel free to adjust a scene, photograph, or image to highlight the elements you love most. This helps convey your feelings about the scene to the viewer.

How can an artist express their feelings about a scene?

An artist can express their feelings by accentuating the elements they love about the scene, such as making clouds bigger or light warmer, to help the viewer notice and connect with those aspects.

Why should you adjust the design and coloring of a scene?

Adjusting the design and coloring helps to accentuate the elements you love, making it easier for the viewer to feel and connect with what you find beautiful about the scene.

What specific elements did the instructor accentuate in this lesson?

In this lesson, the instructor accentuated the towering clouds and the warm sunlight by making the clouds bigger and the light warmer.

Why is it important to change an image or scene when painting?

Changing an image or scene is important to expressively highlight the things you love about it, allowing you to share those feelings with your audience.

Summary & Key Takeaways

In this chapter, I set out to guide you through the process of capturing the mesmerizing beauty of tropical skies with front lighting. From the initial block-in to the final details, we've explored how to harness the warm, bold colors of a sunset and the subtle gradations of light and shadow that front lighting offers. My hope is that you now feel more confident in using these techniques to create your own expressive skies, filled with depth and atmosphere.

We've delved into the importance of preparing your canvas with a warm base layer and protecting it to maintain the integrity of your painting. By carefully selecting your palette and understanding the nuances of color mixing, you've learned to create dynamic skies and clouds that convey movement and emotion. The journey through painting the ocean and beach has shown how to use texture and color to bring your scene to life.

As you continue your painting journey, remember that each brushstroke is an opportunity for expression. Embrace the unexpected, and let your artistic instincts guide you. I hope this chapter has inspired you to explore new techniques and to see the world through the lens of a painter, ever curious and eager to capture the beauty around you.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Embrace the bold, warm colors of a sunset to enhance your sky.
- Use front lighting to create subtle depth with light and shadow.
- Prepare your canvas with a warm base layer for color harmony.
- Protect your base layer with gloss medium varnish if using interactive acrylics.
- Select a palette that allows for vibrant and harmonious color mixing.
- Work from light to dark to maintain color vibrancy in the sky.
- Use impasto techniques to add texture and depth to clouds.
- Vary shapes and colors to keep your painting engaging and natural.



Tropical Beach 12x12" Acrylic on Board

Student Critiques

Club members painted their own versions of this scene and I critiqued each one. Their paintings — and my feedback — are a wonderful way to see this lesson's ideas in action.

“Expressive Skies after Richard Robinson, 12x12 acrylic on hardboard” by Rachel Chard



Expressive Skies after Richard Robinson, 12x12 acrylic on hardboard

Nice work, Rachel. You have executed a very carefully observed painting with good drawing skills and fine colour perception. Your cloud is particularly interesting in all of its subtle transitions and details.

Just a couple of points to think about. You've made the bases your foliage very clear cut against the sand which gives the appearance of the day man made thing, and a bit cut out rather than joined to the sand. To avoid that look simply add some smudgy darkness around the bases and it will look more natural. Secondly, if you are trying to loosen up your painting style I suggest you use much larger brushes. Good job.

“Expressive Skies 11 x 14 Oil on Linen” by Louise Villegas



Expressive Skies 11 x 14 Oil on Linen

Some lovely angelic clouds there, Louise! Very uplifting. I almost expected Jesus to be coming around the corner on a donkey. They are particularly gorgeous shapes with a nice variety of soft and hard edges. I like the colour transitions you have from mauves to pinks to yellows which makes them all the more beautiful and interesting. The grasses have come up very well - those fine dark accents add a lot of realism in an elegant way.

The only thing I would like to see different is the palm trees done with a little more panache rather than careful drawing.

Here is a great lesson for painting palm trees: <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/245-Tropical-Island>

“"Expressive Skies" second attempt at the cloud, in acrylics, by Eric Hillmer, Toronto. ON, Canada.” by **Eric Hillmer**



"Expressive Skies" second attempt at the cloud, in acrylics, by Eric Hillmer, Toronto. ON, Canada.

Hi Eric, the large cloud shape this second attempt is an improvement on the initial one. What's great about it is that it has created a large flat shape for the palm trees to strut their stuff on.

You've done great with the bushes and grasses too.

It does look like you are having trouble creating shapes with soft edges.

With acrylics it is difficult to produce these soft edges once the paint has dried but there are a few things you can do to keep the acrylic paint wet for longer.

1. Use more paint. Big piles of paint on your palette will dry much more slowly.
2. Mist your palette and painting everything few minutes with a fine water spray bottle.
3. Use re-wettable acrylics like Chroma interactive acrylics or Golden Open acrylics.
4. Use a retarder medium to slow the drying time.
5. Plan your colour transitions through big shapes and premix those colours on your palette. If those colours are dissimilar use separate brushes for each colour.
6. If using a stretched canvas on a frame you can spray water on the back of the canvas to extend drying time.

7. Plan each section you are going to paint and execute it quickly.

I hope that helps.

“Expressive Skies 12x12 Oil on Canvas” by Nancy Newton



Expressive Skies 12x12 Oil on Canvas

Nice design, Nancy. Very expressive! I love the sharp repeated shapes you have employed in the clouds and the beach which brings a sense of design unity to the whole painting. Nicely done.

This new lesson talks about this concept in more detail: <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/258-The-Dancing-Pine>

With all of that impasto paint in the cloud I would want to see thick impasto in the foreground to balance that out as well otherwise the cloud seems to come closer than the foreground.