



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

In this chapter, we'll embark on a journey to capture the breathtaking beauty of expressive skies, focusing on a scene that features towering clouds illuminated by the warm, golden light of a tropical sunset. This lesson is designed to help you transform your landscape paintings by enhancing the sky, a key ingredient often overlooked. We'll delve into the art of improving upon photographs for painting, using your heart to design, and understanding the nuances of front lighting. The scene I've chosen is particularly rewarding because it allows us to explore the dramatic interplay of light and shadow, with the volcanic fog adding an orangey glow that enriches the sky's palette. You'll learn to create variety in your clouds through shape, color, edge, and texture, making your paintings more engaging and expressive. By the end of this chapter, you'll have the skills to bring attention to the beauty you see, using just six steps to guide you through the process. Whether you're working with acrylics or oils, this lesson will inspire you to experiment and infuse your work with the vibrant energy of expressive skies.



Tropical Beach 12x12" Acrylic on Board



REFERENCE PHOTO

The scene as Richard found it.

Materials

Gather these materials before you start. 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



Capture Tropical Skies

Visualize a scene with towering clouds and warm sunset light typical of tropical regions. Consider the effect of volcanic fog, which adds a warm, orangey glow to the sky during sunrise and sunset.

Focus on Front Lighting

Choose a front-lit cloud situation to emphasize the warm light. This lighting creates an opportunity to use large, bold, flat colors, enhancing the drama and beauty of the scene.

PRO TIP

Use volcanic fog effects to add a warm, orangey glow to your sunset or sunrise skies.

2 Front lighting explanation



Understand Front Lighting

Observe how in a front lighting situation, the light source is behind you, causing shadows to be pushed to the edges of objects. This creates a subtle gradation from light to shadow on curved surfaces.

Identify Shadow Placement

Notice that the darkest shadows appear on the sides of objects, enhancing the rounded forms. This subtle transition from light to shadow adds depth without flattening the scene.

Appreciate the Warmth

Recognize the beauty of front lighting during the evening, with its warm tones and yellow hues from the setting sun. This lighting effect can add a pleasing and inviting atmosphere to your painting.

PRO TIP

Place the darkest shadows on the sides of objects to emphasize their rounded forms.

3 Design adjustments for emphasis



Expand the Cloud

Increase the size of the cloud on your canvas to make it the focal point of your painting. This will allow more warm colors to be incorporated, enhancing the overall impact of the scene.

Reduce Foliage Size

Trim down the size of the foliage to give the cloud more space to dominate the composition. This adjustment will help emphasize the cloud as the most spectacular element.

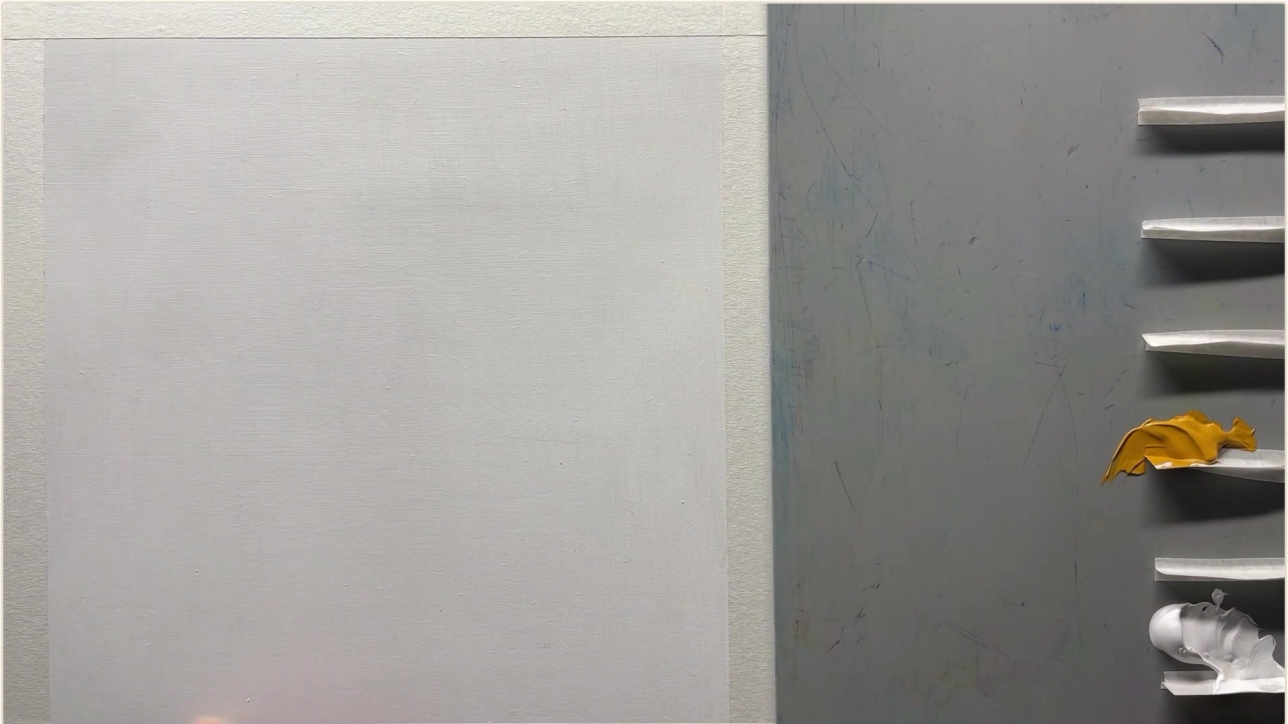
Enhance Warmth

Add more warmth to the cloud and the sky by incorporating warm colors. Lighten and warm the large shadow area to enhance the overall warmth and cohesion of the scene.

PRO TIP

Increase the cloud size to make it the focal point and allow more warm colors to enrich the painting.

4 Preparing the canvas and base layer



Prepare the Canvas

Use a 12 by 12 inch MDF board with two or three coats of acrylic primer. This provides a smooth, non-absorbent surface for your painting.

Mix Base Layer Color

Combine yellow ochre and white to create a warm base layer. This will accentuate the warm colors in your sunset scene.

Apply Base Layer

Use a large flat synthetic brush, dipped in water, to apply the base layer. A big brush allows you to cover the canvas quickly and evenly.

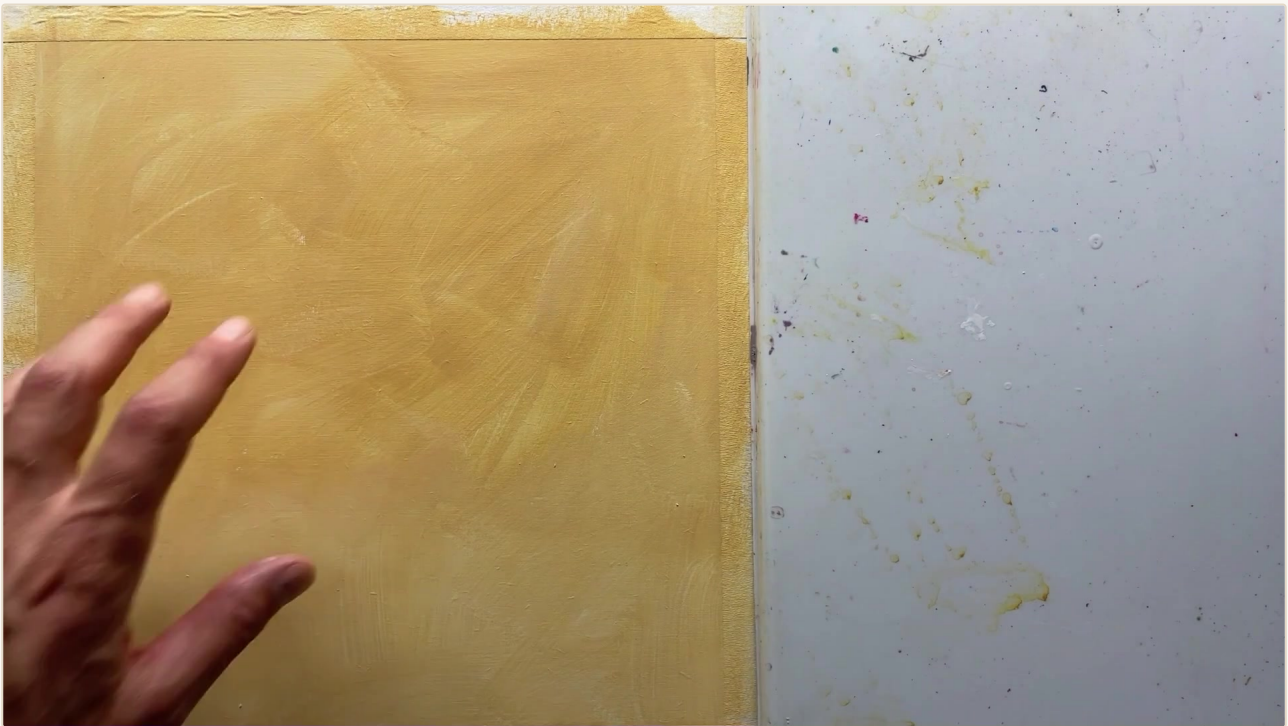
Benefits of the Base Layer

The base layer reduces the absorbency of the surface, allowing subsequent layers to sit nicely on top. It also creates color harmony and a shimmering effect as warm tones show through cooler layers.

PRO TIP

Always dip brushes in water when using acrylics, unless using a dry brush for softening edges or blending.

5 Protecting the base layer



Protect the Base Layer

Apply a gloss medium varnish to the dried base layer to protect it before adding the next layer. This step is necessary for reworkable acrylics to prevent the new layer from activating the previous one. If using normal acrylics, this step is not required.

Prepare the Varnish

Dilute the gloss medium varnish with a little water to improve its flow. Apply it evenly over the surface and allow it to dry completely before proceeding with the next layer of paint.

Alternative Methods

For oil paintings, start with an acrylic or oil base and use a fast-drying medium like Liquin to speed up drying. Avoid adding white to the mixture, as it dries slower. Alternatively, use gloss varnish as a painting medium for the first layer to seal it effectively.

PRO TIP

Dilute gloss medium varnish with water for better flow when protecting the base layer.

6 Palette and brush selection



Prepare Your Palette

Select Phthalo Blue, Napsol Red Light, Brilliant Magenta, Yellow Ochre, Arilamide Yellow, and Titanium White for your palette. These colors will provide a range of tones suitable for expressive skies.

Consider Alternative Colors

If preferred, substitute Napsol Red Light with Cadmium Red Mid or Light. For a darker red, use Magenta or Alizarin. Replace Arilamide Yellow with Cadmium Yellow Light or Lemon Yellow if desired.

PRO TIP

Choose colors that suit your style and the mood you wish to convey in your painting.

7 Blocking in the sky



Prepare Your Brush

Use a synthetic flat brush with a crisp edge and long bristles. This type of brush holds a lot of paint, allowing your brushstrokes to go further and create a calligraphic effect.

Define the Horizon

Block in the horizon line and the line of the beach. Leave ample space for the sky to dominate the scene.

Start the Sky Gradation

Begin with a mix of white, a little yellow, and a tiny bit of phthalo blue to create a light green. Apply this to the canvas, allowing some areas to remain unpainted for texture.

Darken the Sky Gradually

Add more blue and white to your mix, slightly darkening the color. Apply this above the previous layer, ensuring the color is darker to achieve a smooth gradation.

Blend the Colors

With softer strokes, blend the new layer into the previous one. This creates a seamless transition, reflecting the light source coming from behind and slightly to the side.

PRO TIP

Work from light to dark to prevent dulling the colors and achieve a glowing light effect.

8 Painting the clouds



Add Warmth to the Clouds

Wash your brush and mix yellow ochre with white to create a warm tone. Apply this mixture to the bottom of the clouds to add warmth and depth. Paint a few warm clouds to set the base for the sky.

Create Mauve Shadows

Mix magenta, white, and a little blue to form a mauve color. Use this to paint the shadow side of the clouds, focusing on broad, painterly strokes. Soften the edges by smudging with your finger for a natural look.

Introduce Mid-Tones

Mix a slightly lighter color using a bit of red and yellow. This should be a half-tone between the dark and light areas. Apply it with soft edges to create a warm, light feeling in the painting.

Apply Lighter Highlights

Mix white with a tiny touch of yellow and yellow ochre for a lighter, warmer color. Use a palette knife to apply thick, impasto strokes. Check the color on your palette for both value and temperature before applying.

Add Atmospheric Perspective

As the cloud moves toward the horizon, mix in a little blue to the existing color to create a darker, bluer tone. Use this to paint smaller details and create atmospheric perspective. Soften transitions with water for a dynamic effect.

PRO TIP

Soften edges by smudging with your finger to create natural-looking clouds.

9 Adjusting cloud colors and shapes



Enhance Cloud Colors

Add more color to the cloud using a balanced mix of blue and red. Be mindful that phthalo blue is strong, so use it sparingly to adjust the hue. This will create a more vibrant and interesting cloud formation.

Adjust Cloud Shape

Extend the cloud slightly to improve its overall appearance. Focus on creating a crisp form with hard edges to add interest. Scrape off any excess paint if needed to refine the shape.

Add Darker Accents

Incorporate a few darker accent clouds using the same blue and red mix. These accents will dry darker, adding depth and contrast to the sky.

Soften Edges

Lightly spray the canvas to keep the colors wet, then softly feather the edges of the clouds. This technique creates soft transitions and enhances the overall softness of the sky.

PRO TIP

Use a light spray to keep colors wet, allowing for easier blending and softer edges.

10 Painting the ocean



Create the Ocean Base

Mix a little yellow ochre with blue to create a dark green tone. Use this to paint the wave face, adding depth to the ocean.

Add Horizon Details

Switch to a smaller brush and mix a slightly lighter shade to paint the horizon where the water is calmer. This area reflects more of the sky.

Paint Reflections on Sand

Go slightly lighter again and apply this color to the flat water on the sand, reflecting the sky. This adds realism to the scene.

Add Foam and Waves

Use white with a tiny bit of yellow to add foam, warming it with the golden hour sunlight. Consider adding another small wave for visual interest.

PRO TIP

Ensure the paint is dry before using tape to achieve clean lines.

11 Painting the beach and shadows



Lay in the Warm Base Color

Apply a thin layer of warm color to the beach area. This serves as the base and will mix slightly with the paint applied later. Ensure the layer is even but not too thick.

Add Light to the Sand

Use a synthetic filbert brush to apply chunky, light paint to the sand. This texture represents sand and debris, adding interest and realism. Leave some areas with thicker paint to capture the natural texture.

Create Cool Gray Shadows

Mix white, blue, and a touch of yellow to create a cool gray. Push the color slightly towards green to reflect the surrounding environment. Apply this mix to form soft shadows on the beach, capturing the light-filled atmosphere.

Enhance Texture with Impasto

Use a palette knife to add impasto texture to the shadows. Drag the flat of the knife across the surface for a textured effect. Adjust the color slightly towards mauve to add depth and variation.

PRO TIP

Use a palette knife to create textured effects by dragging it flat across the surface for an impasto look.

12 Foliage painting technique



Create Base Texture

Mix blue, red, and white to start creating the foliage texture. Apply the paint with random brushstrokes to achieve a textured look that mimics detailed foliage from a distance.

Develop Darker Tones

Mix a darker version of your initial color by adding yellow ochre to push it towards green. Consider adding more green for depth. Apply this to the base of the foliage, brushing upwards to simulate growth from the sand.

Adjust for Warmth

To create a warmer tone, add more red to your mix. Use this to neutralize the green by greying it down, as red and green are complementary colors.

Introduce Lighter Greens

Mix a lighter, more colorful green for the shadow areas. Break up the dark shapes with variations of the main color, adjusting around the color wheel for interest.

Enhance Light Areas

For large light areas like the sky, avoid flat color. Create gradations by bending and pushing the color slightly around the color wheel to add variety and maintain viewer interest.

PRO TIP

To neutralize a green, add red to grey it down, as they are opposites on the color wheel.

13 Adding details and texture



Create Broken Texture

Use the side of your paintbrush to create a broken texture that imitates grass. This technique adds a natural look to your painting.

Add Flotsam and Jetsam

Add small bits of paint around the area to simulate natural debris. This enhances the realism of your scene.

Warm Up Shadow Areas

Warm up the shadow areas by lightly dragging your brush to create texture. This prepares the area for adding light.

Paint Light Over Shadows

Mix yellow ochre with bright yellow and apply it over the warmed-up shadows. Allow the paint to mix on the canvas for interesting effects.

Adjust Tree Shapes

If you're unhappy with the shape of your trees, use the sky color to paint around them and adjust. Match the color carefully, as acrylics dry darker.

Add Warm Impasto Color

Apply a thick impasto color for the light sand. Use thick paint to create a rich, textured effect.

Vary Shape Sizes

Avoid making all shapes the same size and shape. Vary them to create a more natural appearance.

PRO TIP

Spray the back of your canvas with water to prevent acrylic paint from drying too quickly.

14 Final touches and signing



Enhance Tree Trunks

Mix some white with a little yellow to create a soft highlight color. Apply this mix to the tree trunks to add dimension and interest. Vary the placement of the highlights to create a natural look.

Sign Your Painting

Use a little bit of red to sign your painting. Choose a spot that is visible but does not distract from the composition.

Remove the Tape

Carefully pull off the tape from the edges of your painting. If you notice any harsh lines, gently break them up to create a softer transition.

PRO TIP

Use a little bit of red to sign your painting, ensuring it complements the overall color scheme.

15 Artistic expression and takeaway



Adjust the Scene

Feel free to adjust the scene or photograph to highlight what you love most. Your role as an artist is to convey your feelings about the world and your experiences.

Accentuate Key Elements

Identify the elements you love about the scene and accentuate them. For example, make clouds more towering or sunlight warmer to draw attention to these features.

Expressive Connection

By exaggerating certain aspects, you make it easier for viewers to connect with what you love about the scene. This enhances their experience and understanding of your artistic expression.

PRO TIP

Don't be afraid to modify an image to expressively highlight what you love about the scene.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by visualizing the dramatic beauty of tropical skies, where towering clouds meet the warm glow of a sunset. Begin by selecting a front-lit scene to capture the essence of warm, bold colors that define these expressive skies. As you progress, focus on the subtle gradations from light to shadow, which add depth and dimension to your composition.

Prepare your canvas with care, ensuring a smooth base layer that harmonizes with the warm tones of your scene. Use a well-chosen palette to bring your vision to life, selecting colors that convey the mood and atmosphere you wish to express. As you block in the sky and paint the clouds, pay attention to the transitions and textures that create a natural and inviting atmosphere.

In the final stages, add details and texture to enhance realism and interest. Use techniques like impasto and soft blending to capture the vibrant energy of the scene. Remember to sign your work with a touch of color that complements your composition, and don't hesitate to modify elements to highlight what you love most. Your painting is a reflection of your unique perspective and artistic expression.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use volcanic fog effects to add a warm, orangey glow to your skies.
- Place the darkest shadows on the sides of objects to emphasize their rounded forms.
- Increase the cloud size to make it the focal point and allow more warm colors to enrich the painting.
- Always dip brushes in water when using acrylics, unless using a dry brush for softening edges or blending.
- Work from light to dark to prevent dulling the colors and achieve a glowing light effect.
- Soften edges by smudging with your finger to create natural-looking clouds.
- Use a light spray to keep colors wet, allowing for easier blending and softer edges.
- Don't be afraid to modify an image to expressively highlight what you love about the scene.



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.