



Expressive Skies - Back Lighting

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/257-Expressive-Skies-Back-Lighting>

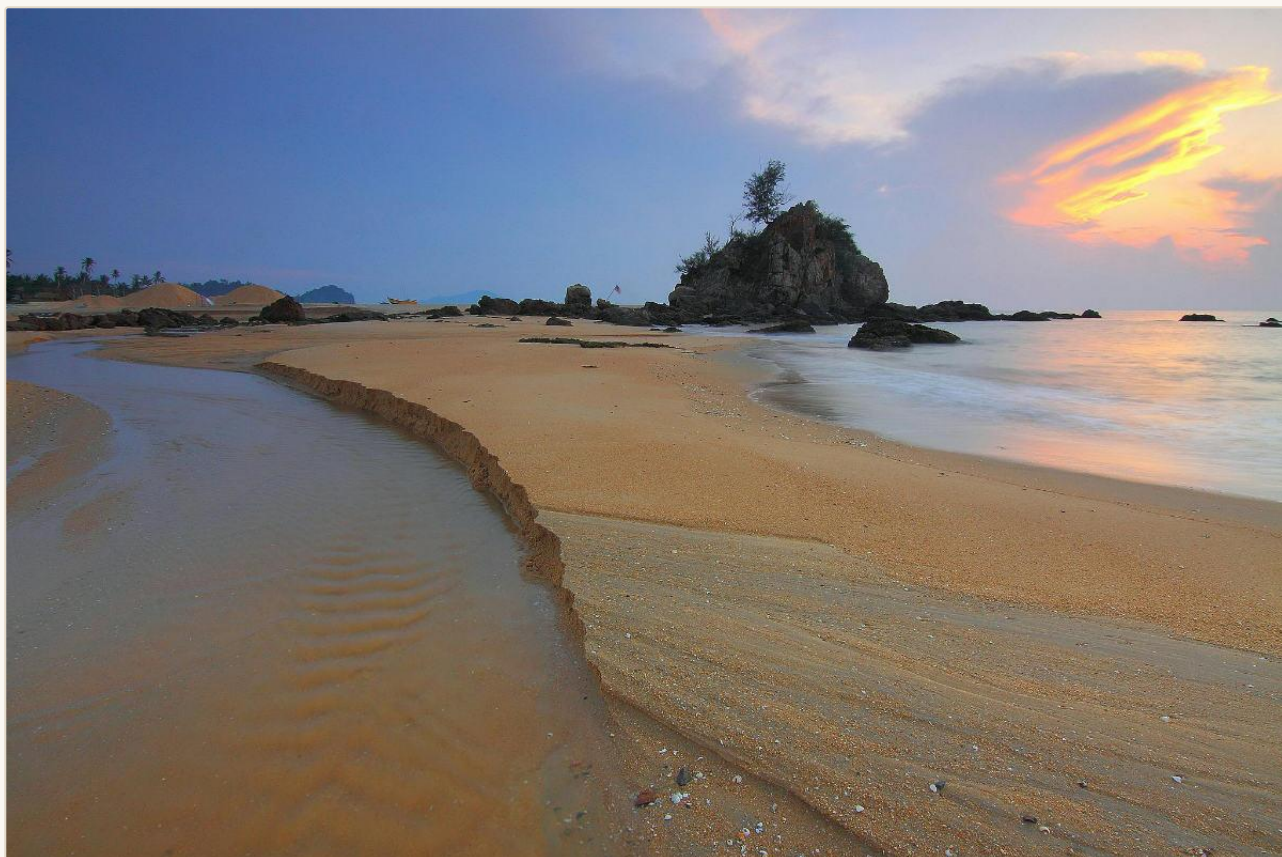
MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, we're diving into the art of painting expressive skies with a focus on back lighting—a key element often overlooked in landscape painting. This scene offers a captivating opportunity to explore the drama of towering clouds and the subtle gradation of the sky. As artists, our task is to highlight the beauty we perceive, and this lesson will guide you in enhancing and exaggerating those elements that captivate you. We'll start with the sky's gradation, painting into a wet layer to capture the warmth of sunset light, and then move on to creating expressive clouds with a variety of shapes, colors, edges, and textures. You'll learn how to use back lighting to create rim-lighting effects, adding depth and interest to your work. Using a large synthetic flat brush, we'll tackle the shadows on rocks and wet sand, ensuring they lead the viewer's eye to the majestic clouds above. This lesson is designed to be accessible, whether you're working in acrylics or oils, and I'll guide you through each step, encouraging you to experiment and infuse your own style into the process. Enjoy the journey of bringing your skies to life!

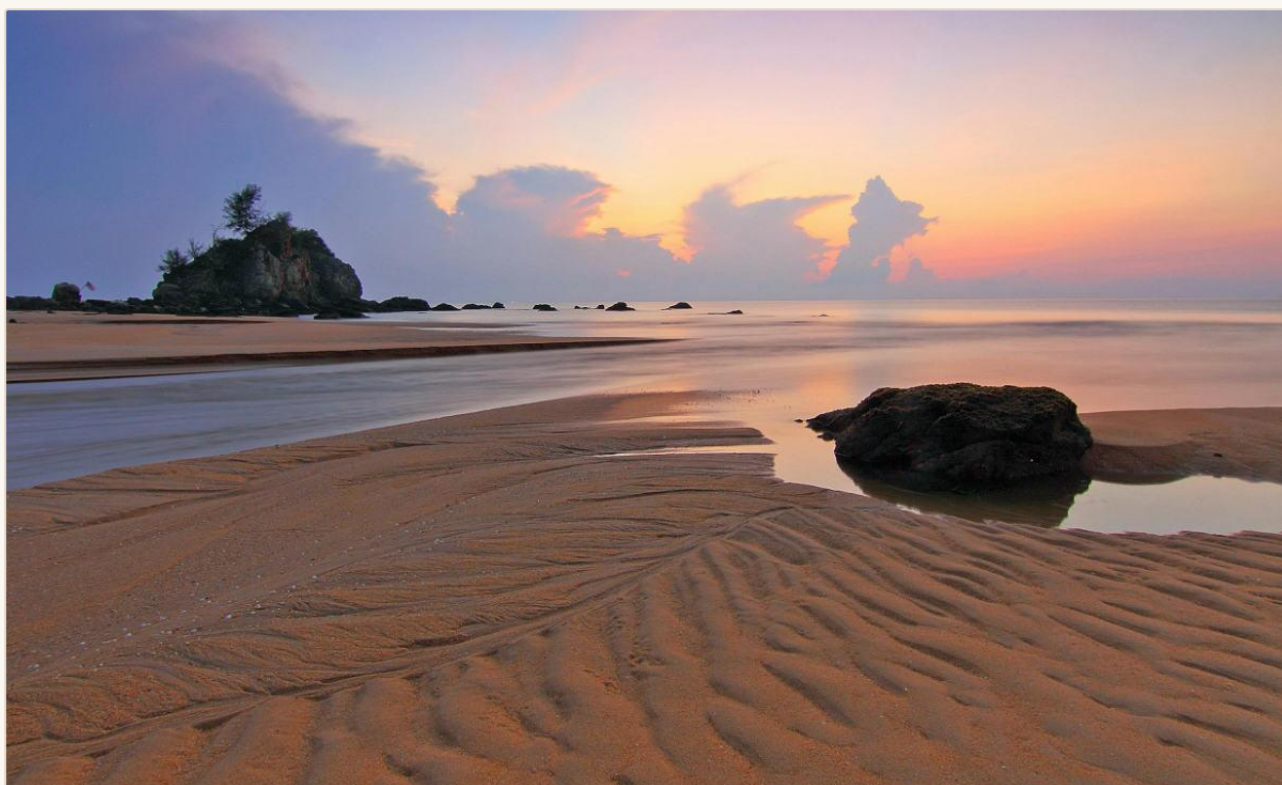


Terengganu 12x12" Acrylic on Board



REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 2

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 Painting the sky base

Prepare the Sky Base

Cover the sky and foreground with a layer of white paint to create a 'couch' for painting. This wet layer allows for smooth paint flow and easy gradations, especially in skies.

Adjust Paint Consistency

Thin down the white paint with a little water if it's too thick. Aim for a wet layer, not a thick one, to ensure the paint flows easily into the white base.

Maintain Moisture

Keep the white paint layer wet by occasionally squirting it with a water bottle. This helps maintain the moisture needed for smooth blending.

Apply Sunset Pink

Add a little red at the bottom of the sky to create a sunset pink effect. Blend this color smoothly into the white base to achieve a nice gradient.

Blend into Foreground

Block the red paint in at the bottom and smooth it out across the bottom and down into the water in the foreground. This ensures a smooth transition and blending with the white base.

2 Creating sky gradations

Apply Yellow and White

Mix yellow with a little bit of white and apply it higher up in the sky area, away from the pink. Work your way outwards to prevent the yellow from being affected by the pink.

Spray for Smoother Blending

Spray the painting lightly to keep the paint wet, allowing for smoother blending as you work down into the pink areas.

Blend with Phthalo Blue

Wash your brush, then mix a little bit of phthalo blue with white. Start at the very top and work your way down to blend smoothly with the yellow.

Use Varied Brushstrokes

Use your brushstrokes in various directions and work quickly to keep the paint wet for a smooth blend. Use the tip of the brush to soften the transition.

Darken Foreground Reflection

Add more blue and a little red to the mix for the foreground reflection. Work your way up into the pink, blending smoothly with the tip of the brush.

3 Painting clouds

Mix a Darker Blue

Combine white, blue, and a little touch of red to create a blue that's slightly darker than the pink you have. This mixture will help the paint sit on top of the wet or semi-wet layer.

Use Thicker Paint

Apply thicker paint to ensure it sits on top of the wet or semi-wet layer. This provides better coverage and allows the colors to stand out.

Slow Down Drying Time

Use retarder medium to slow down the drying time of your acrylics. Dip into it as you mix colors or add it to your spray bottle to keep the paint workable longer.

Achieve Soft and Hard Edges

Work quickly to achieve soft edges while the paint is still wet. For hard edges, let some areas dry slightly or use a more deliberate application technique. Smush some areas with your finger for softer transitions.

Paint the Cloud Base

Paint a straight line across the base of the clouds. It doesn't need to be a hard edge, but aim for it to be fairly straight, even if it has a slight curve.

4 Adding cloud details

Create Wind-Blown Cloud Tops

Sway your brush over the cloud, moving it back and forth as if the cloud is dancing. This technique helps depict the movement of wind at higher altitudes.

Smooth and Dynamic Cloud Bases

Smooth out some brushstrokes at the bottom of the clouds while leaving them more obvious at the top. This creates a dynamic effect and adds interest to your clouds.

Vary Edge Hardness for Depth

Use a combination of hard, soft, and very soft edges when painting clouds. This variety guides the viewer's eye and adds dimension to the clouds.

Reflect Cloud Darkness in Water

Drag your brush across the water to create texture, mimicking the effect of a breeze. This technique helps integrate the sky and water elements in your painting.

5 Backlit cloud highlights

Prepare Your Brush

Give the brush a good wash and switch to a smaller brush. Wet the brush, then dry it slightly on paper so it's just damp. This helps in applying the paint smoothly.

Mix Light Orange

Mix a light orange color by starting with white paint, then adding a little yellow and a touch of red. The color should be slightly lighter than the cloud in shadow.

Maintain a Clean Brush

Keeping the brush clean is crucial because the wet paint is dark and cool, and it can mix with the new paint each time you touch it. Clean the brush and use fresh paint to prevent the colors from merging together.

Apply Highlights

Apply the paint very lightly with the tip of the brush. If the brush picks up any unwanted color, like blue, wipe it off and pick up more paint. This ensures the highlights remain distinct and don't blend into the rest of the cloud.

Create Depth with Highlights

The purpose of adding backlit highlights is to show that the Sun is behind the clouds, lighting up their underside and rim. This adds depth and realism to the painting.

6 Painting the island and rocks

Mix Neutral Colors

Create a neutral color by mixing blue and red together. This combination includes the three primary colors and results in a color that is nearly black. Be cautious with this mix as it can become too dark.

Use Crisp Synthetic Brushes

Select crisp synthetic brushes for their ability to provide a sharp edge. These brushes help you create precise, sharp shapes in your painting.

Maintain Dark Colors

When painting over wet paint, keep replenishing the dark paint on your brush to maintain its darkness. Wipe off the brush, pick up fresh paint, and continue applying it to ensure the color stays dark.

Add Trees with a Filbert Brush

Use the very tip of the corner of a filbert brush to make small dabs. This technique helps create the shape of a tree effectively.

Add Texture to Straight Lines

Adjust straight lines to avoid symmetry, adding texture to make the painting feel more natural and balanced.

7 Adding color and detail to rocks

Ensure Rock Stability

Keep the bases of the rocks horizontal and straight to ensure they appear stable and grounded in the painting. For the foreground rock, make the base slightly rounded as it is closer to the viewer.

Add Warmth to Rock Silhouettes

Lighten the value of the rocks with white and add a touch of red to reflect the warmth of the sky. Use the brush sideways to block in areas of color, enhancing the rock silhouette.

Incorporate Color Variations

Add variation by using yellow ochre for lighter edges and faces, and blue for lighter faces on the opposite side. This creates depth and interest in the rock formations.

Depict Foliage

Mix a very dark grey-green by adding a touch of yellow to depict foliage growing on the tops of the rocks. This adds a natural element to the scene.

Reflect Sky Warmth

Add a touch of yellow to the rocks to push the color towards orange, especially on the top planes. This helps the rocks reflect the warmth of the sky effectively.

Distinguish Foreground Rocks

To bring a rock forward in the composition, add a touch of light and warmth to distinguish it from the rock behind. Adjust the light and warmth as needed to achieve the desired effect.

8 Painting rock reflections

Create the Reflection Base

Start by painting a dark color close to the rock to create the reflection. This establishes the foundation for the reflective surface.

Introduce Light into the Reflection

Add some yellow ochre and a little bright yellow to the dark base. This simulates clear water by introducing more light into the reflection.

Enhance Realism with Crisp Edges

Ensure there is a very crisp edge where the rock reflection meets the sky reflection. This sharp contrast enhances the realism of the scene.

9 Painting the sand

Mix the Base Sand Color

Start with red, as it's the closest color to brown, which is the color of sand. Add a little blue to tone down the punchy mix of red and yellow, creating a brown color. If the color appears too dark, add a little bit of white to lighten it.

Adjust the Sand Color

Add more warm colors, like red and yellow, if the sand color becomes too gray. As the sand moves further away, it should get a little bit lighter due to more light exposure. Use big brushstrokes with lots of paint for the sand in the foreground.

Define Sand Edges

Use a pencil to draw the edge of the sand if you want to ensure the shapes are nice and accurate. Paint very crisp edges where the sand meets the water to create a clear distinction.

Create Soft Shadows

Add more yellow ochre and white to soften the sand color and help create a soft shadow with very soft edges. When the sand mixes with a little bit of the sky color, it creates the effect of the sky reflecting off wet sand.

Detail Around Rocks

Be careful to draw around the rocks quite accurately. Switch to a smaller brush if it helps, or use a large crisp brush for clean and defined edges.

10 Adding sand shadows and details

Create Big Shapes

Use a brush that allows for crisp shapes to create big shapes with a single brushstroke. Control the brush to achieve the desired shape effectively.

Add Highlights and Shadows

After forming the big shapes, add little highlights and shadows on top to enhance the details and depth of your painting.

Mix Shadow Color

Mix a slightly darker color by reducing the amount of white in your mix. This will help create a darker tone suitable for depicting shadowed areas.

Place Sandbank Shadows

Place the shadows on the side of the sandbank opposite the light source. Since the sun is coming from one side, the shadow should be on the opposite side of the sandbank.

Apply and Blend Shadow Color

Apply the darker color thickly on the sandbank and then taper it out to nothing. This creates a gradient effect that mimics natural shadows.

Use Gray-Blue for Shadows

Use a more gray-blue color for the shadows to provide a natural and subtle contrast against the sand.

11 Final touches and seagulls

Capture the Essence

Use the photo for inspiration rather than copying it blindly. Aim to capture the essence of the scene rather than replicate every detail.

Mix Blue-Grey for Reflections

Mix a blue-grey color to represent the dark reflection of the big rock and the tumultuous water that reflects the sky.

Add Seagulls

Use the blue-grey color to add a little seagull to the scene. Include a few seagulls doing their sunset dance in the sky for dynamic movement.

Lighten Foliage

If your foliage looks too heavy, add a few little sky holes in it. This will help lighten the appearance and add depth.

Paint Sunlight on Sand

Mix a slightly lighter brown to paint sunlight on the forward-facing edges of the wet sand. Remember that the paint will dry darker, so make it lighter than you think is necessary.

Add Sunlight to Rock

Add a little sunlight on the rock using a slightly lighter brown. Make it a little redder as it gets closer to the viewer to add depth and warmth.

Dot Shells with Blue-Grey

Use a medium blue-grey to dot shells around the scene. Avoid creating a pattern and vary the lightness of some shells to add interest.

12 Finishing touches and encouragement

Use Mid Value Blue-Grey

Apply a mid value blue-grey to create a strong contrast against the sky, making it appear darker and more defined.

Switch to a Smaller Brush

If your brush is too large for detail work, switch to a smaller brush, such as a signing brush, to gain better control over fine details.

Correct Mistakes with Sky Color

To fix mistakes, paint the sky back around the area. Make the sky color slightly lighter than intended, as it will dry darker.

Enhance Sky Vibrancy

Increase the vibrancy of the sky by adding more red, yellow, blue, or violet. This will create a more vibrant background that enhances the colors painted over it.

Customize Elements

Feel free to customize elements like clouds and islands, shaping them to your preference for a personalized touch.

Share Your Work

After completing your painting, photograph it and upload it to the website to share with others and receive feedback.

Summary & Key Takeaways

In this lesson, you embarked on a journey to capture the beauty of expressive skies with backlighting. Begin by laying down a wet base of white paint to ensure smooth blending and gradations. Introduce colors gradually, starting with a sunset pink at the bottom, blending into yellows and blues as you move upwards. This creates a dynamic sky that sets the stage for your painting.

As you progress, focus on creating depth and movement in the clouds by using a combination of hard and soft edges. Use retarder medium to extend the drying time of your acrylics, allowing you to blend colors seamlessly. Pay attention to the details in the clouds and reflections, ensuring they convey the natural interplay of light and shadow.

Finally, bring your scene to life by adding details to the rocks, sand, and reflections. Use a variety of colors and brush techniques to add texture and dimension. Remember to personalize your painting by adjusting elements like clouds and islands to suit your vision. Once complete, share your masterpiece with others and enjoy the feedback from your painting community.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Keep the white paint layer wet by using a water bottle for smooth blending.
- Use retarder medium to slow down drying time and allow for better blending.
- Apply thicker paint for clouds to ensure it sits on top of the wet layer.
- Use a combination of hard, soft, and very soft edges to add dimension to clouds.
- Apply paint lightly with the tip of the brush to keep highlights distinct.
- Maintain the darkness of a color over wet paint by replenishing the paint on your brush.
- Use big brushstrokes with lots of paint for the sand in the foreground to create texture.
- Make the sky color lighter than intended, as it will dry darker.



Terengganu 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 Back Light - Oil on 12 x 12 canvas” by Louise Villegas



Expressive Skies Back Light - Oil on 12 x 12 canvas

Wow that's some punchy colour there Louise! Great cloud shapes, good drawing of the rocks, clean colour. If you grey the green reflection of the rock a little it'll look more natural. (Just add some red). Similarly, if you grey down the orange sand a little (just add blue) it'll look a little more natural too.

“Expressive Skies-Backlight” by Nancy Newton



Expressive Skies-Backlight

Lovely contrast here between the crisp sharp shapes and the billowing softness of the clouds. Nice! Only thing I'd implore you to do is use a finer brush for those flying gulls.

“Exhausting Skies! Reminds why this is my second ever acrylics. Dry within moments so no time to stop, rest and reflect.” by Ian States



Exhausting Skies! Reminds why this is my second ever acrylics. Dry within moments so no time to stop, rest and reflect.

Ooh - very dramatic! Nice one, Ian. Intensifying the colours in this and darkening the mid values has created a much more dynamic painting. Congratulations!

""Expressive Skies" in acrylics by Eric Hillmer, Toronto, ON Canada." by **Eric Hillmer**



"Expressive Skies" in acrylics by Eric Hillmer, Toronto, ON Canada.

Really good work on creating more interest in the rocks here Eric which is something I felt was lacking in my own piece.

Just be careful when you're adding lights into shadow areas though. This is supposed to be a backlit situation so none of the rocks in the shadow areas should have lights on them. Adding lights there changes the lighting situation, and the main thing we need to do if we want to paint more realistic landscapes is to maintain a consistent lighting situation across the whole scene. In other words, where is the light coming from, where are the shadows and where are the lights?