



# Expressive Skies - Back Lighting

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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

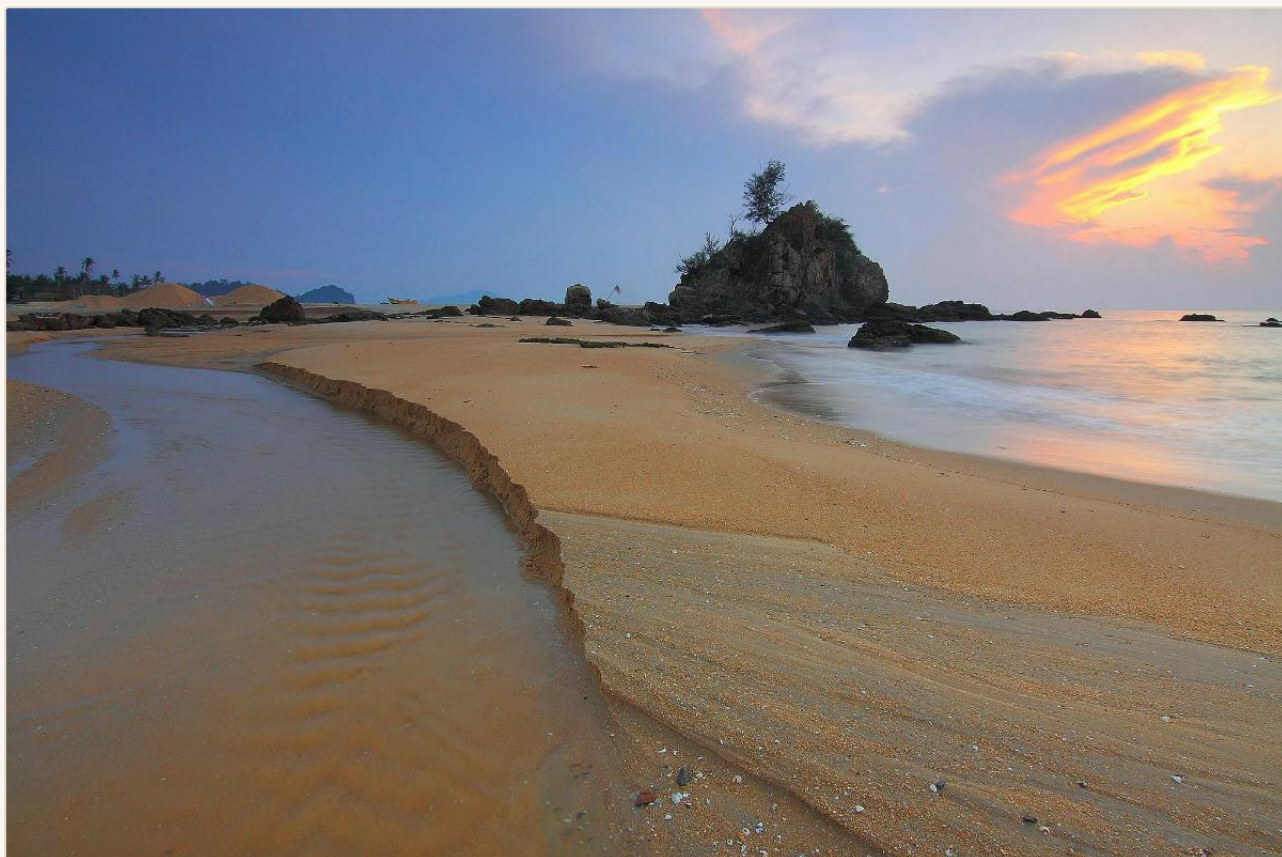
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In this chapter, we delve into the art of painting expressive skies, focusing on a captivating backlit scene from Malaysia at sunset. This lesson is a part of a larger course I'm developing, Expressive Skies, and offers a glimpse into the techniques we'll explore. The scene presents a unique opportunity to understand backlighting, where the sun is positioned directly in front of us, casting the island and clouds into shadow while highlighting their edges with a beautiful rim light. This setup creates a striking gradation in the sky, transitioning from warm light near the sun to cooler, darker hues as you move away. We'll explore how to capture this effect effortlessly in both acrylics and oils. The process is broken down into four simple steps: painting the sky's gradation, layering the expressive clouds, adding the rocky island, and finishing with the wet sand in the foreground. Each step is designed to be easy to follow, allowing you to experiment and enhance your own paintings. I invite you to enjoy this free lesson and share any feedback you might have, as it will help me refine the course to better suit your creative journey.



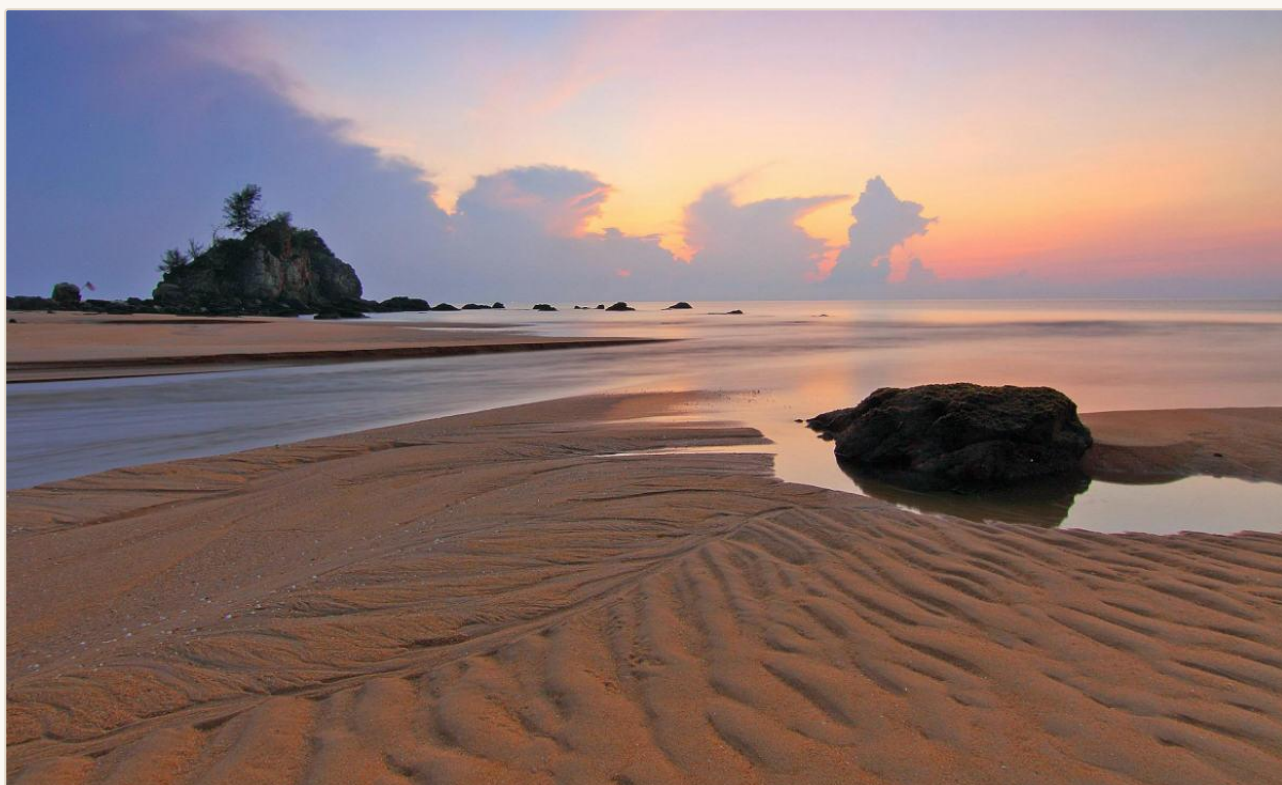
*Terengganu 12x12" Acrylic on Board*





**REFERENCE PHOTO 1**

*The scene as Richard found it.*



**REFERENCE PHOTO 2**

*The scene as Richard found it.*



# Materials

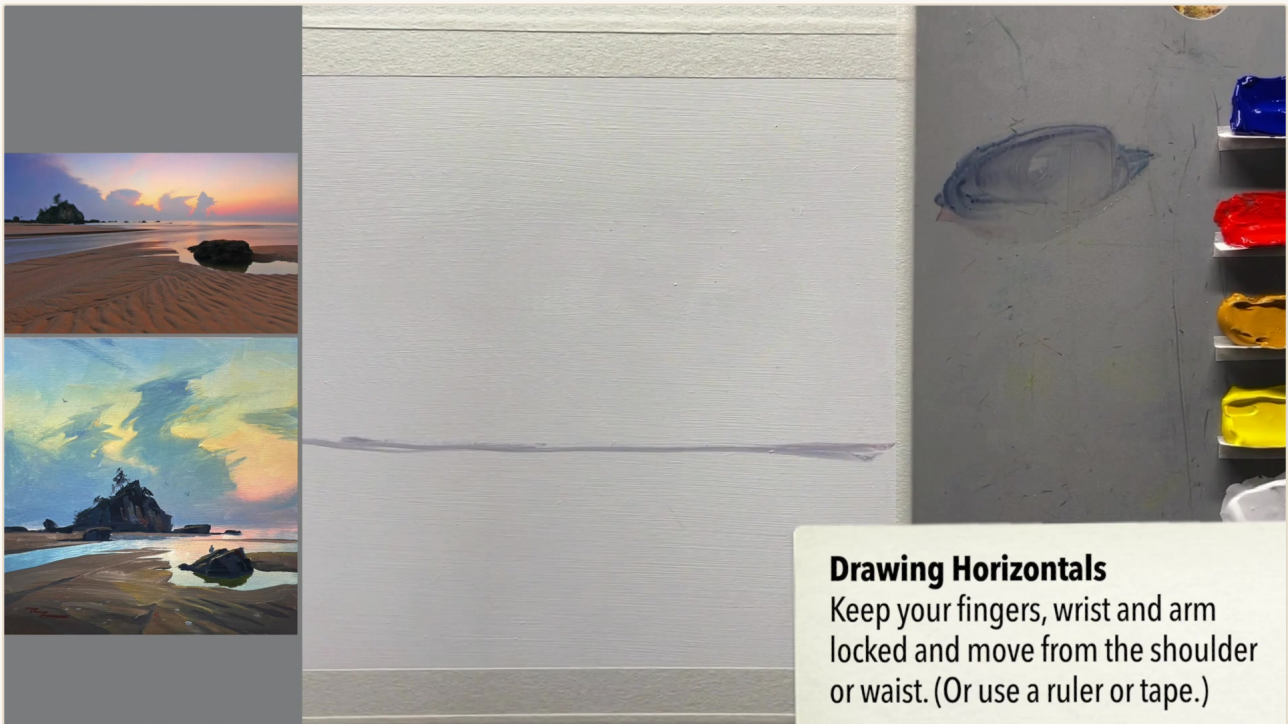
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Gather these materials before you start. If you don't have the exact same supplies, use what you have and substitute freely.

## 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 area and a bit of the foreground where the water will be with a thin layer of white paint. Thin the paint slightly with water if it's too thick, ensuring it's just wet enough for smooth paint flow.

### Maintain Wetness

Use a water bottle to lightly mist the painted area, keeping it wet. This ensures the paint remains workable for smooth gradations.

### Apply Sunset Pink

Mix a little red to create a sunset pink hue. Block this color in at the bottom of the sky, blending smoothly into the white base. Extend the color down into the water area for a cohesive look.

#### PRO TIP

*Keep the painted area wet by misting with water to allow for smooth blending and gradations.*

## 2 Creating sky gradations



### Add Yellow and White to the Sky

Mix yellow with a little bit of white. Start applying this mixture higher up in the sky, away from the pink area. Work your way outwards and downwards into the pink, ensuring a smooth transition. Keep the area wet with a light spray to help with blending.

### Introduce Blue to the Upper Sky

Clean your brush thoroughly before starting with blue. Mix a small amount of phthalo blue with white, being cautious as phthalo is very strong. Begin at the top of the sky, above the yellow, and work your way down. Use varied brushstrokes to maintain a smooth blend while the paint is wet.

### Darken the Foreground Reflection

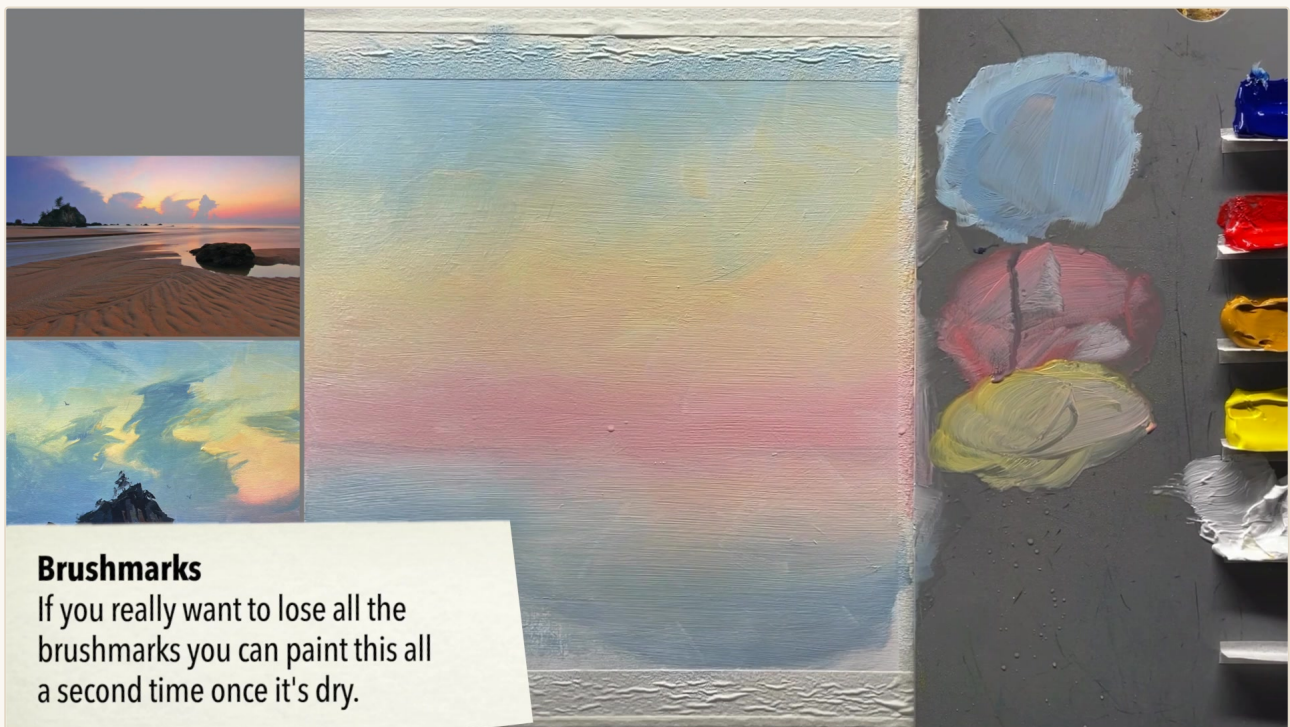
Mix more blue with a little red to darken the foreground reflection. Apply this mixture, working upwards into the pink, reversing the sky's gradient. Use the tip of the brush to blend smoothly, softening the transition.

#### PRO TIP

*Use varied brushstrokes and keep the paint wet to achieve smooth blends in the sky.*



### 3 Painting clouds



#### Brushmarks

If you really want to lose all the brushmarks you can paint this all a second time once it's dry.

#### Prepare the Cloud Color

Mix a blue that's slightly darker than the existing pink on your palette. Add white and a touch of red to push the color towards purple. Ensure the paint is thick enough to sit on top of the wet or semi-wet layer.

#### Use Retarder Medium

Consider using retarder medium to slow down the drying time of your acrylics. Dip your brush into the medium as you mix colors, or add it to your spray bottle for extended workability.

#### Paint the Cloud Base

Paint a straight line across the canvas for the cloud base. Aim for a fairly straight line, allowing for a slight curve if necessary.

#### Add Cloud Details

Work upwards from the base line to form clouds. Aim for a mix of soft and hard edges by working quickly. Use your finger to smush and soften some edges for a natural look.

#### PRO TIP

*Use retarder medium to keep acrylics workable for longer, allowing for smoother blending.*

## 4 Adding cloud details



### Create Cloud Movement

Paint the top of the cloud with a swaying motion to mimic the wind blowing its top. Move your brush in one direction and then back, as if the cloud is dancing.

### Preserve Pink Highlights

Extend the cloud downwards, but ensure you don't lose all the pink hues. Reintroduce some pink in areas to maintain the vibrancy.

### Smooth and Define Brushstrokes

Smooth out brushstrokes at the bottom of the cloud while keeping them more pronounced at the top. This contrast adds interest and depth to the painting.

### Vary Cloud Edges

Create a mix of hard and soft edges around the clouds. This variation will guide the viewer's eye and add depth to the scene.

### Reflect Darkness in Water

Add some of the cloud's darkness to the water below. Drag your brush to create texture, suggesting a breeze on the water's surface.

#### PRO TIP

*Use a mix of hard and soft edges on clouds to add depth and interest.*

## 5 Backlit cloud highlights



### Prepare the Brush

Wash your brush thoroughly and switch to a smaller one. Wet the brush, then dry it slightly on paper until it's just damp.

### Mix Light Orange

Start with white paint to create a base. Add a little yellow and a touch of red to achieve a light orange that is slightly lighter than the cloud in shadow.

### Apply Backlit Highlights

Apply the light orange to the underside and rim of the clouds to create a backlit effect. Keep the brush clean and loaded with fresh paint to prevent it from mixing with the darker, cooler wet paint on the canvas.

#### PRO TIP

*Use the tip of the brush lightly to avoid picking up too much of the underlying paint.*



## 6 Painting the island and rocks



### Mix a Neutral Dark Tone

Combine blue and red to create a neutral dark tone. This mix includes a bit of green from the blue, resulting in a balanced neutral color. Avoid making it too dark, as black can appear like a hole in the painting.

### Apply Dark Tones to Rocks

Use a big, crisp synthetic brush to apply sharp shapes for the rocks. Keep replenishing the dark tone to maintain its depth, as the wet blue-grey can lighten it. Wipe off the brush and pick up new paint as needed.

### Add Details and Texture

Echo the cloud shapes with the rocks for visual harmony. Add small trees using a filbert brush, placing them with small dabs. Adjust the texture and shape to avoid symmetry and create a natural look. Extend the rock below the horizon with a sharp edge for a crisp base.

#### PRO TIP

*Use a crisp synthetic brush to achieve sharp edges and maintain the dark tone by regularly replenishing the paint.*

## 7 Adding color and detail to rocks



### Add Variation to Rocks

Introduce different sorts of rocks by varying their shapes. Ensure the bases of the rocks are horizontal and straight for a realistic effect. Use a smaller brush if it helps with precision.

### Darken and Color Foreground Rock

Darken the foreground rock, keeping its base slightly rounded as it's closer to the viewer. Add warmth from the sky by mixing in some white and red to create a more interesting silhouette.

### Lighten and Color Rock Faces

Use the brush sideways to block in lighter areas on the rocks. Add yellow ochre to lighten the edges and faces, reflecting the sky's warmth. Over the other side, mix in blue for lighter tones.

### Add Green for Foliage

Mix yellow to create a dark grey-green for foliage on the rock tops. This adds a natural touch where plants might grow.

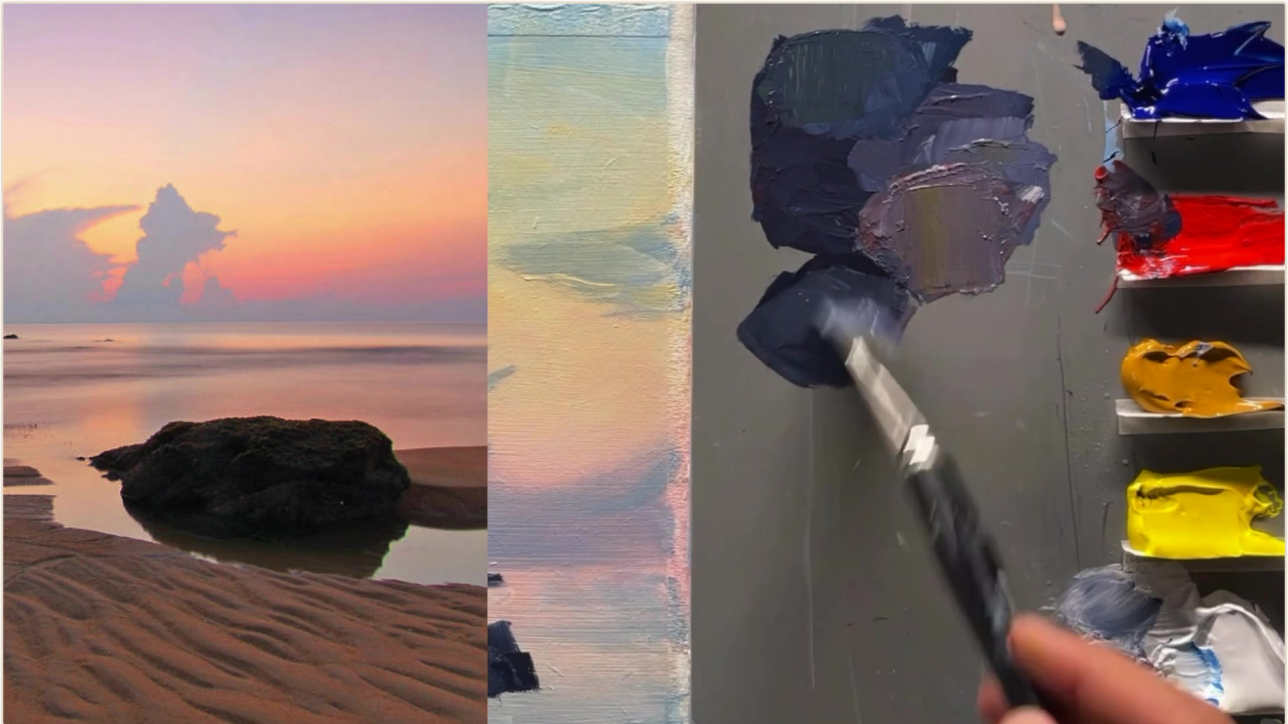
### Enhance Light and Warmth

Increase the light and warmth by adding more yellow, pushing the color towards orange. Apply this to the rock planes to reflect the sky's warmth, bringing the rocks forward.

#### PRO TIP

*Ensure rock bases are horizontal and straight for a realistic effect.*

## 8 Painting rock reflections



### Paint the Reflection

Use a dark color to paint the reflection close to the rock. This creates a strong base for the reflection.

### Add Light to the Water

Mix in some yellow ochre and a little bright yellow to the reflection. This adds the effect of light penetrating the clear water.

### Define the Edge

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

#### PRO TIP

*A crisp edge between the rock reflection and sky reflection enhances realism.*



## 9 Painting the sand



### Mix the Base Sand Color

Start with red as the base color for the sand, then add a little yellow. To tone it down, mix in some blue to create a brown. If it's too dark, lighten it with a bit of white. Adjust the color by adding more blue to gray it down if needed.

### Apply the Sand Color

Begin applying the sand color in the foreground with big brushstrokes and lots of paint. As you move further away, make the sand color lighter to reflect more light.

### Define Edges and Shapes

Consider drawing the edges with a pencil for accuracy, especially for important shapes like long triangles. Use a smaller brush if necessary to draw around rocks accurately.

### Add Light and Shadows

Add more yellow ochre and white to lighten the sand color. Soften it into the dark area to create a soft shadow with very soft edges, which helps guide the eye into the mid-ground.

### Create Crisp Edges

Ensure crisp edges where the sand meets the water, allowing some of the sky color to mix in for a reflective effect. Use a large crisp brush for a clean look, and adjust as needed for accuracy.

#### PRO TIP

*Use a large crisp brush for clean edges and a professional finish.*

## 10 Adding sand shadows and details



### Create Big Shapes

Use a single brushstroke to create a big shape. Focus on achieving crisp shapes with your brush for a strong foundation.

### Mix a Darker Color

Clean your brush slightly and mix a darker color by reducing the amount of white. This will help in creating the shadowed side of the sandbank.

### Add Sandbank Shadows

Apply the darker color to the side of the sandbank that is in shadow, considering the sun's position. Use a thick application at first, then taper it out to a fine line.

### Incorporate Fine Shadows

Add a few fine shadows using a gray-blue tone. These can be as numerous as you like to enhance the depth and detail.

#### PRO TIP

*Use a single brushstroke to create big, crisp shapes for a strong foundation.*

## 11 Final touches and seagulls



### Add Reflections

Mix a blue-grey color and apply it to the water area to create a dark reflection of the big rock. Allow the water to appear tumultuous and reflect the sky as well.

### Paint Seagulls

Using the same blue-grey, paint a small seagull in the scene. Add a few more seagulls in the sky to create a sense of movement and life.

### Create Sky Holes

If the foliage appears too dense, add a few sky holes to lighten it up and add depth.

### Highlight Wet Sand

Mix a slightly lighter brown to highlight the forward-facing edges of the wet sand, keeping in mind that the paint will dry darker. Adjust the color to be a bit lighter than you think is necessary.

### Add Shells

Dot a medium blue-grey around to suggest shells on the sand. Avoid creating a pattern, and vary the lightness of some shells for a natural look.

#### PRO TIP

*Remember that paint dries darker, so mix colors slightly lighter than desired.*



## 12 Finishing touches and encouragement



### Add Details to the Sky

Use a mid-value blue-grey to add details to the sky. This color will appear darker against the lighter sky, creating depth.

### Refine the Seagull

Switch to a smaller brush to refine the seagull. If needed, paint the sky back around it, keeping in mind that the paint will dry slightly darker.

### Add Warmth and Sign

Mix a darkish color with some warmth and use it to sign your painting. Consider adding a touch of red to the rocks for added interest.

### Enhance Vibrancy

Increase the saturation and vibrancy of your colors by adding more red, yellow, blue, or violet to the sky. A vibrant background will influence the colors you layer on top.

### Personalize Your Painting

Feel free to shape the clouds, island, and sand path as you like. These elements are flexible, allowing you to create a unique composition.

#### PRO TIP

*Remember that paint dries darker, so adjust your colors accordingly when painting details.*

# Summary & Key Takeaways

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In this lesson on painting expressive skies with backlighting, you begin by establishing a smooth base for your sky using a wet-on-wet technique. This allows you to create seamless gradations from a sunset pink to a vibrant yellow and deep blue. As you progress, focus on blending colors smoothly and maintaining a wet surface to achieve the desired atmospheric effect.

Next, bring your sky to life by adding clouds, using a combination of soft and hard edges to create depth and interest. Employ retarder medium to extend the workability of your acrylics, allowing you to manipulate the paint for natural transitions. As you add details, such as highlights and shadows, remember to keep your brush clean and your colors fresh to enhance the backlit effect.

Finally, add the finishing touches to your landscape by painting the island, rocks, and their reflections. Pay attention to the interplay of light and shadow, using crisp edges and varied brushstrokes to convey realism. Incorporate small details like seagulls and shells to bring movement and life to your scene. Remember, the drying process will darken your colors, so adjust accordingly to maintain the vibrancy of your painting.

## LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Keep the painted area wet by misting with water for smooth blending.
- Use varied brushstrokes and keep the paint wet to achieve smooth blends in the sky.
- Use retarder medium to keep acrylics workable for longer, allowing for smoother blending.
- Use a mix of hard and soft edges on clouds to add depth and interest.
- Ensure rock bases are horizontal and straight for a realistic effect.
- A crisp edge between the rock reflection and sky reflection enhances realism.
- Use a single brushstroke to create big, crisp shapes for a strong foundation.
- Remember that paint dries darker, so mix colors slightly lighter than desired.



*Terengganu 12x12" Acrylic on Board*



# Student Critiques

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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?