



The Dancing Pine

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/258-The-Dancing-Pine>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, we'll explore the captivating scene of 'The Dancing Pine' at Lake Ohau, a subject that offers a delightful challenge and a rewarding experience for any painter. This lesson is designed to guide you through creating a harmonious painting that feels united, not just through color, but through the repetition of shapes that echo the swishy, dynamic form of the tree. You'll learn how to manipulate your palette for ease of use, ensuring each color has the same consistency for smoother application and mixing. As we paint, we'll delve into capturing the unique character of each element, from the expressive branches of the pine to the majestic mountains, which I've artistically relocated to enhance the composition. By adjusting lighting and shadow, you'll discover how to direct the viewer's attention and bring your painting to life. With just five steps, I'll lead you through this process, helping you add those crucial finishing touches that can elevate your work. Embrace your artistic license, and let's create a piece that sings with unity and character.



"The Dancing Pine, Lake Ohau" 11x14" Oil 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

- M. Graham & Co. Oil Paints
- Titanium White
- Cadmium Yellow Light
- Yellow Ochre
- Cadmium Red Mid
- Quinacridone Violet
- Ultramarine Blue
- Painting medium
- M. Graham & Co. Walnut Oil or Walnut Alkyd Medium
- Solvent
- Gamsol
- Surface
- MDF panel primed with 2 coats of acrylic undercoat. Sand lightly between coats.
- You could use a canvas panel or anything you prefer.
- Brushes
- [Rosemary & Co. Richard Robinson Brush Set](#)
- Palette Knife
- Paper Towels
- Container for solvent
- Container for painting medium

1 Paint Viscosity and Mediums

Check Paint Viscosity

Dab the end of your palette knife or brush into each paint to assess its thickness. Ensure all paints have a similar viscosity to make mixing colors easier and faster.

Adjust Paint Thickness

If a paint is too thick, add a little walnut oil to thin it out. Continue adding oil gradually until the paint reaches a consistency similar to margarine or slightly warmer than room temperature butter.

Choose Walnut Oil

Use walnut oil as it doesn't yellow over time and is less likely to cause sensitivity. It's a safe and preferable option for adjusting paint viscosity.

Speed Up Drying Time

To speed up drying, use a fast-drying medium like liquin, especially with white paint, which dries the slowest. Be aware that liquin contains petrochemicals that can produce strong fumes.

2 Materials and Surface Preparation

Gather Your Materials

Use titanium white, cadmium yellow light, yellow ochre, cad red medium, quinacridone violet, and ultramarine blue for your palette. Choose walnut oil as your painting medium and Gamsol as a paint thinner.

Select Your Brushes

Opt for synthetic brushes, specifically long flats in sizes 12 and 10, a filbert, a shorter long flat, and a little signing brush. Synthetic brushes provide smoother brushstrokes and are less likely to scrape paint off the board.

Prepare Your Painting Surface

Use a 12 by 14 inch MDF board coated with a couple of coats of acrylic primer, or choose any size you prefer. Alternatively, canvas or canvas board can be used if you prefer a different texture.

Apply Initial Coat

Cover the surface with a very light coat of yellow ochre using a brush dipped in Gamsol. Smooth it down with a lint-free rag. This coat will dry in about 15 minutes as the thinners evaporate quickly.

3 Sketching the Composition

Sketch Big Shapes

Use ultramarine to sketch the big shapes on your canvas. Begin with the fall of the hills, deciding where they will be positioned in your composition. This will help establish the overall layout.

Add Diagonals

Incorporate diagonals into your composition to add interest and enhance the visual appeal. Avoid relying solely on horizontal lines, as diagonals can create a more dynamic design.

Position the Tree

Place the tree so it overlaps either inside or outside the mountain. Ensure it doesn't just touch the top line of the mountains. This overlap will make the composition easier to read from a distance.

4 Character and It-ness of the Tree

Understand Tree Character

Recognize the unique qualities and features of the tree, such as its type, height, color, width, branch angles, and trunk thickness. Consider how these elements define the tree's individuality and interaction with its surroundings.

Capture Tree 'It-ness'

Observe and depict the inherent characteristics that define the tree, like its typical shape and growth patterns. Focus on the essential qualities that make the tree what it is, including its environmental adaptations.

Exaggerate Features for Emphasis

Choose to exaggerate certain features of the tree to emphasize its unique character. This can draw the viewer's attention to its distinct qualities, making the painting more engaging and expressive.

Consider Environmental Influence

Acknowledge how the environment affects the tree's character by influencing growth patterns, such as branch direction due to wind and growth towards light. These adaptations contribute to the tree's unique character within its environment.

5 Balancing Elements in the Composition

Position the Trees

Position the trees to balance the main bulk of the composition asymmetrically. This adds interest to the painting by creating a dynamic layout.

Place the Red Cabin

Place the red cabin away from the center of the painting to avoid it being too obvious. Tuck it a little down from the center to create a spot of interest with a warm color.

Balance Colors

Use a touch of red or a very warm color, like the red cabin, to balance the cooler colors in the painting. This creates a spot of interest and helps achieve color balance.

Depict the Cast Shadow

Depict the cast shadow as soft-edged because it falls on long grasses. This creates a more natural look in the composition.

Consider the Sun's Position

The sun's position affects where the shadows fall in the painting. If the sun is coming from one side, it will cast shadows down on the opposite side, adding depth and interest.

6 Dynamic Shapes and Movement

Break Hard Lines

Add more interest to a shape by breaking hard lines and flattening out certain areas. This technique enhances the dynamic and engaging quality of your composition.

Incorporate Swishy Cloud Shapes

Use interesting, swishy shapes in the clouds to contribute to the overall theme of dynamic shapes and movement. These shapes help to unify the painting's lively composition.

7 Blocking in Big Shapes

Establish Basic Composition

Block in the big shapes to define the main elements and their relationships. This creates a foundation for more detailed work.

Create Diagonal Shapes

Vary the size and direction of diagonal shapes to add interest and dynamism. Ensure opposing diagonals are not the same size for a more engaging composition.

Contrast Foreground and Background

Use vibrant colors in the foreground against a grey background to create depth and interest. This contrast draws the viewer's eye to the more colorful and dynamic areas.

Add Dynamic Movement

Incorporate swishy, dynamic shapes to add movement and energy. These shapes guide the viewer's eye through the composition, creating a lively scene.

Incorporate Photo Inspiration

Use a photo of a mountain range to inspire shapes and patterns. Include interesting snow patterns from the photo to add detail and interest to your mountain shapes.

8 Painting the Darkest Darks

Select Your Brush

Use your biggest brush, like a size 12, to paint the darkest darks. This allows you to cover larger areas efficiently and create beautiful swishy shapes.

Mix the Darkest Dark

Mix blue, red, and maybe some yellow ochre to create a dark green with some gray in it. Adjust the color by adding more blue if the red is too powerful.

Adjust for Distance

The darkest dark should not be pure black because the area you're painting is about 100 meters away. Lighten it slightly to reflect the distance.

Lighten the Dark

Add some white and a little more yellow to lighten the darkest dark color while keeping it very dark but not quite black.

Apply the Paint

Ensure the paint is thick enough to cover the canvas without looking like a watercolor. Apply the darkest darks thinly to allow for easier layering with lighter colors later.

9 Background Colors and Mountains

Refine Tree Edges

Paint the tree slightly larger than intended. Use background colors to paint back into it, refining the edges and integrating it with surrounding elements.

Soften Grass Edges

Brush downwards when painting grasses. This technique helps keep the edges softer, creating a natural transition between elements.

Mix Mountain Background Color

Combine blue and red with more blue to create a blue-grey. Add white to adjust the hue, then tweak with red and a little yellow to achieve the desired tone.

Create Depth with Color

Make the background color lighter than the halftone. This distinction helps separate it from the foreground elements, adding depth to the painting.

Avoid Muddy Colors

Prevent muddy colors by not mixing darks into lights. Reload your brush frequently and brush off any unwanted paint before continuing.

Separate Mountain Layers

Paint the bottom of the mountains lighter to mimic mist. This technique helps distinguish the mountains from the foreground.

Block in Shapes

Paint over the drawing when blocking in shapes. This approach helps establish the composition and large areas of color.

10 Atmospheric Perspective and Mountain Details

Create Distance with Color

To make mountains appear further away, add a little blue and white to lighten and cool the color. This helps push the mountains back, creating a sense of distance.

Bring Mountains Closer

Use a darker and more gray color to bring mountains closer. This creates a sense of proximity and adds structure to the mountains.

Add Mountain Details

Create detail by working over the area with darker colors in a patchy manner, using angles that match the form of the mountains. This gives a sense of structure and detail.

Apply Snow with a Gilbert Brush

Use a Gilbert brush with a mix of white, blue, and a touch of violet to apply snow. Use the brush creatively in a calligraphic way to make interesting snow shapes, ensuring the paint is lighter than the base color.

Create Textured Snow

Avoid big globs of paint when loading your brush for painting snow. Smooth out the paint and use the edge of the brush to create a textured look by dragging it back and forth.

Practice Calligraphic Strokes

Practice making calligraphic strokes on your palette, especially for thin lines. This helps you assess the thickness of the paint and whether you need to add a painting medium like walnut oil.

Use Atmospheric Perspective

Distant mountains take on the color of the atmosphere due to veils of moisture and dust, resulting in less contrast and softer edges. This helps create a sense of depth.

Enhance Depth with Edges

Create a sense of three-dimensional space by using softer edges for distant elements and sharper edges for those closer to the foreground or center of interest. This enhances the perception of depth.

11 Deciding on Light and Shadow

Consider Light and Shadow

Decide whether to keep the mountains in shadow or highlight them with light. Keeping them in shadow can draw more attention to the foreground elements. Highlighting them can make the entire scene come to life, like turning on a light switch.

Use a Palette Knife Carefully

Experiment with a palette knife to create interesting textural effects and apply thicker paint. Be cautious, as it is harder to control and might lead to losing finer details achievable with a brush. Avoid turning the painting into a whole palette knife piece if detailed work is desired.

12 Painting the Sky

Mix the Sky Color

Create a lighter, cooler color for the sky by combining white, a little ultramarine, and some of the greys you have mixed. Ensure this color is lighter than the mountain but not as light as the snow.

Decide on Edge Sharpness

Choose whether you want crisp or soft edges for the sky. Use crisp edges around mountain peaks for definition, and softer edges near the tree to avoid visual competition.

Paint the Sky

Apply the sky color with your brush, making sure to soften the mountain edge near the tree. This will allow the tree to stand out as the focal point without competing with a sharp edge behind it.

Clean and Reload the Brush

Use a paper towel to wipe off any dark color picked up by the brush. Reload the brush with the light sky color before continuing to paint.

Adjust Brush Strokes

Consider your mood when applying brush strokes. Energetic feelings might result in angular shapes, while a relaxed mood could lead to swishy, rounded strokes.

Soften Edges Near Canvas Edge

Soften the edges as they approach the edge of the canvas. This prevents the viewer's eye from being drawn to hard edges, helping to guide the eye around the canvas.

13 Refining the Tree and Adding Details

Maintain Color Consistency

Use a limited palette to prevent confusion and maintain consistency in your color relationships. Mix new colors beside the original pile of paint instead of over it, allowing you to compare and adjust the new mix as needed.

Create Natural Edges

Drag your brush lightly and quickly to achieve a broken edge, especially if the paint layer is slightly dry. This technique creates a more natural, soft edge that enhances the organic feel of the tree.

Add Small Details

Use the very corner of your brush to make small marks. With careful handling, even a large brush can create tiny details, adding to the intricacy of the tree.

Break Up Unnatural Edges

Avoid man-made looking edges by breaking up flat or unnatural lines. This helps maintain the tree's organic character and contributes to a more dynamic composition.

Adjust Color Darkness

Add more of the necessary colors, such as blue, to adjust the mix for the desired darkness. Continuously compare it with the original mix to ensure it matches your intended color.

Maintain Dynamic Brushwork

Use your brush in various ways to keep the tree's dynamic and dancing feeling. Incorporate diverse brush strokes and maintain soft edges to avoid a uniform or typical Christmas tree appearance.

14 Foreground and Grass Textures

Mix Mid Value Color

Begin by grabbing some yellow ochre and adding it to the side of your paint pile, along with a little bright yellow. Aim for a mid value that is lighter and greener than the base color, using thicker paint for more vibrancy.

Apply Mid Values

Pick up the paint on the side of your brush and gently smush it onto the canvas. Work from the darks into the mid values, being careful not to obliterate the dark areas.

Add Light Textures

Apply lighter paint on top of the mid values, creating texture with your brush. Ensure the light shapes are big enough to maintain the tree's natural look without over-lightening it.

Create Distant Forest Effect

Start with a shadow color and add a little bit of white. Use soft, little brush strokes to create swishy shapes that resemble a distant forest.

Enhance with Cool Tones

Use a greener base color and add some light to it, keeping the color cool unless the tree is the center of interest. Lightly brush colors into areas where you think the darks might be to add variety and realism.

15 Trusting the Process

Create Shadow Colors

Mix a brown using orange and blue. Apply this color lightly to the painting to introduce rich color into the shadow areas.

Apply Paint Lightly

Use a gentle touch when applying the paint to avoid thick layers that could interfere with existing ones. This technique helps achieve a delicate, grass-like appearance.

Enhance Shadow Depth

Add a touch of gray to the dark areas to increase depth and variation in the shadows.

16 Adding Light and Mid Values

Mix Mid Values

For the mid values in the foreground, use yellow ochre as the main color. Mix it with some white and a little bit of blue to create the desired mid values.

Create Soft Transitions

Brush into the darks without covering them completely to achieve a soft transition from dark to mid values. This will help create soft edges.

Maintain Perspective and Depth

Start with small shapes in the distance, as the front shapes will overlap the back shapes. This approach helps maintain perspective and depth in the painting.

Depict Grassy Texture

Use brushstrokes going down and up to create a grassy feel. This technique will help depict grass in both light and shadow areas, giving a natural grassy texture.

Avoid Sharp Edges

Avoid sharp edges on the side of the canvas to maintain the illusion of grass and natural elements. Soft edges help preserve the intended soft, grassy appearance.

Create Light and Shadow on Grass

Ensure that the tops of the grass catch the light, while the sides and lower parts remain in shadow. This contrast will give the grass a realistic three-dimensional appearance.

17 Adding Lupins and Foreground Details

Add Light Areas

Use yellow to create the light areas in the painting. These areas will add brightness and contrast without being the highlights.

Create Impasto Texture

Use a fast drying medium to thicken the paint, allowing for more texture and a thicker application. This technique enhances the impasto effect in your painting.

Blend with Wet Paint

Paint with wet paint to easily create blends and soft edges. This approach is beneficial for achieving smooth transitions and certain effects in your artwork.

Mix Colors on Canvas

Avoid over-mixing the paint on your palette. Instead, let the colors mix directly on the canvas with your brush strokes to achieve unique effects.

Enhance Contrast

Add more white to the paint to increase contrast. Adjust the angles and areas of brightness, extending bright spots to enhance the contrast between elements like the tree and the background.

18 Finalizing the Sky and Background

Enhance Foreground with Lupins

Add a few lupins to the foreground to introduce more color interest. These flowers are lovely and can provide a nice touch of color to your painting.

Create Reflected Light Effect

Warm up the area under a tree with colors that suggest light reflecting from the grasses. This technique adds depth and realism to your painting.

Paint Sky Reflection on Rocks

Use a dark blue color to paint the reflection of the sky on a rock. Remember, this reflection should be a darker shade, not a light one.

Subdue Attention-Grabbing Elements

Tone down a fence post by mixing yellow ochre and blue to prevent it from being too punchy and drawing too much attention.

Paint Subtle Branches

Mix a color slightly darker than the background to paint branches coming through the trees. This will help them stand out subtly against the background.

Maintain Clean Color

Fold your paper towel instead of scrunching it to keep your colors clean. Clean your brush at the top of the folded towel and work your way down, folding it over as needed to maintain a clean surface.

Adjust Overlapping Edges

If two edges are meeting awkwardly, extend one element, like a tree, further up to create a more natural transition.

Soften Mountain Edges

Use a softer edge technique to soften the edges of a mountain in the background. This helps create the illusion of distance and makes the mountain appear further away.

19 Final Touches and Signing

Blend Soft Edges

Gently blend the colors at the edge of the area you are working on to create a more natural transition between elements in your painting.

Lighten Snow

Lighten the snow slightly by toning it down with a bit of blue. This adds warmth reminiscent of sunlight, or keep it in shadow for a different effect.

Shape the Tree

Use a small brush to dip into dark paint and shape the tree with sharp, swishy strokes. This adds character and depth to the tree.

Control the Light

Adjust the lighting in your painting to create the mood and focus you desire, making the painting uniquely yours.

Add Subtle Highlights

Apply lighter tones sparingly, such as just highlighting the tippy top of a snow-covered area for a nuanced and delicate effect.

Fill White Gaps

Brush down into areas like trees to define them more clearly and fill in any gaps, ensuring a more cohesive and complete look.

Add Smoke

Use a mid blue-grey color to paint a soft, wispy trail coming out of the chimney. This small detail can add life and realism to your scene.

Enhance Tree Interest

Add more shape and warmth to the tree using varied brush strokes and warmer colors to give it more depth and character.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by preparing your materials and surface with care. Begin by ensuring your paints have the right viscosity using walnut oil for adjustments, and prepare your canvas with a light coat of yellow ochre. Sketch your composition with ultramarine, focusing on dynamic shapes and the unique character of the tree to set the stage for your painting.

As you progress, pay attention to the balance and movement within your composition. Use vibrant colors and dynamic shapes to create depth and interest, and carefully position elements like the red cabin to draw the viewer's eye. Block in the big shapes to establish the foundation, and use atmospheric perspective to create a sense of distance and depth in your mountains.

In the final stages, refine your details and focus on light and shadow to bring your painting to life. Use a limited palette to maintain color harmony, and apply your brushstrokes with intention to create texture and interest. Soften edges where needed to guide the viewer's eye, and add finishing touches to highlight the tree as the focal point of your lively and dynamic composition.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use walnut oil to adjust paint viscosity without yellowing.
- Synthetic brushes provide smoother strokes and less paint scraping.
- Exaggerate tree features to emphasize its unique character.
- Place the red cabin slightly off-center for a warm spot of interest.
- Vary the size and direction of diagonal shapes for dynamism.
- Use a size 12 brush to efficiently cover large areas with the darkest darks.
- Reload your brush frequently to maintain color purity and prevent muddiness.
- Soften the mountain edge near the tree to make it stand out as the focal point.



"The Dancing Pine, Lake Ohau" 11x14" Oil 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.

“Oil on 11 x 14 Canvas” by Louise Villegas



Oil on 11 x 14 Canvas

A lovely, lively painting, Louise. It's interesting the colour variety you placed in the clouds and mountain and I would have liked to have seen a little more of this in the foreground as well. There are two things I would like you to look at further, one being the light on the tree, which is not very evident since there is no clear difference between shadow and light shapes there. It also needs to be firmly attached to the ground by merging the shadow shape of the tree with the cast shadow on the ground. The second thing is the wire strung between the fence posts. I always find this a little jarring, (and excuse me if I start ranting here) with everything else painted so freely, then the sharp little detail superimposed over the top, which is unnecessary to convey the idea of a fence and only serves to draw the eye away from the stars of the show which are the tree and the mountain. You wouldn't really see the wire at this distance anyway, so why include it at all? One could argue that it's leading the eye to the centre, but we already have the path and posts to do that without the need of crisply painted straight lines. If you're going to paint straight lines, why not a railroad track, a highway, or a skyscraper? Straight lines in the landscape are a harsh human imposition. Aaaaand, now I will hop down off my little soapbox.

“The Dancing Pine after Richard Robinson, 11x14 acrylic” by Rachel Chard



The Dancing Pine after Richard Robinson, 11x14 acrylic

Some nice work here, Rachel. It's just lacking a little contrast. If you apply lights in the foreground grasses lighter than what you have there now it'll give the appearance of stronger light rather than an overcast look. Adding that light mainly in the area around the tree will also give this whole area nice spotlight effect. Enjoy!

“The Dancing Pine 11x14 oil on canvas” by Nancy Newton



The Dancing Pine 11x14 oil on canvas

Lovely vibrant colour in here and expressive brush work that really brings this painting to life, Nancy. I would just caution you against the tree so symmetrical and Christmas tree-ish although, you do have curve on it. When we make shapes too obvious paintings, looking too much like the symbols we have in our heads for those things, then it removes a chance for variety and interest. Aside from that, very nice!

“Lake Ohau pine , 12x25” oil on panel , mark price” by **Mark Price**



Lake Ohau pine , 12x25” oil on panel , mark price

Great swishing snow shapes in the mountain and clouds there, Mark, echoing those in the tree, which was one of the learning points of this lesson, so that's nice to see. I do feel that if the tree was a little less symmetrical then it would have more unique character. I love the thick impasto paint in the grasses and how that contrasts with the smooth background. See the dark edge that's outlining the edge of the hill right in the middle? Would be better to dissolve that or break it with a tree because outlines always tend to flatten shapes painting, spoiling the illusion of depth. Just a little tweaking. Great job, mate!