



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, where the harmony of shapes plays a pivotal role in creating a cohesive painting. As you embark on this artistic journey, you'll learn how to craft dynamic shapes that echo throughout your composition, much like a recurring musical phrase that unifies a symphony. This lesson will guide you through the process of achieving this unity, focusing on the repetition of swishy shapes that mirror the unique character of the pine tree. You'll discover how to manipulate color and shape to bring your painting together, ensuring each element sings in concert with the others. We'll also delve into the practical aspects of painting, such as achieving the right paint consistency for a smoother application and mixing. By the end of this chapter, you'll have a deeper understanding of how to capture the essence and character of your subject, and how to use artistic license to enhance your composition. I look forward to seeing your interpretations and encourage you to share your work on the website. Enjoy the process and let your curiosity lead you to new artistic paths.



"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 color to check their thickness. Ensure all paints have a similar viscosity to make mixing easier and maintain your painting flow.

Adjust Paint Thickness

If a paint is too thick, add a little walnut oil to thin it to the consistency of margarine or slightly warmer than room temperature butter. Adjust according to your preference for ease of application or a thicker impasto effect.

Consider Drying Time

For faster drying, mix a fast-drying medium like Liquin into your white paint, as white tends to dry the slowest. Be aware of the strong fumes from petrochemicals in these mediums.

Choose Your Medium

Decide on a painting medium such as walnut oil, which doesn't yellow over time and is less likely to cause sensitivity compared to linseed oil. Use it consistently throughout your painting.

PRO TIP

Ensure all paints have a similar viscosity to maintain a smooth painting process and stay in the creative zone.

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 colors. Prepare walnut oil as your painting medium. Select synthetic brushes, including long flats in sizes 12 and 10, a filbert, a shorter long flat, and a signing brush. Synthetic brushes provide a crisp edge suitable for smooth brushstrokes.

Prepare Your Surface

Use Gamsol as your paint thinner. Dip your brush into the thinner and pick up some yellow ochre. Cover the surface lightly with yellow ochre to eliminate the white surface. Smooth it down with a lint-free rag and let it dry for about 15 minutes.

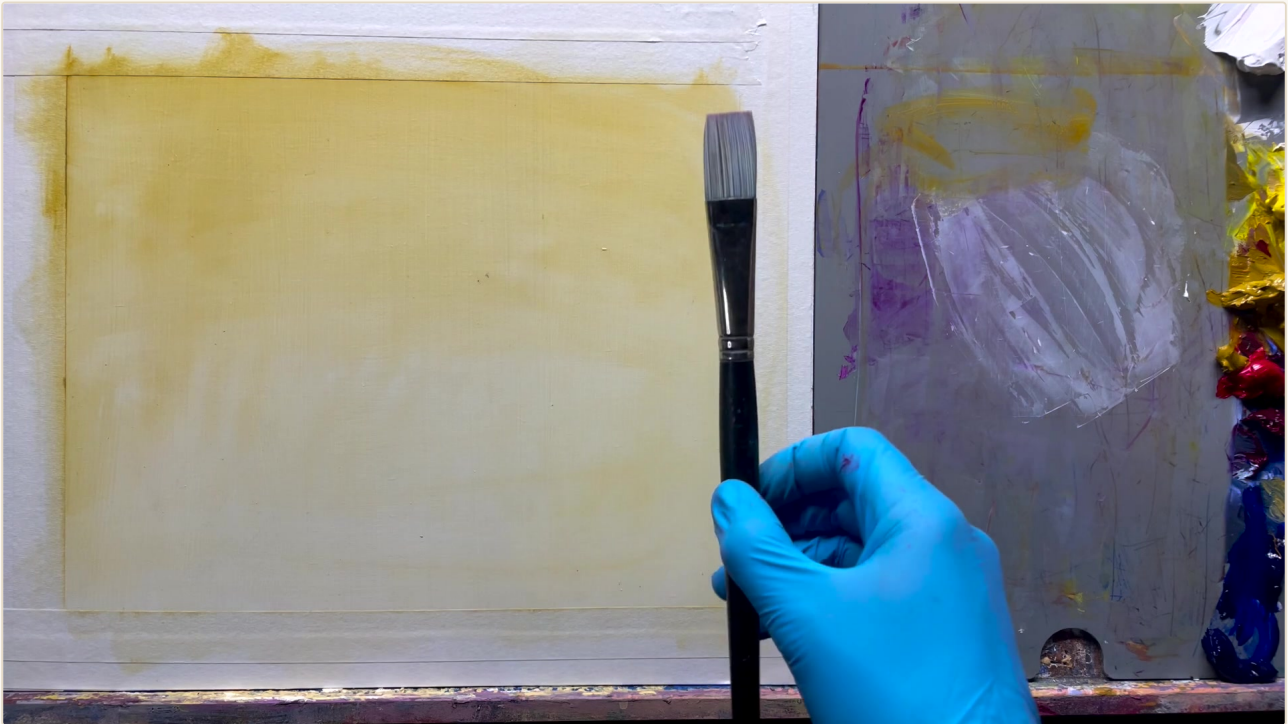
Choose Your Surface

Work on an MDF board coated with a couple of coats of acrylic primer, sized 12 by 14 inches. You can also use canvas or canvas board if preferred. Boards offer a crispness to brushstrokes that enhances the painting's texture.

PRO TIP

Synthetic brushes are ideal for painting on board as they prevent paint from being scraped off, unlike natural bristle brushes.

3 Sketching the Composition



Prepare Your Materials

Use a synthetic brush to achieve crisp brushstrokes on the board. The board allows for sharp lines, unlike canvas, which softens strokes due to its weave.

Sketch the Hill Shapes

Mix ultramarine on your palette. Sketch the big shapes, starting with the fall of the hills. Decide where each hill will be positioned, enhancing any diagonal lines for a more dynamic composition.

Outline the Tree

Focus on the tree's character. Draw a center line with a slight curve to show its lean. Mark the base and outline the main bulk of the tree, ensuring it has a distinct presence.

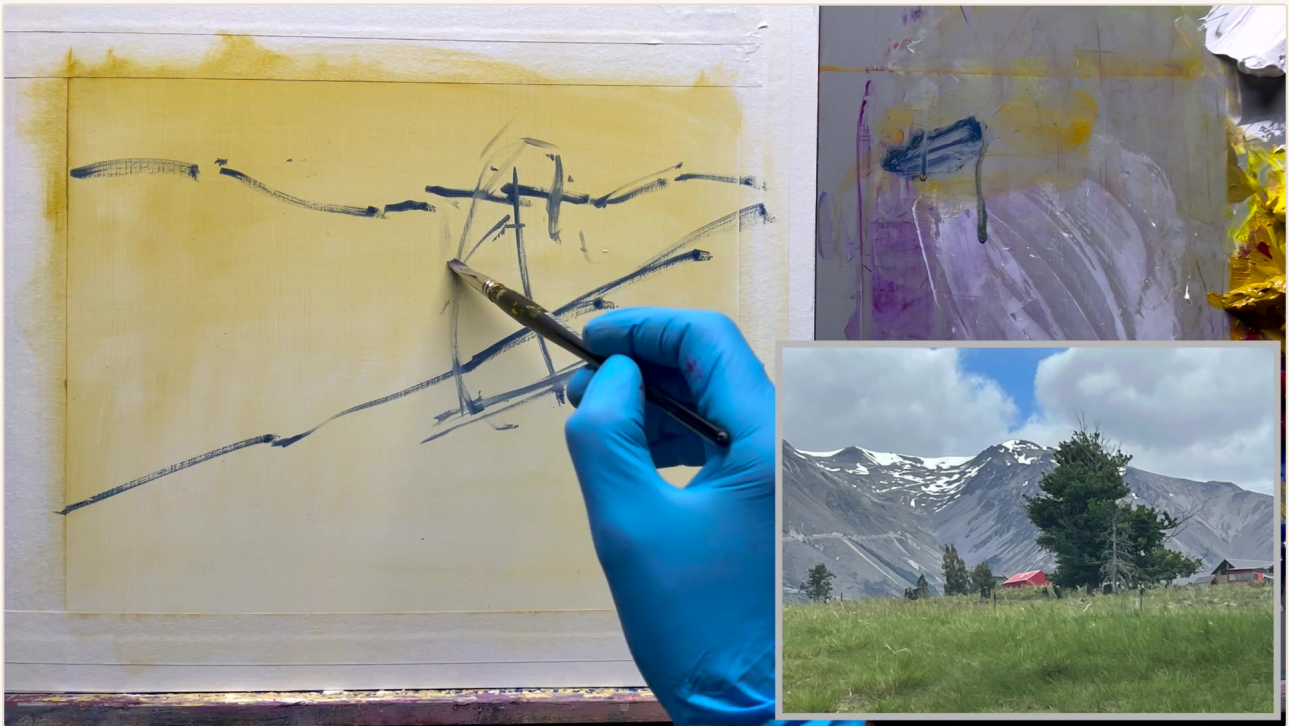
Adjust Tree and Mountain Overlap

Ensure the top of the tree does not merely touch the mountain's top line. Position it either inside or outside the mountain to create a clear overlap, enhancing readability from a distance.

PRO TIP

Enhance diagonal lines in your composition to create a more interesting and dynamic design.

4 Character and It-ness of the Tree



Observe the Tree's Main Shapes

Examine the main shapes of the tree you are painting. Consider the type of tree, such as a pine or makakapa, and note its unique characteristics.

Identify the Tree's 'It-ness'

Focus on the tree's defining features like height, color, and width. Observe the angle of the branches, the thickness of the trunk, and how branches taper off. These elements contribute to the tree's 'it-ness'.

Consider Environmental Influences

Think about how the tree adapts to its environment, such as the direction of the wind and the source of light. These factors influence the tree's character and movement.

Capture and Exaggerate the Tree's Character

Aim to capture the tree's character on canvas, emphasizing its unique traits. Feel free to exaggerate these features to draw attention to the tree's personality, like imagining it dancing across the landscape.

PRO TIP

Observe the tree's unique features and environmental influences to capture its character on canvas.

5 Balancing Elements in the Composition



Position Additional Trees

Add other trees further down in the composition to balance the main tree. Arrange them asymmetrically to create interest and avoid symmetry.

Place the Red Cabin

Position the red cabin away from the center of the painting to avoid it being too obvious. Tuck it slightly down and to the side, using a warm color to balance the cooler tones and add a spot of interest.

Consider Light and Shadows

Imagine the sun coming from one side to determine the direction of shadows. Add a soft-edged shadow in the foreground, considering the long grasses that will diffuse the shadow's edge.

PRO TIP

Position elements asymmetrically to create a more dynamic and interesting composition.

6 Dynamic Shapes and Movement



Flatten the Hard Line

Soften the hard line by flattening it slightly. This will add more interest to the shape and prevent it from being too rigid.

Create Dynamic Cloud Shapes

Add swishy, interesting shapes to the clouds. These dynamic forms will enhance the movement and energy of the painting, reflecting the lively nature of the tree.

PRO TIP

Incorporate dynamic shapes throughout the painting to convey movement and energy.

7 Blocking in Big Shapes



Sketch Path and Diagonals

Indicate a rough path in the foreground with a light sketch. Add a swishy diagonal shape opposing the path to create dynamic movement in the composition.

Add Mountain Range

Sketch a different mountain range in the background, using a photo reference if available. Ensure the peaks are varied in height to add interest.

Create Depth with Color

Paint the distant mountains in light blue tones to push them back into the distance. Contrast this with vibrant colors in the foreground to create a dynamic color versus grey effect.

PRO TIP

Use diagonals to create dynamic movement and interest in your composition.

8 Painting the Darkest Darks



Prepare Your Brush

Select your largest brush, such as a size 12, and dip it lightly into walnut oil. This will help the paint flow smoothly onto the canvas.

Mix the Darkest Dark

Combine blue, red, and a touch of yellow ochre to create a dark green with gray undertones. Adjust by adding more blue if the red is too dominant.

Lighten the Dark

Since the area under the tree is 100 meters away, lighten the dark mix slightly with white and a bit more yellow. Ensure it remains very dark but not black.

Apply the Paint

Apply the paint thickly enough to cover the canvas but thinly enough to allow for layering. Avoid a watercolor effect, as you will layer lighter colors over this base.

Paint the Tree

Use the brush to create beautiful, swishy shapes for the tree. The brush should produce crisp edges and cover the area effectively.

PRO TIP

Ensure the paint is thick enough to cover the canvas but thin enough to allow for easy layering of lighter colors.

9 Background Colors and Mountains



Paint the Tree Larger

Paint the tree slightly larger than intended. This allows you to paint back into it with background colors, creating a softer edge. Add a few darks to suggest grasses growing up into the tree.

Mix a Blue-Grey Background Color

Switch to a smaller long bristle synthetic flat brush. Mix a blue-grey color using more blue than red, and add some white to see the hue clearly. Adjust the color by adding a little red and yellow to achieve a lighter tone than your halftone.

Apply the Blue-Grey Background

Apply the blue-grey color thinly to the background. This will allow you to work over it easily. Be aware that the neutral grey will appear bluer next to the warm foreground colors.

Maintain Pure Colors

Avoid muddy colors by not mixing darks into lights. If paint from the dark areas gets on the brush, clean it off, reload, and continue painting. Reload the brush frequently to maintain pure colors.

Lighten the Bottom of the Mountains

Lighten the color at the bottom of the mountains to create separation from the foreground. This effect mimics the natural mist often seen at the base of mountains, adding depth to your painting.

PRO TIP

Reload the brush frequently to maintain pure colors and avoid muddiness.

10 Atmospheric Perspective and Mountain Details



Create Atmospheric Perspective

Add a little blue and white to the mountains in the distance. This lightens and cools them, helping to push them further away. Adjust the color to ensure it doesn't become muddy, maintaining a clear separation between the mountain layers.

Enhance Mountain Detail

Darken the closer mountains with a more gray tone to bring them forward. Apply the darker color in a patchy manner, following the natural angles and forms of the mountains. This technique adds a sense of structure and detail, suggesting large planes of rock.

Add Snow in Shadow

Mix white, blue, and a touch of violet to create a snow color lighter than the base. Use a Gilbert brush to apply the snow in a calligraphic manner, creating dynamic and interesting shapes. Ensure the brush is not overloaded with paint to maintain control.

Adjust for Atmospheric Effects

As the mountains recede, lighten the snow color to reflect atmospheric perspective. This reduces contrast and softens edges, enhancing the sense of distance. Ensure the snow color blends with the atmosphere, which can be observed by looking at the sky above the mountains.

PRO TIP

Use softer edges for distant elements and sharper edges for those in the foreground to create a sense of three-dimensional space.

11 Deciding on Light and Shadow



Decide on Highlight Timing

Leave the highlights, such as snow and light, until later in the painting process. This allows the paint to dry slightly and saves the most rewarding details for last, much like enjoying dessert after a meal.

Consider Using a Palette Knife

Experiment with a palette knife for creating shapes if desired. Although it offers less control than a brush, it can produce interesting textures and thicker paint applications. Be cautious, as it can easily lead to a predominantly palette knife painting, which may lack the finer details achievable with a brush.

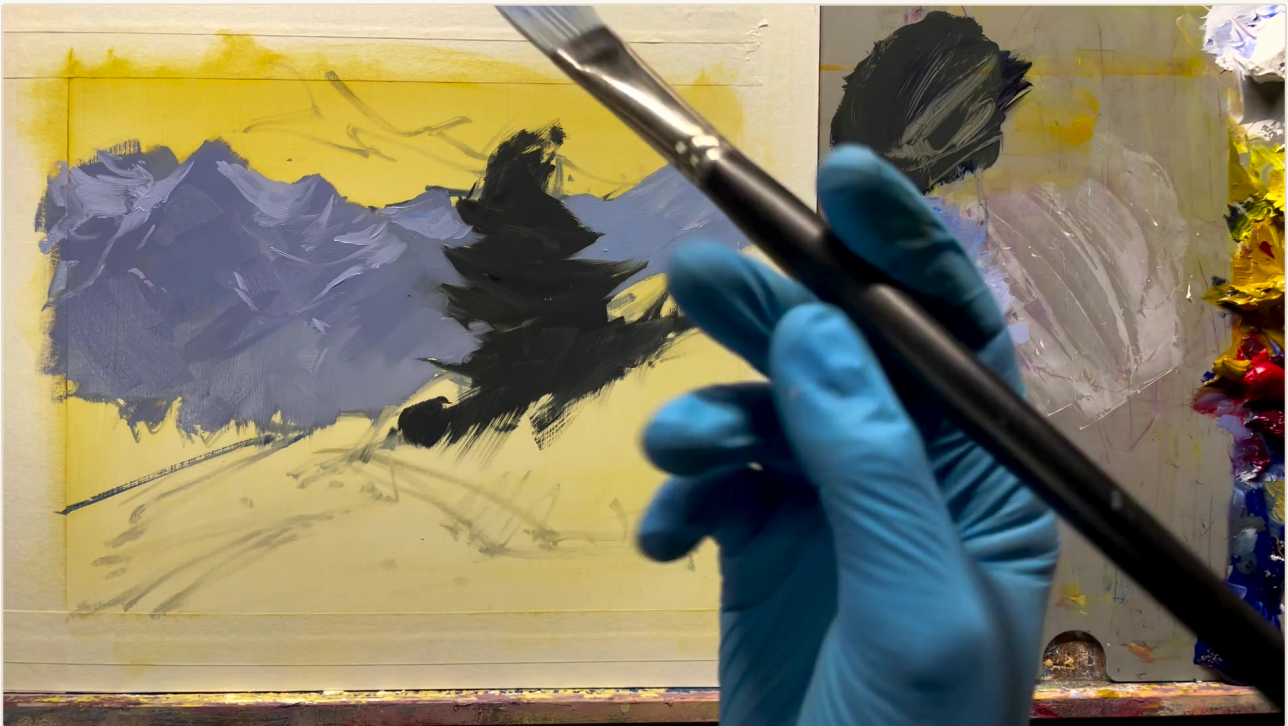
Determine Light and Shadow

Decide whether to keep the mountains in shadow or bring them into light later. Keeping them in shadow can draw more attention to the foreground, while lighting them up can make the scene more dynamic. Choose based on the focal point you wish to emphasize.

PRO TIP

Experiment with a palette knife for interesting textures, but be mindful of losing finer brushwork details.

12 Painting the Sky



Prepare the Sky Color

Mix white with a little ultramarine and some of the greys from your palette. Aim for a color lighter than the mountain but not as light as the snow. This should be a slightly cooler tone.

Paint the Sky

Apply the mixed sky color to the canvas, considering the shapes of the mountains as you paint. Decide whether you want crisp or soft edges around the mountain peaks. Use synthetic brushes for precise edges.

Create Soft and Crisp Edges

Around the mountain peaks, use crisp edges to define the shapes. As you approach the tree, soften the mountain's edge to ensure the tree stands out as the focal point.

Maintain Color Purity

Use a paper towel to wipe off any dark color picked up by the brush when painting near the tree. Reload your brush with the light sky color to keep it pure.

Shape and Stroke Variation

Experiment with dynamic, angular shapes or softer, rounded strokes based on your mood. Softer edges near the canvas edge prevent the eye from being drawn away from the main focus.

PRO TIP

Soften edges as they approach the canvas edge to keep the viewer's focus on the central elements.

13 Refining the Tree and Adding Details



Mix the Base Color for the Tree

Combine blue, red, and a bit of yellow ochre to create a dark, greyish base color. Ensure the paint is thick enough for the lighter areas you'll add later. Mix beside the original pile to easily compare and adjust the color.

Apply Finishing Strokes to the Tree

Use the mixed color lightly to add finishing strokes to the tree. Aim for soft edges to maintain the tree's dynamic character, avoiding a crisp, uniform outline. Use varied brush techniques to keep the tree lively and expressive.

Create Texture and Detail

Drag the brush lightly and quickly to achieve broken edges, especially if using a fast-drying medium. Use the brush corner for small, lively marks, reminiscent of slow-motion explosions. Ensure edges don't appear artificially straight or flat.

PRO TIP

Mix colors beside the original pile to easily compare and adjust without losing track of the color relationship.

14 Foreground and Grass Textures



Create Mid-Value Lights in the Tree

Mix yellow ochre with a touch of bright yellow to create a mid-value color. This should be lighter and slightly greener than the base color. Use thicker paint to maintain vibrancy and apply it by picking up the paint on the side of the brush, gently smushing it onto the canvas without covering the darks completely.

Add Lighter Highlights

Introduce a light yellow to the mix for highlights, ensuring not to go too light to maintain the tree's character. Apply this color on the top surface of the mid-value, creating texture and a larger light shape to balance the tree's darkness.

Paint Distant Trees in Shadow

For trees further away, use a shadow color mixed with a little white. Apply with soft, upward brush strokes to create a forest of swishy shapes. Add darker tones on top to build depth.

Develop a Closer Tree

Use a green base color for a closer tree and its smaller counterpart. Add light to this tree, keeping it cool rather than warm, unless it's a focal point. Use small shapes to suggest trees, creating a scene with minimal effort.

Enhance Foreground with Color Variety

Clean your brush and lightly apply some of the mixed colors into the dark areas of the foreground. This will prepare the area for an overlay of yellow ochre and warm colors, adding variety and realism.

PRO TIP

Use small, deliberate brush strokes to suggest trees, creating a scene with minimal effort.

15 Trusting the Process



Create Shadow Triangles

Add a shadow to form a triangle shape, connecting it to a smaller triangle for an interesting composition. This will serve as a guide for your painting.

Mix and Apply Shadow Colors

Mix a shadow color using brown, which is a combination of orange and blue. Apply this thick paint to the shadow areas, ensuring there's a lot of color variation to enhance the depth.

Brush Lightly for Grass Effect

Brush the shadow color lightly to create the appearance of grasses. Keep the paint thin to avoid conflicts with thicker layers later.

Add Soft Shadows

Add another soft, thin shadow in the designated section to enhance the depth and realism of the scene.

Trust the Process

Even if the painting looks rough at this stage, trust the process. It will come together as you continue to work on it.

PRO TIP

Keep the initial layers thin to prevent them from interfering with thicker paint applied later.

16 Adding Light and Mid Values



Prepare the Mid Values

Mix yellow ochre with some white and a little bit of blue to create the mid values. Aim for soft edges by brushing into the darks without covering them completely. This will create a smooth transition from darks to mid values.

Add Light to the Foreground

Focus on the tops of the clumps of grass where the light hits. Use larger shapes in the foreground and gradually make them smaller as they recede into the distance. This will help create depth and a sense of light coming from a specific direction.

Create Soft Shadows

Use soft edges to indicate shadows, avoiding hard edges which suggest non-grassy elements. Brush down and out to form a grassy texture both in front and behind, capturing the interplay of light and shadow.

PRO TIP

Start with small shapes in the distance and work forward, allowing front shapes to overlap back shapes for depth.

17 Adding Lupins and Foreground Details



Prepare Light Colors

Grab some yellow paint to begin working on the lighter areas of your painting. Push the yellow slightly towards green to create a more vibrant impasto effect. Remember, using a fast-drying medium can help achieve the desired texture, but the wetness of the paint allows for easy blending and soft edges.

Create Impasto Texture

Apply thicker paint to the canvas by dragging it with your brush. Avoid over-mixing the paint on your palette; instead, let the colors mix directly on the canvas for unique effects. This technique enhances the texture and adds depth to your painting.

Enhance Contrast

Add a little more white to your mixture to increase contrast in specific areas. Focus on creating a bright spot that stands out against the background, especially near the tree. This contrast will help define the shapes and bring attention to the focal points.

PRO TIP

Allow colors to mix on the canvas for unique effects and enhanced texture.

18 Finalizing the Sky and Background



Fill in Small Details

Use a small brush to fill in any little holes in the painting. Consider adding lupins in the foreground for extra color interest. Add darker lupins in some areas and a few highlights for detail.

Warm Up Under the Tree

Add warm tones under the tree to suggest reflected light from the grasses. Use a little blue to reflect the sky on top of the rock, ensuring it's a dark blue for contrast.

Add Fence Posts

Mix a warm grey for a darker fence post and add another one being overrun by grass. Include a bit of sky reflection on one side for depth.

Create Tree Holes and Branches

Mix a color slightly darker than the background to add small holes through the trees. Paint a few branches extending out, holding your breath for precision.

Refine the Sky

Use a brush with a little white and brighter yellow to enhance the sky. Be cautious of picking up dark colors, as they can spoil the light warm tones.

Maintain Clean Color

Fold your paper towel neatly and clean your brush from the top down to maintain clean color. Avoid scrunching the towel to prevent unwanted color mixing.

Adjust Mountain Edges

Dull the color with a little blue as you move across the mountain to add variety. Soften the edges of the mountain as it recedes into the distance.

Soften Edges

After blocking in shapes, soften the edges to avoid sharp lines meeting. This applies to both the tree and the mountain edges for a more natural look.

PRO TIP

Fold your paper towel neatly and clean your brush from the top down to maintain clean color.

19 Final Touches and Signing



Revitalize Color

Use a small brush to add sharp, swishy shapes reminiscent of the tree. This will revitalize the color and add interest to the composition.

Add Light to the Snow

Decide whether to keep the snow in shadow or add a soft light. If adding light, mix a slightly lighter tone with a bit of blue and warmth from the sun. Apply this to the tippy top of the snow for a subtle effect.

Define Trees

Brush down into the trees to define them more clearly and eliminate any white gaps. This will enhance the overall depth and detail of the painting.

Add Chimney Smoke

Mix a mid blue-grey and paint a small amount of smoke coming out of the chimney. This adds a charming detail to the scene.

Enhance Tree Shape

Adjust the tree to have more shape and interest by adding a little more warmth and complexity to its form. This will make the tree look less like a single stroke.

Sign Your Painting

Once satisfied with the final touches, sign your painting to complete it.

PRO TIP

Use a small brush to add subtle light to the snow, creating a gentle warmth that enhances the scene.

Summary & Key Takeaways

In this lesson, you embarked on a journey to capture the essence of a dancing pine tree in a dynamic landscape. Starting with the preparation of your materials, you ensured that your paints had the right viscosity and selected a suitable medium to maintain a smooth painting process. With your surface ready, you sketched the composition, focusing on the tree's unique character and the balance of elements within the scene.

As you progressed, you paid attention to the tree's defining features and how it interacts with its environment, allowing its personality to shine through. You balanced the composition by positioning elements asymmetrically, creating dynamic shapes and movement throughout the painting. By blocking in big shapes and painting the darkest darks, you established a strong foundation for your work.

Finally, you refined the details, considering atmospheric perspective and the play of light and shadow. You experimented with textures and ensured that the tree remained the focal point, using both brush and palette knife techniques. As you completed the painting, you added the finishing touches to the sky and foreground, capturing the vibrant energy of the scene.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Ensure all paints have a similar viscosity for a smooth painting process.
- Use synthetic brushes for crisp edges on board surfaces.
- Enhance diagonal lines in your composition for dynamic design.
- Observe the tree's unique features to capture its character.
- Position elements asymmetrically for a more interesting composition.
- Incorporate dynamic shapes to convey movement and energy.
- Reload the brush frequently to maintain pure colors.
- Soften edges as they approach the canvas edge to focus on central elements.



"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!