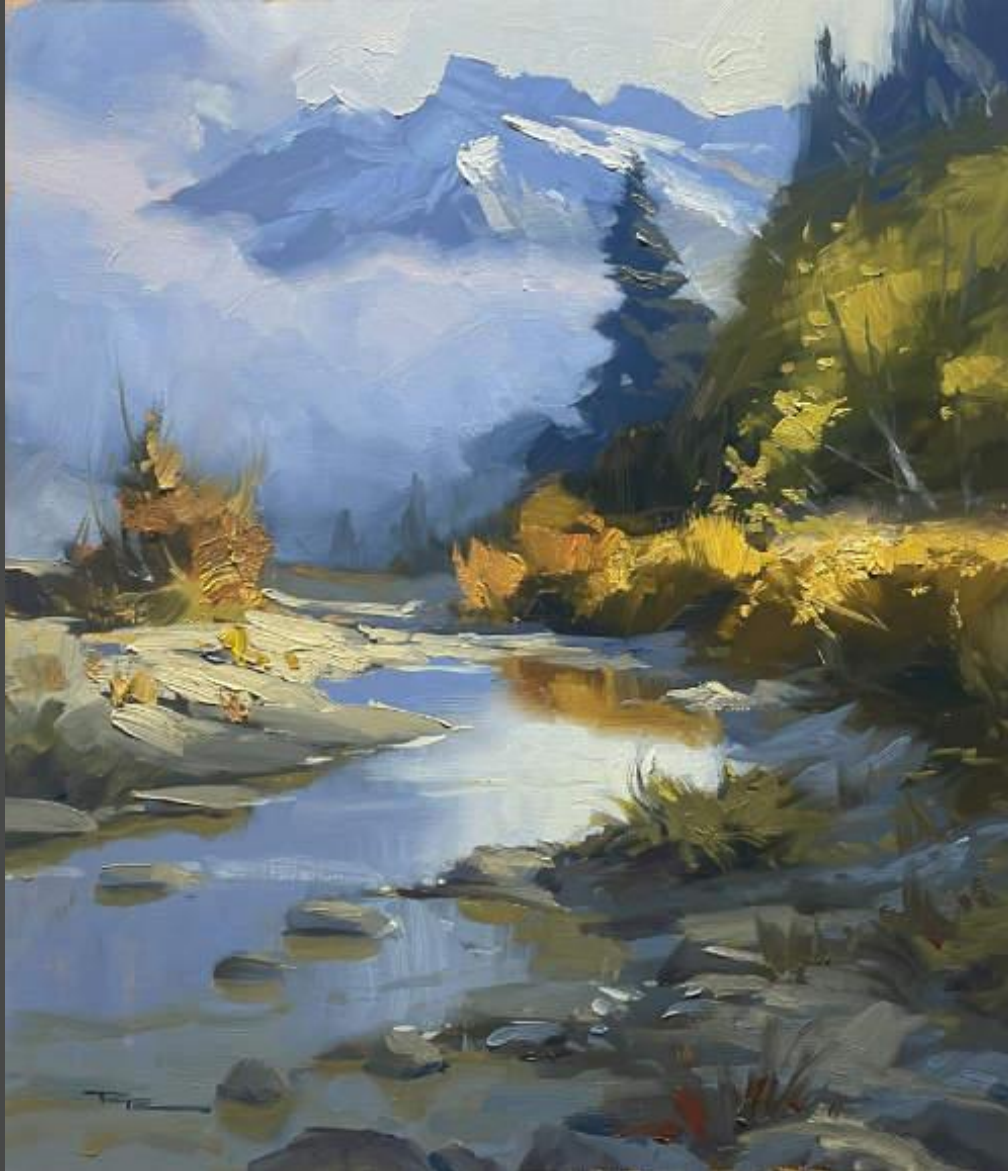




Mountain Stream

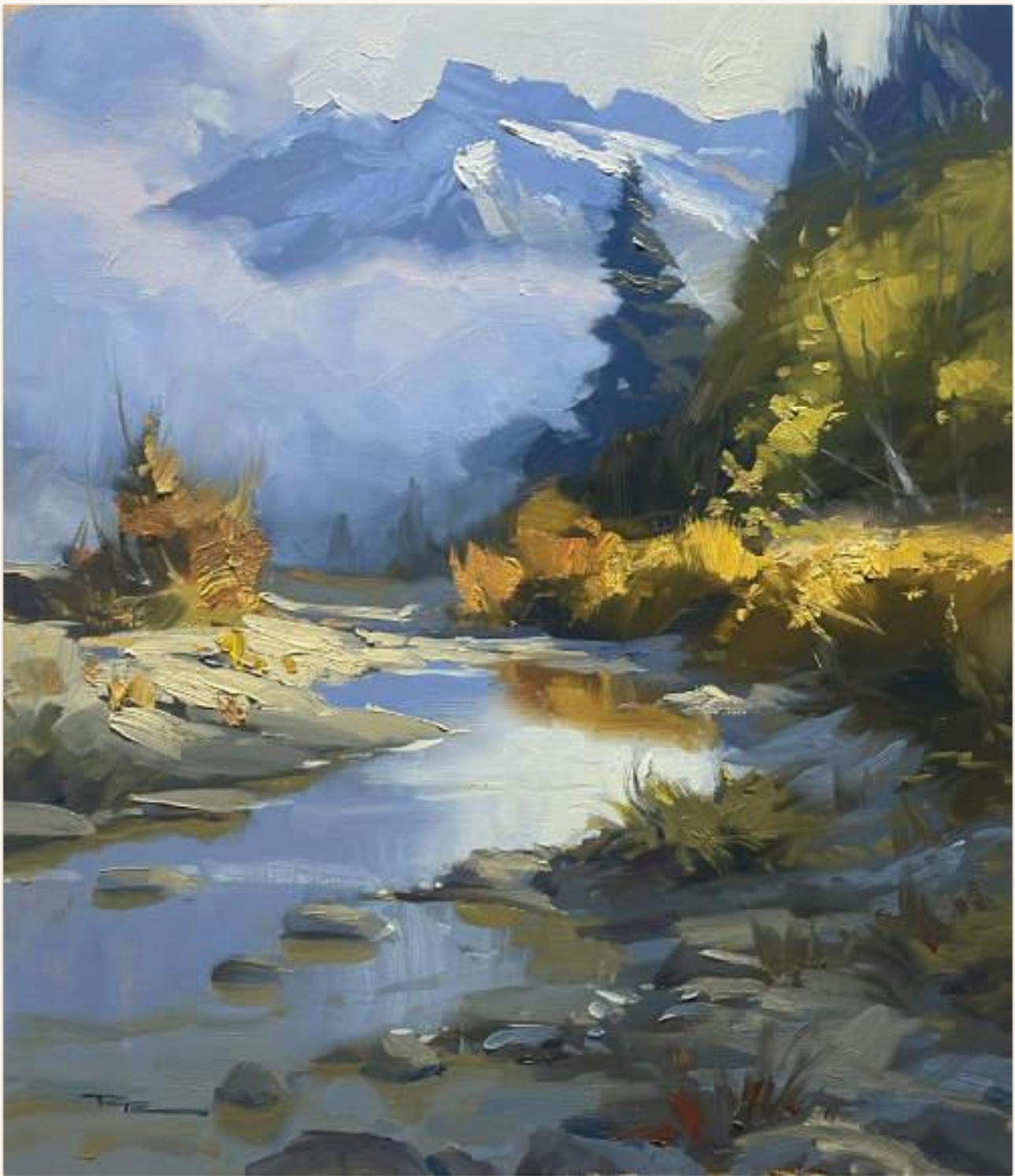
A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/259-Mountain-Stream>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

Welcome to the studio! Today, we're diving into the enchanting world of a mountain stream from New Zealand's South Island. This scene, captured from photographs I took during my plein air painting trip, offers a wonderful opportunity to explore the art of orchestrating light and shade. Whether painting from life or a photograph, our goal is to present the scene in its best light, idealizing it to capture its essence. In this chapter, we'll focus on identifying the elements you love most about the scene and using them to guide your artistic decisions. By concentrating on these key elements, you'll learn to enhance your focal point through thoughtful shape and light design, ensuring other areas remain subdued and non-competitive. This approach not only highlights the beauty of the scene but also teaches you to create paintings with depth and focus. Together, we'll navigate this process step by step, allowing you to apply these techniques to all your future works, transforming each painting into a masterpiece of light and shade.



Mountain Stream 12x14" Oil 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

- M. Graham & Co. Oil Paints
- Titanium White
- Cadmium Yellow Light
- Yellow Ochre
- Cadmium Red Mid
- Burnt Sienna
- Ultramarine Blue
- Painting medium
- Liquin or 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 Focusing on Key Elements



Mountain Stream
Oil on Board 12x14"

Identify Key Elements

Determine the one or few elements you love most about the scene. Focus on these elements to guide all your decisions for the painting.

Enhance the Focal Area

Concentrate your efforts on enhancing the area you identified. Use shape and light design to draw attention to this spot.

Subdue Other Areas

Subdue other areas of the painting to ensure they don't compete with the focal point. This will help maintain focus on the key elements you love.

PRO TIP

Use shape and light design to lead the viewer's eye to the focal area.

2 Lighting Techniques



Capture Changing Light

When taking photos for paintings, stay in one place for a while and capture images periodically. This allows you to see how the light changes over time, providing options for different lighting effects in your painting.

Combine Photos for Ideal Lighting

Select photos taken from similar positions to create a composite image. Overlay one photo on top of another and delete parts of the top layer to reveal the desired lighting from the bottom layer. This technique helps create a balanced light and shadow effect.

Create a Light Sandwich

Arrange your composition with alternating shadow and light areas. For example, use soft shadow in the foreground, light in the mid-ground, and shadow in the background. This guides the viewer's eye through the painting and highlights the center of interest.

Orchestrate Lighting Intentionally

Plan your painting's lighting to lead the viewer's eye effectively. Move beyond replicating a scene to confidently orchestrating lighting to enhance the composition and focus.

PRO TIP

Use alternating shadow and light areas to subtly guide the viewer's eye through the painting.

3 Shape Design and Variety



Design Shape Variety

Focus on creating a variety of shapes to lead the viewer's eye through the painting. Use an S-curve to guide the eye deeper into the scene. Incorporate different shapes in light and shadow to add interest.

Simplify and Enhance

Trim unnecessary elements from the painting to emphasize the S-curve and foreground interest. Adjust the shapes to be more dynamic, such as making the grass zigzaggy or enlarging a bush to catch the light.

Add Tree and Mountain Interest

Introduce variety in tree shapes by mixing round and pointy forms. Paint the obscured mountain rising from mist to create a romantic or epic feel. Ensure each shape is slightly different to maintain viewer interest.

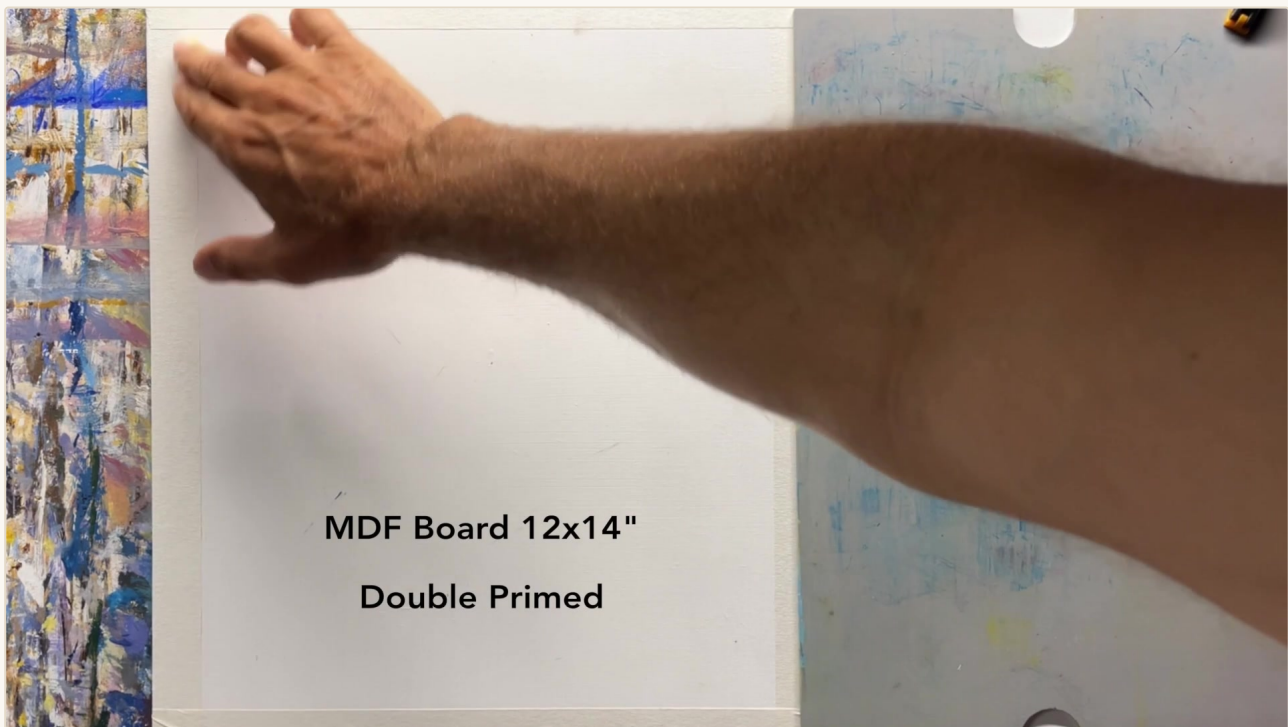
Consider Light and Shadow

Position the sun to enhance the scene's contrast. Light up the tops of grasses and trees while casting strong shadows on the riverbed. Use direct light for darker shadows and lighter highlights, increasing contrast and visual interest.

PRO TIP

Ensure each shape is slightly different to maintain viewer interest and avoid monotony.

4 Preparing the Canvas



Prepare the Canvas

Use an MDF board taped to 12 by 14 inches. Ensure it is double primed with acrylic undercoat for a smooth painting surface.

Mix Base Tone

Combine white and yellow ochre interactive acrylic paint to create a warm base tone. This will provide a cohesive undertone for your painting.

Apply Base Tone

Dip a big synthetic brush in water, then use it to cover the canvas with the mixed paint. Ensure an even coverage and leave it to dry for about an hour.

PRO TIP

Use a big synthetic brush to evenly apply the base tone across the canvas.

5 Materials and Tools



Prepare Your Paints

Set out your oil colors: ultramarine blue, burnt sienna, cadmium red, yellow ochre, cadmium yellow light, and titanium white. These colors will provide a versatile palette for your painting.

Select Your Brushes

Use long synthetic flat brushes from Rosemary & Co., including sizes 12 and 10, along with a filbert and a shorter flat. A rigger brush will be useful for adding finer details.

Choose Your Medium

Use Liquin as your painting medium to enhance the flow and drying time of your oils. Alternatively, walnut oil or another preferred medium can be used. If using acrylics, a painting medium is not necessary.

PRO TIP

Select a variety of brush sizes to accommodate both broad strokes and detailed work.

6 Initial Sketch and Composition



Create the Initial Sketch

Dip a brush into liquid and use a little ultramarine to sketch. Alternatively, use a pencil if preferred. Focus on big, simple shapes for this drawing phase.

Establish the Horizon Line

Draw a line just above halfway on your canvas to represent a false horizon line. This line is lower than the actual horizon, which is obscured by the mountains.

Sketch the Mountains and Trees

Position the mountains above the horizon line. Add a roundy tree and some pointy trees nearby. Include a small bush catching the light.

Add Foreground Elements

Draw the base of grasses leading from the foreground to the background in zigzaggy shapes. Include a small area of still water reflecting the grasses and mountains.

Focus on Shape Variety

Ensure a variety of shapes and distances between them to avoid repetition. This randomness mimics nature and prevents a man-made appearance.

Plan the Lighting

Visualize the light coming from one side, creating light on top of objects and casting shadows. Arrange the composition with shadow in the foreground, light in the middle, and shadow in the background, creating a light sandwich effect.

PRO TIP

Ensure a variety of shapes and distances between them to avoid repetition and mimic nature.

7 Blocking in Darks



Mix Dark Base Color

Dip a big brush into liquin and mix ultramarine blue with a tiny touch of burnt sienna to dull the blue. This creates a complementary mixture that is dark and balanced.

Add Yellow Ochre

Introduce yellow ochre to the mixture to push it towards a dark green. Ensure the paint is thick enough to cover the canvas without forming lumps.

Apply Dark Greens

Brush in the dark greens with big gestural strokes, focusing on covering the canvas without worrying about detail at this stage.

Adjust with Blue and White

Add more blue and a tiny touch of burnt sienna, then lighten slightly with white. Use this to paint areas in shadow, like the trees, maintaining a 'light sandwich' effect.

Create Warm Brown

Mix in a little more brown with yellow ochre and burnt sienna to create a warm brown. Add a bit of blue to tone it down and apply with soft edges to maintain obscurity in the shadows.

PRO TIP

Focus on soft edges in shadow areas to avoid drawing attention away from the focal points.

8 Mountains and Reflections



Neutralize and Add Greys

Neutralize the color by making it more grey. Add this grey to the foreground and mid-ground to begin working on the riverbed.

Identify Dark Areas

Identify the darkest darks and big shadowed areas in the scene. Use gestural, big brushstrokes with soft edges to block these areas in. Focus on enjoying the process with the big brush.

Add Tree Details

Add a little more detail to the tree by using yellow ochre and a touch of bright yellow. Create a big, soft, amorphous shape with soft edges, focusing on the darks.

Prepare for Mountains and Reflections

Switch to a clean brush and dip it in your chosen painting medium. Prepare to work on the mountains and their reflections, as well as the grey riverbed.

PRO TIP

Use gestural, big brushstrokes with soft edges to block in shadowed areas, focusing on enjoying the process.

9 Building Up the Riverbed



Mix a Blue-Grey Base

Start with a blue base and add a strong red to it. Balance the mixture with more blue to achieve a blue-grey tone. Add white to reveal the true color of the dark mixture.

Adjust the Color Tone

If the mixture appears too purple, add yellow ochre to tone it down. If it shifts towards green, introduce a tiny touch of red. Aim for a cool, bluey grey.

Paint the Riverbed

Brush the blue-grey mixture onto the riverbed, focusing on zigzag shapes. Use big strokes and avoid detailing at this stage. Keep the edges soft, especially where dark areas meet.

Lighten the Shore

Lighten the shore area slightly, considering any grass that might cast shadows. Focus on creating interesting, soft edge shapes without fussing over details.

Build Layers for Depth

Add more white and blue to push shapes back into space, creating a sense of depth. Indicate foliage with soft edges and build layers that recede into the distance.

Block in the Mountains

Use the remaining mixture to block in the mountains with a darker tone. Plan to lighten this area later to add dimension.

PRO TIP

Use big strokes and avoid detailing when first painting the riverbed to keep the focus on overall shapes and soft edges.

10 Creating Mist and Sky



Create a Mid-Value Mist

Add a little white and more blue to your base color to achieve a mid-value tone. Use a mid-gray palette to compare and ensure the value is correct. This will serve as the foundation for the mist.

Block in the Mist Shape

Apply the mid-value paint to block in the large shape of the mist. Focus on covering the area quickly to establish the base layer.

Soften the Mist Edges

Work on the edges of the mist by painting into the dark shape of the tree. Consider the shape and softness you want for the edge. Use a zigzag swish motion to soften the edges effectively.

PRO TIP

Use a zigzag swish motion to soften edges quickly and effectively.

11 Reflections in Water



Build the Sky

Add a little bit of blue to your palette. Mix it with some white to create a soft sky color. Apply this mixture to the sky area, keeping the edges soft against the tree to push it into the distance.

Create Snow and Shadow

Use the same blue and white mixture to suggest snow and shadow on the distant mountains. This will help integrate the snow into the scene with a subtle, cohesive look.

Paint Reflections in Water

With the same color, start painting the reflection of the mountain and mist in the still water in the foreground. Use down strokes or side strokes to mimic the natural reflection in the water.

PRO TIP

Use down strokes or side strokes to create realistic reflections in the water.

12 Foreground and Midground Details



Add Yellow Ochre to the Foreground

Add a little touch of yellow ochre to the foreground to push the color towards green. This will enhance the effect of looking down into the water and seeing the sandy bottom.

Adjust Mountain Light

Use the same color mix for the mountain in light, excluding the snow areas. If the color is too dark, add some white and a touch of burnt sienna to warm it up.

Enhance Snow and Shadow

Switch to a smaller brush, like a filbert, to work on the snow and shadow areas. Intensify these areas by mixing white and blue with gray, and add a very light touch of bright yellow to see how it looks.

PRO TIP

Use a smaller brush for detailed work on snow and shadow areas to achieve more precision.

13 Adding Light to Mist



Mix Light Mist Color

Start with a blue-grey base and add white to lighten it. Introduce a touch of red to push the color towards pink, and a tiny touch of bright yellow to nudge it towards orange. This mixture will create a lighter and warmer hue for the mist.

Apply Light to Mist

Use the mixed color to fill in the gap at the top of the mist. This represents the light touching the top of the mist. Soften the edges to blend it seamlessly with the surrounding area.

Create Interesting Shapes

Ensure the shapes you create with the mist are interesting. Even if the edges are soft, focus on making the shapes visually engaging, as shapes are an important element in your painting.

PRO TIP

Add a touch of red and yellow to your mist color to create a warm, light effect.

14 Sky and Mountain Edges



Soften Edges

Use a whisking motion to soften the edges of the shapes in your painting. Bring the softened edges down slightly to create a more cohesive look. Add some squiggly shapes as you soften to introduce variety.

Adjust Sky Color

Mix a lighter sky color by adding some blue and a tiny bit of yellow to warm it up. Apply this color to the sky area, softening the edges to blend seamlessly with the existing colors.

Create Crisp Mountain Edges

Ensure the mountain edges are crisp to contrast with the soft edges of the sky and mist. This contrast adds variety and helps the mountains stand out, drawing the viewer's attention.

PRO TIP

Use contrast between sharp and soft edges to add variety and interest to your painting.

15 Refining Sky and Reflections



Add Light to Sky

Mix a little more white with yellow to lighten the sky. Carefully paint up to the edges of the dark areas to avoid muddying the colors. Adjust the edges to suit your composition.

Refill Your Brush

Keep refilling your brush with paint when working where light meets dark. This ensures you have enough paint to maintain the brightness against the dark areas.

Enhance Snow and Light

With the same brush, add some white and a tiny bit of blue to create snow and light areas. Use a very soft touch to drag the paint off, or switch to a smaller brush if preferred.

Blend Reflections

Add a little blue to your mix and use downward strokes to brush into the reflective area. Blend it in with vertical or horizontal strokes to maintain the reflective quality of the water.

PRO TIP

Use vertical or horizontal strokes to preserve the reflective quality of water, avoiding diagonal strokes.

16 Enhancing Grasses and Reflections



Prepare for Reflections

Leave space for the reflections of the grasses and the bank in the water. Brush down into the dark area to suggest the presence of grasses.

Darken the Base

Add a little more blue to darken the area slightly. This creates a base for the mid-ground and foreground details.

Apply Mid-Tone Grasses

Switch to a slightly smaller 10 flat brush. Mix ochre with a little burnt sienna and blue to tone it down. Apply these mid-tones to create a soft transition between the dark and light areas, brushing out to paint the tops of the grasses.

Add Reflections

Mix a little dark with blue to begin painting the reflections. Use horizontal and vertical strokes to suggest reflection in the water.

Introduce Light Highlights

Add a little white and bright yellow to your mix. Brush up and down to create soft edges, focusing on maintaining clean transitions between the darks and lights.

PRO TIP

Use mid-tones to build a soft transition between dark and light areas, ensuring clean color transitions in your painting.

17 Foreground Bushes and Trees



Soften Reflections

Use your finger or a dry, soft brush to gently soften the reflections in the water. Ensure these reflections are slightly darker than the objects they mirror to create depth.

Add Stronger Lights to Grasses

Load your brush with thick, impasto paint and add stronger lights to the tops of the grasses. Include a touch of bright yellow, allowing some colors to mix directly on the canvas for a natural effect.

Create a Red Glow Effect

Add a soft red glow to the area to enhance the glowing effect. Use a brush to blend it softly, varying the intensity to avoid uniformity.

Enhance Bushes and Trees

Start with a darker color to bring the bush closer to the viewer. Gradually add lighter colors, using blue and yellow to create green tones for the tree. Use the corner of the brush to form interesting shapes, considering the light direction.

Add Highlights and Variety

Lighten the tree with bright yellow and white near the center of interest for more impact. Add green touches to the glowing area for variety, ensuring the foreground bushes remain in soft shadow.

PRO TIP

Use the corner of your brush to create interesting, soft-edged shapes that add variety and depth to your painting.

18 Foreground Rocks and Reflections



Mix Dark Green

Mix a dark green by combining a little blue with a touch of burnt sienna. This will create a darker, grayer tone suitable for the foreground.

Apply Foreground Texture

Brush the dark green into the foreground using light, flicking strokes. This technique will create soft edges and grassy shapes, adding texture to the scene.

Add Grass Details

Use a smaller brush, like a rigger, to add more detailed grass in the foreground. Avoid painting every blade; just suggest the presence of grass for visual interest.

Introduce Warmth

Add a little warmth to the mixture to create a softer tone. This will help in depicting the reflection of rocks in the water.

Paint Rock Reflections

Visualize where the rocks would be and paint their reflections in the water. Ensure the reflections are toned down to blend naturally with the scene.

PRO TIP

Use light, flicking strokes to create soft edges and grassy shapes in the foreground.

19 Riverbed and Rock Details



Create Reflections on Rocks

Mix a bluish dark grey using blue and burnt sienna, aiming for a shade about 75% grey. Apply this to the rock surfaces angled towards the sky to reflect the sky's color. Vary the shapes and sizes of the rocks to avoid repetition and create depth.

Add Light to Rocks and Sand

Mix a warm color by adding white to your existing warm tones. If the color is too vibrant, add a touch of blue to tone it down. Apply this lighter color to the rocks and sand, keeping edges soft to suggest a soft shadow.

Enhance Light and Contrast

Increase the light by adding more white and a bit of yellow ochre for warmth. Use thick paint to create a contrast between impasto areas and smoother sections. Apply this to areas of the bank that tilt towards the light.

Introduce Half-Light and Warm Grey

Mix a warm grey that is slightly darker than mid-value. Apply this to the tops of some rocks to create a half-light effect. Use this to suggest patches of sand and smooth areas, enhancing the contrast and warmth of the scene.

PRO TIP

Vary the size and shape of rocks to create depth and avoid repetitive patterns.

20 Final Touches and Accents



Enhance Tree Details

Add some dark tones to the tree or bush to define its shape. Introduce a bit more mist around the tree to enhance its depth. Mix a slightly lighter and greener shade using blue, burnt sienna, white, and a touch of yellow. Apply this color to create interesting shapes and textures, using thick paint to catch the light.

Add Tree Trunks

Use a thin line of grey paint on the end of your brush to dash in some tree trunks with a very light touch. To integrate these trunks into the scene, use a clean brush to gently soften the edges of some, but not all, of the trunks.

Dark Accents on Rocks

Mix blue, red, burnt sienna, and a touch of white to create a neutral dark color. Apply this to add dark accents to the rocks, representing occlusion shadows in cracks and under bushes where little light reaches. Focus on creating interesting shapes, with larger shapes in the foreground and smaller, flatter shapes as they recede.

PRO TIP

Use thick paint to create textures that catch the light and add sparkle to your painting.

Summary & Key Takeaways

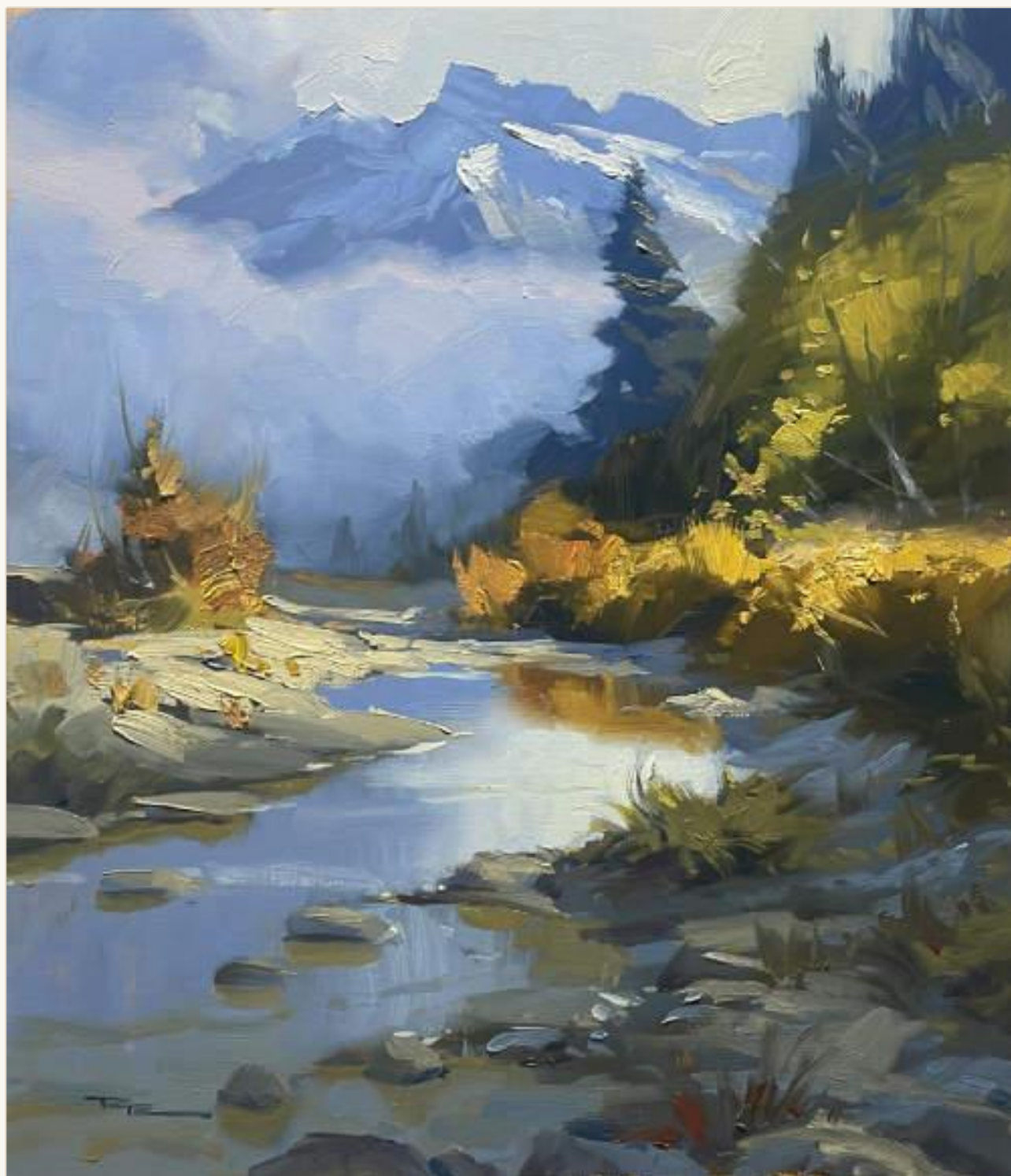
Embark on your painting journey by identifying the key elements of your mountain stream scene that captivate you the most. Use shape and light design to enhance these focal points, ensuring they draw the viewer's eye. Subdue other areas to maintain focus and create a harmonious composition.

Capture the essence of changing light by photographing your scene over time, allowing you to select the most compelling lighting effects. Use these references to orchestrate a balanced play of light and shadow, guiding the viewer's eye through your painting with alternating areas of light and shadow.

As you build your painting, focus on creating a variety of shapes and textures to maintain interest. Use an S-curve to lead the eye deeper into the scene and incorporate dynamic shapes in both light and shadow. Prepare your canvas with a warm base tone and select versatile colors and brushes to bring your vision to life. As you refine your painting, pay attention to the interplay of sharp and soft edges, ensuring your composition remains engaging and cohesive.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Focus on key elements and subdue others to maintain focal points.
- Use alternating shadow and light areas to guide the viewer's eye.
- Ensure each shape is slightly different to maintain interest.
- Use a big synthetic brush to evenly apply the base tone.
- Select a variety of brush sizes for both broad strokes and detailed work.
- Use gestural, big brushstrokes with soft edges for shadowed areas.
- Use down strokes or side strokes to create realistic reflections in water.
- Use contrast between sharp and soft edges to add variety and interest.



Mountain Stream 12x14" 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.

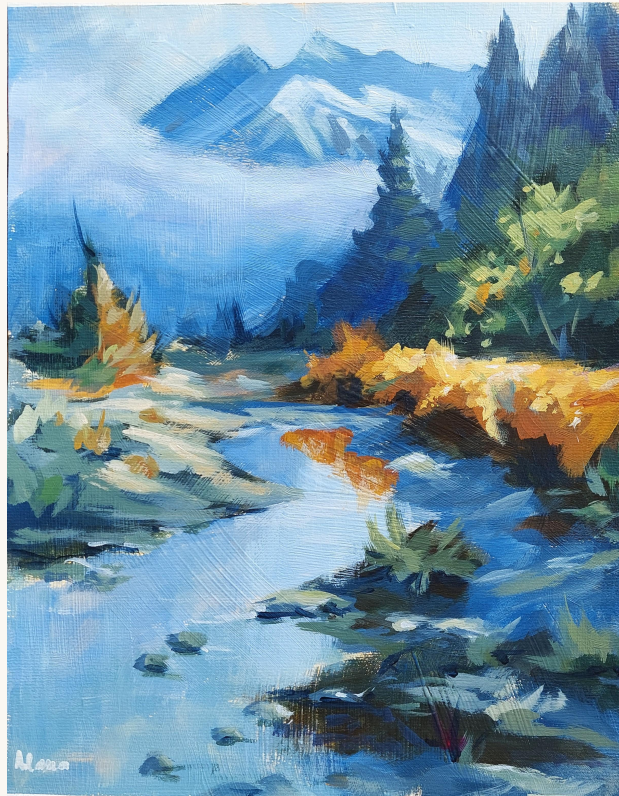
“Oil on board , great fun as always” by Stephen Dickens



Oil on board , great fun as always

Hi Stephen, bold and energetic. Nice! Keep it up. Always lots to learn.

“mountain stream, acrylic on primed paper, 30x40 cm” by Adana VIRNA



mountain stream, acrylic on primed paper, 30x40 cm

Lovely expressive style, Adana! I admire calligraphic brushwork like this that seems to dance across the canvas. The only thing I'd change is in the shadow sides of the orange tussocks, to make the transition from mid orange to darkest dark a little softer, either with soft edged brushwork or a darker transitional colour between the two. My rule of thumb is that all transitions within shadows should be soft edged.

Anyway, I love it! Looks like you enjoyed painting it.

“Mountain Stream 12x16 Oil on Canvas” by Nancy Newton



Mountain Stream 12x16 Oil on Canvas

Strong sense of light in this one, Nancy, with high contrast, high chroma warm lights versus dark subdued shadows. Nice! The transition in the water from light to dark is particularly well done.

“Mountain Stream after Richard Robinson, acrylic on canvas” by Rachel Chard



Mountain Stream after Richard Robinson, acrylic on canvas

Hey Rachel, some good work in here! You've created a sense of depth and your shapes are interesting and defined well. It's trickier with acrylics to get those gradations and soft blends behaving like with oils. I can see you're working to get those right. You'll find that has a lot to do with speed, because as soon as you start painting over dry layers you'll get that gravelly broken paint rather than a smooth transition. You'll find then, that if you painted this a second time, building each section at a time from sky to foreground, you'd be able to work faster and avoid layers drying on you. (This is the second time I've painted this one.)

It's a shame the mountain got smooshed and softened as that's supposed to be the payoff for the end of the eye's journey through the painting. Seems like you might need some new, crisp brushes to be able to create some sharper shapes. It's worth it!

Looking forward to seeing your next one.