



Last Light

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/82-Last-Light>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

Nestled at the far end of Lake Wakatipu in New Zealand's South Island, Kinloch is a charmingly tiny village with a population of just six. It's here that I found the perfect scene to explore the interplay of subtle greys and vibrant colors in our painting journey. In this chapter, we'll delve into the techniques that bring out glowing light and interesting textures using acrylics. I initially captured this scene in oils and later enhanced it with digital warmth, sparking the idea to recreate it in acrylics. Together, we'll focus on crafting subtle warm and cool variations within your greys, a skill that adds remarkable depth and intrigue to your work. This scene offers a rewarding challenge, inviting you to master the balance between muted tones and bursts of color, ultimately enriching your painting repertoire. Join me as we bring the tranquil beauty of Kinloch to life on canvas, step by step.



"Last Light" 12x12" Acrylic on Canvas by Richard Robinson.



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. Acrylic Paints
- Alizarine Crimson
- Phthalo Blue
- Ultramarine Blue
- Burnt Sienna
- Cadmium Red
- Cadmium Orange
- Yellow Ochre
- Cadmium Yellow Light
- Titanium White
- Canvas
- Fredrix ultrasmooth canvas (Giving it a light sanding first helps the paint stick better).
- 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 Learning Objectives



Explore Warm and Cool Variations

Focus on creating subtle warm and cool variations within your grays. This will add depth and interest to your painting.

PRO TIP

Pay attention to the temperature of your grays to enhance the overall mood of your artwork.

2 Initial Sketch and Design



Prepare Your Canvas

Spray the back and front of your canvas with water to ensure it's damp. This helps the paint flow smoothly.

Select Your Colors

Choose a range of colors for your painting. Include a yellowish toning gray for added depth.

Sketch the Design

Use a big brush and watered-down burnt sienna to mark in the big shapes and major lines of your design. Soften these lines with a paper towel to create a gentle, blended effect.

PRO TIP

Soften initial sketch lines with a paper towel for a blended effect.

3 Blocking in Darks and Alla Prima Technique



Block in the Darkest Darks

Use a large brush to block in the areas where the darkest darks will be. Mix ultramarine blue with burnt sienna to create a near-black color. Apply this mixture to the areas of your painting that require the absolute darkest tones.

Achieve Soft Edges with Alla Prima

Paint quickly to maintain wet layers, which is essential for achieving the soft-edged, wet-in-wet look of the alla prima technique. This approach mimics the effect of oil painting with acrylics, allowing for softer transitions between colors.

PRO TIP

Mix ultramarine blue with burnt sienna to create a near-black for the darkest areas.

4 Mixing and Modifying Grays



Lighten the Darks

Add yellow ochre to the dark areas to lighten them slightly. This will create a subtle warmth and variation in the shadows.

Mix Warm Grays

Use toning gray to create a warm gray around the log. This helps to establish a cohesive tone in the area.

Modify the Gray

Continuously modify the gray by adding different colors from the palette. Focus on adjusting the hue rather than changing the value to create dynamic color shifts.

Apply Dark Grays

Place the darkest grays in shadowed areas where objects are struck by light. This contrast will enhance the depth and realism of the scene.

PRO TIP

Modify the gray by adding different colors to adjust the hue without changing the value.

5 Keeping Acrylics Wet



Keep Acrylics Wet

If your acrylic paint layers are drying too quickly, use a spray bottle set to a fine mist. Spray the paint once or twice to keep it wet on both the painting and the palette for a longer period.

PRO TIP

Use a fine mist spray to extend the working time of acrylic paints.

6 Shadow and Light Variation



Unify Shadow Colors

Use a greenish grey to paint the shadow areas of the grass. Introduce this greenish grey into other darker shadow areas along the beach to help unify the colors in the painting.

Lighten Distant Shadows

As shadows move further from the log, allow more light from the sky to reflect into those areas. Gradually lighten the shadows as they extend away from the log to create a natural transition.

PRO TIP

Use a consistent shadow color to unify different areas of the painting.

7 Base for Green



Create a Yellow Base

Apply a layer of yellow paint to the area where the green will be added. This serves as a foundation for the green tones.

Modify with Toning Grey

Mix the yellow with a touch of toning grey. This begins to shift the color towards green without making it overtly green.

PRO TIP

Use toning grey to subtly transition yellow towards green without overpowering the base color.

8 Background Trees and Soft Edges



Mix the Background Tree Color

Create a grey-brown color by mixing a fair amount of yellow ochre with a touch of white. This will be used for the trees in the background.

Darken the Base of the Trees

Ensure the color is slightly darker at the bottom of the trees. This adds depth and structure to the painting.

Apply with Soft Edges

Use the tip of the brush to whisk the color onto the canvas, creating very soft edges for the background trees.

PRO TIP

Use the tip of the brush to create soft edges for a more natural look in the background.

9 Tree Leaves and Color Saturation



Mix the Leaf Color

Mix a color that is warm and bright for the bulk of the leaves on the main tree. Consider how vibrant you want the tree to be, choosing between a straight yellow or orange. Adjust the saturation to your preference, possibly greying it down if it feels too intense.

Block in the Tree Area

Block in a large area of the tree with the mixed color to see if it feels right. If the color doesn't work, wipe or scrape it off and try a different mix.

Modify the Front Tree

Use a slightly warmer and darker version of the main tree color to modify the little tree at the front. This will create a subtle variation and depth in the painting.

PRO TIP

Block in a large area to judge the color's effectiveness, and adjust as needed.

10 Background and Sky



Apply a Neutral Gray Background

Mix a fairly neutral gray and apply it to the background. This will appear bluish due to the surrounding warm colors and will make the vibrant foreground colors stand out more.

Create Soft Edges

Use the very tip of the brush to whisk the paint on, achieving nice soft lost edges. Avoid sharp edges to ensure the background serves as a subtle backdrop.

Layer Depth in the Background

Create three or four subtle layers of depth by gradually darkening the gray as it comes forward. This adds dimension without distracting from the foreground.

Add Light to the Background

Introduce a little light over the background to avoid a gloomy appearance. Ensure this light is darker and greyer than the main tree in the foreground.

PRO TIP

Paint quickly with acrylics to blend soft edges effectively.

11 Water and Beach Details



Adjust Sky Color

Ensure the sky is lighter and cooler than the furthest background hill by adding a touch of blue. This creates depth and contrast in your painting.

Paint Water Reflections

Use down strokes with the same sky color to paint the water in the mid-ground. This creates a reflection and adds interest to both the sky and water.

Add Texture

Keep the paint wet using a spray bottle and dab it to create textual interest. This technique adds depth and variety to the painting.

Enhance Water Reflectiveness

Mix a slightly darker and bluer color and paint a few horizontal strokes. This gives a sense of the water's reflectiveness.

Include Distant Beach

Add a little bit of beach in the distance to complete the scene and provide context.

PRO TIP

Use a spray bottle to keep paint wet and create texture by dabbing.

12 Highlight and Shadow on Beach



Apply Highlight to Beach

Mix yellow ochre and bright yellow with a lot of white to create a thick, impasto paint. Apply this mixture very thickly in the center of the spotlight area on the beach. Ensure the highlight is horizontal and straight to maintain the natural look of the light.

Transition to Shadow

As you move away from the spotlight area, gradually darken the colors. Use a slightly darker mix to create a transition from light to dark, paying attention to the natural lines of the tide. Angle these lines gently as they curve towards the viewer to enhance the depth.

PRO TIP

Ensure the highlight is horizontal and straight to maintain the natural look of the light.

13 Tree Trunks and Edges



Paint Tree Trunks

Begin with a neutral gray for the tree trunks. Gradually warm up the color as it approaches the highlight area to create depth and interest.

Define Trunk Edges

Ensure soft edges where the trunk curves into the shadow to convey roundness. Use crisp edges where the trunk meets the dark background for contrast and clarity.

PRO TIP

Use soft edges for shadowed areas and crisp edges against dark backgrounds to enhance depth.

14 Highlight Techniques and Impasto



Build Up the Highlight

Use a palette knife to build up the highlight, then blow out the edge for a soft transition. Soften the highlight further with a dry brush to create a glowing effect.

Extend the Glow

Brush a light, warm color outward from the spotlight area to extend the glowing effect. This helps to integrate the highlight into the surrounding area.

Thicken the Highlights

Apply more paint to thicken the highlights, especially if using acrylics, which require more paint for impasto effects. Consider using impasto mediums or thick body acrylic paints for added texture.

PRO TIP

Use thick body acrylic paints in highlight areas for impasto effects, but apply them at the end as they dry quickly.

15 Complex Shadows and Foreground Details



Add Dimensionality to the Tree

Enhance the big willow tree by incorporating a highlight color to add more dimensionality. This will prevent the tree from looking flat and give it a more realistic appearance.

Paint the Tree Trunk

Switch to a smaller brush and use burnt sienna, slightly grayed down, to start building the trunk of the tree. Allow the trunk to disappear into the translucent foliage by making it lighter and warmer as it ascends into the leaves.

Highlight Foreground Details

Apply a splash of warm, intense color to the foreground where the warm light strikes. Focus on the sticks, leaves, and other debris washed up on the beach to capture the warmth and vibrancy of the scene.

PRO TIP

Use a smaller brush to add detail and subtle color variations to the tree trunk, making it blend naturally into the foliage.

16 Foreground Textures and Light Effects



Create Crisp Edges with a Palette Knife

Use a palette knife to add crisp edges and interesting details to the foreground. This technique will create an impasto effect, adding texture and depth.

Add Foreground Details

Include elements like a stick or post in the water with its reflection. Focus on creating interesting shapes in the foreground to enhance visual interest.

Enhance Grass Structure

Apply a slightly pinkish grey into the shadows of the grass. This will add structure and contribute to the glowing effect from the light spotlight area.

Define Light Shafts on the Beach

Refine the shafts of light across the beach. Ensure the light skips over the shadowed ledge to create a dynamic effect.

Highlight Land Behind Dark Trees

Add a touch of light to the land behind the dark trees. This will increase the contrast and add punch to the center of interest.

Paint Foreground Shells

Include a few shells in the foreground, keeping them in shadow. Use a grey tone to maintain the shadowed effect.

PRO TIP

Use a palette knife to create crisp edges and add texture to the foreground.

17 Final Adjustments



Refine Tree Trunks

Assess the tree trunks in your painting. If they appear awkward or out of place, spend some time reshaping them. Aim for a more natural and pleasing appearance.

PRO TIP

Regularly step back to compare your adjustments with the original to ensure improvements.

Summary & Key Takeaways

In this lesson, you embarked on a journey to capture the essence of 'Last Light' by skillfully manipulating grays and exploring subtle temperature shifts. From the initial sketch to the final details, you learned how to create depth and interest through warm and cool variations. By paying close attention to the temperature of your grays, you enhanced the overall mood and atmosphere of your painting.

Starting with a damp canvas, you laid the foundation with big shapes and lines, softened for a gentle effect. You then moved on to blocking in the darkest areas using a near-black mix of ultramarine blue and burnt sienna, maintaining wet layers for a soft, alla prima look. As you progressed, you modified grays with hues rather than values to create dynamic color shifts, ensuring a cohesive and realistic scene.

Throughout the process, you employed techniques to keep your acrylics wet, unified shadow areas with consistent colors, and built up textures and details in the foreground. By using impasto techniques and refining light effects, you added depth and vibrancy to your painting. With each step, you focused on creating a harmonious balance between light and shadow, ultimately bringing your vision of 'Last Light' to life.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Pay attention to the temperature of your grays to enhance mood.
- Soften initial sketch lines with a paper towel for a blended effect.
- Mix ultramarine blue with burnt sienna for the darkest areas.
- Modify gray by adjusting hue without changing value.
- Use a fine mist spray to extend the working time of acrylic paints.
- Use a consistent shadow color to unify different areas.
- Ensure highlights are horizontal and straight for natural light.
- Use thick body acrylic paints for impasto effects at the end.



"Last Light" 12x12" Acrylic on Canvas by Richard Robinson.

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.

"A Gentle Light" by Sarah Bottjer



"A Gentle Light" 10x12" Acrylic on Canvas by Sarah Bottjer

Hi Sarah this is an interesting take on this scene. I'm not sure if the over simplification of the lines of the beach was intentional or not but it does make an interesting design. Unfortunately the two points of the beach formed by the longest lines seem a bit odd like there's a piece missing. I have a sense that you feel the need to see every item clearly in your painting but let me encourage you to explore using more mystery in your painting. If you using more lost edges and fewer lines in your work you'll see a marked improvement. For instance you don't need to draw every branch in the trees on the left - you could obscure them in a soft haze of foliage. You've also made lines of the shadow sides of your logs instead of the interesting broken shapes that they really are. That's your challenge for the next one!

"Autumn's Last Light" by Laurena Beirnes



"Autumn's Last Light" 11x14 Oil on Canvas by Laurena Beirnes

That's getting there Laurena. Nice work with your colours - you've created a strong light effect with subtle transitions between light and shade areas which is not an easy thing to do. Only problem is you've smoothed your brushwork a lot and over-simplified the design, making lines too regular and losing much of the interest you might have had. The sky for instance could have more colour variation, the grass could use a few vertical strokes to break up the surface, as could the foreground sand. In short, if you use more paint, larger and more aggressive brushwork without second guessing each stroke you'll have a much more exciting painting. It'd be great for you to do this painting again with that in mind. Make sure you get the drawing right to start with though. Good luck!

"Workshop36" by Karlo Bonacic



"Workshop36" Oil on Canvas by Karlo Bonacic

Nice one Karlo - you've done well with the greys although it's got a little muddy in places where you could have used more colour in your greys like in the sky and at the base of the bushes on the left. It's a fine line between rich greys and mud. You're brushwork is really very good with loads of variety, if a little uncertain in some places. The drawing is very good too, all except the horizon line which is running into the baseline of the main trees - it should be a little higher to avoid that connection. Overall very well done.

“The Sounds of Silence” by Cristina Mihailescu



"The Sounds of Silence" by Cristina Mihailescu

Quite an impressionistic take on this scene Cristina with lots of lively brushwork. There's a problem with the drawing of the triangular grassy patch which has become over simplified now and could do with a much larger and more broken edge as it comes towards us. Dabbing bright green on that area doesn't give a convincing impression of light - better to use thin horizontal strips of light to lend it some perspective. Your trees look like they're crouching a bit to stay in the frame - better to not have them 'kissing' the top edge - just run them clearly out of the top as if there were another third of them outside the canvas. Make sure distant horizons are flat and horizontal - any small variation seen in this from a distance means something big is happening over there, so you've got to be careful - I even use a ruler sometimes. Check the drawing of your trees too - you can see more of the front ends of them in the photo with much more foreshortening than what you've drawn here. Overall it's a nice strong image that could do with a few tweaks.