



The River Bend

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/260-The-River-Bend>

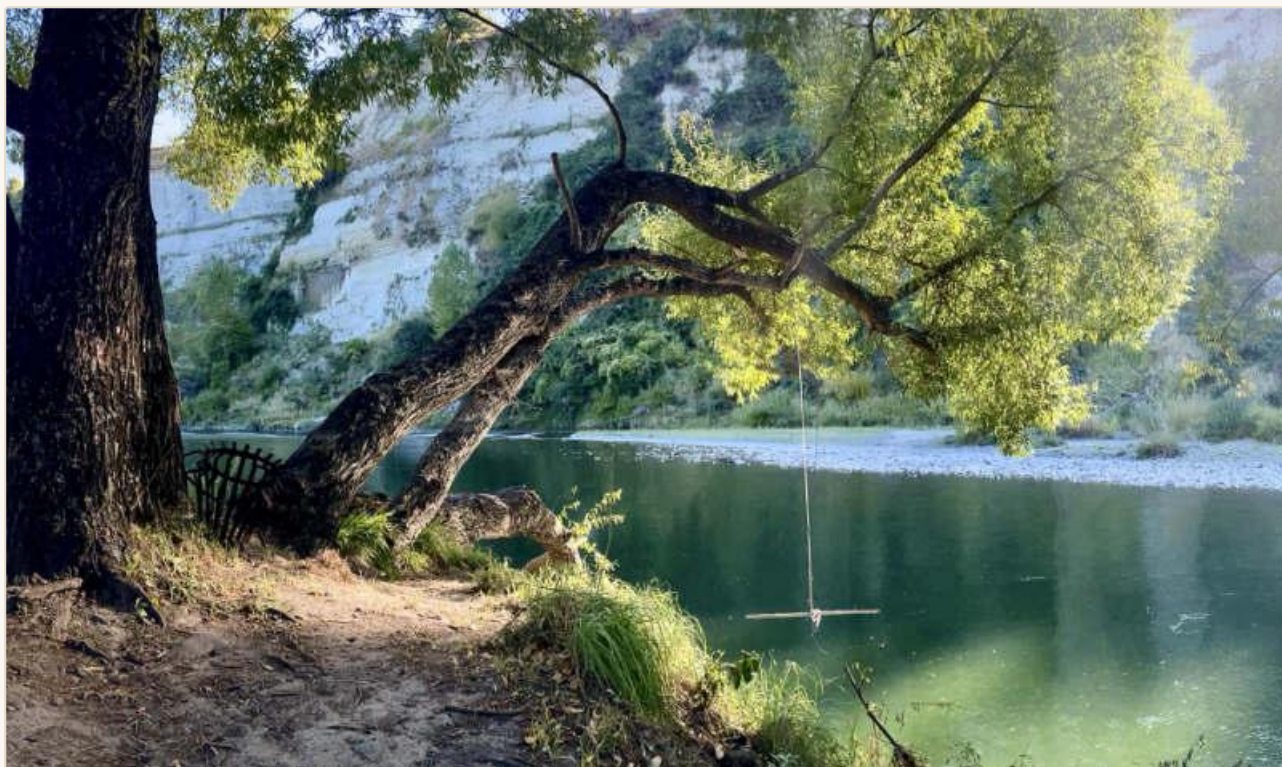
MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, we'll explore the captivating scene of a tree on the river bend, inspired by the Rangiteiki River in New Zealand. This lesson is all about capturing the essence of what you love most in a scene and bringing it to life on canvas. We'll start by designing our painting in greyscale, focusing on the elements that truly speak to us, like the beautiful tree and the enchanting dappled light. I'll guide you through the process of using AI as a creative tool, showing you how it can help flesh out your design and save time while still allowing you to gain valuable experience. Whether you choose to incorporate AI or prefer a more traditional approach, the choice is yours—do what brings you joy. As we paint in oils, we'll embrace the alla prima technique, enjoying the freedom of completing the work in one session. You'll learn how to manage background and foreground elements, use light and shadow to create depth, and add finishing touches with precision. By the end of this chapter, you'll have a stunning painting that captures the serene beauty of the river bend, and you'll have expanded your artistic toolkit in the process.

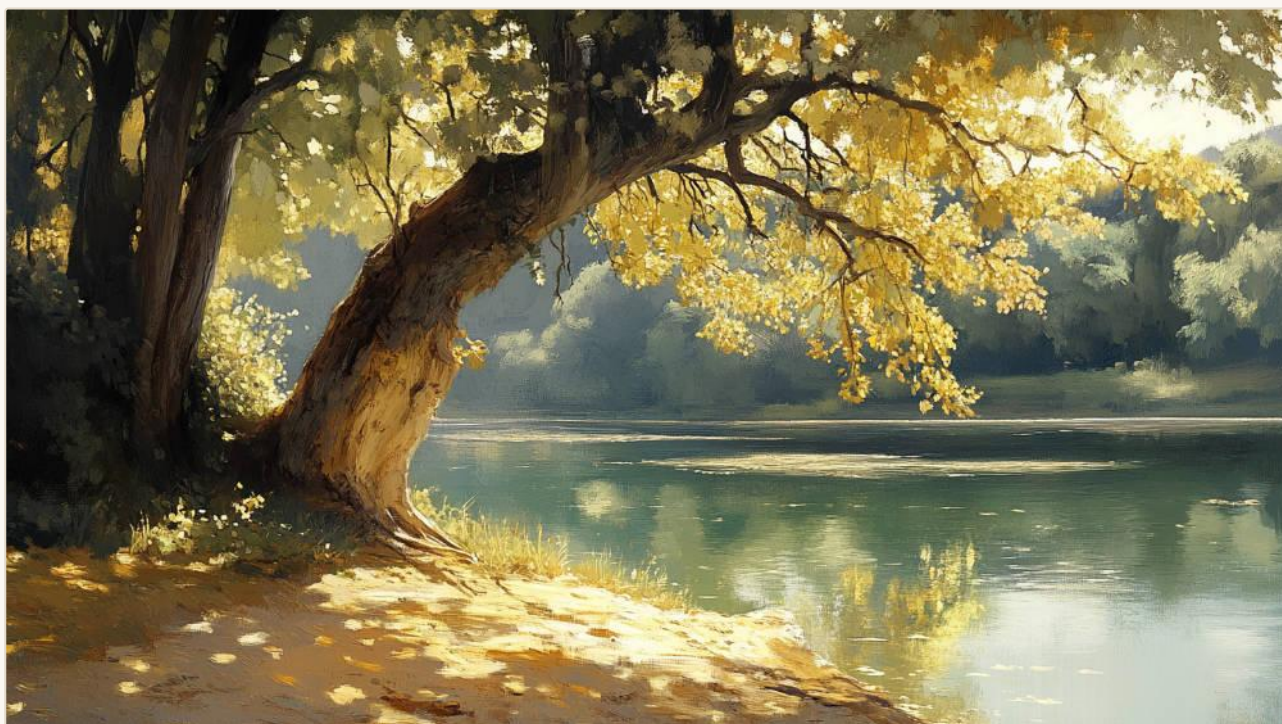


'The River Bend' 10x1" Oil on Board by Richard Robinson



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

- Winsor & Newton Oil Paints
- Winsor Blue Red Shade
- Venetian Red
- Gold Ochre
- Cad Yellow Pale
- Titanium White
- Painting medium
- Liquin
- Solvent
- Gamsol
- Surface
- MDF panel primed with 2-3 coats of acrylic undercoat or gesso. 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 Photo Analysis and Composition Planning

Adjust Photo Proportions

Change the panoramic nature of the photo to match the square proportions of your canvas. This will help ensure that the composition fits well within the space you have to work with.

Refine Tree Shapes

Modify the shapes of the trees if they appear odd or angular. Adjust them to better suit your artistic vision and create a more harmonious composition.

Focus on Light Areas

Identify the areas where light is coming through, especially in the trees. Highlight these areas in your painting to capture the essence of the scene.

Select Key Elements

Decide what to include by focusing on what you love most about the scene. Simplify or subdue other elements to make them supporting actors or background for your main focus.

2 Digital Sketching and Design Adjustments

Adjust the Tree Structure

Make the tree bigger and thicker by using a single trunk instead of two. Curve the trunk to create interesting shapes and add character to the tree.

Create Balance with Multiple Trunks

Split the tree into several trunks to achieve balance. Connect these trunks with a bush to unify the dark areas into a single piece.

Enhance Foliage Cohesion

Make the foliage more cohesive by thickening and darkening it at the top. This creates the effect of the tree emerging into the light.

Modify the Background

Change the background from a cliff to a hill. Lighten it and add reflections of the sky, along with overhanging backlit leaves.

Incorporate Dappled Light

Use dappled light to create atmosphere. Allow light to filter onto the tree and reflect off the water, illuminating parts of the tree while maintaining contrast with darker areas.

3 Using AI for Image Generation

Upload Images to Mid Journey

Upload two images into the AI image generator, Mid Journey. These images will serve as the base for generating new ideas while maintaining the original design.

Generate Image Variations

Type in the desired elements or changes you want to see in the images. Adjust the settings as needed, then initiate the process to generate four image variations to choose from.

Select and Modify an Image

Choose one of the four generated images that best fits your vision. Make any necessary changes to the selected image, then download it to use as a reference for your painting.

4 Blocking in the Sketch

Choose Your Sketch Medium

Block in the sketch using pencil, charcoal, or paint. Select the medium that you feel most comfortable with to begin your painting process.

Position the Horizon Line

Find the halfway point on your canvas and place the horizon line slightly below it. This placement helps establish the perspective of your scene.

Draw the Horizon Line

Use a ruler or masking tape to draw a straight horizon line. Although precision isn't crucial at this stage, ensure the line angles up slightly to reflect the river flowing away from you.

Shape Curves with Straight Lines

Use straight lines to shape curves, as it's easier to determine angles with straight lines. This technique aids in accurately capturing the scene's perspective.

Transfer the Sketch

Use the carbon transfer method or the grid method to transfer your sketch onto the canvas. Choose the method that suits your comfort level and ensures accuracy.

5 Drawing and Composition Tips

Embrace Flexibility in Landscapes

In landscape painting, don't worry about exact drawing precision. Slight variations, like a tree differing from the sketch, won't be noticed by viewers and add to the painting's charm.

Focus on Accuracy in Portraits

When drawing subjects like portraits, ensure accuracy in features such as the nose. Inaccuracies in these areas will be noticeable and can affect the overall likeness.

Plan the Cast Shadow

Identify where the major shape of the cast shadow will be. This organic shape is lovely to paint and adds an abstract quality to your work.

Paint the Background First

Start by painting the background and leave space for foliated shapes. This method helps you concentrate on the larger composition before adding finer details.

Enhance with Subtle Design Elements

Observe subtle design elements, like how tree curves are counterposed by other curves. These aspects can significantly enhance your painting's overall composition.

6 Painting the Background

Prepare Your Brush

Switch to a bigger brush to begin painting the background. Dip the brush into the painting medium first to loosen it up, making it easier to apply paint smoothly.

Mix the Base Color

Start with blue and add a little bit of gold ochre to push it towards green. Add a touch of Venetian red to dull it down, aiming for the darkest dark under the trees to create depth and contrast.

Apply the Darkest Dark

Paint the darkest dark a little past where you want it to stop. This allows you to paint a lighter, greener version into this area later and soften the edges.

Adjust for Distance

As you move downstream and further away from the viewer, make the colors a little bluer and lighter to reflect atmospheric perspective.

Plan for Tree Placement

Don't worry about painting over where the tree will be. You can wipe out some of this area later to allow for the yellowish paint to go in.

7 Adding Reflections and Atmospheric Perspective

Add Reflections in the Water

Use the same color as the surrounding area to block in reflections in the water. Soften the edges to create a smooth transition, enhancing the realism of the reflection.

Paint Distant Hills

Work softly into the top of the dark mass of foliage to paint distant hills. This sets the background and adds depth to your painting.

Mix and Apply Dark Greens

Begin by mixing the darkest greens, adding yellow ochre to your base color. Gradually transition to lighter greens by adding more yellow ochre and then Cad Yellow Pale with a little white.

Leave Dark Spots for Shadows

Leave spots of the darkest color showing through to represent shadows under the bushes. This technique adds depth and dimension to the foliage.

Create Foliage Clumps

Break up the edges of your painted areas to resemble little clumps of foliage. This adds texture and realism to the landscape.

Highlight Tree Faces

Add a little Cad Yellow Pale and white to your green mix for the faces of trees facing the viewer. This lighter color highlights areas more directly facing the light source.

Achieve Atmospheric Perspective

Use greens slightly lighter than the dark bluey green background to achieve atmospheric perspective. This subtle variation in value creates depth and keeps the painting cohesive.

Paint Overlapping 'Puffballs'

Paint overlapping 'puffballs' to create a sense of depth and layering in the foliage. This technique conveys the complexity and richness of the landscape.

8 Painting the Water and Reflections

Lighten and Cool the Water

As the water flows downriver, gradually lighten and cool it by adding white to the paint. This creates a natural effect without needing to add blue.

Use Yellow Sparingly

Apply bright yellow sparingly to create a catch light on the grass. Avoid using it in the background greens to keep them subdued and blue, allowing the yellow tree in the foreground to stand out.

Vary Brush Strokes

Use a variety of brush strokes: larger strokes, smaller strokes, and a few little baby strokes. This variation adds dynamic and interesting texture to your painting.

Choose the Right Brush

Use a filbert or fan brush for creating the tops of tree patterns. Flat-ended brushes can also be effective, giving a blocky feel to the painting.

Highlight Cloud-Like Bushes

Place the strongest lights on the cloud-like bushes directly opposite the sun, where the light is coming down.

Blend Green into Water

Brush some of the green into the water to blend it with the surrounding landscape, creating a cohesive and natural look.

9 Sky and Light Effects

Observe Reflection Darkness

Reflections in water are typically darker than the subject being reflected. This is due to the way light interacts with the water surface, so keep this in mind when painting reflections.

Use Horizontal and Vertical Strokes

When painting reflections in water, use only horizontal and vertical strokes. This maintains the reflective surface's appearance and avoids disrupting the softness and realism of the reflection.

Adjust Reflection Colors

Add a little more blue to the reflections to match the reflected subject, such as a hill or sky with a blue tint. This adjustment helps create a more accurate and cohesive reflection.

Handle High Contrast Areas

When painting areas with high contrast next to each other, fill in the area without touching the adjacent area first. Then, adjust the edge between the two areas to create a clean transition.

Create Fine Lines

To make fine lines with a brush, squish out a ridge of paint and push the brush into it. This technique allows you to pick up a ridge of paint on the brush, enabling you to paint fine lines.

Maintain Vibrant Colors

Keep your brush clean when painting light into dark areas to avoid picking up dark paint, which can muddy the colors. Clean the brush, refill it with paint, and continue to ensure vibrant and pure colors.

Reflect Sky Lightness

The reflection of the sky should be lighter at the top and darker at the bottom. This mirrors the actual sky, which is darker at the top and lighter at the bottom, creating a realistic reflection effect.

Paint from Dark to Light

Start with dark colors painted thinly and smoothly, using more liquid. As you move to lighter colors, use thicker paint with less liquid, allowing it to fall onto the canvas rather than being smushed flat.

10 Sky and Hill Transitions

Block in the Sky

Begin by blocking in a little bit of the sky, being careful around the dark edges. Paint around the edges initially to keep the paint clean.

Refine Sky Edges

Once you've filled in the sky area, play with the edges to refine them. This will help create a more natural transition.

Add Texture to the Sky

Add a few little spots in the sky area to help with the texture. These spots will add interest and depth to the sky.

Create Soft Hill Edge

Brush down to create the soft edge of the hill, which is being blown out by the light. This creates a nice sensation of light.

Maintain Pure Colors

If the paint picks up muddy colors, clean your brush, wipe the area off, and add back in the lighter color to keep it pure.

11 Foreground Rocks and Water Details

Mix Blue-Grey for Rocks

Mix blue and grey paint until you achieve a blue-grey color. This shade will help simulate the look of rocks on the riverbed.

Paint Rocks Touching Water

Angle your brush to create a sharp edge on the bottom and a rougher edge on the top of the rocks. This technique mimics the appearance of rocks interacting with the water surface.

Add Water Shimmer

Flatten out the paint and gently push it into the canvas to create a fine line along the water's edge. This adds a subtle shimmer effect without overdoing it.

Highlight with Sunlight Effects

Use a good brush and apply paint with the edge to create stronger sunlight highlights. This enhances the realism of your painting.

Adjust Rock Colors Upstream

As the rocks go upstream, mix in a bit of blue to make the color thinner and cooler. This creates a darker tone, conveying depth and distance.

12 Painting the Tree Trunk

Block in the Darkest Darks

Start with the darkest areas of the trunk using a mix of blue and Venetian red. Apply the paint thinly to prevent any lumps and ensure smooth transitions in later layers.

Create Texture with Brushwork

Use the fine edge of a large brush to make zigzags and vertical strokes, leaving spaces for the darks. This technique helps develop interesting bark textures.

Consider Light and Shadow

Remember that the trunk is a cylinder with reflected light on the underside and direct light skimming across it. Keep the trunk mostly in shadow with subtle reflected light to maintain realism.

Add Variety and Depth

Incorporate blued grey to reflect the sky and add more white to lighten specific areas. Leave some darkest areas unpainted to create occlusion shadows, adding depth.

Paint Surrounding Foliage

Use a dark dull green for the foliage around the tree, applying it thinly to maintain a dark appearance and enhance the contrast with the trunk.

13 Foliage and Tree Details

Create a Glowing Effect

Add more yellow to your paint mixture to create a glowing effect. This will serve as a half tone between light and dark areas, enhancing the backlighting and making it slightly punchier.

Use Gestural Brushwork

Apply a technique similar to creating a patchwork quilt or an abstract painting. Focus on being gestural with your brush, emphasizing the overall effect rather than exact details.

Apply Darkest Colors

Mix your colors to create the darkest darkness and apply them to subdued areas. Ensure these areas are fairly homogenous in value and dark to keep attention on the main areas of interest.

14 Building Up Light and Color

Define Edges for Realism

Keep some of the edges of branches and trunks sharp to ensure they stand out. This maintains a sense of realism and prevents the painting from becoming too abstract, allowing viewers to easily identify the elements in your scene.

Use Varied Greens

Incorporate different types of green to create a sense of light and depth. Use warmer and yellower greens in certain areas, while cooler and darker greens enhance other parts, adding realism and interest to your painting.

Reserve Bright Colors

Avoid using your brightest colors too early in the painting. By saving them for the end, you can create a crescendo effect, making the brightest areas the focal point and adding interest to your painting.

Build Up to Brightness

Gradually build up to the brightest areas to create a focal point or 'star of the show.' This approach is similar to the climax of a story or the crescendo in music, enhancing the overall impact of your painting.

Practice Patience

Exercise patience as you carefully build up colors and details. This leads to a more refined and interesting final piece. Enjoy the process of dabbing color on and take your time to achieve the desired effect.

15 Adding Highlights and Sky Holes

Prevent Unwanted Mixing

Be aware of your brush picking up dark paint and mixing it with the light sky paint. Wipe your brush if needed to maintain the desired effect and keep your colors clean.

Avoid Muddy Paint

If the paint becomes muddy, wipe out some areas to make it easier to paint over. This helps avoid fighting with the paint and keeps your colors vibrant.

Use Thicker Paint for Highlights

To paint light colors over dark areas, use thicker paint. This ensures the light colors stand out against the dark background.

Build Up Light Gradually

Start with the darkest light color to gradually build up the light. This approach allows for more control and depth in your painting.

Use a Smaller Brush for Details

A smaller brush helps create a speckled feel and allows for precise application of lighter colors. Focus on painting bigger clumps initially, then add individual leaves for detail.

Think of Shapes as Families

Consider shapes as families, where big shapes have small shapes coming off them. This approach helps create a cohesive and natural look in your painting.

Enhance Light Effects

Let some of the paint mix with the sky to enhance the effect of light pushing through. This adds a nice touch to the overall composition.

16 Camera Glitch and Repainting

Add Fine Details

Use the very tip of the brush to add little details. This helps in creating highlights and ensures that the details are similar in size, preventing any one element from stealing attention.

Vary Highlight Colors

Not all highlights should be the same color because some need to be a little darker. This variation adds depth and interest to your painting.

Avoid Oversized Details

Be cautious of making any detail too large, like a giant leaf, as it can steal people's attention from the rest of the painting.

Create Cooler Tones

To create cooler tones, add a little blue and more white to your paint mixture. This helps in transitioning to cooler areas of your painting.

Maintain Clean Colors

Clean your brush well to ensure the color remains as clean as possible. Make new color when it gets too dirty to maintain the clarity of your sky holes.

Vary Sky Holes

Sky holes should not look the same to avoid a repetitive pattern and to create a more natural and varied look in your painting.

Darken Sky Holes in Shadows

Make the sky holes a little darker as you move into dark areas where you don't want too much contrast. This helps in blending them into the surrounding area.

Redo After Camera Glitch

If you lose footage due to a camera glitch, you may need to scrape off what you've done and redo it so that you can capture the process again.

17 Tree Trunk and Bark Texture

Create Bark Texture

Use your brush to drag sideways as well as vertically to mimic the natural wiggly patterns of bark. This technique adds realism to your painting by creating a bark-like texture.

Maintain Tree Trunk Darkness

Keep the tree trunk in the darks to suggest it is in shadow, not in direct light. Avoid making it too light to prevent it from appearing as if direct sunlight is hitting it.

Add Bounced Light

Lighten the dark color slightly with ochre and blend it in to soften the dark color on the tree trunk. Focus on the underside to achieve the effect of bounced light from a nearby light patch.

Vary Brush Strokes

Use different angles and pressures with your brush to create a more natural and textured appearance. This variety prevents the strokes from all looking the same.

Create Gradient for Depth

As the tree trunk goes up, mix the bounced light color with the dark to maintain a darker effect. This gradient helps suggest depth and shadow.

Add Subtle Highlights

Use a small amount of lighter color to add a subtle highlight to the tree trunk. Avoid using too much white to ensure the trunk remains in shadow.

18 Ground Plane and Dappled Light

Mix Base Color

Start with a color similar to ochre, adding a little bit of red and blue. This will serve as the base for your ground plane.

Adjust Warmth

If the initial color is too warm, cool it down by adjusting the color mix. This helps achieve the desired tone for the ground plane.

Create Depth

Begin with the darkest dark in the area, spread it around, and then lighten it by adding a little more yellow ochre and white. This layering helps create depth.

Add Dimension

Lighten the color by adding more white and a bit more yellow ochre, but make sure not to cover everything you previously painted. This adds dimension and interest.

Introduce Grey Tone

To create a grey tone, lighten the color and add a little more blue. Be careful not to add too much blue as it is a strong color.

Vary Brushwork

Use the brush in different ways to create interest, applying the paint fairly thick to contrast with the thinner, smoother paint in the background.

Warm Up Light Areas

Warm up the color as you approach the light areas. This will help create a glowing light effect, especially around the main light area and spots that might catch light.

19 Grass and Foreground Details

Add Foreground Details

Use a smaller brush to add light details in the foreground for more control and precision. Focus on applying dappled light and highlights to bring out the texture.

Create Earth Texture

Drag the paint on with a brush to achieve a broken texture. This technique adds interest and a sense of texture to the earth.

Shape Composition

Think about shapes in terms of families, with big shapes and smaller shapes branching off like kids and cousins. This helps create a more cohesive and natural composition.

Vary Brush Strokes

Use different directions, thicknesses, and lengths for your brush strokes. Avoid making all shapes and strokes the same to maintain a natural appearance.

Create Depth

As shapes get further away, make them thinner, flatter, and smaller. This helps create a sense of depth in your painting.

Glowing Effect

Paint just inside a light spot without covering the whole area to create a glowing effect. This technique leaves a nice glow around the light spot.

Vary Distances and Angles

Varying distances and angles prevents the painting from looking unnatural. If they are too similar, it detracts from the natural feel.

Sharpen Highlights

Use a smaller brush to sharpen up highlights, adding crisp detail to make them stand out more effectively.

Define Grass with Color

Use darker green for the base of the grass and lighter green for highlights. This contrast helps define the grassy areas and adds depth.

Add White Flowers

Add little white flowers catching the light to depict small flowers in the grass. This adds interest and detail to the foreground.

Enhance Leaves with Skylight

Add a little more light to the tops of the leaves to depict blue skylight reflecting on them. This enhances the realism of the leaves.

Think in Clumps

Think of the grass as clumps rather than individual blades. This approach helps create a more natural and cohesive look.

Add Dark Accents

Adding dark accents like twigs and small details provides contrast and depth, enhancing the overall texture and interest of the foreground.

20 Painting Branches and Fine Details

Prepare Your Paint

Mix blue and Venetian red to create the color for the branches. Squish the paint flat and push the brush into it to form a ridge of paint for easy application.

Hold the Brush Correctly

Hold the brush further back to allow for more fluid, calligraphic strokes. This technique gives the branches an elegant and graceful appearance.

Apply the Paint

Use the very tip of the brush and apply the paint lightly to create realistic, calligraphic strokes. Focus on key branches to add realism without overwhelming the painting.

Use the Right Brush for Details

Select a very fine synthetic brush for painting fine details, as it provides a crisp edge. Use the Rig-a-Brush for even finer detail on the branches after starting with a different brush.

21 Using a Rigger Brush for Fine Lines

Prepare the Rigger Brush

Lube the rigger brush with liquid to ensure smooth application. Cover the brush well with paint to create a crisp edge for fine lines.

Enhance Paint Flow

If the paint isn't flowing smoothly, add more liquid or linseed oil. This will help the paint glide easily for fine calligraphic work.

Create Fine Lines

Use the rigger brush's long bristles to create fine lines and details. These are ideal for delicate calligraphic work.

Allow for Broken Lines

Not all lines need to be connected. Leave some lines broken to suggest leaves in front of branches.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by thoughtfully analyzing your reference photo and planning your composition. Transform the panoramic view into a square format that suits your canvas, and make artistic adjustments to elements like trees and light to capture the essence of the scene. Focus on what you love most about the scene, allowing other elements to play a supporting role.

As you progress, use digital tools and AI to explore variations and refine your design. Begin your painting with a solid block-in, establishing perspective with a carefully placed horizon line. Embrace the freedom of landscape painting, where slight variations add charm, and focus on capturing the larger composition before diving into details.

Bring your scene to life with thoughtful use of color and brushwork. Create depth with atmospheric perspective, and use reflections and light effects to add realism. Pay attention to textures and transitions, ensuring each element harmonizes with the overall composition. As you add final details, remember that subtlety and balance are key to achieving a cohesive and captivating painting.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Highlight areas where light comes through to capture the essence of the scene.
- Curve the trunk to add character and create interesting shapes.
- Position the horizon line slightly below the halfway point on your canvas to establish perspective.
- Paint the background first to focus on the larger composition before adding details.
- Mix more color than you think you'll need to ensure consistency and save time later.
- Leave spots of the darkest color showing through to represent shadows under the bushes, adding depth and dimension.
- Use only horizontal and vertical strokes when painting reflections in water to maintain realism.
- Brush down to create the soft edge of the hill, enhancing the light effect.



'The River Bend' 10x1" Oil on Board 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.

“The River Bend Oil on Oil paper” by Geoffrey Geeson



The River Bend Oil on Oil paper

Hey Geoffrey this is a great painting full of strong colour and intense contrasts, exciting brushwork and solid drawing skills. Painting oils on paper certainly gives it a different feel, somewhat softer than canvas or panel. I bet this one looks great on the wall. Lovely job.

“River Bend' by Fay Thomson - 12" x 16" Oils on Canvas Board” by Fay Thomson



'River Bend' by Fay Thomson - 12" x 16" Oils on Canvas Board

Hi Fay, lovely work! The harmonious colour scheme and soft treatment of the light create a beautifully serene mood. I love that you've included what looks like bark peeled off the trunk and the upper reaches of the tree, along with the subtle colour shifts that accompany it—such a thoughtful touch. Your brushwork is very gestural, adding a lively, expressive quality. The one thing I'd like to see changed is the value of the green reflections in the water, which could be a little lighter to enhance their realism. Other than that, this is a beautiful painting.

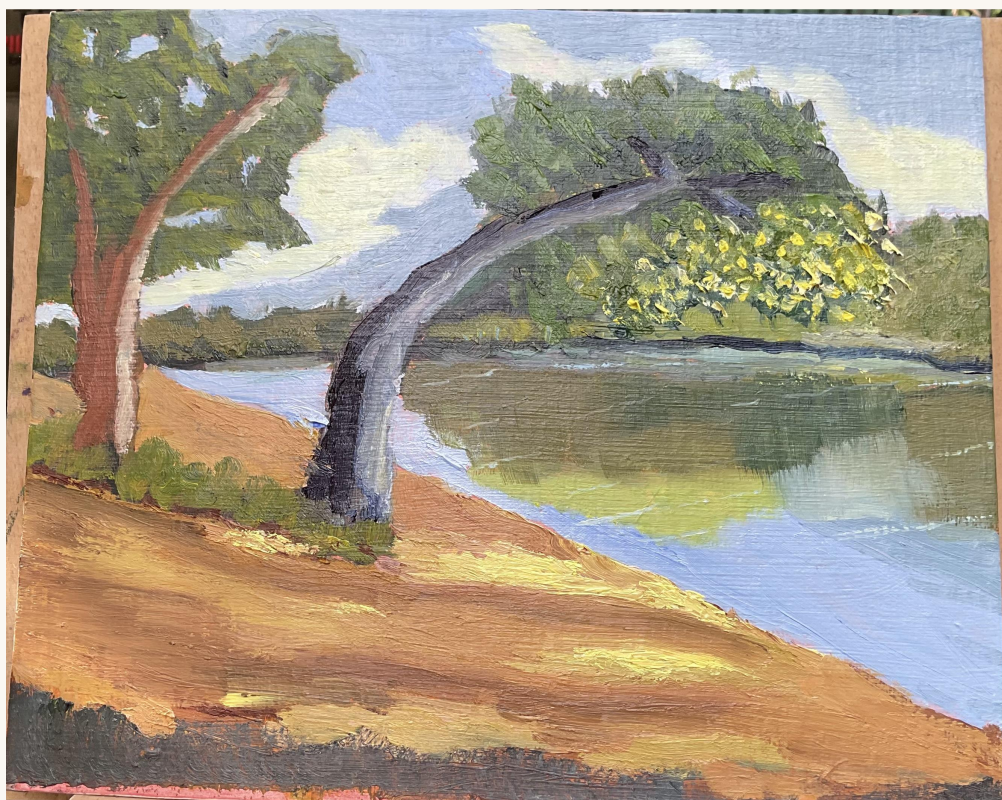
“"Rangitikei River Bend" in NZ, in Acrylics, Toronto, ON, Canada.” by **Eric Hillmer**



"Rangitikei River Bend" in NZ, in Acrylics, Toronto, ON, Canada.

Hey Eric, wow, that's an interesting take on this painting! You certainly have a different eye, and it shows in the really interesting organic shapes you've created in the tree trunks. There's a lot of engaging action happening in the foliage and the riverbanks, which adds a lively energy to the work. The smooth, calm area of water provides a nice moment of rest for the eye, but I do feel it could benefit from a slight horizontal shimmer somewhere to enhance the effect of flat, reflective water. Nice work.

“My attempt at River Bend 10x12 Oils” by Stephen Dickens



My attempt at River Bend 10x12 Oils

Hey Stephen, great effort on your painting! It's good to see you're not afraid to get the paint on the canvas—you've got a nice thickness of paint there, which many artists apply too timidly, so you're off to a solid start. I can see you've avoided the trickiest part of the painting, which is the lacy effect of the sky peeking through the leaves. It's natural to want to oversimplify, but I encourage you to have a go at this area using two brushes—one for the sky and one for the foliage—to capture that delicate interplay.

Speaking of oversimplifying, you've also simplified the shape of the riverbank and the trunks of the trees. By taking a bit more time to note the subtleties of these shapes through practice, you can create a more realistic effect.

It all comes down to drawing, which is where every painter needs to start honing their skills, because painting is just drawing with colour. So, I encourage you to work on those drawing skills, keep a sketchbook, and practice drawings of simple things, then move on to your hand and more complex subjects. You'll see improvement over time. It's all part of the journey! Enjoy.