



Milford Sound

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/261-Milford-Sound>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

Painting Milford Sound is an experience like no other. This breathtaking location, often referred to as the 8th Wonder of the World, offers a perfect natural composition that captivates the imagination. As a child, I was inspired by placemats of this majestic scene, which led to my first landscape painting at age 12. In this chapter, we'll explore how to convey the grandeur and depth of Milford Sound using seven visual tools: scale, atmospheric perspective, overlapping shapes, texture, color, detail, and linear perspective. These techniques will not only bring your painting to life but also enhance your future works. We'll address common photographic limitations, such as under-exposed darks and compressed distant objects, by adjusting our approach to create a more dynamic and realistic scene. Through a step-by-step process, I'll guide you in mixing subtle value differences, employing light mist for mystery, and crafting sunlit mountainsides with a filbert brush. By balancing cool tones with a warmer sky and adding foreground textures, you'll achieve a painting rich in detail and depth. Whether you're working in oils or acrylics, this lesson will empower you to capture the essence of Milford Sound beautifully.



"Milford Sound 3" 13.5 x 28" Oil on Linen by Richard Robinson



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

- Winsor & Newton Oil Paints
- Winsor Blue Red Shade
- Permanent Rose
- Venetian Red
- Gold Ochre
- Cad Yellow Pale
- Titanium White
- Painting medium
- Winsor & Newton Liquin
- Solvent
- Gamsol
- Surface
- Fredrix Linen with a smooth texture.
- 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 Scene Description and Composition

Understand the Scene Elements

Familiarize yourself with the key elements of the scene: the mist from Sterling Falls, the depth of the valley, the crisp shape of Mitre Peak, and the surrounding massive mountains. Notice the beautiful white herons, side-lit trees, long reflections in the crystal-clear water, and sparkling stones.

Consider the Lighting

Observe how the scene is both backlit and side-lit, with the sun perfectly lighting the area. This lighting enhances the visual appeal and should be captured in your painting.

Capture the Water's Beauty

Focus on the crystal-clear water with its long reflections and magical sparkle. These elements add to the scene's allure and should be emphasized in your work.

2 Choosing and Cropping the Scene

Identify Key Elements

Include Bowen Falls on the right and Mitre Peak on the left in your painting. Capture the mist, clouds, depth, still reflections, and warm grasses in the foreground to convey the essence of Milford Sound.

Choose a Panoramic Crop

Crop the scene by excluding the top part to prevent the elements from appearing too small. Trim the foreground to create a long, panoramic rectangle that enhances the composition.

Enhance Mountain Size

Raise the size of the distant mountains in your painting to improve the composition. This adjustment compensates for the 35mm camera on an iPhone, which can make the mountains appear smaller.

3 Creating Depth with Perspective

Adjust Mountain Heights

Increase the height of the mountains in your painting to counteract the shrinking effect of camera lenses. This adjustment will help maintain proper proportions and enhance depth in your composition.

Use Color Temperature for Depth

Apply warmer and lighter colors to areas closer to the viewer and the sun. Use cooler and darker colors for distant areas to create a sense of depth through atmospheric perspective.

Incorporate Overlapping Shapes

Position shapes so they overlap, indicating that one shape is behind another. This technique suggests distance and enhances the perception of depth in your painting.

Apply Linear Perspective

Ensure objects become smaller as they recede into the distance. This use of linear perspective is essential for creating the illusion of depth on a flat surface.

Adjust Darkest Darks

Modify the darkest areas of your painting to reflect subtle differences in darkness between foreground and background. This adjustment compensates for limitations in photographs and enhances depth.

4 Toning the Canvas and Initial Sketch

Prepare Your Canvas

Use a canvas approximately eight inches by 16 inches to maintain a two to one ratio. This size provides a balanced space for your composition.

Select Your Colors and Brushes

Gather titanium white, cadmium orange, cadmium yellow pale, gold ochre, cadmium red, permanent rose, venetian red, and Winsor blue red shade. Use Rosemary and Co long flat brushes in sizes 12, 10, and a smaller size 3 or 4 for signing.

Mix and Apply Liquin

Mix Liquin with titanium white to make it easier to spread onto the canvas. This will help in creating a smooth base for your painting.

Tone the Canvas

Lightly brush gold ochre mixed with odorless spirits onto the canvas. Rub most of it off with a paper towel to remove the white of the canvas, creating a more cohesive base for your painting.

Create the Initial Sketch

Use a small brush to sketch the initial outlines of your composition. This sets the foundation for your painting.

5 Sketching the Main Shapes

Sketch the Horizon Line

Grab some blue and sketch in the horizon line first. Use a ruler or a piece of tape to ensure it's perfectly horizontal for a stable foundation.

Create Foreground Diagonals

Focus on sketching nice diagonals in the foreground that lead into the scene. Decide where each element will go to maintain a balanced composition.

Enhance Mountain Drama

Make the mountains appear more dramatic by sketching them steeper than they actually are. This technique enhances their dramatic effect and adds interest to the landscape.

Vary Shapes and Angles

Avoid creating patterns by making all angles and shapes the same. Vary the shapes and angles to prevent uniformity and maintain a dynamic composition.

Incorporate Natural Variations

Pay attention to subtle differences in nature and avoid making lines parallel. This prevents long, straight shapes that lack interest and captures the natural variations found in the landscape.

6 Painting the Mountains

Mix the Dark Base Color

Mix more than you need of a dark color by combining blue with a bit of permanent rose. Add white to see the color clearly and adjust with a little red and orange to tone it down.

Create Depth with White and Blue

Gradually add white and blue to the dark color to push the mountains back into space, creating a sense of depth.

Differentiate Spaces

For mountains further back, add more white, a little rose, and a little orange to grey the color down. This helps differentiate spaces and enhances depth.

Leave Space for Mist

Leave a little space for the mist or spray from the waterfall to come out, ensuring it can be added later without interfering with the mountains.

Warm the Color Near the Sun

As you get closer to the sun, add a little white and a little red to make the color warmer and lighter.

Test and Adjust Colors

Check the color with a small spot first to see if it's right. If not, wipe it off and try again.

Paint Larger Mountains

Paint the mountains a little larger than desired, allowing room to define the edge as soft or sharp when painting the sky.

Adjust for Distance

For mountains further from the sun, add more blue and adjust the value with white to counteract the darkness. As they recede into the valley, add more white to lighten them and convey distance.

Fine-Tune Colors

Make fine adjustments by comparing colors on the palette and adding small amounts of blue, white, or other colors as needed to achieve the desired shade.

7 Adding Mist and Reflections

Mix and Apply Mist

Clean your brush and mix white paint, ensuring it is slightly darker than the lightest parts of the clouds. Use a large brush to apply the paint, creating a hard edge at the front and softness in the back area. Intensify the mist effect gradually as needed to build up the desired look.

Utilize Oil Paints for Mist

Take advantage of oil paints for creating mist effects, as they allow for soft transitions and blending. This makes it easier to achieve the desired softness and blending required for mist.

Enhance Depth with Mist

Use mist to enhance the separation of mountains by creating a visual barrier between them. This adds depth and dimension to the landscape, making it more visually interesting.

Create Reflections with Mist Colors

While you have the mist colors on your palette, use them to create reflections in the water. This adds coherence and harmony to the painting, tying the elements together.

8 Painting the Water Reflections

Apply Vertical Strokes

Use vertical strokes to apply the paint for the water reflections. This technique helps mimic the natural look of reflections in water.

Adjust Color for Realism

Create cooler and lighter reflections by adjusting the color to reflect the specific area you are painting. This adds realism to the reflection.

Blur Reflection Edges

To blur the edges of the reflections, brush sideways and then brush down. This technique helps create nice soft edges, especially towards the bottom.

Layer Darker and Lighter Colors

Start by applying the darker colors first, then add the lighter colors. This layering helps create depth and realism in the reflections.

Depict Disturbed Water

Add a strip of lighter color to separate the darker and lighter reflections. This suggests movement and texture in the water.

9 Adding Greens and Foliage

Choose the Right Brush

Use a long filbert brush for adding greens and foliage. Its shape resembles the top of a tree, making it ideal for dabbing on paint to create natural tree shapes.

Layer Greens from Dark to Light

Begin with the darkest greens and gradually move to lighter shades. This approach helps you understand color relationships and ensures a natural progression on the canvas.

Apply Paint Thickly

Make the green color appear brighter by applying the paint thickly. Avoid smushing it into dark areas to maintain the value without altering the paint itself.

Use Greyer Greens for Subtlety

Avoid using bright greens that aren't greyed down, as they would stand out too much. Maintain harmony in the painting by using greyer greens for a subtle effect.

Create a Spotlight Effect

Start painting in one area and work outwards to create a spotlight effect. As the paint wears off the brush, it will naturally blend and enhance the spotlight feel.

Add Reflections

Brush down into a few areas to create reflections. This technique adds depth and enhances the overall effect of the painting.

10 Detailing the Dark Areas

Mix a Lighter Grey

Mix a little brown with a little white to create a slightly lighter grey. This mixture will help indicate features like cliffs in the dark areas.

Add Depth with Lighter Grey

Use the lighter grey to suggest features such as cliffs in the dark areas. This will add depth and interest to the painting, making it appear more dynamic.

11 Painting the Midground and Background

Adjust Midground Color

Add white and a little bit of orange to your midground color. Evaluate the color; if it needs more green, add a tiny touch of yellow. If it's too vibrant, incorporate a bit more blue.

Create Fine Details

Use the very tip of the brush to smooth out the paint. Push the brush tip into the paint to form a fine ridge, which can be used to craft small, detailed shapes.

Lighten and Cool Background Colors

As you move into the background, make colors lighter and bluer. This applies to both the mountain and foliage colors, reducing contrast between lights and darks.

Add Calligraphic Strokes

Make your brush strokes calligraphic to introduce elegance and flow. This technique enhances the overall aesthetic of the painting.

Paint Mitre Peak

At the top of Mitre Peak, adjust the color to be slightly bluer. Use a light blue-gray to swish across specific areas, employing a ruler for precision if necessary.

12 Painting the Sky

Maintain Lightness in the Sky

If your brush picks up too much dark paint while painting the sky, wipe your brush clean. Reload it with the desired color to maintain the intended lightness of the sky.

Paint the Sky with Intention

Approach painting the sky like an abstract piece. Work with intention rather than just smushing paint around for a pleasing outcome.

Create Light and Depth

Darken and cool the sky slightly as it moves away from the sun. This creates a sense of light and depth in your painting.

Soften the Edges

Soften the edges in your sky painting, as skies are mainly composed of soft edges. Avoid hard edges that can stand out and disrupt the natural look.

Add Depth with Edge Variation

Create depth by softening some edges while keeping others sharp. This technique helps push certain elements back and bring others forward.

Introduce Warmth

Add a tiny touch of red to the sky colors to introduce warmth. This makes the sky appear lighter and warmer compared to other areas.

13 Final Touches on the Sky

Warm Up the Sky Near the Sun

Add some yellow ochre to warm up the color near the sun. Avoid picking up too much bright yellow to prevent an unwanted greenish tint. If this happens, remove the excess yellow from your brush and adjust your color mix.

Enhance Sky Interest

Introduce a touch more pink to the sky for added interest. Tone it down with yellow ochre and blue as needed to create variety and depth.

Add Highlight Clouds

Enhance the drama of the sky by adding small highlight clouds. These clouds help to show the scale of the scene, making it more dynamic and interesting.

Use Crisp Brushes for Sharp Edges

Ensure you have a crisp brush to create sharp edges. An old or worn-out brush makes it harder to achieve clean lines, so investing in new, good-quality brushes is beneficial.

Integrate Colors in the Foreground

Apply paint to the foreground using vertical and horizontal strokes. This technique helps integrate the colors and create a cohesive look.

Reflect Mist in the Water

Reflect the mist in the water to add realism and cohesion to the painting. This detail mirrors the atmospheric effects in the sky.

14 Foreground Details

Mix Foreground Darks

Start with blue and add some brown, venetian red, a bit of white, and a little yellow ochre to create the darkest darks in the foreground.

Lighten Dark Colors

To lighten the dark colors, add yellow ochre, some orange, and blue. Introduce a muted green by mixing in some green to those darks.

Brush Down Shapes

Use a big brush to brush down into the shapes made with the darks, adding a little more yellow and white to lighten them. This creates a transition from darker green to slightly lighter warm tones.

Create Depth with Color

Add white to cool down the color, which helps push elements back into space and create a sense of depth. Transition from darker greens to slightly lighter warm tones to enhance this effect.

15 Adding Final Details and Highlights

Mix Land Color

Mix some blue, a little brown, and a little white to create the color for the land. Ensure it is slightly less blue and a little darker because it is closer than other elements in the painting.

Paint Trees

Use a filbert brush for painting the trees. This brush helps in creating nice little shapes for the trees.

Position Land Levels

Position the levels of the land so that each level is slightly below the one before it, with the overall line being pretty much flat across.

Add Light to Trees

Add light to the trees by using a mix of white, orange, and a little yellow. Avoid covering the area with green; instead, create little spotlights to make it more interesting.

Create Grass and Clumps

Use brush strokes that go up for the appearance of grass and down for the clumps in front. Change up the strokes to add naturalness, instead of painting in one direction.

Detail the Dock

Switch to a smaller brush for the dock and use little strokes. For reflections, brush down and keep reloading the brush to avoid picking up too much blue paint.

Mix Warm Gray for Sand

Mix colors to create a warm gray that represents sand or mud. This is important as the tide reveals sand and mud when it goes out.

Add Water Sparkle and Rocks

Use white toned down with blue-gray and drag it across the water to add sparkle. Add a few little rocks with highlights and light on the front of some rocks to reflect strong light.

Enhance with Reflections

Add a warmer reflection of the sky and include reflections of trees in a few spots where the canvas shows through.

Add Final Details

Yes, you can pop in a bird or other small details to enhance the painting.

16 Final Adjustments and Finishing Touches

Evaluate Your Painting

Step back from your painting to assess its overall effect from a distance. This perspective helps you identify areas that may need adjustment and prevents overworking the piece.

Enhance or Subdue Elements

Consider whether any areas could be subdued or enhanced to better convey the subject. Look for opportunities to add interest with a spot of light or by softening edges.

Soften Sharp Edges

To soften a sharp edge, gently blend it with the surrounding area. This technique can help certain elements stand out more effectively in the composition.

17 Revisiting and Enhancing the Painting

Prepare the Painting Surface

Apply a light coat of liquid or painting medium across the entire painting or just the area you plan to touch up. This helps the new paint adhere well and allows for a wet-on-wet finish, resulting in softer brush effects. If you apply too much medium, wipe it off with a paper towel or rag to ensure only a very light coat remains.

Mix and Apply Snow Colors

Mix white with a little bit of blue for snow in shadow, and possibly a tiny touch of red. Adjust the mixture to be lighter than the base color but not as light as the sky, and apply it in diagonal strokes on the mountain tops.

Enhance Light and Vibrancy

Add white with a tiny touch of yellow, especially near the sun, and a little orange as it drops lower. This creates a punchy, vibrant effect compared to the original, enhancing the light in the painting.

Add Misty Effects

Lightly apply paint over the desired areas to add misty effects. This technique is easier to achieve on a dry surface compared to wet-on-wet painting, allowing for subtle enhancements without starting from scratch.

Create a Warm Atmosphere

Add warm light instead of cool light to create a more inviting and vibrant atmosphere. This enhances the overall mood and depth of the painting, making it more dynamic.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by immersing yourself in the breathtaking scenery of Milford Sound. Begin by understanding the scene's key elements, such as the majestic Mitre Peak, the serene reflections in the water, and the dynamic lighting that plays across the landscape. As you compose your painting, focus on capturing the essence of the scene by carefully choosing and cropping your view to enhance the composition.

As you progress, employ techniques to create depth and perspective, ensuring your painting conveys the grandeur of the mountains and the tranquility of the water. Utilize a variety of colors and brush strokes to depict the atmospheric perspective and intricate details of the landscape. Pay attention to the interplay of light and shadow, and use these elements to guide the viewer's eye through your painting.

In the final stages, refine your work by adding delicate details and ensuring the harmony of colors and forms. Use the sky and reflections to tie the composition together, and make the final touches that bring your painting to life. Remember, each brushstroke contributes to the overall narrative of the scene, and your unique interpretation will make your painting truly stand out.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Capture the dynamic lighting by emphasizing both backlit and side-lit elements.
- Crop the scene into a long, panoramic rectangle for a more engaging composition.
- Use cooler and darker colors for distant areas to enhance depth through atmospheric perspective.
- Tone your canvas with gold ochre to remove the stark white and create a cohesive base.
- Use vertical strokes to mimic natural water reflections.
- Paint the mountains slightly larger than needed to allow for edge definition when painting the sky.
- Soften the edges in your sky painting to maintain a natural look.
- Use a long filbert brush to easily create natural tree shapes with dabbing motions.

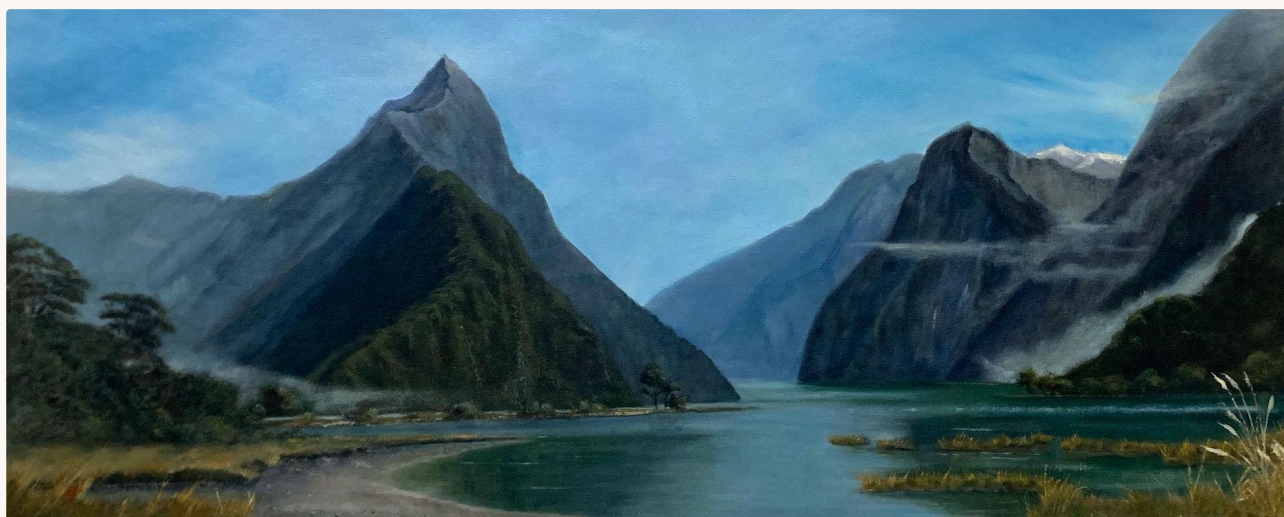


"Milford Sound 3" 13.5 x 28" Oil on Linen by Richard Robinson

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.

“Milford Sound, by Mark Price 1m x 40cm oil on loose canvas.” by Mark Price



Milford Sound, by Mark Price 1m x 40cm oil on loose canvas.

Wow Mark you hit it out of the park with this one - great to see you working on such a large canvas, which is always much more difficult to resolve, but this epic scene really deserves it. Lovely composition with that sweeping intro, great depth you've created and plenty of interesting details to fill the canvas and hold attention. The reflections are great too. One thing you could consider to give this painting even more power is to strengthen the spotlight effects you've created in various key spots. At the moment the overall lighting effect is subdued and austere, which is fine, but you could add some more visual WOW by intensifying some spotlit areas. Food for thought. Congratulations on a great painting!

“Milford Sound - 8 x 16 Oil on Linen” by Louise Villegas



Milford Sound - 8 x 16 Oil on Linen

Hi Louise, isn't it interesting how when you chose a squarer canvas than the original design, that squeezing those mountains into that new shape makes them seem so much taller! Something else that you've done that makes mountains appear more grand is making their upper crags smaller, which makes them look like giants seen from an ants-eye-view. Nice!

Just a couple of thing I'd like you to look at - the first is that the greens on the mountains needs to always be lighter, if only slightly, than the base blue/grey they're painting on top of. That's especially noticeable on the base of Mitre Peak here. Secondly, being very still water, your grassy clump needs a reflection. Otherwise the water looks like ice.

“Milford Sound - 8" x 16" Oils on Canvas” by Fay Thomson



Milford Sound - 8" x 16" Oils on Canvas

Really nicely done, Fay. I love the moulding of form you've created in the greened slopes by subtly modulating the lights there. The same can be said for the little spotlight areas in the foreground grasses. The reflections are on point too. Two things I can see you could work on in the next one: Give a little more structure to some part of the sky/clouds so it's not just a woolly blanket. There's room for more interest there. The gradation you've got there is great though. Secondly, You've got a line running down the right side of Mitre Peak - a definite no-no which only serves to flatten form. Easily fixed. Other than those little tweaks, beauty!

“Milford Sound Oil on oil paper” by **Geoffrey Geeson**



Milford Sound Oil on oil paper

Hi Geoffrey, this is a really interesting take on it - much more graphic, with distinct organic shapes and more colour contrast. Beautifully done! I think this would look amazing large on a big plain wall.