



Milford Sound

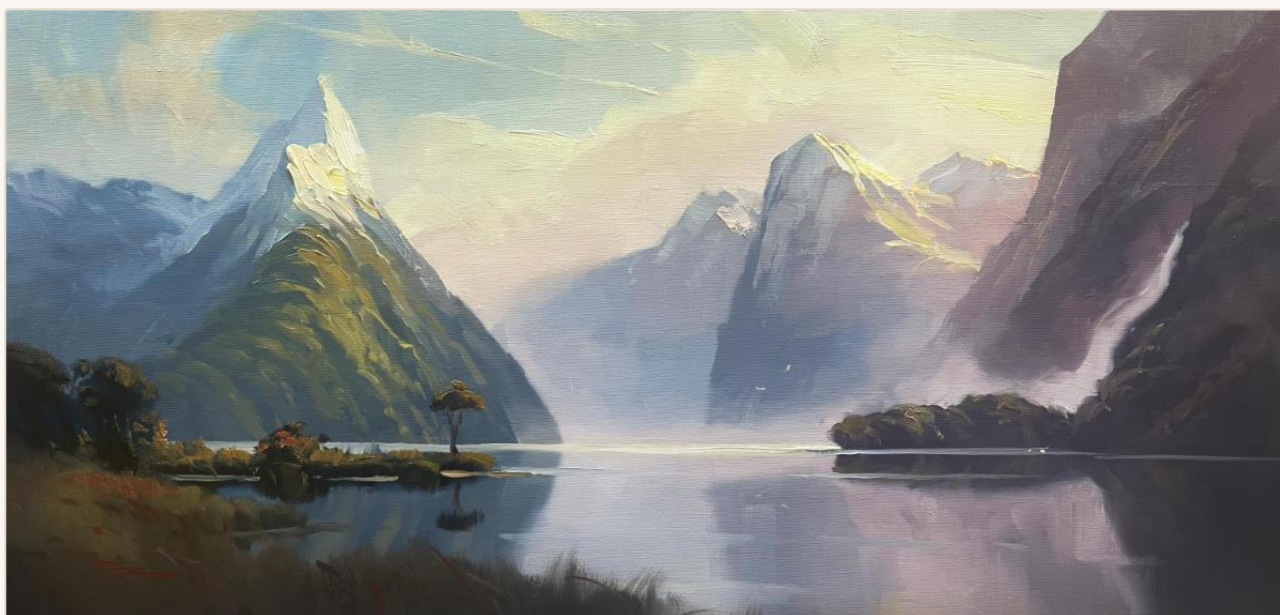
A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

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

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

Painting Milford Sound is a dream come true for me, a place I've longed to capture on canvas since childhood. This stunning New Zealand landscape, often called the 8th Wonder of the World, is a perfect subject with its dramatic lighting and majestic peaks. In this chapter, we'll explore how to convey the grandeur and depth of this scene using seven visual tools. We'll start by understanding scale, atmospheric perspective, and overlapping shapes to create a sense of distance. Texture plays a crucial role, with thicker, rougher strokes in the foreground contrasting with smoother ones in the background. As we paint, we'll adjust colors to reflect the scene's cool, misty atmosphere and warm sunlit areas. I'll guide you through each step, from sketching the composition to adding the final details, ensuring you capture the essence of Milford Sound. Whether you're using oils or acrylics, this lesson will enrich your painting skills and inspire you to explore new creative paths. Let's dive into this breathtaking scene and bring its beauty to life on your canvas.



"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



Observe the Scene

Take a moment to absorb the scene's vastness and complexity. Notice the mist from Sterling Falls, the depth of the valley, and the crisp shape of Mitre Peak. Appreciate how the sun lights the scene, enhancing its sculptural quality.

Identify Key Elements

Identify the key elements you want to include in your painting. Consider the side-lit trees, the long reflections in the water, and the magical sparkle on the surface. These elements will add depth and interest to your composition.

Capture the Atmosphere

Aim to capture the atmosphere of Milford Sound, including the sense of being dwarfed by the massive peaks. Remember the scene's backlit and side-lit qualities, which contribute to its dramatic lighting.

PRO TIP

Focus on the lighting effects to enhance the sculptural quality of the scene.

2 Choosing and Cropping the Scene



Select Key Elements

Identify the main features you want to include in your painting. Choose both the waterfall on the right and Mitre Peak on the left as the focal points to capture the essence of Milford Sound.

Consider Additional Elements

Incorporate other elements like mist, clouds, depth, reflections, and warm grasses in the foreground to enrich the scene and add interest.

Crop the Scene

Crop the top and foreground to focus on the key elements. This will create a panoramic composition that emphasizes the main features without making them appear too small.

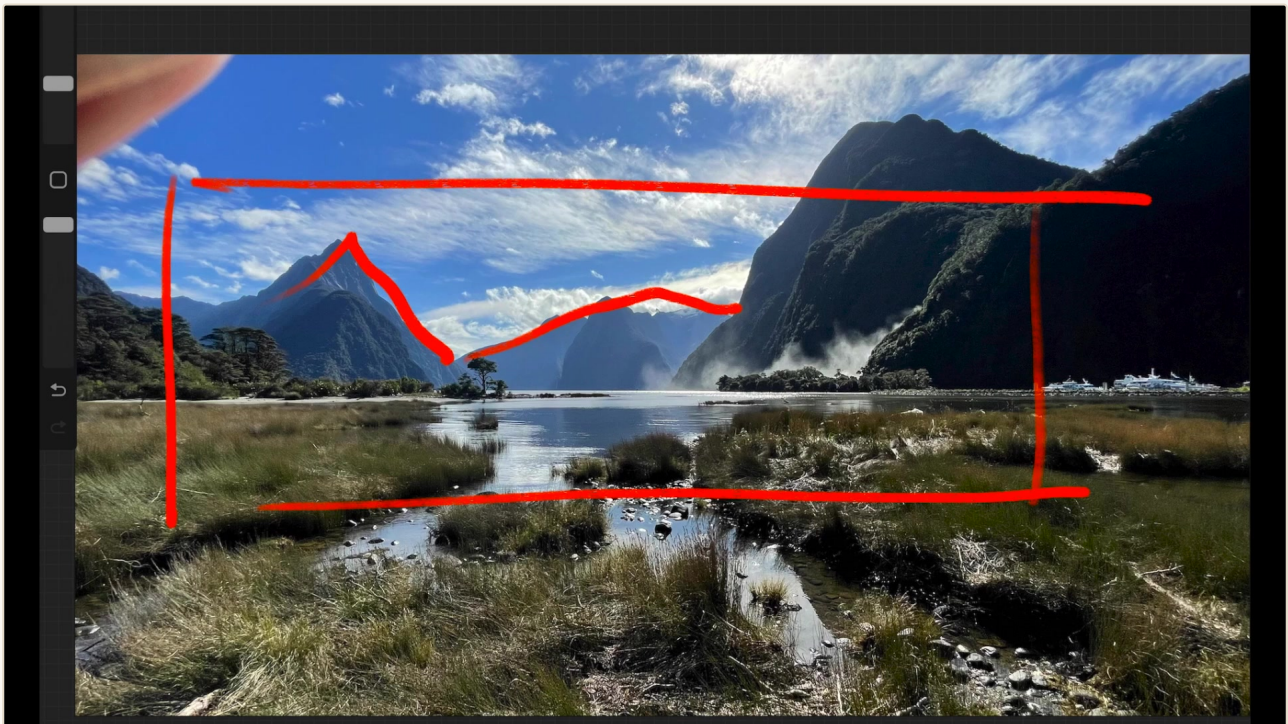
Adjust Mountain Size

Raise the size of the distant mountains to enhance their presence in the composition, compensating for the distortion a camera might introduce.

PRO TIP

Create a panoramic composition by cropping unnecessary elements and focusing on the main features.

3 Creating Depth with Perspective



Understand Perspective

Recognize that objects in the distance appear smaller due to perspective. This effect is intensified by camera lenses, which can make distant mountains seem less grand than they appear to the naked eye.

Adjust Mountain Heights

To counteract the shrinking effect of perspective, increase the height of the mountains in your painting. This adjustment helps convey their true grandeur and enhances the overall composition.

Observe Lighting and Color

Notice that colors become warmer and lighter as they approach the sun and cooler and darker as they recede into the distance. Use this knowledge to create depth by applying warmer tones to closer elements and cooler tones to distant ones.

Create Depth with Color Gradation

Apply a gradation of colors from warmer and lighter in the foreground to cooler and darker in the background. This technique, known as atmospheric perspective, helps create a sense of three-dimensional depth on a two-dimensional surface.

Utilize Overlapping Shapes

Use overlapping shapes to indicate depth. When one shape overlaps another, it suggests that the overlapped shape is further away. This visual cue enhances the perception of depth in your painting.

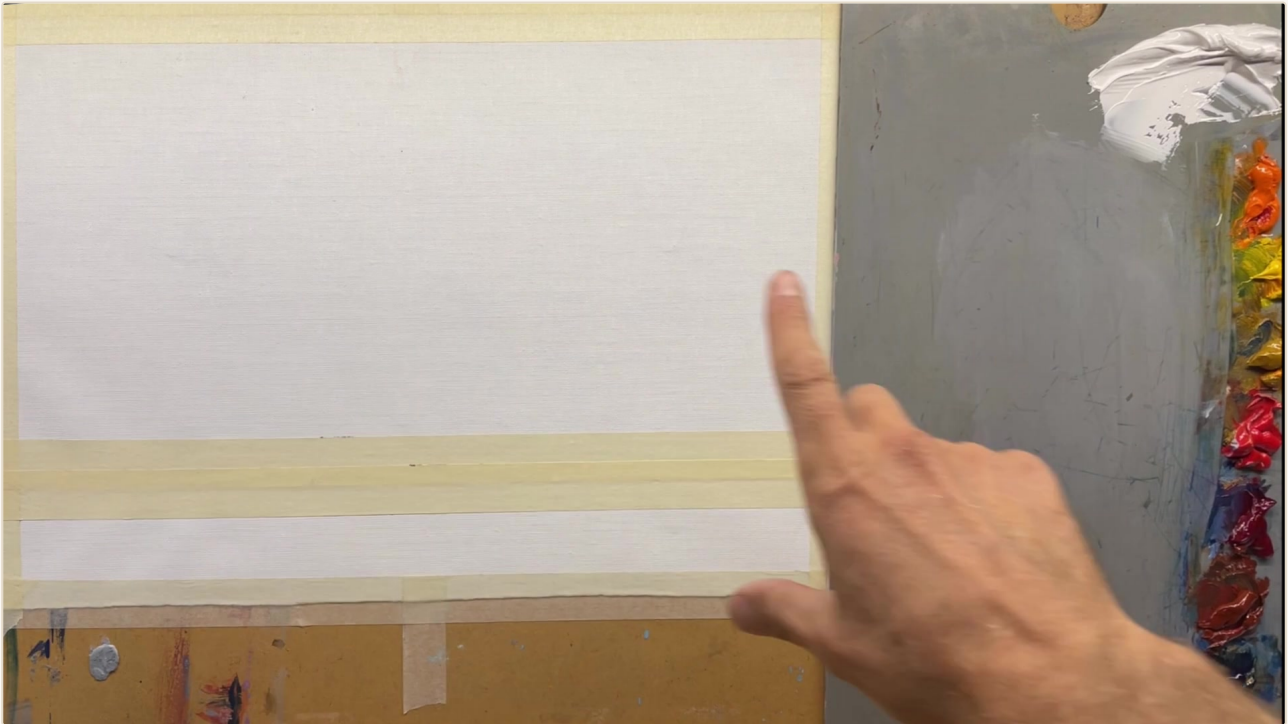
Incorporate Linear Perspective

Ensure that objects decrease in size as they move into the distance. This linear perspective reinforces the illusion of depth and draws the viewer's eye into the scene.

PRO TIP

Apply warmer and lighter colors to elements closer to the sun and cooler, darker colors to those further away to enhance depth.

4 Toning the Canvas and Initial Sketch



Prepare Your Materials

Ensure you have your canvas ready, approximately eight inches by 16 inches, with a two to one ratio. Gather Winsor and Newton oil paints in the following colors: titanium white, cadmium orange, cadmium yellow pale, gold ochre, cadmium red, permanent rose, venetian red, and Winsor blue red shade. Use Rosemary and Co brushes, mainly long flats in sizes 12 and 10, and a small flat size 3 or 4 for finer details.

Tone the Canvas

Mix liquin into your titanium white to make it easier to spread. Use a large brush and dip it into odorless spirits, then pick up some gold ochre. Lightly brush this mixture over the canvas to tone it, removing the stark white. Use a paper towel to gently rub off excess, allowing it to dry quickly.

Create the Initial Sketch

With a small brush, sketch the basic composition onto the toned canvas. This will serve as a guide for your painting, helping you to place elements accurately.

PRO TIP

Use a paper towel to gently rub off excess paint when toning the canvas, allowing it to dry quickly.

5 Sketching the Main Shapes



Establish the Horizon

Use a ruler or a piece of tape to create a straight horizontal line for the horizon. Ensure it is more horizontal than you might naturally draw, as this will anchor your composition.

Sketch Foreground Shapes

Draw large foreground shapes with diagonal lines leading into the scene. These shapes will guide the viewer's eye and set the stage for the rest of the composition.

Position the Bowen Falls

Decide where the Bowen Falls will be placed within your scene. Adjust the shapes if necessary to fit everything into the composition, ensuring a balanced layout.

Draw Mountain Shapes

Sketch the mountains, allowing them to extend out of the top of the canvas if needed. Make the mountains steeper than they are in reality to add drama to your painting.

Avoid Repetitive Patterns

Be mindful of not creating repetitive patterns with angles and shapes. Adjust lines and shapes to avoid parallel lines and identical angles, as nature rarely follows such patterns.

PRO TIP

Make mountains steeper than they are in reality to add drama and impact to your landscape painting.

6 Painting the Mountains



Mix the Base Dark Color

Mix a generous amount of a dark color using blue, permanent rose, and a touch of orange. Add white to see the resulting shade. Adjust with red and more orange to tone down the blue. This will be your base color for the mountains.

Create the First Layer

Brush in the dark base color onto the canvas, leaving space for mist and waterfall spray. This layer should be quite dark to represent the closest mountains.

Lighten and Warm the Color

Add more white, rose, and orange to the base color to create a lighter, warmer shade. Apply this to areas further back in space, closer to the sun, to create depth.

Adjust for Distance

Continue adding white to lighten the color as you move further back into the valley. Test small spots to ensure the color is not too blue or red. Make subtle adjustments as needed.

Prepare for Sky and Foliage

Keep the mixed colors on your palette for later use in mixing greens for foliage highlights. Paint the mountains slightly larger to allow for adjustments when painting the sky.

Refine with Blue and White

Add a little more blue and white to the mix for areas further from the sun. Ensure the value is similar to the previous layer but slightly bluer. This helps create the illusion of distance.

Final Adjustments

As the mountains recede into the valley, add more white to lighten the bottom. For the foreground, use a mix similar to the previous layer but slightly darker to differentiate from the background.

PRO TIP

Paint the mountains slightly larger than needed to allow for edge refinement when adding the sky.

7 Adding Mist and Reflections



Paint the Last Layer

Lighten and cool the color slightly for the last layer. Ensure the paint is lighter than the previous layers to create depth. Brush it gently to dissolve and blend the edges smoothly.

Add Mist

Clean your brush and mix some white paint, ensuring it's not as light as the lightest parts of the clouds. Apply the mist with a focus on creating a hard edge at the front and a soft transition at the back. Consider using a smaller brush for more detailed areas.

Intensify the Mist

Add more intensity to the mist by layering additional light paint. This backlit mist should be quite light to enhance the effect. Adjust as needed to achieve the desired softness and separation between the mountains.

Create Reflections

Utilize the colors from the mist to create reflections in the water. This will help unify the painting and add realism to the scene.

PRO TIP

A really nice way to separate mountains is with mist.

8 Painting the Water Reflections



Brush Vertical Strokes

Use the chosen color and brush vertically up and down to create the initial reflection. Adjust the color to be cooler and lighter where it reflects the lighter areas.

Blur the Edges

Blur the edges of the reflection by brushing sideways and then downwards. Focus on creating soft edges, especially towards the bottom of the reflection.

Add Darker Reflections

Introduce darker tones into the reflection to add depth. Apply these darker colors first before moving on to lighter areas.

Separate with Disturbed Water

Add a strip of slightly disturbed water to separate different areas of reflection, enhancing the realism of the scene.

PRO TIP

Blur the edges of reflections by brushing sideways and then downwards for a softer, more natural look.

9 Adding Greens and Foliage



Prepare the Greens

Switch to a long filbert brush. Start with the darkest green and progressively lighten it. Mix in a little orange, white, and bright yellow to achieve the desired shade.

Test the Color

Compare your mixed color to a reference photo to ensure it matches. If it looks good, try it on the canvas.

Apply the Foliage

Use the filbert brush to dab the paint, mimicking the tops of trees. Avoid creating patterns by varying the placement and size of the trees.

Adjust Brightness

Increase brightness by applying the paint thicker without blending it into the dark areas. Add a touch of white and a tiny bit of yellow for more brightness if needed.

Create Subtlety

Ensure the green is greyed down to maintain subtlety and avoid it standing out too much. This painting focuses on subtle color relationships.

Spotlight Effect

Start painting from a central area and work outward. Let the paint naturally blend as it wears off the brush to create a spotlight effect.

Finish with Reflections

Wipe off excess paint and brush down into a few areas to suggest reflections. Keep in mind the light strip that will be added later.

PRO TIP

Use a long filbert brush to dab paint and mimic the tops of trees, avoiding patterns by varying placement.

10 Detailing the Dark Areas



Enhance Dark Areas

Mix a little brown with a touch of white to create a slightly lighter grey tone. Apply this mix to the dark areas to suggest cliffs or other details. This will add depth and prevent the area from appearing flat.

PRO TIP

Use a slightly lighter grey to add depth and detail to dark areas, suggesting forms like cliffs.

11 Painting the Midground and Background



Mix Midground Color

Add white and a little bit of orange to your base color. Adjust with a tiny touch of yellow for a slight green hue. If needed, add more blue to tone down the punchiness and darken the mix.

Apply Midground Paint

Use the very tip of your brush to create smooth, fine ridges of paint. Shape these ridges to form the midground elements, curving them as needed. Ensure the shapes reach out and curve over the top.

Adjust for Depth

As you move back in the painting, make the colors lighter and bluer. Reduce contrast between lights and darks to create depth. This applies to both the mountain and foliage colors.

Enhance Background Details

For the background, introduce more green into the mix, but not excessively. Aim for elegant, calligraphic strokes to add flow and elegance. Slightly strengthen areas to create a spotlight effect.

Define Distant Peaks

At the top of Mitre Peak, use a bluer tone to define its shape. Use a light blue-gray to swish across the top, defining the round hill in front. Feel free to use a ruler for precision.

PRO TIP

As elements recede into the background, make them lighter and bluer to create a sense of depth.

12 Painting the Sky



Prepare the Sky Area

Use a clean brush to scrape off any excess paint from the canvas. Mix white with a touch of yellow and lightly block in the sky area. Be cautious not to pick up too much dark paint; if you do, wipe your brush clean, reload, and continue painting.

Create a Gradient Effect

Mix a grey color and apply it to the sky, softening the edges to create a gradient effect. The goal is to depict light emanating from one area, with the sky becoming darker and cooler as it moves away from the light source.

Add Warmth with Red

Introduce a tiny touch of red to add warmth to the sky. Ensure this mixture is slightly lighter and warmer than the previous colors. This will add variation and interest to the sky.

Soften Edges for Depth

Focus on softening the edges, especially around the mountains, to avoid a cut-out appearance. Soft edges in the sky create depth and prevent any harsh lines from standing out.

PRO TIP

Skies are mainly soft edges; soften any hard edges to maintain a cohesive look.

13 Final Touches on the Sky



Warm Up the Sky Near the Sun

Add yellow ochre to the area close to the sun to warm it up. Be cautious not to pick up too much bright yellow to avoid creating a green tone. Adjust until you achieve a pleasing warm color.

Create a Hat Cloud

Use a crisp brush to paint a small hat cloud on the mountain. Ensure the edges are sharp for a clean look. A good quality brush will make this easier.

Add Pink Highlights

Introduce a touch of pink to the sky for added interest. Tone it down with yellow ochre and blue if it appears too dark. This will enhance the sky's drama.

Enhance Cloud Drama

Paint a few small highlight clouds to add scale and drama to the sky. These little clouds will enrich the overall composition.

Reflect Mist in the Water

Use vertical and horizontal strokes to reflect the mist in the water. This will create a cohesive look between the sky and the water.

PRO TIP

Use a crisp brush to achieve sharp edges when painting clouds and other details.

14 Foreground Details



Establish Dark Foreground Tones

Use a new brush to apply the darkest tones first. Mix blue with brown, Venetian red, and a bit of white to create a very dark color. Add a touch of yellow ochre to adjust the tone, then decide where the darkest areas should be placed in the foreground.

Lighten and Add Muted Greens

Lighten the initial dark mix by incorporating yellow ochre and orange. Introduce blue and a muted green to the darks, creating a dull, subdued green. Use a large brush to apply these colors, ensuring you maintain the shapes you've established.

Transition to Lighter Tones

Gradually lighten the colors by adding more yellow and white. Brush these lighter tones into the existing shapes without completely covering them. This creates a transition from darker greens to slightly lighter, warmer tones, which helps to create depth.

Enhance Warmth and Depth

Warm up the lighter areas by adding a bit more yellow and white. This transition from darker to lighter tones helps to push the background into space, creating a sense of depth. Prepare for another strip of land and larger trees in the composition.

PRO TIP

Use a large brush for initial dark tones and transition to a smaller brush for detail work later.

15 Adding Final Details and Highlights



Define the Land

Mix blue, a little brown, and a little white to create the land color. Ensure it's slightly less blue and a bit darker since it's closer. Use a filbert brush to paint the trees, paying attention to the subtle differences in levels.

Add Light to the Trees

Mix white, orange, and a little more yellow to highlight the trees. Avoid covering everything with green; instead, create spotlights that make the scene more interesting.

Finish the Foreground

Use a brush to create the appearance of grass by brushing up and down for clumps. Vary the strokes to add naturalness and avoid uniformity.

Work on the Dock

Switch to a smaller brush for detailed strokes. Mix a warm gray to depict sand or mud revealed by the tide. Brush down for reflections, reloading the brush often to avoid picking up too much blue.

Add Highlights and Sparkle

Use light blue-gray to add highlights and reflections. Create sparkle on the water with white toned down with blue-gray, dragging it across the surface. Add highlights to rocks and reflections of the sky and trees.

PRO TIP

Use a filbert brush for painting trees to achieve nice shapes and subtle details.

16 Final Adjustments and Finishing Touches



Evaluate the Painting

Remove the tape from the edges of your painting. Step back and assess your work to determine if any areas need to be subdued or enhanced to better convey the subject.

Soften Sharp Edges

Identify any sharp edges that might be too prominent. Soften these edges to help certain elements, like the foreground, come forward more naturally.

Add a Spot of Light

Apply a small spot of light to areas where you want to highlight features, such as a waterfall. Be cautious not to overdo it; a subtle touch can suggest light effectively.

Avoid Overworking

Step back frequently to view your painting from a distance. This helps maintain the freshness of your brushstrokes and prevents overworking the piece.

PRO TIP

Regularly step back from your painting to evaluate it from a distance, ensuring you maintain the freshness of your brushstrokes.

17 Revisiting and Enhancing the Painting



Prepare the Canvas

Apply a thin layer of painting medium or oil across the entire painting or just the area you plan to enhance. This prepares the canvas to accept another layer of paint, allowing for softer brush effects and evening out the surface.

Mix Snow Colors

Combine white with a little blue to create snow in shadow. Add a tiny touch of red if needed, but be cautious as the colors are strong. Aim for a color slightly lighter than the base but darker than the sky.

Apply Snow to Mountains

Paint the snow on the mountain tops using diagonal strokes. Ensure the color is consistent with the desired lightness compared to the sky.

Enhance Light with Yellow

Mix white with a tiny touch of yellow to add punchy highlights. Increase the yellow as you approach the sun to create a warm light effect.

Add Light and Mist Effects

Introduce a warm light in the foreground and add misty effects to the background. These effects are easier to achieve on a dry painting, allowing for more control and subtlety.

PRO TIP

Use a thin layer of painting medium to prepare the surface for softer brush effects and easier corrections.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by immersing yourself in the majestic beauty of Milford Sound. Begin by observing the scene's natural grandeur, focusing on the interplay of light and shadow that defines its dramatic landscape. Capture the essence of the scene by carefully selecting and composing key elements such as Mitre Peak, Sterling Falls, and the reflective waters, ensuring that your composition conveys both depth and atmosphere.

As you progress, use perspective and color to create a sense of depth and scale. Adjust the size of distant mountains to counteract the camera's distortion, and apply atmospheric perspective by transitioning from warmer, lighter colors in the foreground to cooler, darker hues in the background. This technique will enhance the three-dimensionality of your painting, drawing the viewer into the scene.

In the final stages, focus on refining details and adding the finishing touches. Use soft edges to blend the sky seamlessly with the mountains, and incorporate subtle variations in color to add interest and realism. Pay attention to the reflections and mist, which unify the composition and enhance the overall mood. With these techniques, your painting will capture the breathtaking beauty of Milford Sound, inviting viewers to experience its serene and powerful presence.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Focus on the lighting effects to enhance the sculptural quality of the scene.
- Create a panoramic composition by cropping unnecessary elements and focusing on the main features.
- Apply warmer and lighter colors to elements closer to the sun and cooler, darker colors to those further away to enhance depth.
- Use a paper towel to gently rub off excess paint when toning the canvas, allowing it to dry quickly.
- Make mountains steeper than they are in reality to add drama and impact to your landscape painting.
- Paint the mountains slightly larger than needed to allow for edge refinement when adding the sky.
- Blur the edges of reflections by brushing sideways and then downwards for a softer, more natural look.
- As elements recede into the background, make them lighter and bluer to create a sense of depth.

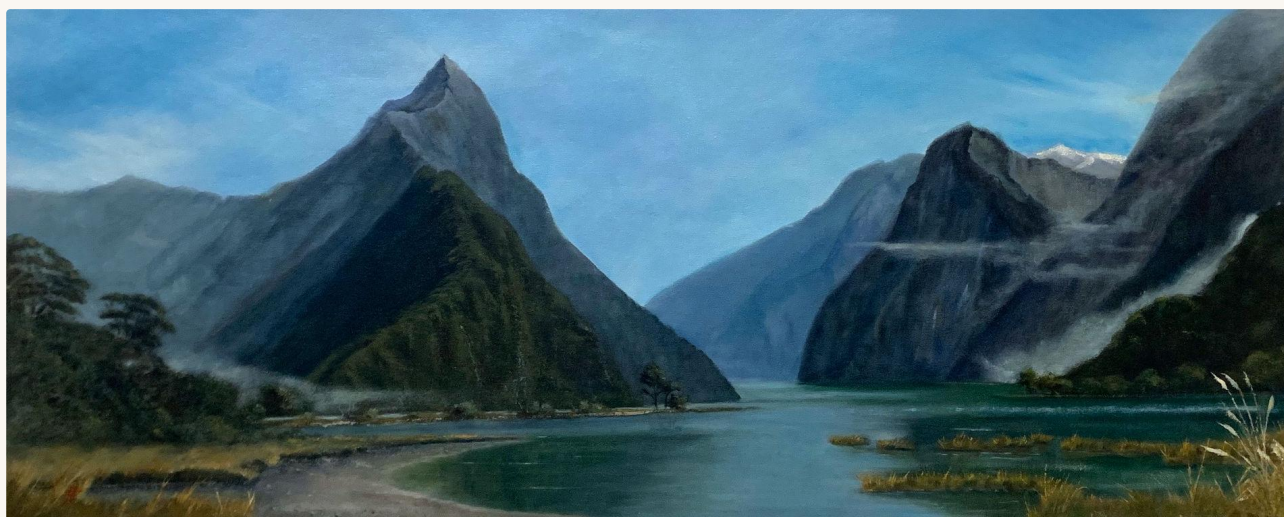


"Milford Sound 3" 13.5 x 28" Oil on Linen by Richard Robinson

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.