



Up the Creek

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/81-Up-the-Creek>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

During a memorable trip to Gibsons, Canada, I had the pleasure of immersing myself in its stunning wilderness, which provided the perfect backdrop for a workshop. In this chapter, I invite you to join me as we explore a charming scene that I discovered there, rich with captivating elements. We'll delve into simplifying a complex landscape, focusing on the interplay of light and shadow, particularly the brightly lit foreground contrasted against a darker background. By honing in on the essential components, such as the striking silhouette of a tree, we'll capture the scene's true essence without the distraction of extraneous details like the tops of trees or the river's curve. Through bold brushwork and strategic composition, you'll learn to distill a scene to its most impactful elements, creating a painting that resonates with clarity and emotion. This approach not only enhances your technical skills but also enriches your artistic expression, making this scene a rewarding subject to master.



"Up the Creek" 11x14" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson.



REFERENCE PHOTO

The scene as Richard found it.

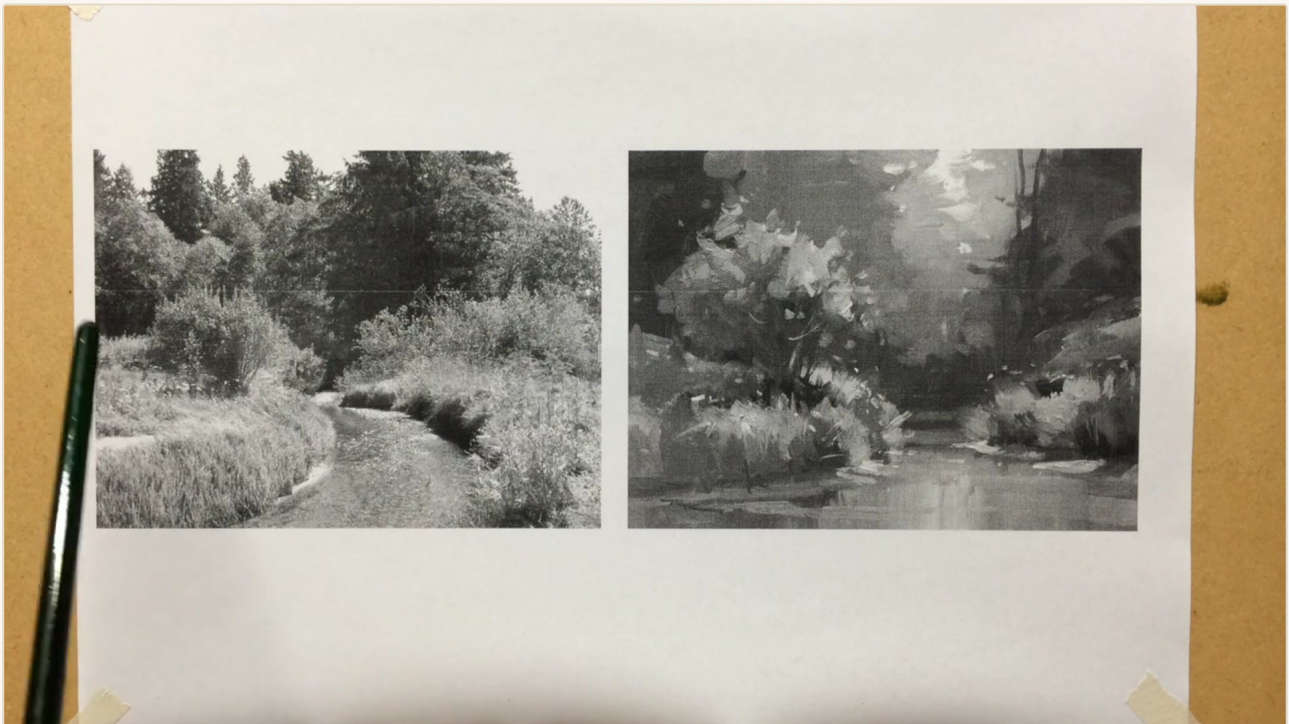
Materials

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

- M. Graham & Co. Oil Paints
- Alizarine Crimson
- Phthalo Blue
- Ultramarine Blue
- Burnt Sienna
- Cadmium Red
- Cadmium Orange
- Yellow Ochre
- Cadmium Yellow Light
- Titanium White
- Painting medium
- M. Graham & Co. Walnut Alkyd Medium or Walnut Oil
- Solvent
- Gamsol
- 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
- Container for solvent
- Container for painting medium

1 Focusing on key elements



Identify Key Elements

Focus on the brightly lit foreground set against the dark background. Highlight the shape of the tree amidst the light to capture the essence of the scene.

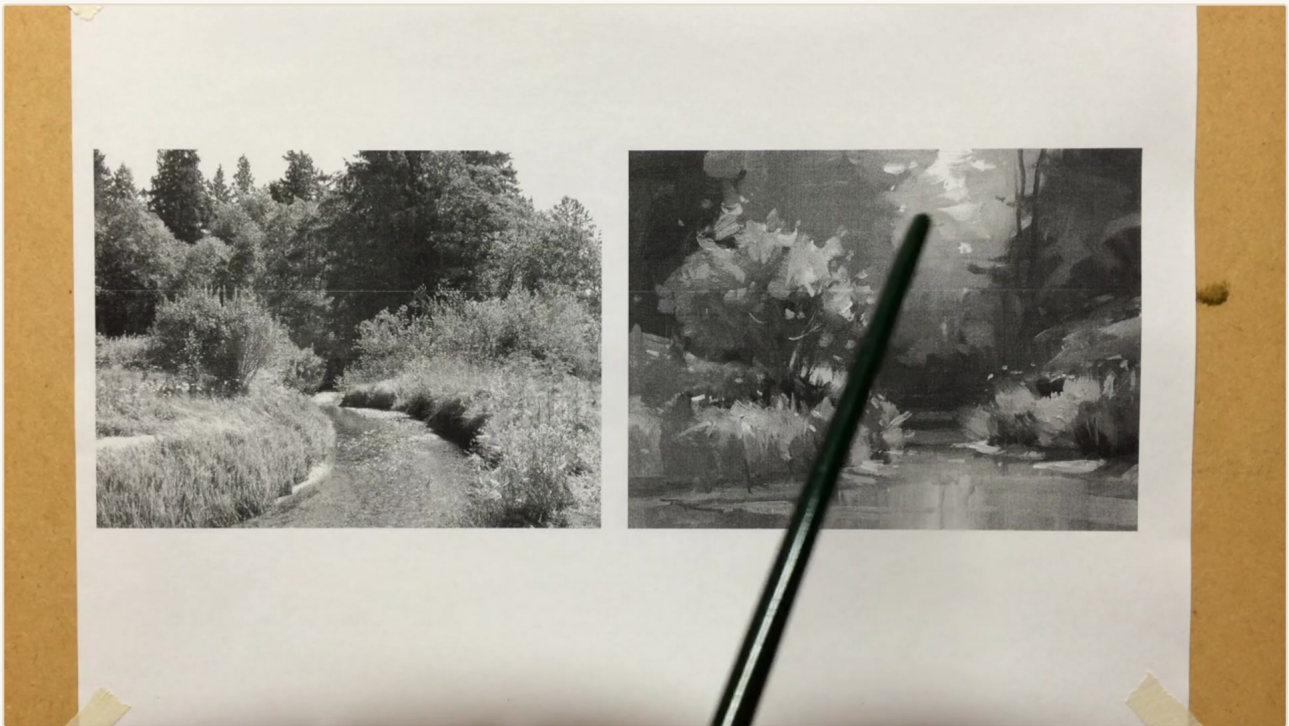
Simplify the Composition

Limit the composition to the essential elements that convey the main message. Avoid including unnecessary details like the tops of the trees or the curve of the river, which can dilute the focus.

PRO TIP

Concentrate on the elements that initially drew you to the scene to maintain a strong, clear message in your painting.

2 Simplifying the background



Simplify the Background

Create large shapes with varying values to suggest trees receding into the distance. Avoid adding too much detail to prevent competition with the foreground. Focus on simplifying the background to allow the foreground details to stand out.

PRO TIP

Use different values to create depth without adding intricate details.

3 Adjusting the viewing angle



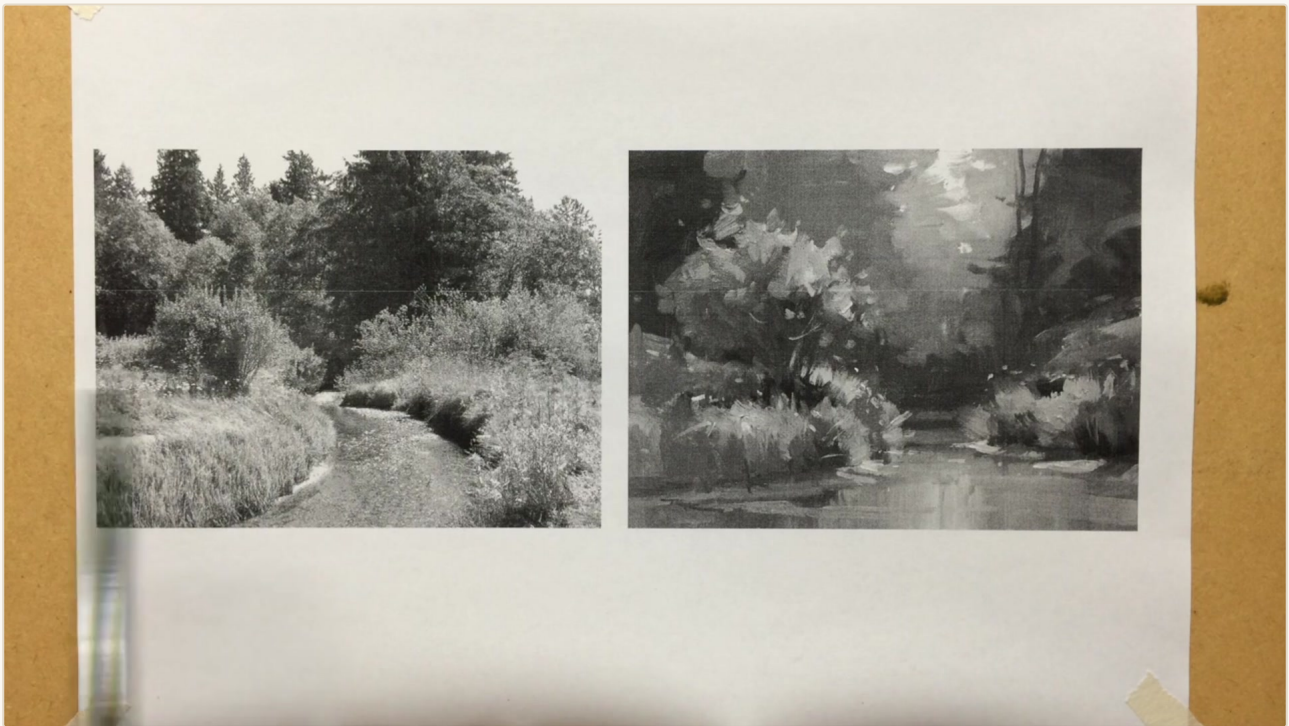
Adjust the Viewing Angle

Lower the viewing level of the scene to change and flatten the angle of the river. This adjustment allows you to crop the scene tighter without losing important details. Keep the tree large in the composition, as it is a focal point of interest.

PRO TIP

Lowering the viewing angle can help maintain important elements while adjusting the composition.

4 Stream shape and interest



Observe Stream Edges

Examine the edges of the stream closely. Notice that they don't curve smoothly but instead have sharp, segmented pieces. This detail is crucial for creating a realistic appearance.

Break Up Simple Shapes

Avoid painting the stream as a simple, smooth shape. Instead, introduce variations like banks or sandbanks to add interest and complexity to the scene.

PRO TIP

Incorporate segmented edges and variations to make the stream look more realistic and engaging.

5 Initial sketch and planning



Create the Initial Sketch

Use a very thin mixture of blue, red, and walnut oil to sketch the major shapes. Focus on capturing the overall composition without adding any detail.

Adjust Composition

Ensure the main elements are positioned centrally and are large enough to be the focal point. Adjust the placement if necessary to achieve better balance.

Plan the Clumps of Grass

Observe how the clumps of grass along the bank indicate the bank's curvature. As they turn away, they should appear smaller and closer together, similar to a tractor tire on its side.

Reflect Grass in Water

Include reflections of the grass clumps in the water to enhance the sense of depth and realism.

Outline Light and Shadow Areas

Decide where the shadow and light areas will be in your sketch. This will guide your painting process and ensure a balanced composition.

PRO TIP

Use reflections to enhance depth and realism in your composition.

6 Mixing and applying darkest darks



Mix the Darkest Dark

Combine blue and yellow ochre with a touch of red and a little white to create a color that is not quite black. Thin this mixture with walnut oil until it is just thick enough to cover the canvas.

Apply the Darkest Dark

Apply the darkest dark to the areas of the canvas where you envision the deepest shadows in the scene.

Mix the Background Base Color

Create a base color for the background by mixing mainly blue with a little yellow ochre, a touch of white, and a tiny speck of red. Ensure this mixture is lighter and bluer than the darkest dark.

PRO TIP

Thin your darkest dark with walnut oil to ensure it covers the canvas smoothly.

7 Background base color



Prepare the Paint Mixture

Use a fair amount of walnut oil to thin the paint. Ensure the mixture is just thick enough to cover the canvas without the weave showing through.

Modify the Base Color

Add more blue to the paint as you move up to the right of the canvas. Increase the blue further as you move to the left to create variety in the background color.

Create Depth

Incorporate a little more white into the mixture as you step back into the trees. This will help push the background further into space.

PRO TIP

Use walnut oil to thin the paint, ensuring it covers the canvas without the weave showing through.

8 Foreground shadows and reflections



Add Foreground Shadows

Mix a color with a bit more yellow and apply it to the shadow parts of the foreground clumps of grass. Leave spaces for the light to come in later, ensuring the shadows aren't too dark.

Paint Reflections

Use vertical strokes to paint the reflections of the grass in the water. Avoid diagonal or horizontal strokes to maintain the vertical reflection effect.

Enhance Color Around the Bank

Warm up the color slightly and apply it around the corner of the bank. Keep the darks at a mid-value to allow for glowing color and add lights on top later.

Maintain Smooth Flow

Avoid adding too much detail in the foreground area. This helps the eye flow smoothly past it to the sharp detail on the top of the bank and into the tree.

PRO TIP

Use only vertical strokes for reflections to maintain the effect of water.

9 Color variation in darks



Add Color Variation

Use a similar color to the right, but mix in a little more blue and yellow ochre. This will create subtle variations and prevent large, uniform blocks of color in your painting. Focus on maintaining these variations while working in the dark areas.

PRO TIP

Look for opportunities to introduce color variation to avoid uniform blocks of color.

10 Tree shadow and light planning



Mix a Warm Dark Green

Mix a very warm dark green, almost a brown, for the underside of the tree. This will help reflect the light bouncing off the grasses in the foreground.

Apply the Dark Green

Work the warm dark green into the dark areas previously painted under the tree. Leave small bits of the original dark color visible to create depth and texture.

Prepare for Light Areas

Extend the dark green into areas where the light will eventually be added. This allows for adjustment of edges when you introduce the lighter tones.

PRO TIP

Leave small bits of the original dark color visible to create depth and texture.

11 Warm foliage and water reflections



Create Warm Green for Foliage

Mix a very warm green using mostly yellow ochre. Apply this color to the shadow sections at the back to create warm foliage that contrasts nicely with the cool background.

Block in Tree Shadow

Add a shadow under the tree using the warm green mixture. This should have been included in your darkest darks to ensure your mid-tones and lights can work effectively against these shapes.

Add Warm Green to Water

Apply the warm greenish color to the water in the background. This will unify the scene and enhance the warmth in the foliage reflections.

PRO TIP

Ensure all darks are established first to allow mid-tones and lights to work effectively.

12 Reflecting background in water



Blend Yellow Ochre for Reflections

Use mostly yellow ochre to smoothly blend into the reflections in the foreground. This will create a harmonious transition from the background into the water.

Switch to a New Brush for Lights

Change to a new brush dedicated to painting the lighter areas. This helps maintain the clarity and brightness of the lighter tones without muddying them with dark paint.

Create Vertical Reflections

Brush vertically downwards to mimic the natural reflection in water. Gradually make the reflections lighter and cooler as you move towards the foreground.

PRO TIP

Use separate brushes for dark and light areas to maintain clean, distinct tones.

13 Water reflection technique



Add Blue and White to Water

Mix more blue and white as you paint towards the middle of the water. This area should be directly underneath the big light shape in the background to create a reflective effect.

Reflect Grasses on Water

Incorporate reflections of the grasses on the side of the bank into the water. This will enhance the natural look of the scene.

Lighten the Center

Clean your brush slightly to achieve a purer, lighter blue in the center of the water. This will make the reflection appear more vivid.

Add Horizontal Strokes

Brush lightly across the surface with horizontal strokes to add perspective. Practice the motion a few times and breathe out as you make each stroke for smoother lines.

PRO TIP

Practice horizontal strokes before applying them to achieve smoother lines.

14 Background trees and sky holes



Mix background color

Combine blue, yellow ochre, and white with walnut oil to create a cooler and lighter shade than the previous dark background. Use big strokes to apply this mixture, allowing the long bristle brush to hold more paint for extended painting.

Add depth to trees

Lighten the mixture slightly by adding more blue and white. Paint the next section of trees, moving them back into space by creating swishy tree shapes and little gaps between branches.

Create sky holes

Use pure white to paint sky holes, starting from the top and letting the color fade towards the bottom. Adjust the brightness and shapes of these sky holes to form realistic tree-like shapes.

PRO TIP

Use long bristle brushes to hold more paint and extend your painting time.

15 Tree highlights and color variation



Mix Warm Yellow for Tree Highlights

Mix a thick paint using bright primary yellow to create a warm highlight for the top of the tree. Avoid lime green by ensuring the yellow maintains warmth.

Add Blue-Green Variation

Mix a more blue-green color to apply on the left side of the tree's top. This adds variation and depth to the tree's color.

Clean Brush for Lighter Highlights

Clean your brush thoroughly to prepare for applying lighter highlights on the top of the tree.

PRO TIP

Avoid using lime green by keeping your yellow mix warm.

16 Foreground grass highlights



Apply Thick Paint

Use thick paint without any walnut medium. Apply it to the canvas with a few light brush strokes to avoid flattening the texture. Reload the brush with new paint as needed.

Create a Warmer Mix

Mix yellow ochre, white, and a little green to create a warmer tone. Apply this mix thickly to the grasses in the foreground, brushing up and away from the center of the clump.

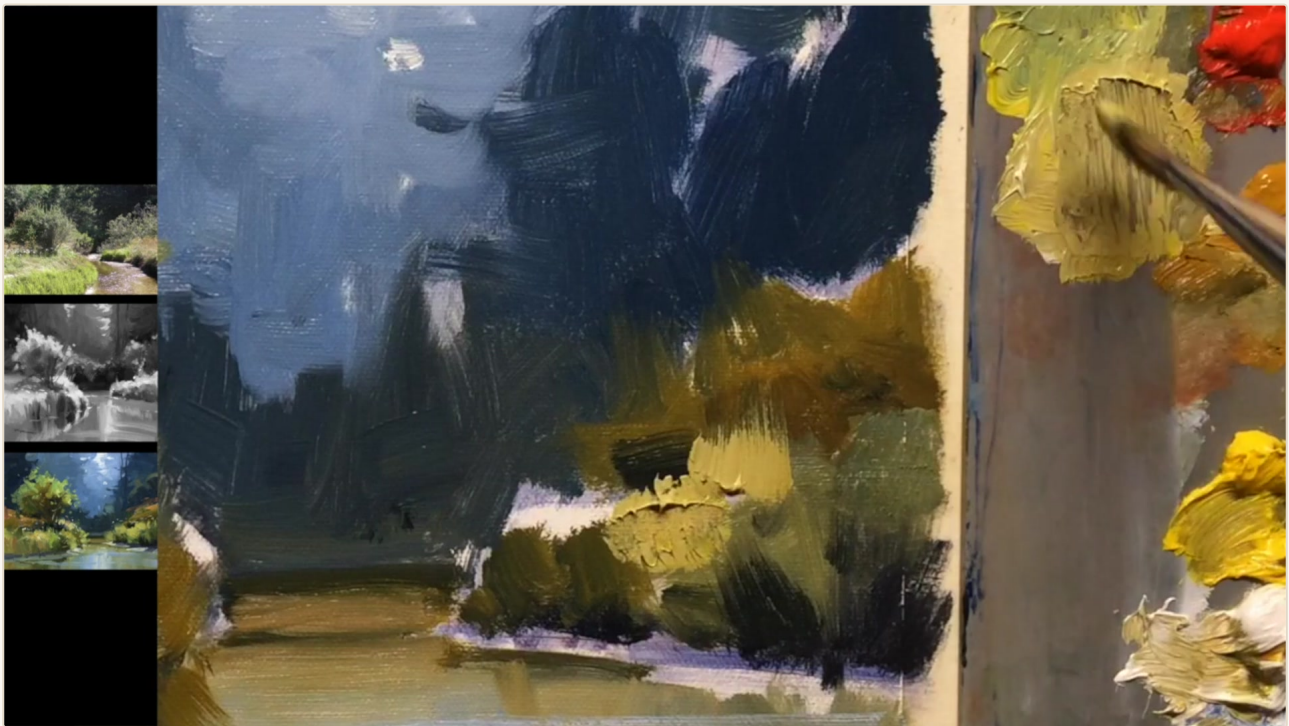
Achieve Crisp Highlights

Use a brush with thick bristles to create crisp highlights. The individual hairs of the brush will help depict individual pieces of grass catching the light.

PRO TIP

Use a brush with thick bristles to easily create crisp highlights in the grass.

17 Brush technique for variety



Create Random Marks

Mess up your brush slightly by allowing individual hairs to poke out. This will help you create more random and interesting marks on the canvas.

Vary Brush Angle

Change the angle at which you hold your brush to the canvas. This variation is crucial for achieving a diverse range of brush marks.

PRO TIP

Don't hold your brush the same way all the time; vary the angle for more dynamic results.

18 Dry bushes and energetic brushwork



Mix a Highlight Color

Create a lighter brown or orange by mixing your paint to capture the light on the top of the dry bushes. This will provide a nice color contrast against the cool background.

Apply Energetic Brushwork

Move your brush quickly and lightly across the top of the canvas. This technique creates energetic and somewhat transparent brush marks that suit the dry, weedy bushes.

PRO TIP

Use quick, light brush strokes to create energetic and transparent marks for dry bushes.

19 Background tree highlights



Add Background Tree Highlights

Use a green that is very blue in hue to indicate the highlights on the background trees. Apply this color to the top areas of the trees to suggest light hitting them. Ensure the value of this color is close to the existing background color for a subtle effect.

PRO TIP

Follow the highlight area from the right to the left of the tree to create a sense of continuity behind the tree.

20 Details in shadows and highlights



Add Light to the Sandbank

Mix a very light gray and apply it to the sandbank area to create highlights. Flatten any clumps that disrupt the form of the bush, using the sharp edge of your brush to add sharp details.

Detail Shadows and Highlights

Use a cool gray to paint the whitish weeds in the shadow areas. Then, switch to a fine signing brush and apply pure white to highlight the weeds in the light, creating bright sparkles.

Use the Brush Tip

Use only the very tip of your brush to apply these details. Avoid squashing the brush down to prevent making broad marks. Apply one or two strokes, then reload the brush as needed.

PRO TIP

Use the very tip of the brush for fine details to avoid broad marks.

21 Key detail branches



Add Key Detail Branches

Mix a dark color slightly lighter and bluer than the darkest areas of your painting. Use this mix to paint very fine vertical lines to represent branches. These branches should contrast sharply against the bright highlight behind them, adding key detail to your painting.

Balance the Composition

Position the branches to balance the weight of the tree on the left side of your painting. Ensure the branches appear to poke up naturally, enhancing the overall composition.

Soften the Branches

Gently soften the bottom of the branches so they blend into the foliage. This will create a more natural transition and prevent the branches from appearing too harsh.

PRO TIP

Use very fine lines to paint branches, ensuring they contrast sharply against the bright highlight.

22 Final touches and details



Add Fallen Trees

Include a few dark fallen trees in the background to add depth and interest. Use a dark bluish grey to suggest these elements subtly.

Create a Distant Sand Bank

Add a hint of a distant sand bank using a dark bluish grey. This will help create a sense of distance and depth in the painting.

Enhance the Left Riverbank

Introduce a small sand bank in the front of the left riverbank. This addition will make the scene more engaging and balanced.

Refine Reflection Ripples

Block in the reflection ripples with a warm grey to unify the water's surface. Then, use a dark bluish grey for the cast shadows on the riverbank to enhance contrast.

Highlight Branches

Add a few small branches catching the light in the large dark space. This will create visual interest and break up the dark area.

PRO TIP

Use a dark bluish grey to subtly suggest distant elements like fallen trees and sand banks, enhancing depth.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by focusing on the key elements that drew you to the scene. Start with a bright foreground against a dark background, capturing the essence of the tree and its surroundings. Simplify the background to let the foreground shine, and adjust the viewing angle to maintain focus on the tree as the central element.

As you progress, pay attention to the stream's edges and the overall composition. Use a thin sketch to plan major shapes and ensure the main elements are well-positioned. Mix and apply your darkest darks to establish depth, and use walnut oil to thin your paint for smooth coverage. Work on the background with varying shades to create a sense of distance.

In the final stages, focus on adding highlights and details. Use thick paint for foreground highlights and vary your brush technique for dynamic results. Pay attention to reflections and ensure your brushwork captures the energy and texture of the scene. Finish with fine details in the shadows and highlights, ensuring each element contributes to a harmonious composition.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Focus on essential elements to maintain a clear message.
- Simplify the background to highlight the foreground.
- Lower the viewing angle to adjust composition without losing key details.
- Use segmented edges for realistic stream shapes.
- Thin darkest darks with walnut oil for smooth coverage.
- Use vertical strokes for water reflections.
- Vary color in dark areas to avoid uniformity.
- Use separate brushes for dark and light areas to keep tones distinct.

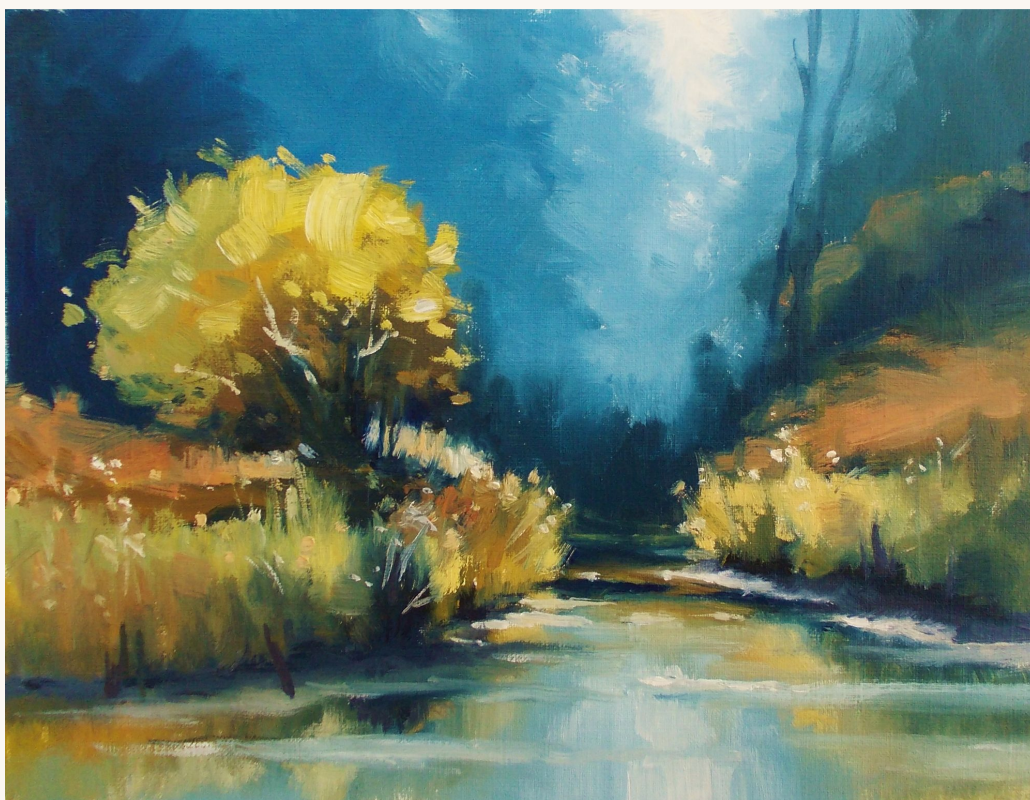


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Student Critiques

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.

"Workshop 37" by Janet Buckton



"Workshop 37" 9x12" Oil on Canvas by Janet Buckton

Bold colour, Janet and lovely and warm in the foreground contrasting with the cool background. I get the feeling the background is a little too blue and could do with a touch of grey-green in it to create some connection with the foreground. My painting is a little guilty of that too. Also the darkest dark in the foreground is too blue making it stand out whereas it should recede beneath the mid values and lights. If the left side of the tree was a little darker it would add more roundness to it - at the moment the value is very similar all over and it's causing it to flatten out a little. You've done very well with your edges creating depth by contrasting sharp edges in the foreground with soft edges in the background. Overall you've made a very good copy of the demo painting and I hope it helps inform your other work in some way.

"Dark Passage 2" by Nancy Sands



"Dark Passage 2" 5x7" Oil on Canvas by Nancy Sands

Hi Nancy, I do like the design of this a lot but unfortunately it's all got a bit muddy and garbled. Your cool darks have mixed with your warm lights through too much dabbing and not keeping your brush clean enough and reloading with fresh colour. Can I suggest you take another look at the demo video and follow the process more strictly of darks, then mid values, then lights. Also the thickness of the paint is important. If you put too much medium in your darks to start with it makes it hard to paint over and if you put too much medium in your lights they'll tend to mix in with the darks. If you give yourself a bigger canvas you'll have more room to move too. You can do it!

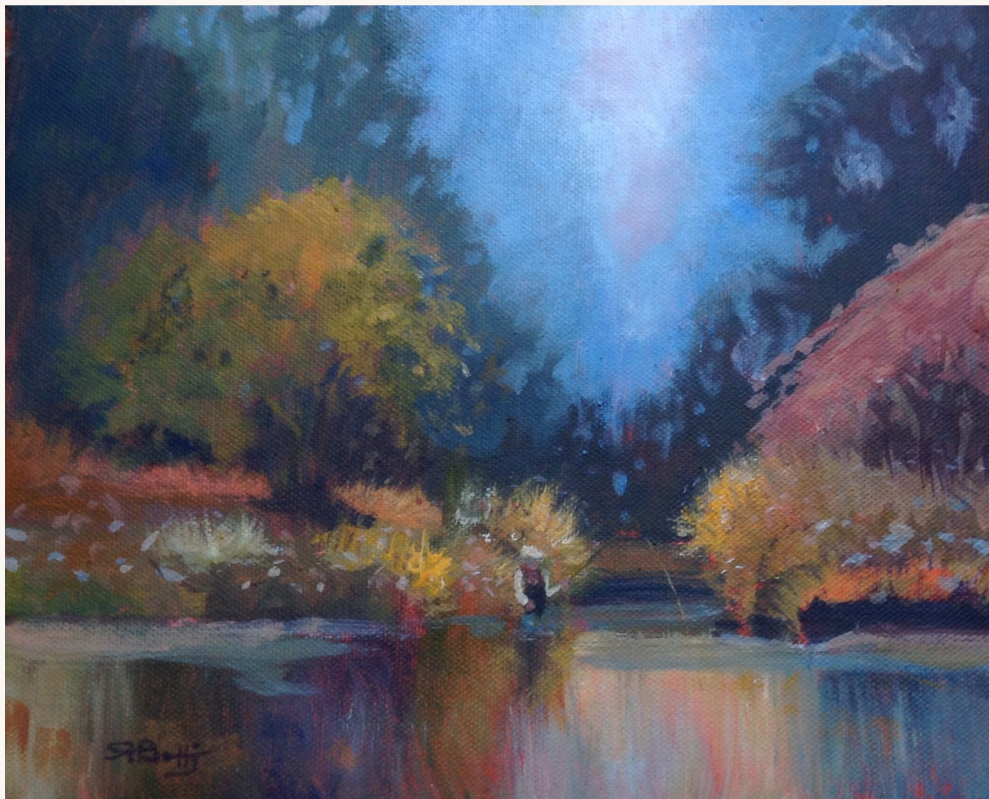
"RR Workshop 37" by Howard Bagley



"RR Workshop 37" 11x14" Acrylic on Canvas by Howard Bagley

Hi Howard, this is a great painting with just a few adjustments needed. Your colour is beautiful and the drawing is good, the brushwork is confident and interesting. Three small changes I'd make would be to add some soft edges and small details to the edge of the green tree, make the background shapes a little more tree-ish, and make the white flowers/weeds smaller in the background. That's it. Otherwise, great work!

"Anglers Retreat" by Sarah Bottjer



"Anglers Retreat" 8x10" Acrylic on Canvas by Sarah Bottjer

Hi Sarah, there's a real jolly feeling to this piece caused largely by the warm colours in the foreground and the sparking little details throughout. The figure is a nice addition too but unfortunately he's about a third the size he should be compared to the rest of the scene which gives him the appearance of a garden gnome.

The value structure of the painting is good, including the depth you've created in the background, though the V shape there is a little too regular and the sky holes are creating more of a lacework pattern than actual tree shapes. That blue sky should also be reflected in the water. By flattening out the base of the river banks you've lost some of the shape interest. A few things to look at but overall a good result.