



Streets of Vernazza

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/78-Streets-of-Vernazza>

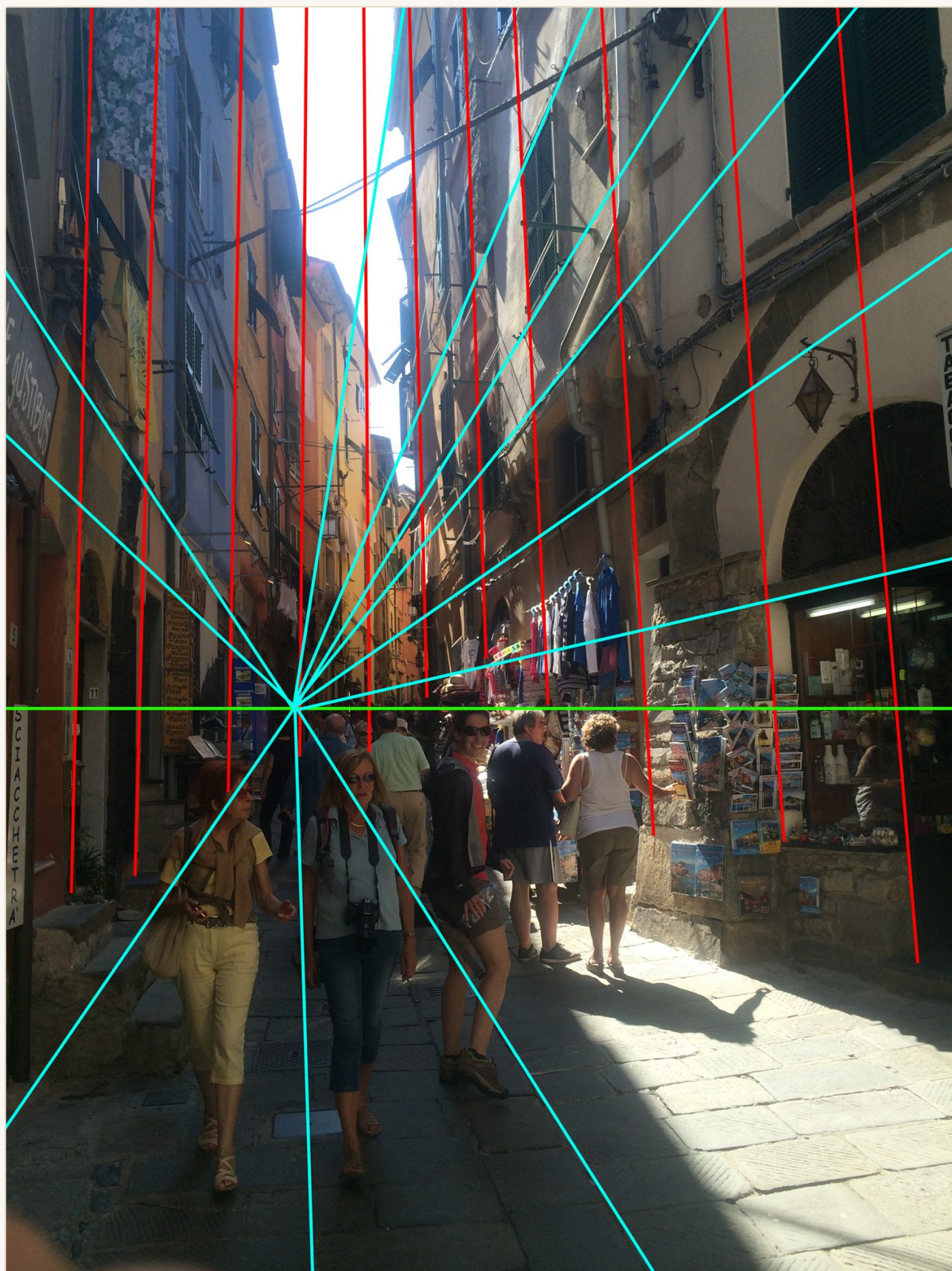
MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

Returning to Italy in this chapter, I invite you to explore the enchanting streets of Vernazza, one of the five charming villages of the Cinque Terre. This area, with its car-free, winding streets and vibrant, colorful buildings, is truly a painter's dream. As we delve into this bustling Italian street scene, you'll learn to capture the glowing light, reflected light, and sky shine that make these streets so captivating. We'll tackle perspective drawing and figure painting, essential skills for bringing this lively scene to life. The unique character of Vernazza, with its rich hues and quaint architecture, offers a rewarding subject for any painter. As you follow along with my step-by-step guidance, consider incorporating elements like umbrellas or overhang canvases to add interest and shape to your composition. Notice how the large light shape in the scene directs the viewer's eye down the street, creating a dramatic design. Together, we'll transform this picturesque setting into a vibrant painting that captures the essence of Italian charm.



"Streets of Vernazza" 14x17" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson.



REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 2

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 3

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 4

The scene as Richard found it.

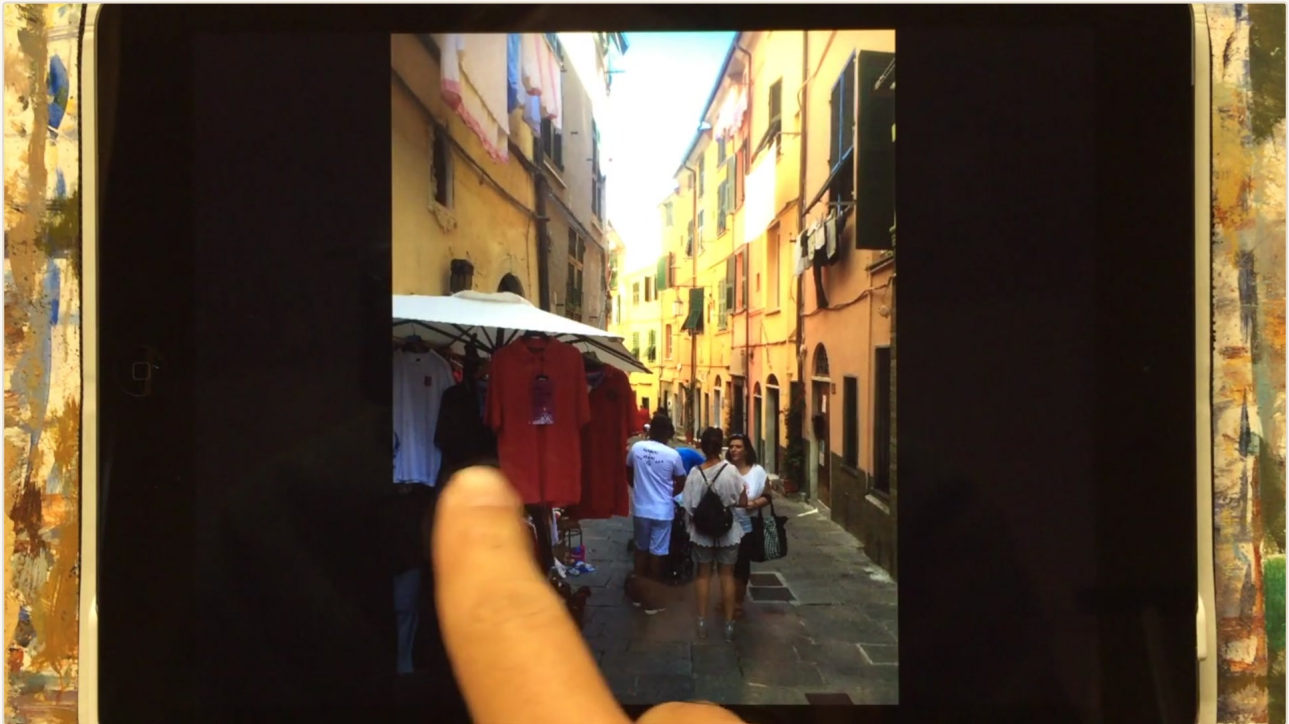
Materials

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 Photo Composition Ideas



Enhance Photo Composition

Consider adding elements like an umbrella or overhang canvases to your painting. These additions can introduce more interest and shape to the composition.

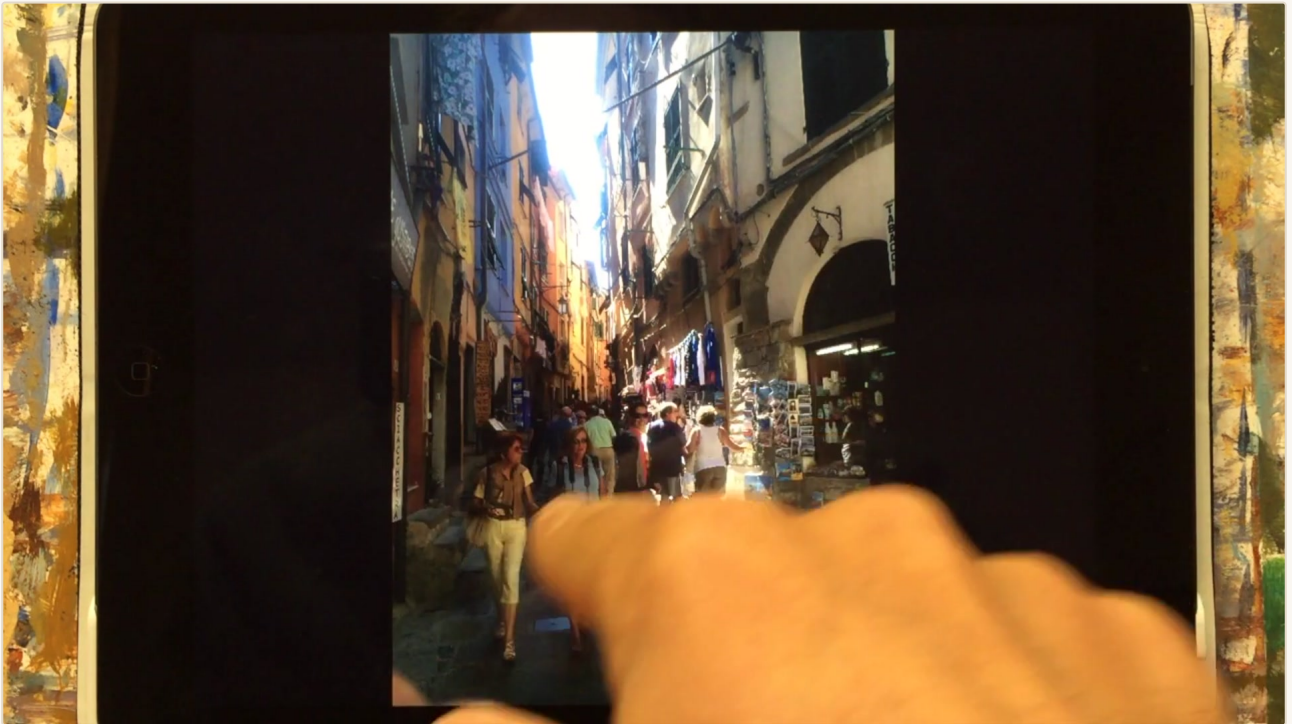
Focus on Dramatic Design

Notice the large light shape in the photo that directs the viewer's eye down the street. Use this element to create a dramatic design in your painting.

PRO TIP

Incorporate elements that guide the viewer's eye through the composition, such as light shapes or curves.

2 Adjusting Photo Exposure



Adjust Photo Exposure

Use image editing software to adjust the exposure of your photo. Increasing the exposure will reveal more color information and detail in the dark areas. Be cautious, as this may cause the lighter areas to become overexposed.

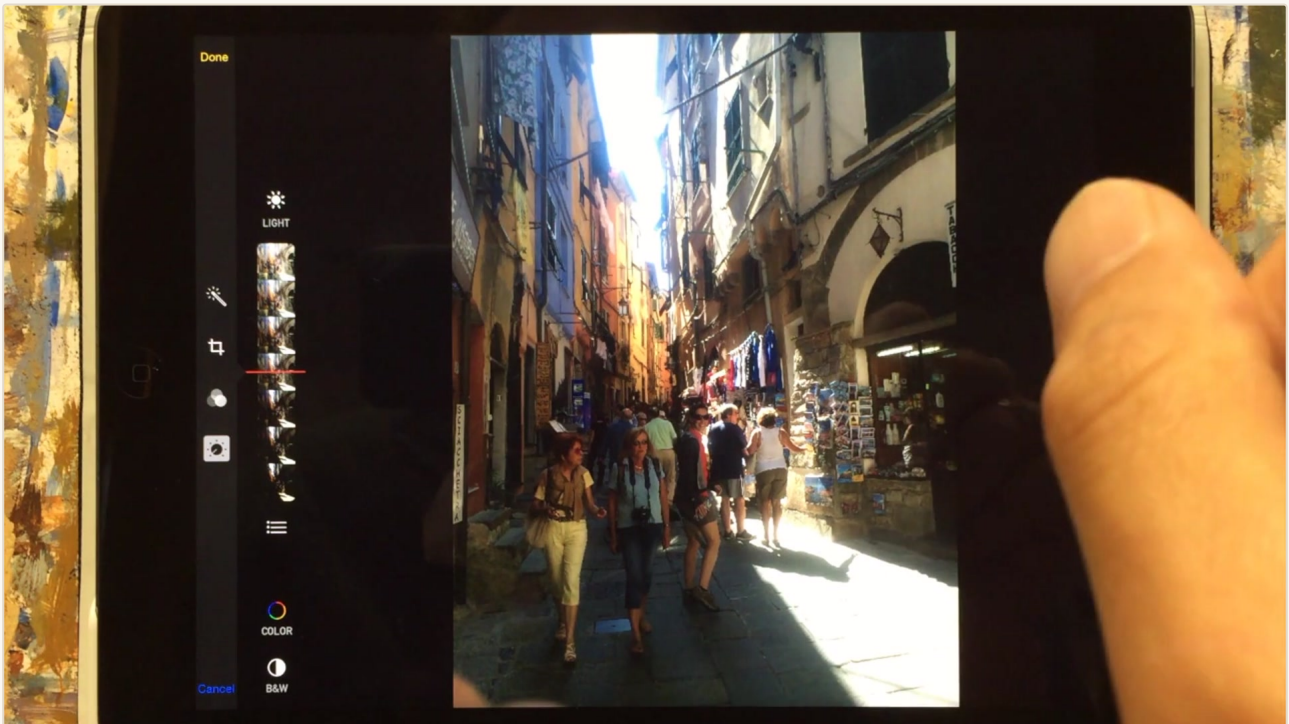
Enhance Shadow Details

Look for a 'shadows' filter in your editing application. Raising the level of the shadows can enhance color information and detail without overexposing the highlights. This adjustment often results in a more balanced and visually appealing image.

PRO TIP

Use the 'shadows' filter to bring out more detail in dark areas without affecting the highlights.

3 Sketching and Grid Transfer Method



Prepare Your Canvas

Tape a 14 by 17 inch canvas onto a board to keep it secure and ready for sketching.

Sketch the Scene

Use a pencil to sketch the scene roughly onto your canvas. This will help you organize the complex subject matter.

Use the Grid Transfer Method

Apply a grid transfer method to accurately transfer the details from the photograph to your canvas. This technique is especially useful for complex subjects.

PRO TIP

Use a grid transfer method to simplify and accurately sketch complex scenes onto your canvas.

4 Perspective Drawing Tips



Identify the Horizon Line

Determine the horizon line, which is the eye level of the photographer. This is crucial because it affects how vertical and horizontal lines are perceived in the scene.

Understand Vertical Line Convergence

Recognize that tall buildings above the horizon line have vertical lines that converge to a point in the sky above the horizon. Compare these lines to the edge of your paper or canvas to see how far they lean towards the center.

Analyze Horizontal Line Convergence

Observe that many horizontal lines in the scene converge to a point on the horizon line. Due to the street's curve and tilt, not all lines do this, but they generally point towards the horizon line.

Convince Your Brain

Use a ruler to measure steep angles at the top of the photo. Your brain may resist believing these angles are accurate, so compare them to the photo to ensure accuracy.

PRO TIP

Use a ruler to measure and verify angles, ensuring your brain doesn't misjudge steep lines.

5 Painting the Darkest Darks



Prepare the Darkest Dark

Use a large, inexpensive bristle brush about an inch wide. Mix your darkest dark by combining blue, red, and yellow ochre in fairly equal quantities. Add walnut oil to thin the mixture, aiming for a neutral dark tone.

Apply the Darkest Dark

Brush the dark mixture onto the canvas, referring to your reference photo to identify the areas for the darkest darks. Focus on areas like the inside of the archway, where shadows are deepest.

Warm the Dark Near Light

As the dark area approaches the glowing light on the pavement, warm it up by adding yellow ochre and red to your mixture. This will lighten the dark slightly and enhance the warm, glowing effect of the light bouncing around.

PRO TIP

Use walnut oil to thin your darkest dark mixture for a smoother application.

6 Maintaining Perspective in Painting



Identify Areas for Dark Tones

Look around your painting for areas where you can apply a really dark tone. This will help to create depth and contrast in your work.

Maintain Vertical Perspective

When painting vertical lines, ensure they converge at the top. This means they should all lean towards the middle, maintaining the perspective of the scene.

Preserve Your Drawing

Keep the original drawing in mind as you paint. The paint can cover up your guidelines, making it easy to lose the intended perspective.

PRO TIP

Ensure vertical lines converge at the top to maintain perspective.

7 Adding Sky Shine and Atmospheric Lighting



Lighten Dark Areas

Add a little bit of white to your darkest darks to create a slightly lighter dark. Use this mixture to brush in all the large areas where a lighter dark is needed. Thin the paint with walnut oil to ensure it covers the canvas without being too thick.

Add Sky Shine

Mix a bluish color to create sky reflections in the shadows. Brush this lighter, bluer color into the dark areas you've already painted. Ensure the initial layers are thin to allow for easy blending of this new color.

Enhance Shadow Contrast

Make the shadow areas a bit bluer than in the reference photo to enhance color contrast between the cool shadows and warm lights. As you paint higher up, gradually lighten the blue by adding white to mimic the effect of sky light.

Create Atmospheric Lighting

Paint the top area with an overall blue to represent light pouring down from the sky. Adjust the blue as you move lower, darkening it to maintain the atmospheric lighting effect. This ensures the lighting condition appears natural and cohesive.

PRO TIP

Keep initial layers thin to allow for easy blending of subsequent colors.

8 Painting Warm Glowing Colors



Mix a Warm Gray

Mix a warmish gray for the front of the archway. Use a big brush to create large, gestural marks that capture the structure's essence.

Switch to a Smaller Brush

Switch to a smaller brush to apply a slightly lighter, much warmer mixture inside the arch. This captures the light bouncing off the pavement and illuminating the underside of the arch.

PRO TIP

Use a smaller brush to apply warmer tones where light reflects, enhancing the glow.

9 Balancing Warm and Cool Colors



Remove Unwanted Blue

Wipe off the blue paint from the area where you plan to add warm colors. This prevents the blue from mixing with the warm tones and creating an unwanted grey.

Add Warm, Light Colors

Introduce much warmer, lighter colors to the areas you just cleaned. Focus on adding light to the side of the wall next to the arch and the start of the figure.

Enhance Shadows with Warmth

Add more warmth to the shadows to create depth and interest. Consider adding a red banner and balancing it with a red awning on the opposite side of the street.

Create Soft Shadows

If adding an awning, paint a dark, soft shadow underneath it to suggest depth and realism.

Balance Rich Colors

Observe the right-hand building in the reference photo. Ensure the dark details contrast with the rich colors to maintain the drama and vibrancy of the scene.

Lighten Colors Towards the Sky

As you paint higher up the building towards the sky, lighten the colors and add more blue to reflect the natural lighting and atmospheric perspective.

PRO TIP

Wipe off any unwanted blue before adding warm colors to prevent creating grey tones.

10 Detailing and Color Interpretation



Interpret Colors Creatively

Use the colors in your reference photo as suggestions rather than strict guidelines. For example, in a dark window, reflect some sky to add light and interest to the shapes.

Mix Light Colors

Create a very light mixture of white with a little phthalo blue, and perhaps a touch of yellow or red. This will add warmth and light to areas like the window reflections.

Enhance Surfaces with Reflections

Paint the flagstones with warm light and add bluish sky reflections to surfaces. This blue can be a feature of your painting, enhancing the glowing effect from the sky.

Detail with Small Brushes

Use a small brush for fine details like shirts hanging on a rack. Although larger brushes are typically used, the detail in this scene calls for smaller brushes early on.

Adjust Line Brightness

Ensure lines in light areas are much lighter than those in dark areas. This contrast will enhance the realism and depth of your painting.

Add Building Details

With the buildings blocked in, use a small brush to add as much or as little detail as desired. Focus on enhancing the scene without overcrowding it with details.

PRO TIP

Reflect sky colors in windows to break up shadowed areas and add interest.

11 Fine Details and Brush Techniques



Maintain Color Harmony in Shadows

Ensure that the dark details in colored areas remain within the same color group. For a red building, keep the shadowed areas light enough to stay in the red color group. Similarly, for a yellow building, make the shadows yellowish.

Add Glowing Light Effects

Start by painting the glowing area around the lights. Then, go slightly lighter and more yellow in the middle of these areas to enhance the glow effect.

Detail with Precision

Use a high-quality brush to add fine details, such as objects catching light along the building's face. A good brush prevents clumps and allows for precise lines.

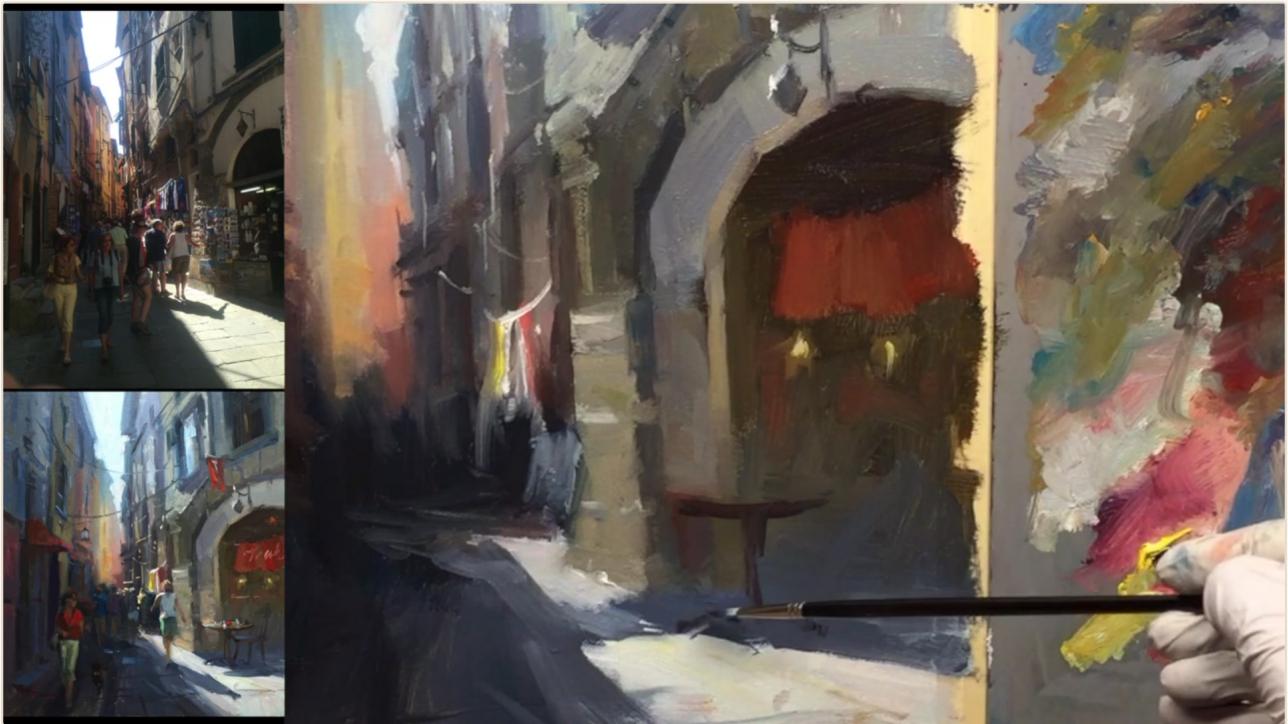
Utilize Long Bristle Brushes

Choose a brush with fairly long bristles. This allows you to paint longer distances with one fill of paint, as the bristles hold more paint.

PRO TIP

Use a high-quality brush to achieve fine lines and avoid clumps in your details.

12 Adding Shape Interest



Add a Table and Chair

Paint a small table and chair in the empty area to create an inviting atmosphere. This addition encourages the viewer to imagine sitting and enjoying the space. It also enhances the composition by adding shape interest to the scene.

PRO TIP

Incorporate elements like furniture to fill empty spaces and add visual interest.

13 Painting Figures and Movement



Paint Basic Figure Shapes

Begin by painting big blocks of color for the figure, focusing on getting the right shape and placement. Avoid getting caught up in small details at this stage.

Create Movement in the Figure

To depict movement, position the figure's legs as if walking, with one leg crossing the light pavement area. Use a lighter, warmer yellow color to enhance the glowing light effect.

Blur Edges for Motion

Leave some edges around the figure slightly blurred to suggest movement and create a dynamic impression.

Position Figures Correctly

Ensure the heads and feet of figures are correctly aligned with the horizon to maintain accurate proportions. This prevents size errors that are difficult to correct later.

Add Background Figures and Details

Dab small figures in the background and add simple details like a dog using dark shapes. Keep these elements minimal without detailed modeling.

PRO TIP

Blur the edges of figures slightly to convey a sense of movement.

14 Final Touches and Adjustments



Add a Shadow

Paint a shadow for the figure to ground her in the scene. Use a darker tone to create depth and realism.

Enhance Reflected Light

Add more reflected warm light into the bottom of the archway. This will create a sense of warmth and cohesion in the painting.

Create a Glowing Effect

Give the light a glowing effect on the tabletop. Use soft, blended brushstrokes to achieve a subtle glow.

Change the Top Color

Repaint the figure's top with a red hue instead of green. This will make her stand out more and add vibrancy to the scene.

PRO TIP

Use a darker tone for shadows to add depth and realism.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by thoughtfully composing your scene, incorporating elements that guide the viewer's eye and create interest. Adjust your reference photo's exposure to reveal hidden details, ensuring a balanced image that serves as a strong foundation for your painting. Begin with a secure canvas and a well-planned sketch, using a grid transfer method to accurately capture complex scenes.

As you progress, focus on maintaining perspective and depth by carefully observing and replicating the angles and lines in your reference. Use a mix of dark tones to establish the shadows and contrast, and gradually build up layers of atmospheric lighting to enhance the scene's realism. Balance warm and cool colors to create a dynamic interplay of light and shadow, ensuring that each element contributes to the overall composition.

In the final stages, refine your painting with fine details and thoughtful color interpretation. Use high-quality brushes for precision, and add elements like furniture and figures to inject life and movement into your scene. Make final adjustments to enhance depth, warmth, and cohesion, ensuring your painting captures the vibrant essence of the Streets of Vernazza.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Incorporate elements that guide the viewer's eye through the composition.
- Use the 'shadows' filter to bring out more detail in dark areas without affecting the highlights.
- Use a grid transfer method to simplify and accurately sketch complex scenes onto your canvas.
- Ensure vertical lines converge at the top to maintain perspective.
- Keep initial layers thin to allow for easy blending of subsequent colors.
- Wipe off any unwanted blue before adding warm colors to prevent creating grey tones.
- Reflect sky colors in windows to break up shadowed areas and add interest.
- Use a high-quality brush to achieve fine lines and avoid clumps in your details.



"Streets of Vernazza" 14x17" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson.

Student Critiques

Club members painted their own versions of this scene and I critiqued each one. Their paintings — and my feedback — are a wonderful way to see this lesson's ideas in action.

"Streets of Vernazza" by Cristina Mihailescu



"Streets of Vernazza" 9x12" Acrylic on Canvas by Cristina Mihailescu

Beautiful rosy colours in here Cristina. Your dark shadows have gone really black unfortunately which sucks some light and chance for more colour from the painting. That could just be the digital image of it here though. It's interesting how a slight change in perspective has made this look like an entirely different street with the archway seen front on and the tops of the buildings drawn less steep. Not better or worse I think, just different. I like the addition of the planter box flowers too. I remember overhearing a tourist guide in Assisi saying that many of those plants are there more to ward off mosquitoes than to look beautiful, but I'm glad they do both. Your central figure is beautifully painted and I think I prefer your table and chair to mine with the flowers and glinting objects on it. Interesting how much you blurred the edges of the red banner in there when the surrounding edges are quite sharp but I suppose it lends some movement to it. Your glowing interior lights are really well done going through the spectrum of yellow orange red as they do, but rendered loosely (like a pro!).

"Italian Village" by Olivia O'Carra



"Italian Village" 9x12" Oil on Canvas by Olivia O'Carra

You've got a lovely fluid feeling to a lot of the brushwork in this painting Olivia. Perhaps you could have ironed out a few more of the wobbles in the archway and the shadows on the pavement though. You've exaggerated the blue glow from the top even further than I did which is good but you're also breaking the spell a little with some of the brownish windows extending up into the blue. With that strong a glow those browns should be more in the bluish realm. Your colour work overall is really rich in variety which is great to see although the darkest darks are tending to black too much which sucks some colour and life from the painting. Overall it's a very pleasing painting.

"Dor's Street in Vernazza" by Dorian Aronson



"Dor's Street in Vernazza" 14x17" Oil on Canvas by Dorian Aronson

Some good work here Dorian, the drawing particularly with the majority of the building angles looking good and the central figure is great. Most of the greys in the mid tones have been dealt with nicely but perhaps the blues have taken over too much in the darks. The yellow pants on the left could do with toning down a little compared to the depth of shadow they are currently in. There is some trouble with the clump of figures in the middle who are blurry and have their feet too far down the canvas - actually in line with the feet of the green skirted woman, which is making them look like ghostly hobbits. It's a good lesson to triple check the relative positions of heads and feet in a scene with multiple figures.

“The street of Stockholm with Italian restaurant” by Elena Sokolova



"The street of Stockholm with Italian restaurant" 40x50cm Oil on Canvas by Elena Sokolova

Good on you for using a different street scene Elena. You've done some subtle work with the glow from the sky quietly affecting the buildings. Was that glazed/scumbled over the top with white and blue? It looks very even and subtle for alla prima work. You've spent considerable time getting the drawing correct and that's paid off. The highlight of this painting for me is the subtlety of the tower - so close to the value of the sky it's nearly lost - not an easy thing to do. As for the composition I feel like the cafe needs a bit more space, which could be taken from the right hand side of the painting as if the viewer just turned their gaze to the left slightly. The cafe with its colourful awnings and flag is the more interesting side of the street so why not focus on that? I suppose it has a lot to do with the photograph to begin with.