



Mediterranean Harbour

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/77-Mediterranean-Harbour>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, we find ourselves back in the enchanting Vernazza on the Italian coast, ready to capture the essence of a vibrant Mediterranean harbour. This scene, with its glowing light and transparent waters, offers a perfect opportunity to delve into impressionistic painting techniques. I chose a stunning image, graciously provided by Kelly, and simplified it to focus on the essential elements that convey the beauty of boats nestled against a charming village backdrop. By narrowing down the composition, we emphasize the scene's inherent allure without overwhelming details. Throughout this lesson, you'll learn how to enhance color vibrancy, manage light, and employ impressionistic brushwork to bring this picturesque setting to life. We'll start by sketching the scene with a phthalo and magenta mixture, adjusting the horizon for a dynamic composition, and carefully placing the main boat. This approach not only simplifies the process but also allows you to practice and refine your skills, ensuring a rewarding painting experience. Let's embark on this creative journey together and transform a simple scene into a stunning work of art.



"Mediterranean Harbour" 11x13" 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.

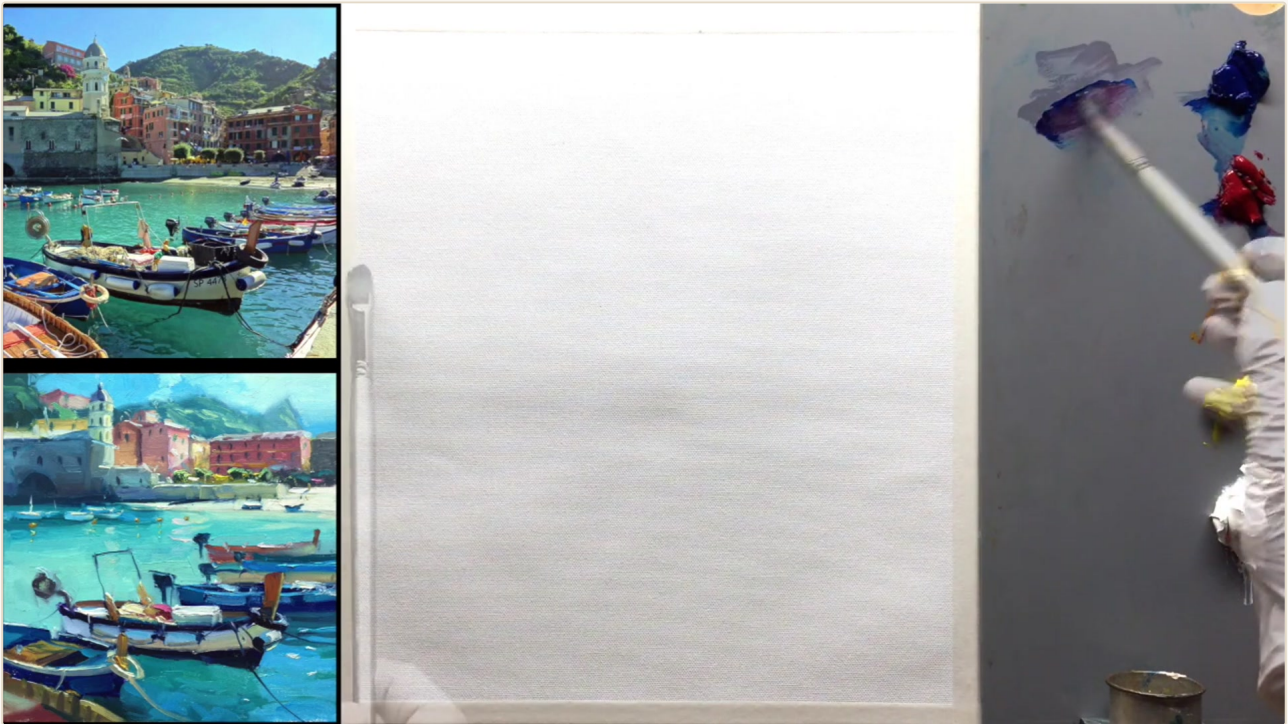
Materials

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 Initial Sketch and Composition



Mix Your Sketching Color

Combine a small amount of phthalo and magenta with walnut oil to create a very oily mixture. This will be used for sketching the scene.

Adjust the Horizon

Raise the horizon slightly to avoid placing it dead center on the canvas. This adjustment creates a more dynamic composition.

Sketch the Main Boat

Block in the placement of the main boat by marking the top, bottom, and ends. Draw a straight center line through the boat to guide the curves, as this helps manage the tricky shapes.

Practice Boat Shapes

If you're unsure about drawing the boat shapes, practice with pencil and paper first. This will help you get comfortable with the forms before committing to paint.

Use Pencil for Initial Sketch

If you prefer not to sketch with paint, use a pencil to lightly sketch the scene. This allows for easy corrections by erasing mistakes.

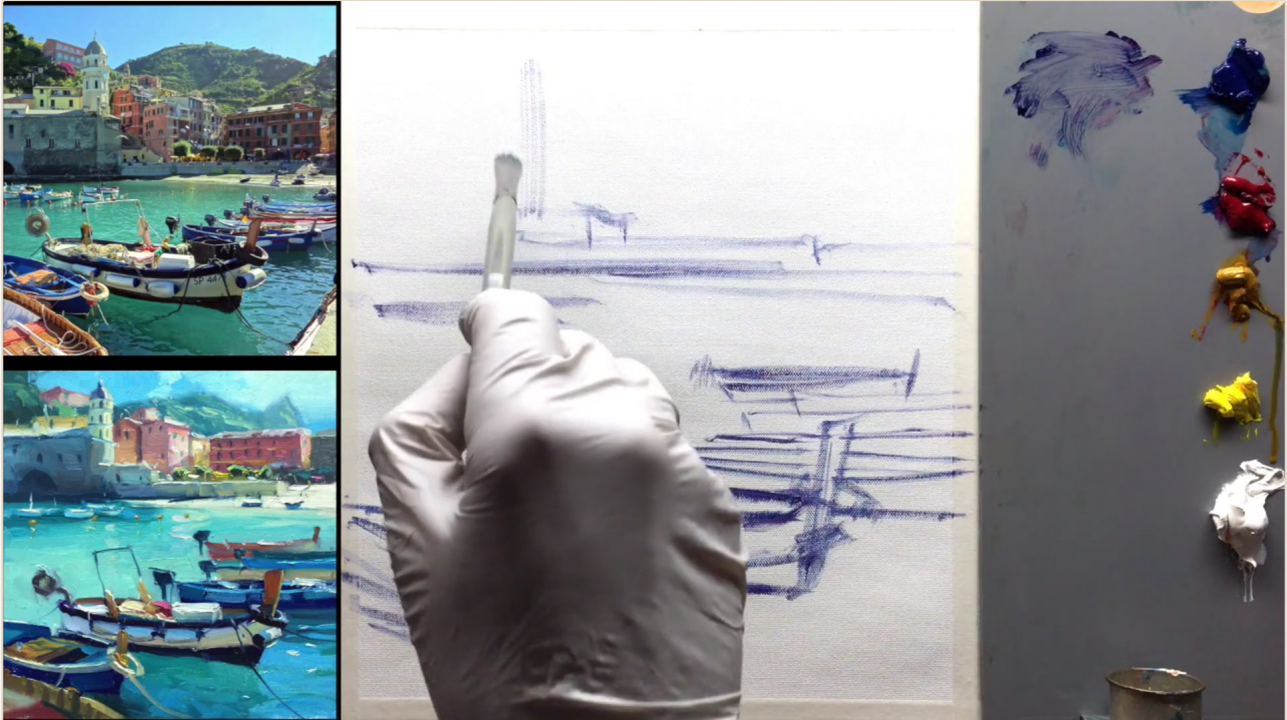
Vary Boat Placement

Extend one boat slightly further out to break the monotony and add interest to the composition.

PRO TIP

Use a center line to guide the curves when sketching complex boat shapes.

2 Dark Values and Shadows



Mix the Darkest Dark

Create a mixture using phthalo, magenta, and a little bit of yellow ochre. This combination will give you the darkest color possible with these pigments. Add some walnut oil to the mix to achieve the desired consistency.

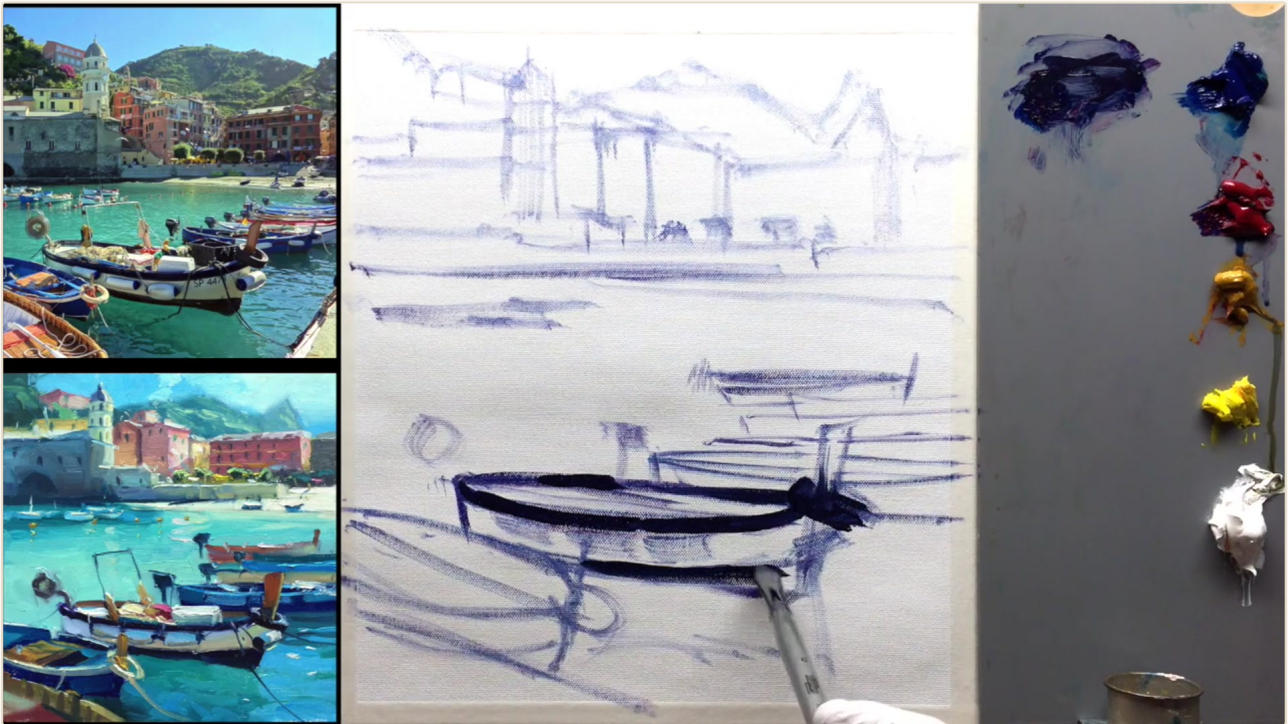
Apply Dark Values

Methodically apply the darkest darks to the painting first. Focus on placing these shadows accurately, as they will form the foundation of your composition. Ensure all shadow areas are covered before moving on to lighter values.

PRO TIP

Always apply the darkest values first to establish a strong foundation for your painting.

3 Color in Shadows



Understand Shadow Colors

Recognize that even in scenes that appear to glow with light, much of the area can be in shadow. Notice how light bounces from illuminated areas into shadows, enriching them with color.

Infuse Shadows with Color

Observe how the scene's shadows are filled with rich, beautiful colors. Use this understanding to add depth and vibrancy to your painting by incorporating these colors into the shadow areas.

PRO TIP

Incorporate bounced light colors into shadow areas to enrich your painting with depth and vibrancy.

4 Perspective and Dark Colors



Add Blue to Dark Color

Add a little more blue to the dark color for the side of the blue boat. Observe how the angle of the seats in the boats converge to a single point on the right, while the lines of the sides converge to a point on the left. This demonstrates two-point perspective drawing.

Create Dark Aquamarine Green

Mix a little yellow with the blue to create a dark aquamarine green for the dark areas of the water in the foreground. This helps in methodically working up the value scale from darks to mediums and then to lights.

Use Walnut Oil for Darks

Add more walnut oil to the darks than you will to the lights later on. This ensures the darks are fairly thin and cover the canvas easily, allowing the lights to sit on top later. Leave gaps for the lights as well.

Compare Darks to Darks

Compare your darks to each other to maintain consistency. For example, the green under the blue boat should be slightly lighter and greener than the blue boat itself. This method of comparing likes to likes simplifies the process.

PRO TIP

Add more walnut oil to dark colors to make them thin and easy to apply, allowing lighter colors to layer on top later.

5 Mixing Grays for the Village



Mix a Dark Bluish Gray

Combine your three primary colors: blue, magenta, and yellow ochre. Use yellow ochre instead of bright yellow to achieve a more neutral gray. Aim for a slightly lighter shade than the reference photo to create depth, allowing the foreground boats to stand out.

Add Variation to the Gray

Observe the photo and notice the variation in the gray tones on the building. Adjust the gray by making it slightly lighter and cooler or warmer in different areas. This variation adds interest and prevents the area from appearing flat.

Apply Brush Strokes with Perspective

Use vertical, horizontal, or slight diagonal brush strokes to follow the perspective of the village. This technique adds color interest and enhances the overall composition.

PRO TIP

Modify the grays continuously to avoid a flat, Lego-like appearance in the village.

6 Color Variation and Clean Brushes



Mix Verdant Dark Green

Create a verdant dark green for the hill or trees behind the tower. Make it slightly darker for the trees along the front to add depth.

Clean Your Brush Thoroughly

Before switching from greens and blues to reds, clean your brush thoroughly to avoid muddy colors. This ensures vibrant and clean color application.

Enhance Shadow Colors

Mix a punchier red for the shadowed face of the brownish building on the right. Photos often under-saturate shadow colors, so adjust to maintain vibrancy and make the painting zing.

Incorporate Color Variation

Observe the photo for color variation cues and incorporate them into your painting. Use reds and oranges with slight variations for different buildings, enhancing the visual interest.

Work from Darks to Mids

Apply the darkest colors first, then lighten them and work the mid-tones on top. This layering technique adds depth and dimension to your painting.

Maintain Clean Brushes

Wipe your brush before each color change to keep colors clean. Use paper towels for effective cleaning, ensuring tidy work and preventing paint from migrating onto clothes or the studio.

PRO TIP

Use paper towels to keep your brushes clean and maintain vibrant colors.

7 Light and Color in Shadows



Lighten and Warm the Shadows

On the shadow side of the buildings, lighten the colors as they descend towards the bottom. This approach contrasts with the photo, which suggests darkening. By lightening, you indicate strong light bouncing back into the shadows, enhancing the vibrancy of the painting.

PRO TIP

Lightening shadows at the bottom can suggest reflected light and add vibrancy to your painting.

8 Background Hills



Mix the Background Hill Color

Create a bluish-greenish color for the dark tone of the background hill. Make it slightly lighter and bluer than the photo to push it further back in space.

Adjust the Hill Shape

Add a peak at the end of the hill for a more interesting shape. Refer to other resource photos for guidance, as this peak isn't in the main photo.

Enhance Depth

Ensure the hill is lighter and bluer to emphasize its distance. Focus on pushing the background back to clearly distinguish the village and boats in the foreground.

PRO TIP

Make distant elements lighter and bluer to enhance depth and push them further back in the painting.

9 Sea Wall and Beach Glow



Enhance the Sea Wall

Make the sea wall warmer and lighter than it appears in the reference photo. This will create the effect of light bouncing off the beach, adding more color to your painting.

Create a Beach Glow

Develop a glowing area around the beach. This will enhance the overall warmth and vibrancy of the scene, making it more visually appealing.

PRO TIP

Make elements warmer and lighter to simulate light bouncing and enhance color.

10 Boat and Water Reflections



Add Shadow Color for Umbrellas

Use a dull yellow to create the shadow color underneath the bright yellow tops of the umbrellas. This will help define the umbrellas and add depth to the scene.

Mix Colors for the Boat

Mix a neutral color for the side of the main boat. Create two variations: a warmer tone closer to the bottom of the boat and a cooler tone higher up the hull and around the left side. This reflects light and sky influences on the boat's surface.

Adjust Color for Form

Mix the next color slightly lighter and bluer than the previous one. This subtle shift in color, without changing the value much, will help make the boat appear more rounded.

Paint White Buffers

Paint the white buffers along the side of the boat using a color similar to the boat's side, but slightly lighter and bluer. This will maintain consistency and realism in the reflections.

PRO TIP

Mix similar colors side by side on the palette to judge subtle differences before applying them to the canvas.

11 Water and Beach Reflections



Mix Sand Color for Water Line

Mix a light sand color for the water line along the front of the beach. This color will create a glowing effect and add a tropical feel to the water.

Prepare Aquamarine Colors

Clean your brush thoroughly before mixing aquamarine colors for the water. Keeping the brush clean prevents the light, pure color from becoming muddy.

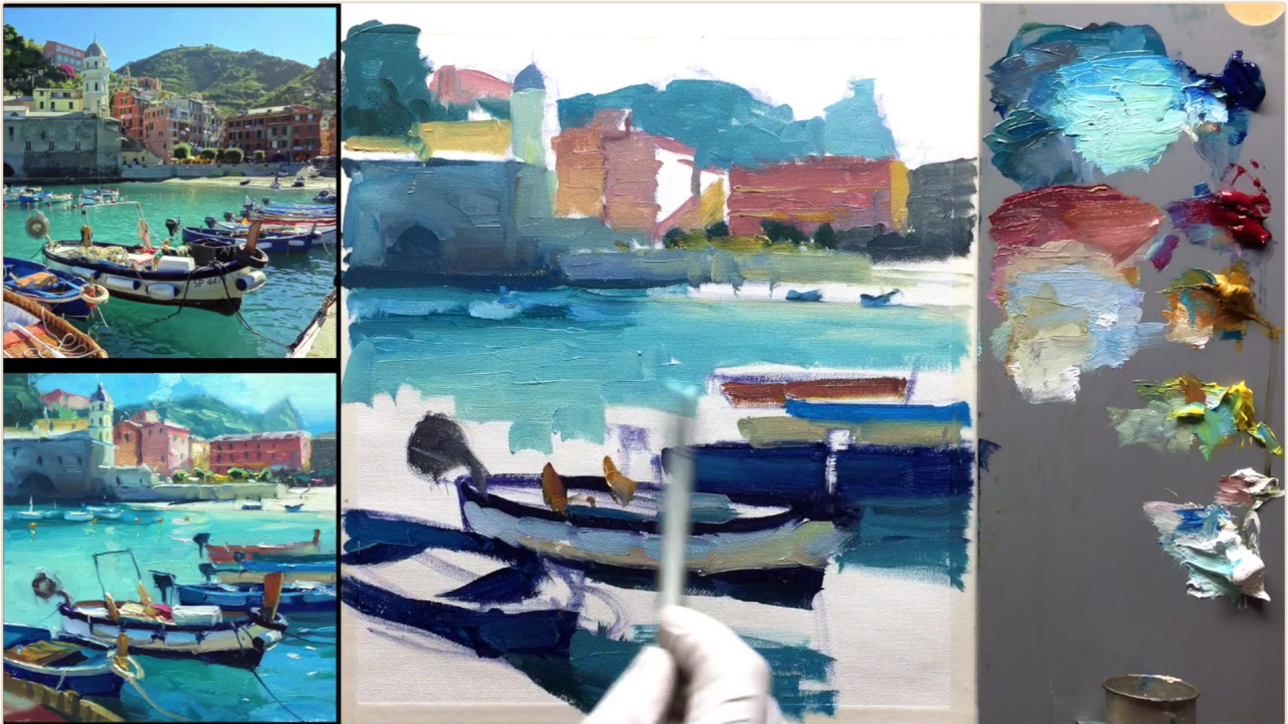
Apply Aquamarine Over Sand Color

Lightly work the aquamarine color over the top of the sand color. This layering will enhance the glowing effect and set the stage for the beach to be added later.

PRO TIP

Always clean your brush thoroughly before mixing light, pure colors like aquamarine to avoid muddying them.

12 Foreground Water and Sky



Identify Color Variations

Squint at the reference photo to identify large areas of slightly different colors in the foreground water. Notice the subtle variations and prepare to mix these differences in your paint.

Mix Foreground Water Colors

Start with a dark bluish green and gradually mix in a slightly lighter, yellower green. This will mimic the natural color shifts in the water.

Add Sky Reflections

For the sky reflection, mix phthalo blue with white to create a slightly lighter blue. Paint this color around the shape of the boat reflection to capture the subtle sky reflection in the water.

Create Soft Edges

As you paint the sky color down into the tops of the hills and trees, ensure the edge is very soft. This softness should increase as the hills disappear into the distance, enhancing the spatial depth of the painting.

Maintain Sharp Edges

When painting around the top of the tower, keep the edge sharp since it is closer to the viewer. This contrast between sharp and soft edges will add depth to your composition.

PRO TIP

Use phthalo blue and white to create the subtle sky reflection in the water.

13 Impasto Technique for Light



Suggest Motor Shapes

Use a couple of strokes to suggest the shape of motors in the scene. As the motors duplicate towards the village, make them smaller and slightly lighter to create depth.

Apply Thick Paint for Light

Mix large amounts of paint without using walnut oil to create thick, impasto strokes. These thick applications will catch the light and add dimension to your painting.

Create Impasto Texture

Push the tips of your brush into the paint piles on your palette to pick up clumps of paint. Lay these clumps onto the canvas to achieve a textured, impasto effect.

Adjust Paint Thickness for Depth

Smooth out the paint on the background hill to prevent it from coming forward. Use progressively thicker paint as you move towards the foreground to enhance the sense of space and recession.

PRO TIP

Mix more paint than you think you'll need for impasto techniques, as you will require more than anticipated.

14 Final Details and Highlights



Add Window Details

Use a small brush to paint a few windows in the background. Avoid painting all of them to maintain balance. Use darker tones, but not as dark as the foreground to keep them in place.

Highlight Sunlit Windows

Paint windows that are in sunlight with a lighter value and brighter colors. Consider using a green tone for a vibrant effect.

Enhance Water Reflections

Introduce reflections of the tower and buildings into the water with a bit more color. Add small touches to represent buoys, capturing the scene's liveliness.

Apply Final Impasto Strokes

Use thick impasto paint to add small areas of sunlight sparkling across the boats. Make sure the final impasto stroke is bold and captures the essence of the scene.

PRO TIP

Use lighter and brighter colors for windows in sunlight to create a sense of depth and realism.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your Mediterranean Harbour painting journey by carefully planning your composition and sketching the scene. Use a light, oily mixture to sketch the main elements, ensuring dynamic placement by adjusting the horizon and extending boat lines. This foundational step sets the stage for a vibrant and balanced composition.

As you progress, focus on establishing strong dark values and shadows, which will serve as the backbone of your painting. Gradually build up the layers, incorporating rich colors into the shadows and using perspective techniques to add depth. Pay attention to the subtle variations in color and light, particularly in the background hills and village, to enhance the sense of space and atmosphere.

In the final stages, bring your painting to life with impasto techniques and detailed highlights. Use thick paint to create texture and dimension, and add small, vibrant touches to capture the lively essence of the scene. By carefully balancing light and shadow, and using clean, vibrant colors, you will achieve a painting that is both dynamic and harmonious.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Raise the horizon slightly for a more dynamic composition.
- Apply the darkest values first to establish a strong foundation.
- Incorporate bounced light colors into shadow areas for depth.
- Add more walnut oil to dark colors for easier application.
- Continuously modify grays to avoid a flat appearance.
- Clean brushes thoroughly to maintain vibrant colors.
- Lighten shadows at the bottom to suggest reflected light.
- Use impasto techniques to add texture and dimension.



"Mediterranean Harbour" 11x13" 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.

"Beautiful Vernazza" by Silvana M Albano



"Beautiful Vernazza" 32.5x31cm. Oil on Paper by Silvana M Albano

A good painting Silvana. The first thing I notice is the colour of the water which is really nice and vibrant. The second thing that struck me is the reason why I focused on the water - it's because you've shrunk the boats which leaves more water to see. That's fine but it has split the scene in terms of focal point where the town now holds as much weight as the boats. Previously the town was a close second to the boats. I don't know if you did that consciously or by accident, but I just wanted to make you aware of the subtle difference there.

The drawing is pretty good on the whole - a few wonky boats could do with a bit of TLC though, especially the small white boats which you've dropped down from the horizon making them too small for their placement now. Your darkest darks seem to be in the little trees above the seawall. By placing darker darks in the foreground boats you'll give the painting more depth. Your brushwork is good - lots of broad painterly work contrasted by some nice crisp details. Nicely done!

"Mediterranean Colours" by Glenys Jones



"Mediterranean Colours" 12x14" Oil on Canvasboard by Glenys Jones

Beautiful work Glenys! This has a real impressionistic feel to it. Subtle colour usage, lyrical brushwork not overworked but with enough fine detail to give it substance, solid composition. Nice! A few things I could pick out for you to look at are firstly, the drawing of the black boat which is wonky, (practice it on paper a few times), the blue in the water should be a little greener, especially in the shadows, to tie in with the greener water colour in the middle. Make sure the waterlines of your distant boats are flat and level. The green in the hill is too strong and dark compared to the blue-grey dark there and the distance it is from us. Other than that it's all good. Great work!

"Courbron - Amalfi Italy" by Toska M. Courbron



"Courbron - Amalfi Italy" 11x14" Oil on Canvas by Toska M. Courbron

Nice work Toska! It's a strong composition - large shapes with your darks joined together and a figure in an ideal 3rd/3rd spot to add narrative and scale. The painterly brushwork is the second thing I was attracted to. The drawing is strong. The overall colour scheme is quite harmonious if a little subdued. I wondered what it would look like to heighten the contrast, saturate the colour a little, warm up the lights and have a darker background behind the light village so I did that in Photoshop. See what you think. You might agree the altered image looks warmer and more inviting which suits this idyllic subject. Something to think about for the next one.

“Mediterranean Harbour” by Janet Buckton



"Mediterranean Harbour" Oil on Canvas by Janet Buckton

Great colour work Janet - you've really nailed it there and your drawing is pretty good too, although your central boat could be a bit bigger. Making the canvas longer has left you with a gap in the middle where there's not much going on in the water - sort of a waste of space. On the other hand you could say it makes it more restful and less busy. Depends on what you like. For me, I try to make every part of my canvas interesting in some way.

Your brushwork is pretty timid in this painting. Not many people come to my workshops and say to me 'I really want to tighten up!' so I'll assume you want to get more gestural and I challenge you to paint right over this painting using LOADS MORE PAINT (and THICK!) and doing in one stroke what you previously did in five, and then LEAVE IT ALONE! Think about the stroke, what it's for, how you'll do it, how to load your brush for it, and SWOOSH! Done. You need good brushes too with long bristles because it's very hard to get beautiful brushwork out of an ugly brush. Ok so consider yourself challenged. I do that because this is a really nice painting, on the verge of becoming a really great painting. Enjoy!