



Sunset Beach

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/73-Sunset-Beach>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, we journey to Proctor's Beach, a cherished spot just over the hill from Oceans Beach, near my home. It's a place that not only offers the thrill of sliding down sand dunes but also presents a breathtaking sunset scene that I love to capture on canvas. The photo we'll work from is an older one, carefully stitched together, with my fingers strategically placed to prevent the sun from overwhelming the image. I've painted this scene multiple times, each attempt revealing new insights and techniques. In this lesson, you'll learn how to create a stunning glowing light effect, master atmospheric depth, and refine your brushwork to bring this sunset beach to life. We'll start by moistening the canvas with a bit of water, allowing the acrylics to flow smoothly as we transition from warm lights to cool darks. This initial step sets the stage for the luminous effect we're aiming for. Let the toned canvas dry thoroughly, ideally for a day, though a few hours will suffice in warm weather. Join me as we explore the nuances of this inspiring scene and enhance your painting skills along the way.

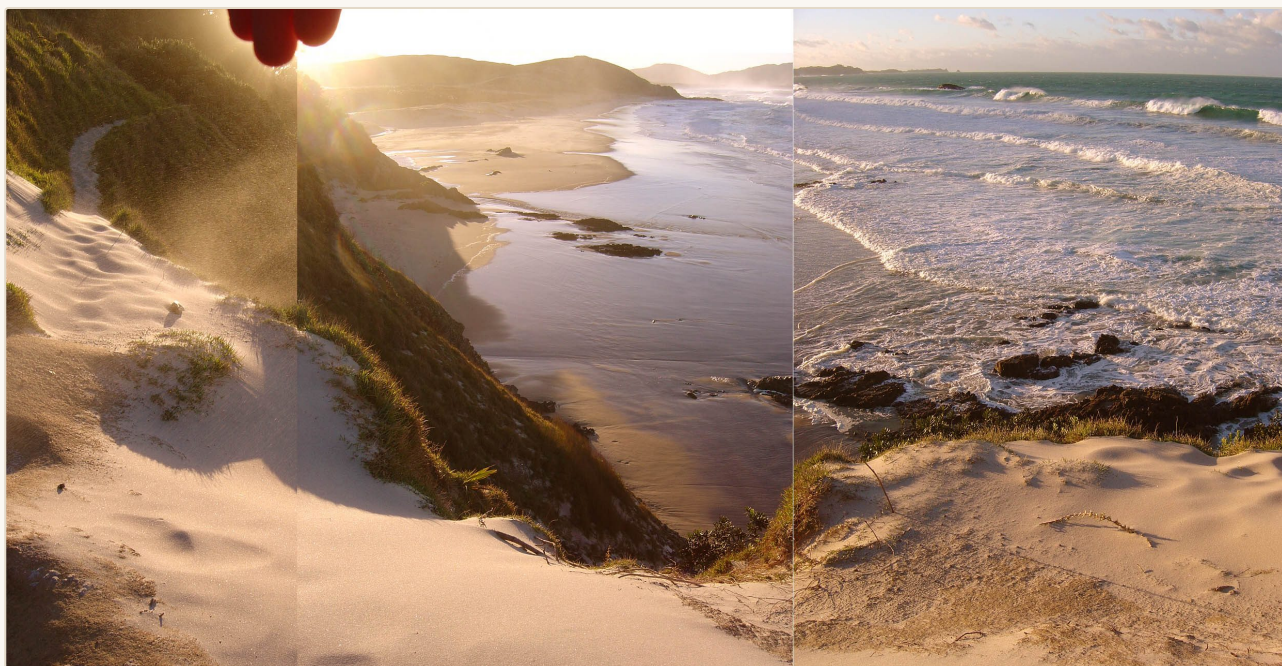


"Sunset Beach" 15.5 x 20" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson.



REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 2

The scene as Richard found it.

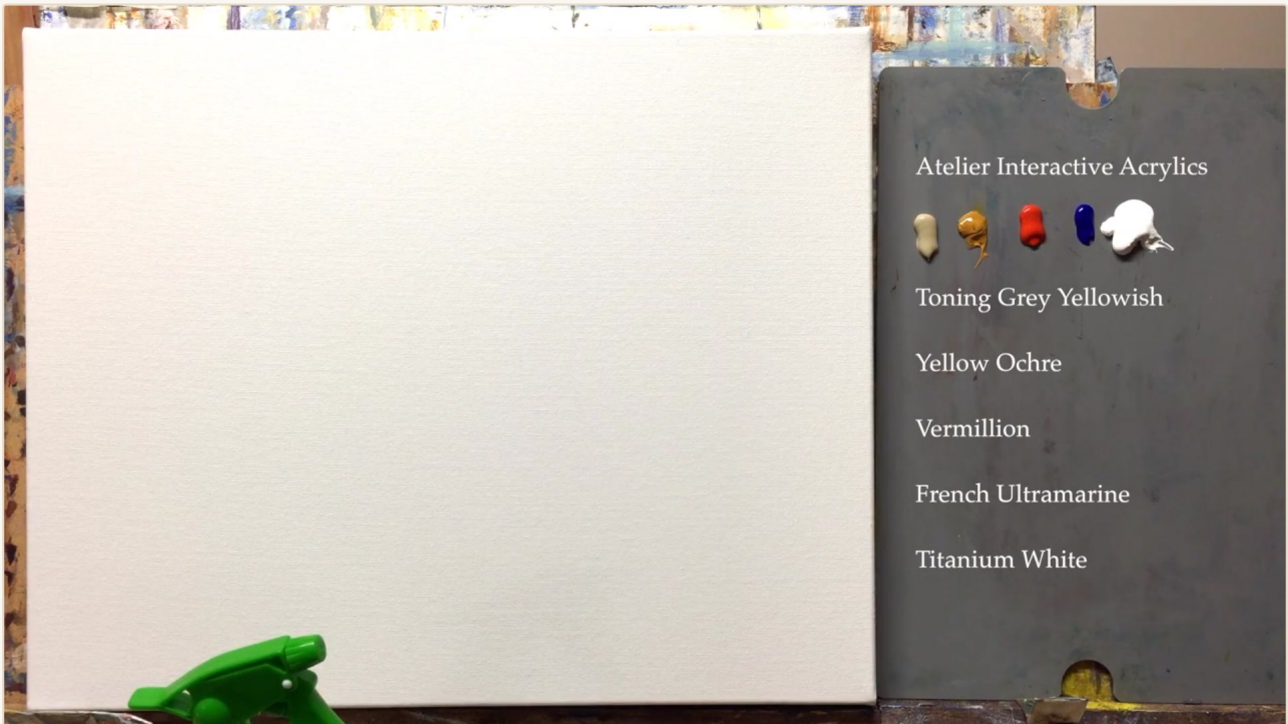
Materials

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 Toning the canvas



Prepare the Canvas

Squirt a little water onto the canvas to moisten it. This helps the paint spread more easily and evenly.

Tone the Canvas

Use a really large brush to apply acrylics, creating a gradient from warm lights to cool darks. This sets the stage for a big glowing effect in your painting.

Dry the Canvas

Allow the toned canvas to dry thoroughly. Ideally, let it dry for a whole day, but a couple of hours is sufficient in warm weather.

PRO TIP

Moisten the canvas with water before applying acrylics for easier paint application.

2 Initial sketch with oil paints



Prepare Your Brushes and Tools

Select a large bristle brush, two large flat bristles, a synthetic flat, and a couple of small brushes for detail work. Have a big palette knife ready for interesting effects.

Mix an Oily Base Color

Create a very oily mixture using mainly red with a little bit of blue. Aim for a thin, watery consistency to easily sketch your initial shapes.

Sketch the Basic Shapes

Use the oily mixture to sketch the big shapes on your canvas. Focus on creating enough variation in these shapes without worrying about details.

PRO TIP

Use a very oily mixture of red and a touch of blue for a thin, fluid base to sketch your initial shapes.

3 Mixing darks for receding hills



Mix Four Different Darks

Prepare to paint the receding hills by mixing four distinct dark shades. Ensure each shade is slightly different to avoid repetitive lines in the hills. This variety will help achieve a natural and dynamic look.

PRO TIP

Avoid making the lines of the receding hills too similar to maintain a natural appearance.

4 Color mixing for hills



Mix Dark Hill Colors

Combine blue, red, and yellow ochre to create a dark base color for the hills. Adjust the first mixture to be slightly greener than the second by varying the proportions of blue and yellow ochre.

Create Lighter, Vibrant Mixture

Lighten the mixture by adding more orange to it, making it more vibrant. Include a small amount of blue to tone down the brightness and introduce a subtle grey tone.

Final Hill Color Adjustment

Take the third mixture and add yellow ochre, white, and a touch of bright yellow. This will create a lighter, more luminous color for the final touches on the hills.

PRO TIP

Use blue to subtly tone down vibrant colors, adding a hint of grey.

5 Painting light colors first



Begin with Light Colors

Start by painting the lighter areas of your scene first. This approach helps maintain the vibrancy of the light colors, especially in glowing light situations like a sunset.

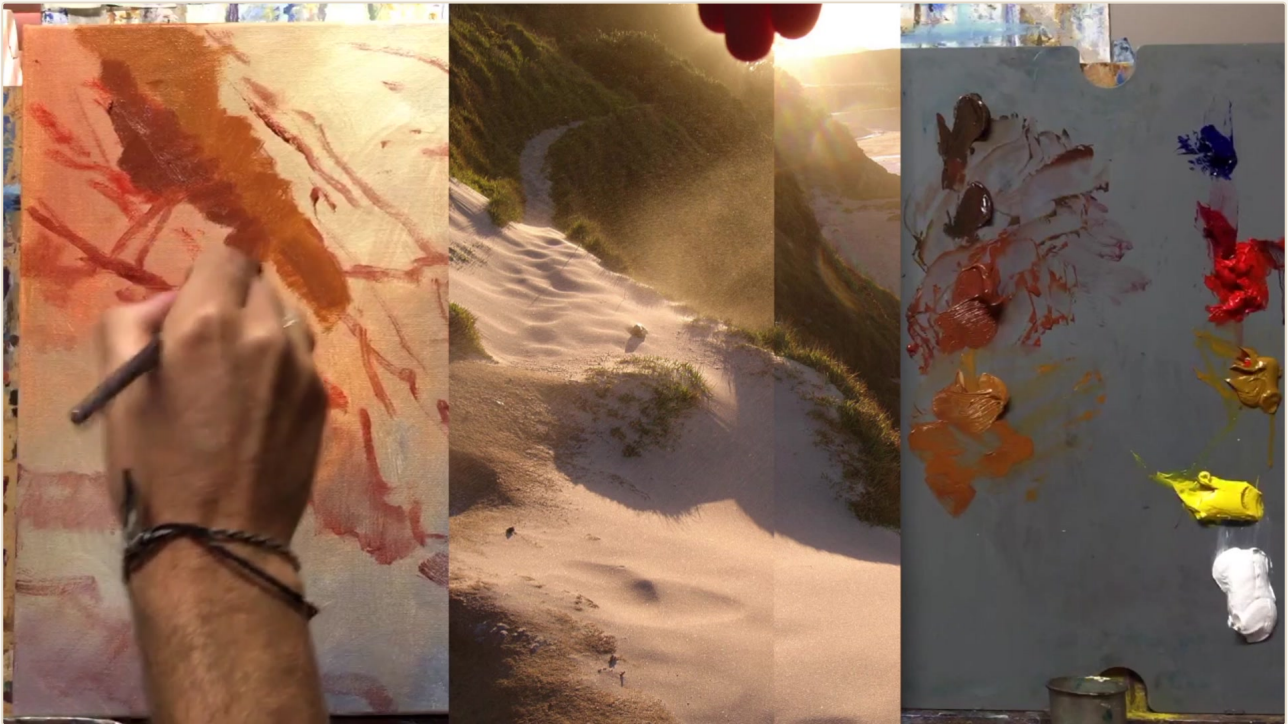
Transition to Dark Colors

After establishing the light areas, gradually work your way into the darker sections. This method ensures that the light colors remain bright and luminous against the darker tones.

PRO TIP

Paint light colors first to keep them vibrant in glowing light scenes.

6 Using a black and white reference



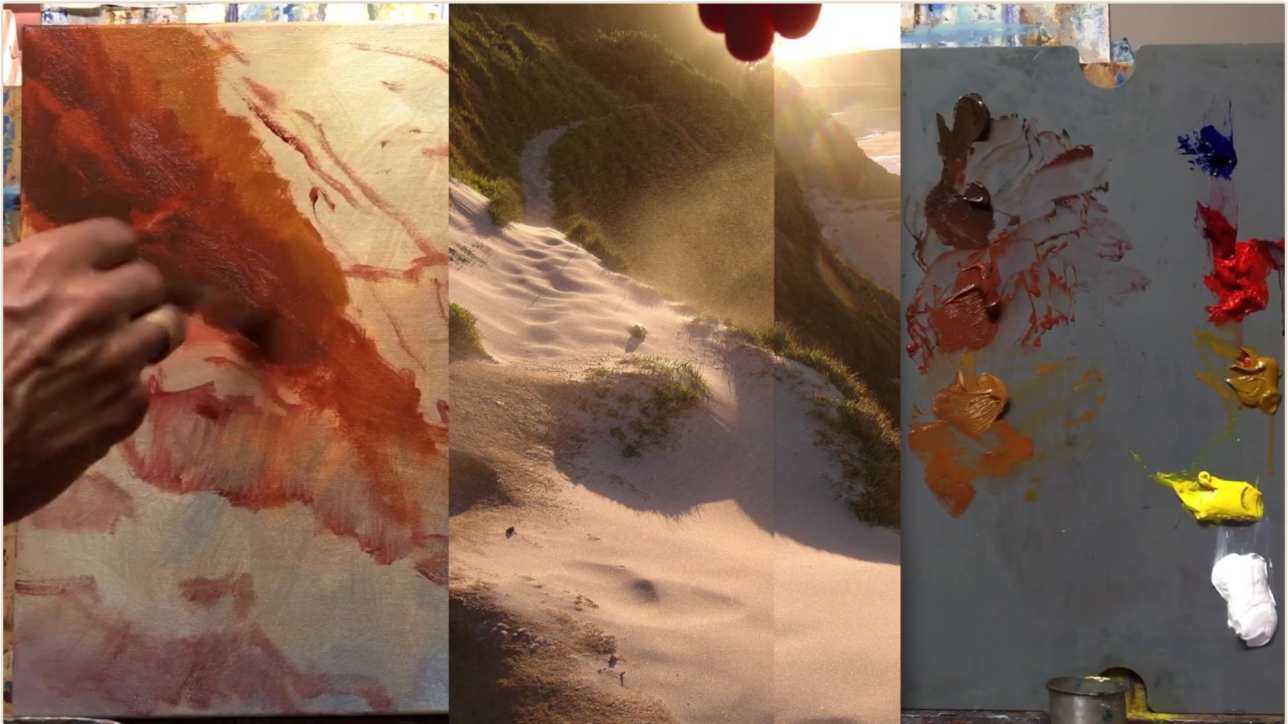
Use a Black and White Reference

Work from a black and white printout of your reference photograph. This helps you focus on the values and composition without being influenced by the colors in the photo. Use this approach to create your own color palette and enhance creativity.

PRO TIP

Use a black and white reference to focus on values and avoid being influenced by original colors.

7 Painting grass and bushes



Create Clumpy Grass

Use the brush sideways to achieve a thin, clumpy grass appearance. Avoid painting the entire area a flat color by leaving small gaps, which will form the tops of the grass clumps.

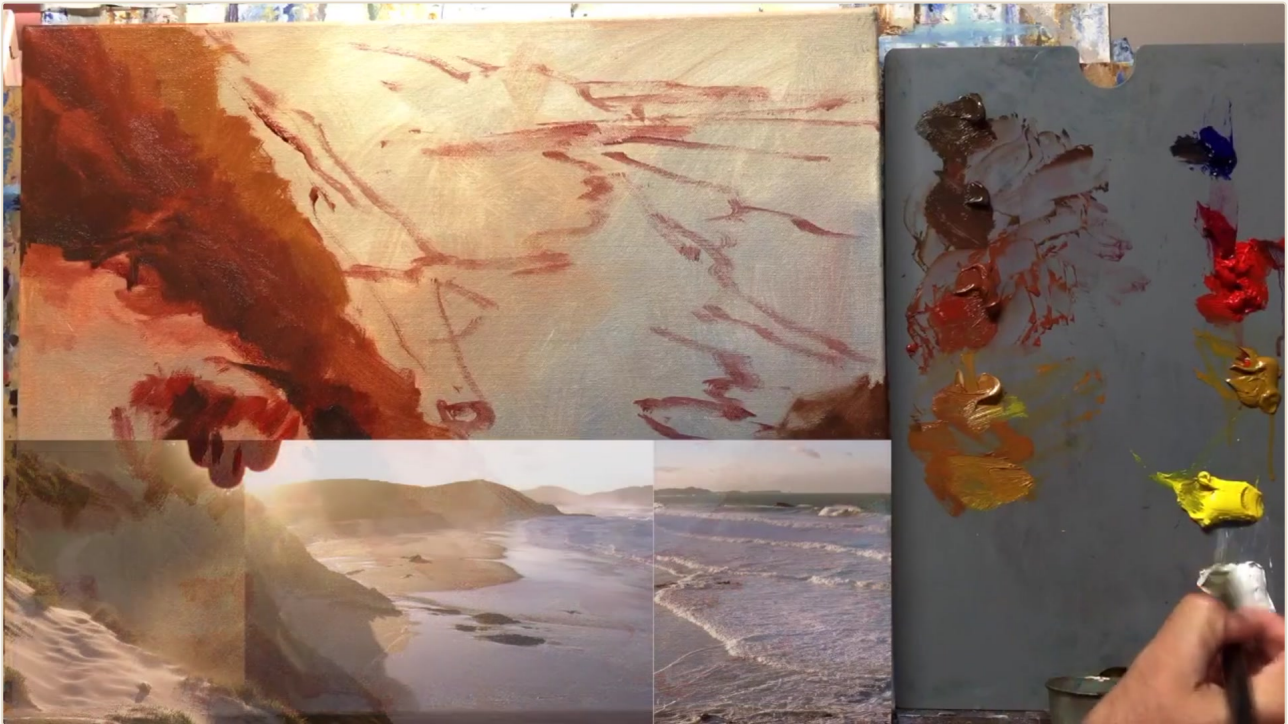
Add Vibrant Red to Bushes

Introduce a more vibrant red into the shadow side of the bushes. This will enhance the depth and richness of the shadows, adding dimension to your painting.

PRO TIP

Use the brush sideways to create thin, clumpy grass with natural gaps.

8 Adding light to hills and background



Add Light to Hills Near the Sun

Mix the lightest color with some white and a little bit of bright yellow. Apply this mixture thinly to the area of the hills closer to the sun. This will create a glowing effect that captures the sunlight.

Lighten Distant Hills

Add more white and yellow to your mixture for the next set of hills, which are further back. These hills should appear much lighter due to the distance and the effect of the sunlight.

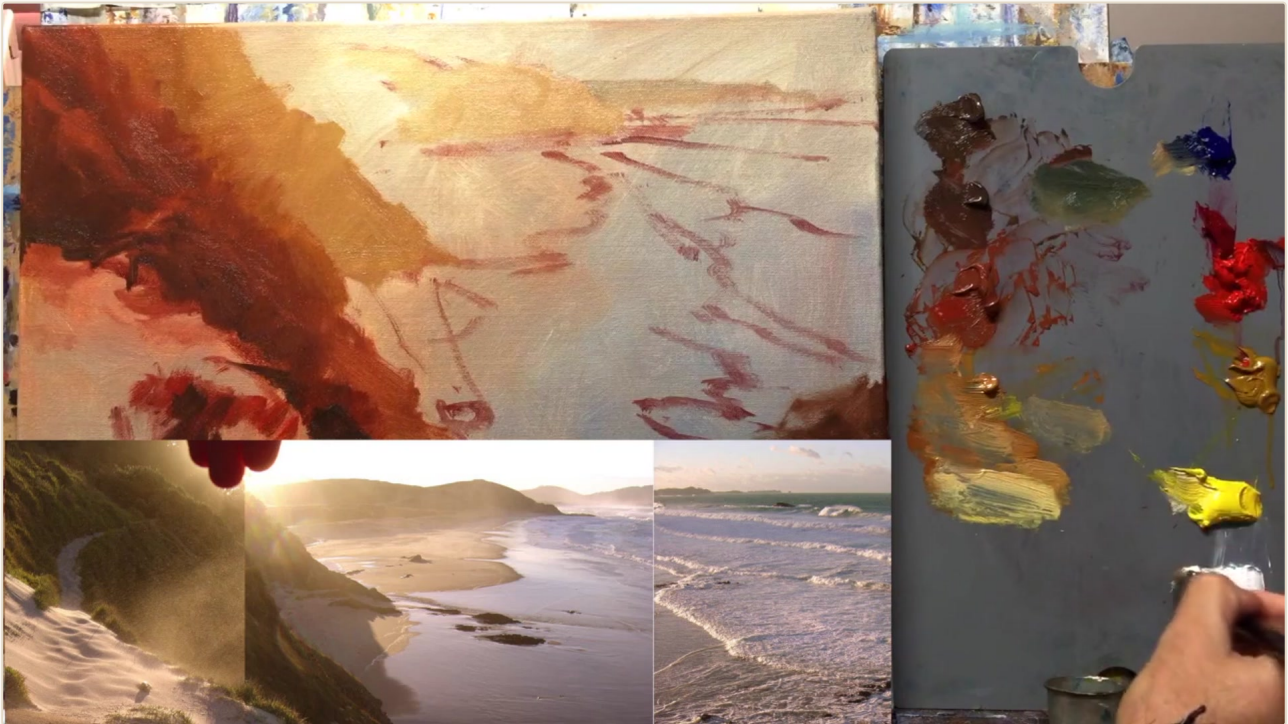
Adjust Background Colors

For the background, introduce a touch of blue to your mixture. This will grey down the color slightly, helping to differentiate the distant land masses from the closer hills.

PRO TIP

Use a touch of blue to grey down the background, enhancing depth and separation between land masses.

9 Mixing colors for ocean and rocks



Mix a Dull Green for the Ocean

Create a dull green color for the ocean by mixing a muted green. Ensure it is not vibrant, as the ocean requires a more subdued tone.

Adjust the Landmass Tone

Notice that the ocean appears too dark compared to the adjacent landmass. Instead of lightening the ocean, darken the landmass to maintain the desired depth of color in the ocean.

PRO TIP

Darken the landmass to balance the depth of color with the ocean.

10 Color and value considerations



Mix a Darker, Warmer Color for Rocks

Blend a darker, slightly warmer color for the rocks in the foreground. Focus on achieving the correct value rather than the exact color, as the reference is a black and white photograph.

Adjust Color Based on Value

Ensure the color is a bit darker and cooler than the area closer to the sun. This will help create depth and contrast between the rocks and the sunlit areas.

Create a Mid-Value Purpley Mauve Grey

Mix a purpley mauve-ish grey for the wet sand at the bottom of the hill. Aim for a mid-value tone to capture the subtle nuances of the wet sand.

PRO TIP

Focus on getting the value correct, as colors can be adjusted later if needed.

11 Adjusting colors for light and distance



Warm and Lighten the Beach

Add a little bit of white and bright yellow to your mixture to warm it up and lighten it. Apply this color up the beach to create a sense of warmth and light.

Cool the Distant Beach

Add a little bit of blue to your mixture to cool down the color as it gets further away from the sun. This helps to create a sense of distance.

Apply Thick Highlights

Avoid using walnut oil when applying lights, as you want the highlights to be quite thick, especially in the foreground. This will make the highlights stand out more.

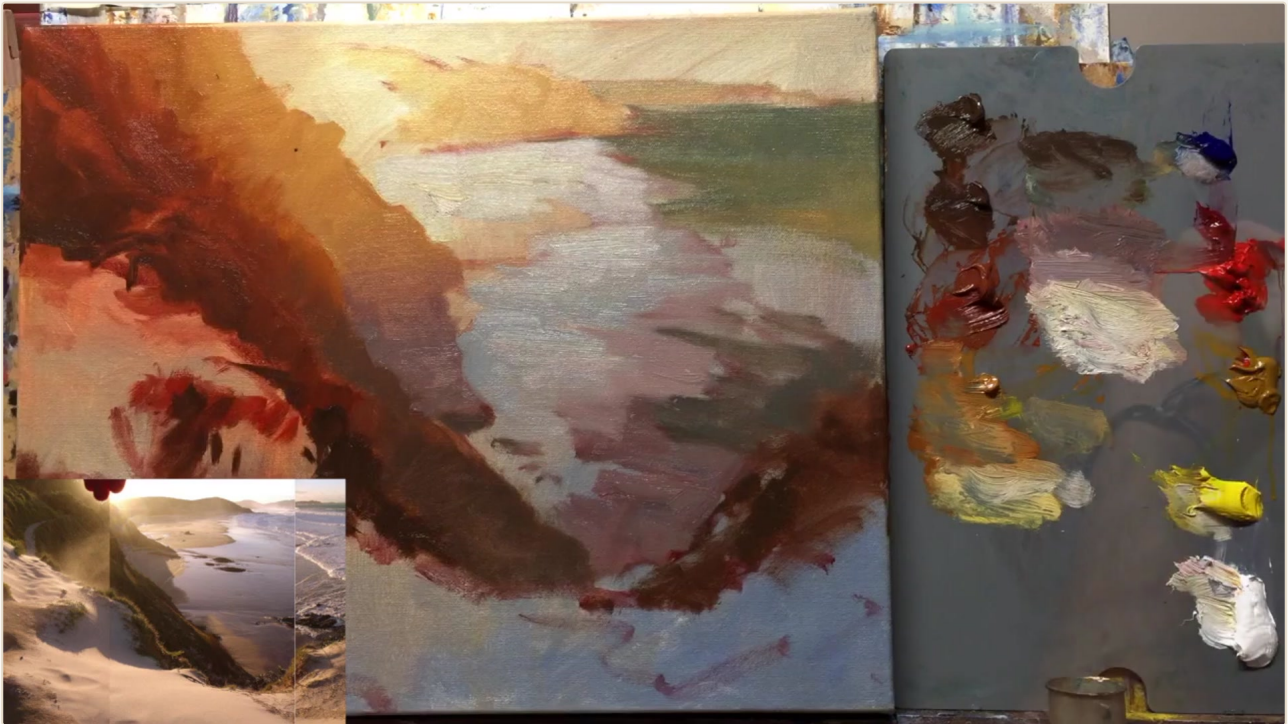
Lighten and Warm Near the Sun

Use more white and yellow as the beach gets closer to the sun to make it appear lighter and warmer.

PRO TIP

Use thicker paint for highlights in the foreground to enhance their impact.

12 Mixing sky colors



Mix Light Green for the Sky

Combine a small amount of yellow with blue to create a light green. This green will capture the warmth of the sun as it lightens and warms the sky. Apply this light green to the sky area, blending softly to enhance the sunset effect.

PRO TIP

Remember that yellow plus blue creates green, which can add warmth to your sky.

13 Mixing and adjusting shadow colors



Mix the Shadow Color

Create a shadow color for the main big shadow in the sand. Aim for a neutral tone, as the surrounding warmth will make it appear cooler than it is. Adjust the mix to ensure it doesn't look too blue when placed on the canvas.

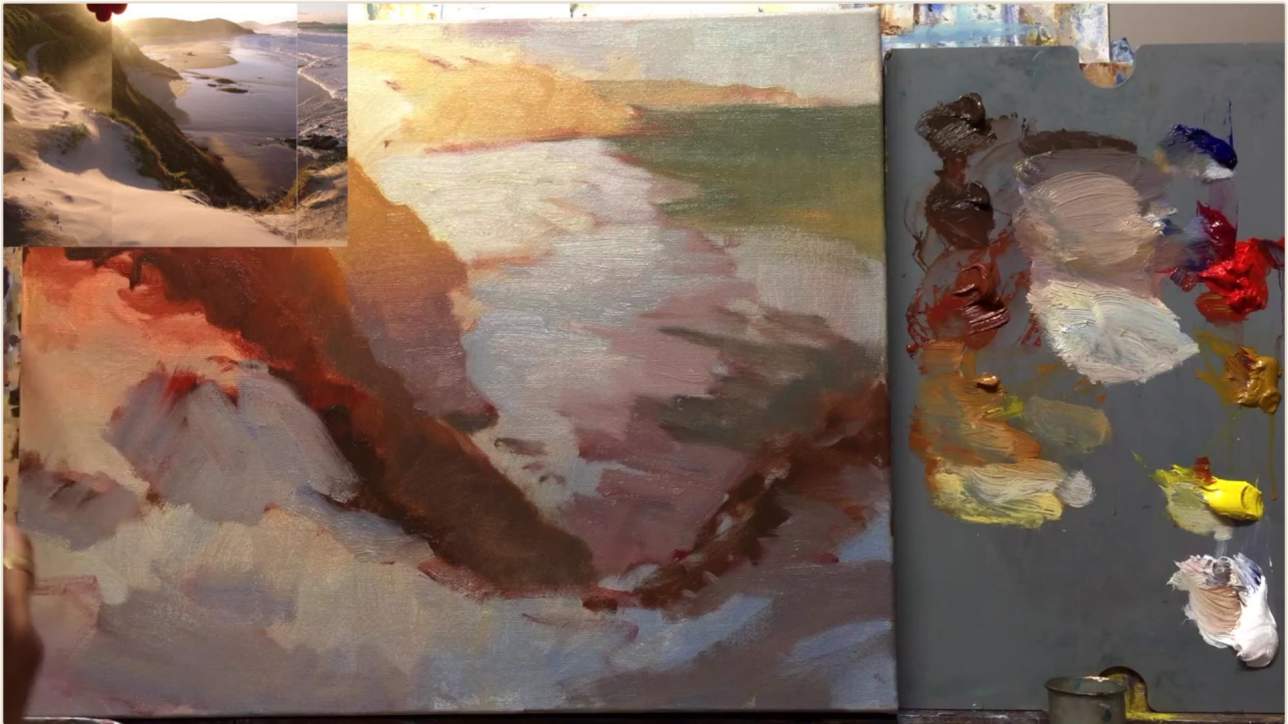
Adjust the Value

Lighten the value of the shadow color slightly compared to what you see in the photograph. This compensates for the camera's tendency to darken shadows in high contrast scenes.

PRO TIP

Surrounding warm colors can make a neutral shadow color appear cooler, so adjust accordingly.

14 Enhancing shadows and glowing effects



Darken and Warm the Shadow

Darken and warm the shadow color in the right-hand corner. This reduces color contrast and prevents the viewer's eye from being drawn to the bottom right corner of the painting.

Lighten the Shadow for Glow

Lighten the shadow color slightly to enhance the glowing effect. This subtle adjustment helps to capture the light interacting with the scene.

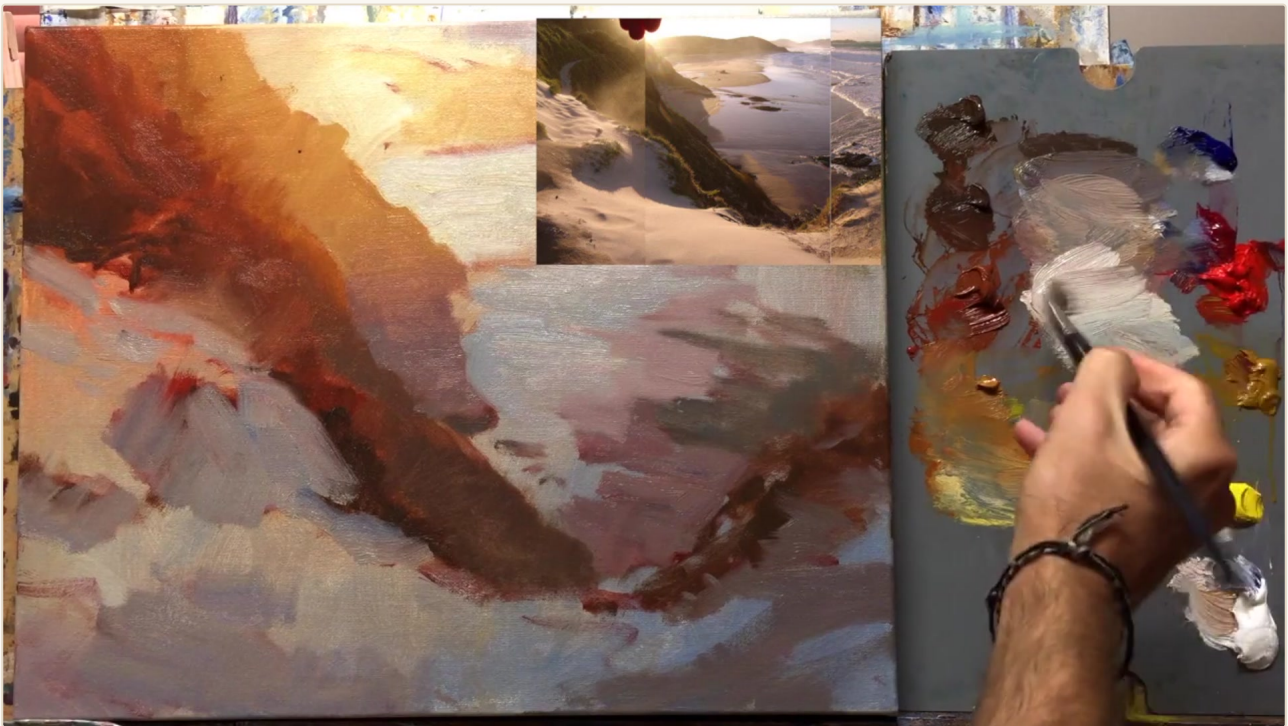
Create Sand Dune Effect

Use a bit of orange and brush it out lightly to mimic the effect of sand being caught by the sun. This adds a dynamic element to the painting, reflecting the windy conditions.

PRO TIP

Lighten shadow colors slightly to enhance glowing effects in your painting.

15 Mixing light colors for sand



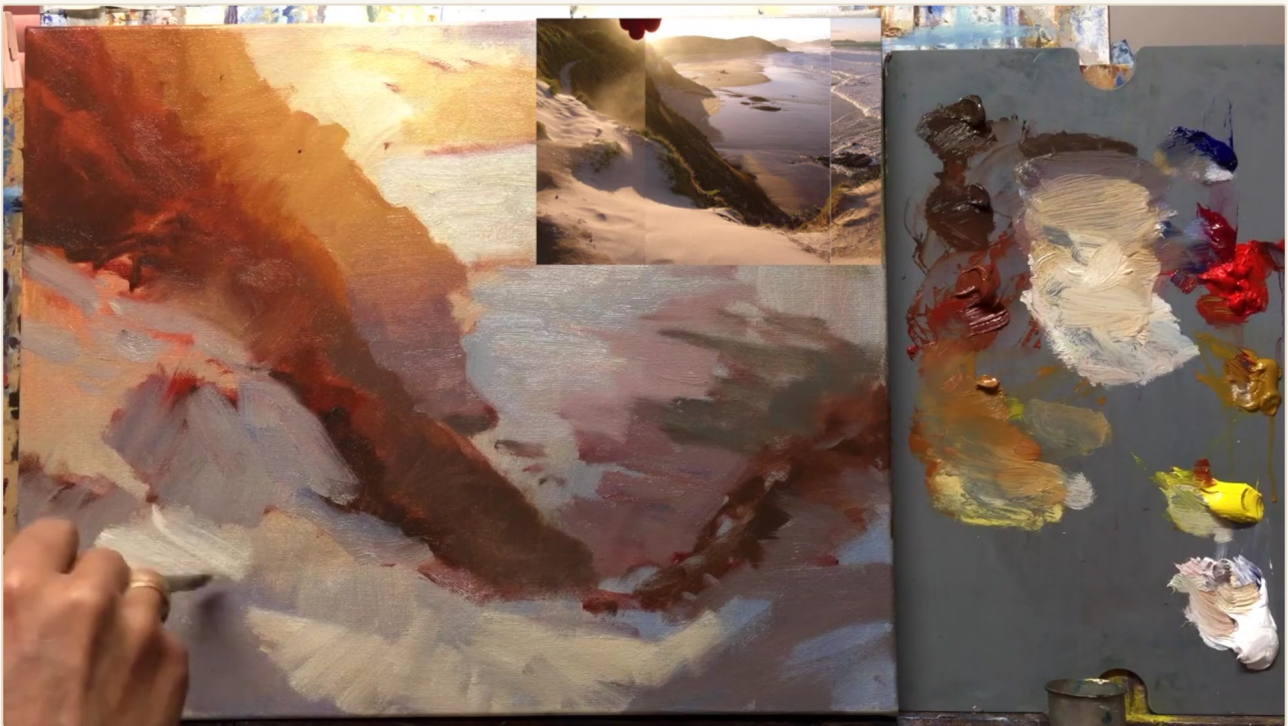
Mix Light Sand Color

Create a light color for the sand by mixing mostly white with a touch of yellow ochre. Add some gray to balance the warmth and achieve a natural look. Be cautious not to make the mixture too light initially, as you need room to add highlights later.

PRO TIP

Avoid starting with a color that's too light to ensure you can add highlights effectively.

16 Painting shadow edges



Consider Shadow Edges

Observe the edges created by the shadows. These are formed by the little grasses on top of the sand dune. Notice how these edges appear wispy and soft.

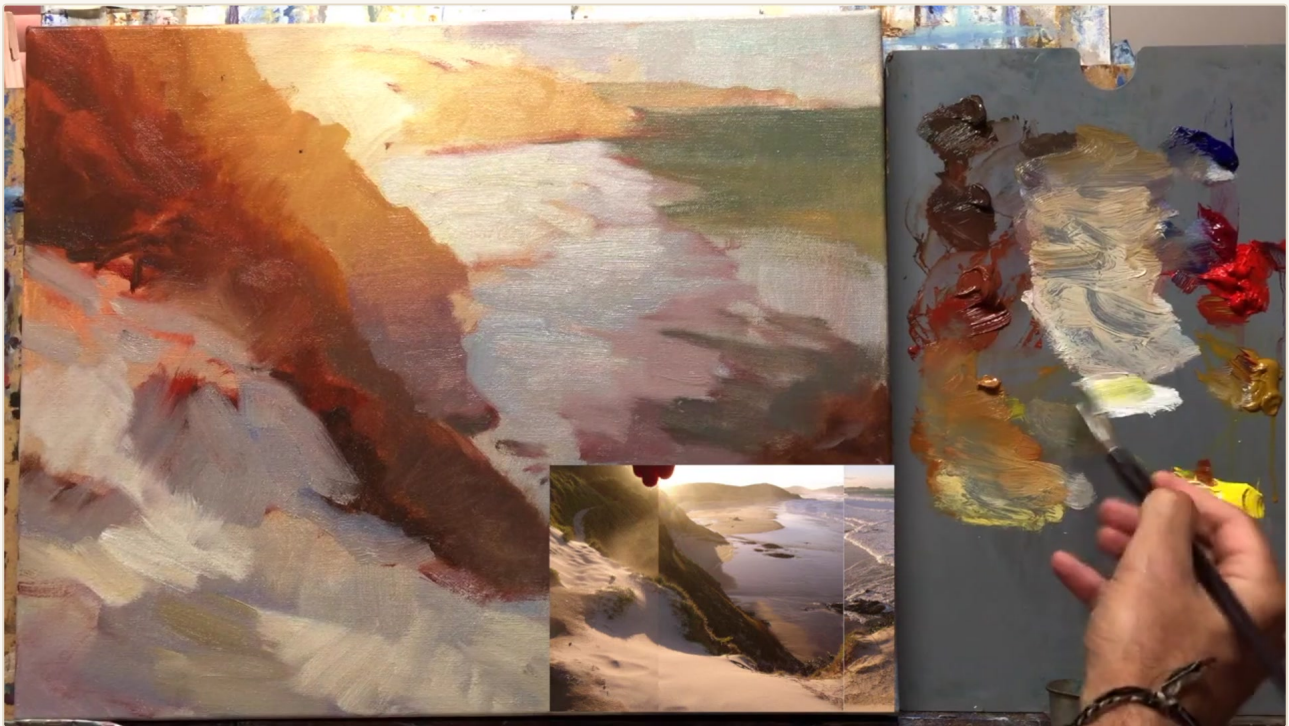
Adjust Lightness

If the shadow area is too light, adjust it to better reflect the natural shadow cast by the grasses. This will enhance the depth and realism of the scene.

PRO TIP

Pay attention to how shadow edges change to capture the natural look of the scene.

17 Painting sun glow



Paint the Sun Glow

Mix a lot of white with a little bit of yellow to create a bright, glowing color. Start painting in the center of the sun glow area. Work outwards from the center, allowing the paint to naturally blend and fade as it runs out, creating a smooth transition into the surrounding colors.

PRO TIP

Start in the middle of the shape and work outwards to achieve a natural blend.

18 Blending landmass colors



Darken the Landmass

Mix a warm gray or grayish brown and apply it to the landmass to darken it. This will help it tie in better with the color of the ocean. Blend the color out into the warmer tones as it approaches the sun.

Layer for Depth

Paint a second, darker layer on the landmass, but don't blend it as far as the previous layer. This technique creates a smooth transition and adds depth as the color gets darker further from the sun.

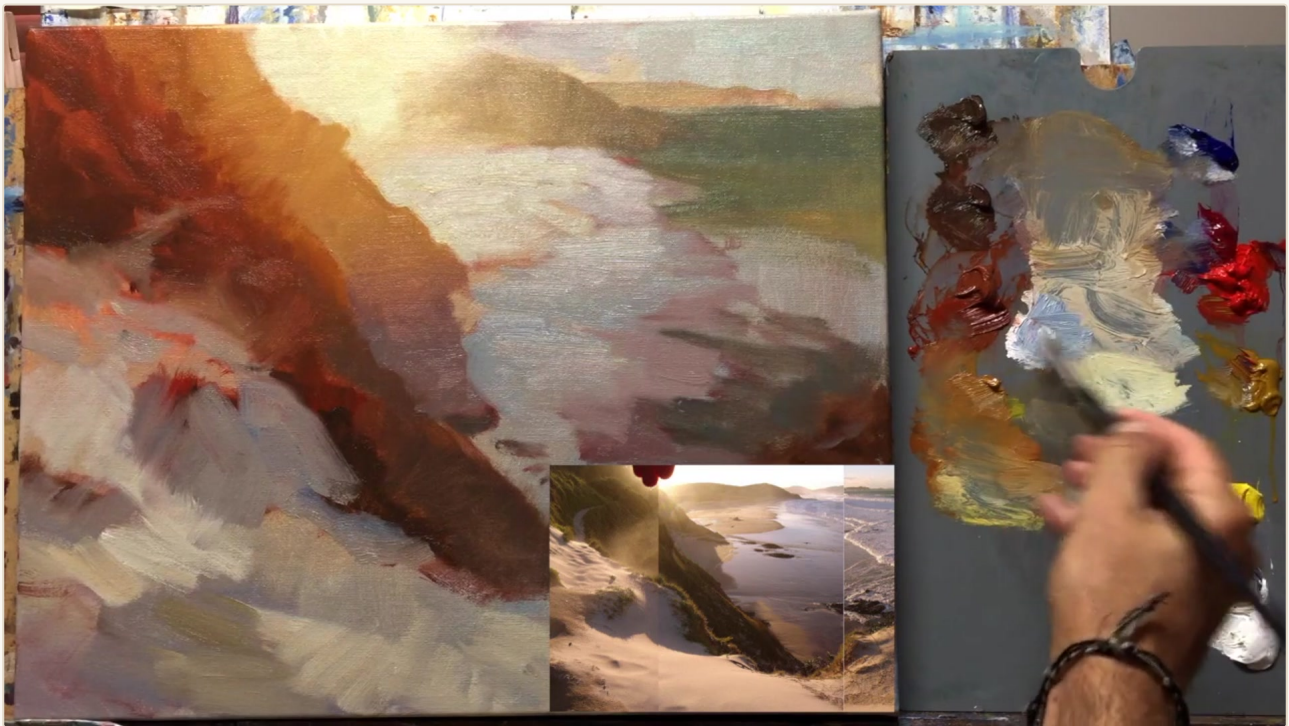
Use Color for Path

Apply the same warm gray or grayish brown to the path along the hill. Surrounded by warm reddish and brownish tones, this color will appear cooler and slightly bluer.

PRO TIP

Blend each layer slightly less than the previous to achieve a smooth transition and depth.

19 Painting ocean foam



Mix Foam Color

Create a light blue color for the foam by mixing in some reds and other colors from your palette to gray it down slightly. This will help achieve the natural look of foam lying flat on the water.

Adjust Surf Lines

Since the photo may not accurately represent the surf lines, use the resource photos provided online to guide you in painting the surf accurately from this angle.

PRO TIP

Use resource photos to ensure accurate depiction of surf lines.

20 Surf and white water placement



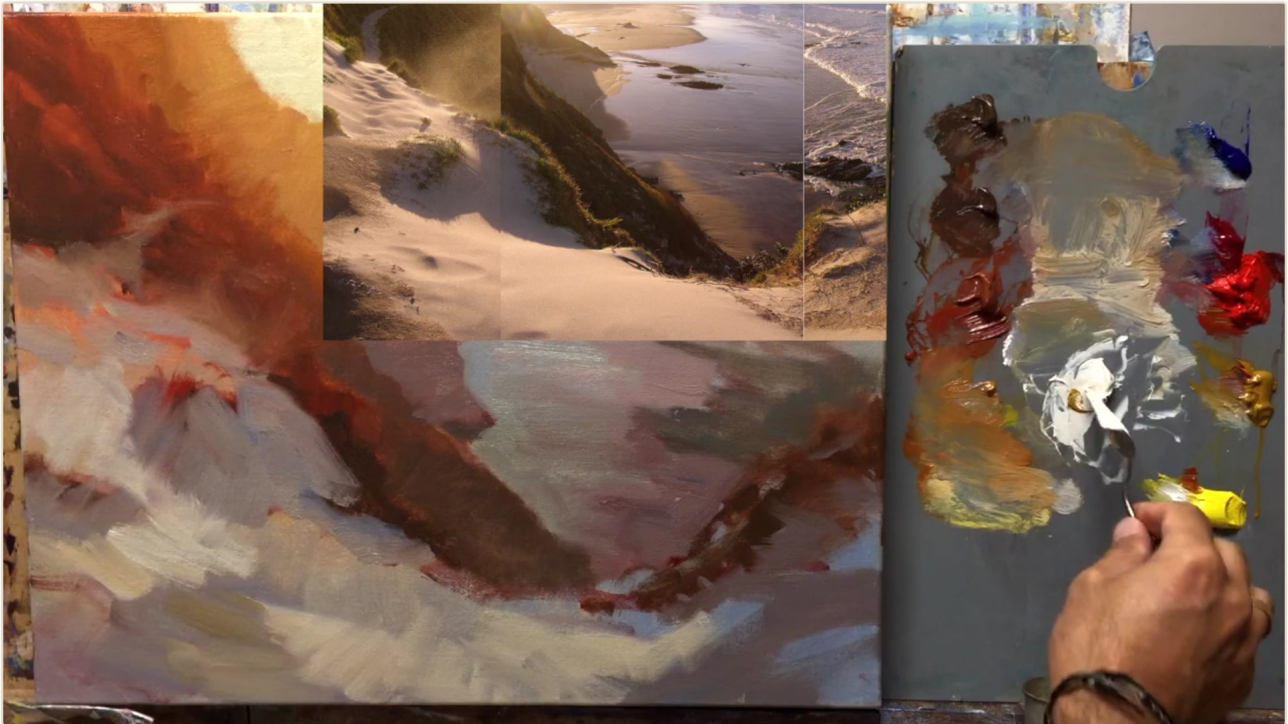
Determine White Water Placement

Decide how far out you want the white water to extend into the ocean. Remember, larger surf means the white water will stretch further out due to increased turbulence. Use this guideline to create a realistic and dynamic ocean scene.

PRO TIP

Larger surf creates more turbulence, pushing white water further out into the ocean.

21 Mixing and applying sand highlights



Mix Sand Highlight Color

Use a palette knife to mix a large amount of paint for the sand highlights in the foreground. This method is effective because it allows you to create a big pile of paint without spreading it out too thinly, which often happens with a brush.

Apply Sand Highlights

Apply the mixed paint thickly to the canvas using either the palette knife or a brush. Be mindful of the edges of the shadows to maintain the integrity of the highlights and shadows on the sand.

PRO TIP

Mix a large amount of paint with a palette knife for better control and application.

22 Retrospective adjustments



Darken the Sand

Consider making the sand area a step or half a step darker. This adjustment will enhance the glow of the sun by reducing competition with the bright foreground.

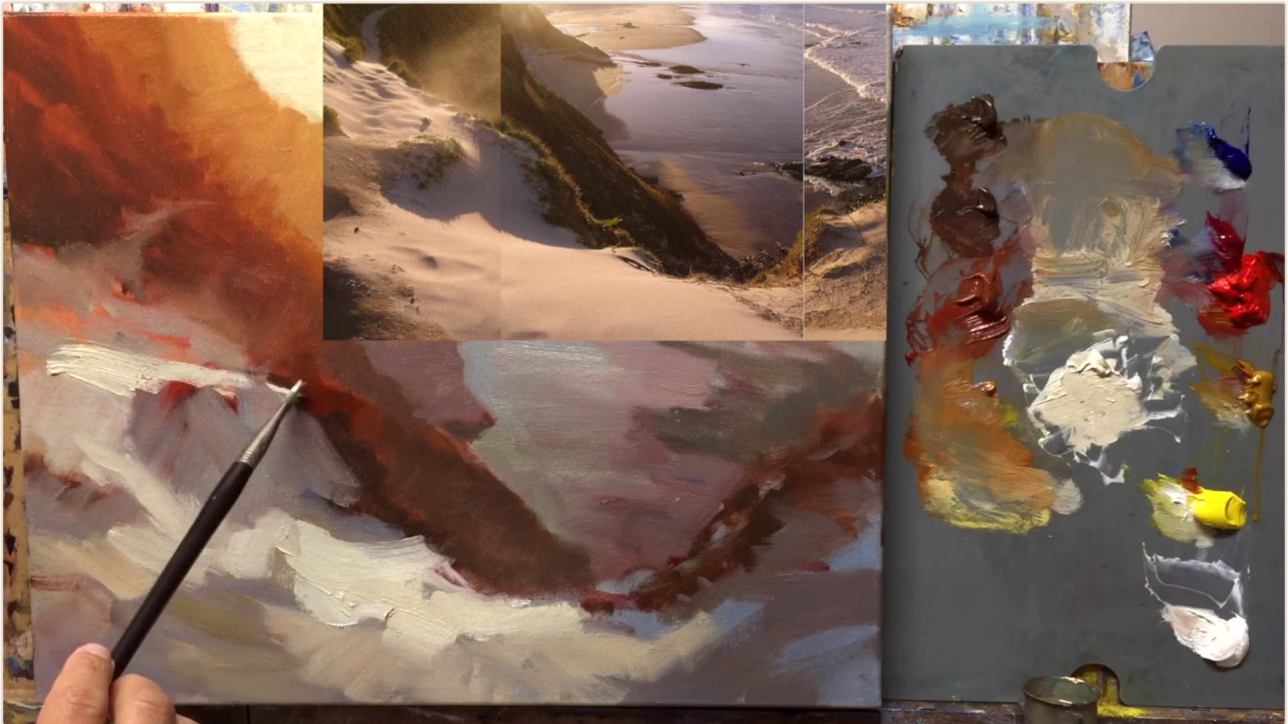
Add Warmth to the Sand

Introduce more warmth into the sand. This will allow for a richer color palette and prevent the area from appearing too light.

PRO TIP

Darkening the sand slightly can enhance the sun's glow by reducing brightness in the foreground.

23 Final brushwork considerations



Focus on Final Brushwork

At this stage, concentrate on your brushwork more than in previous layers. These final layers are what viewers will see, so aim for interesting and creative textures and edges.

Vary Your Brushstrokes

Avoid repetitive brushstrokes like dab, dab, dab. Instead, experiment with different lengths and directions to create a more engaging and dynamic painting.

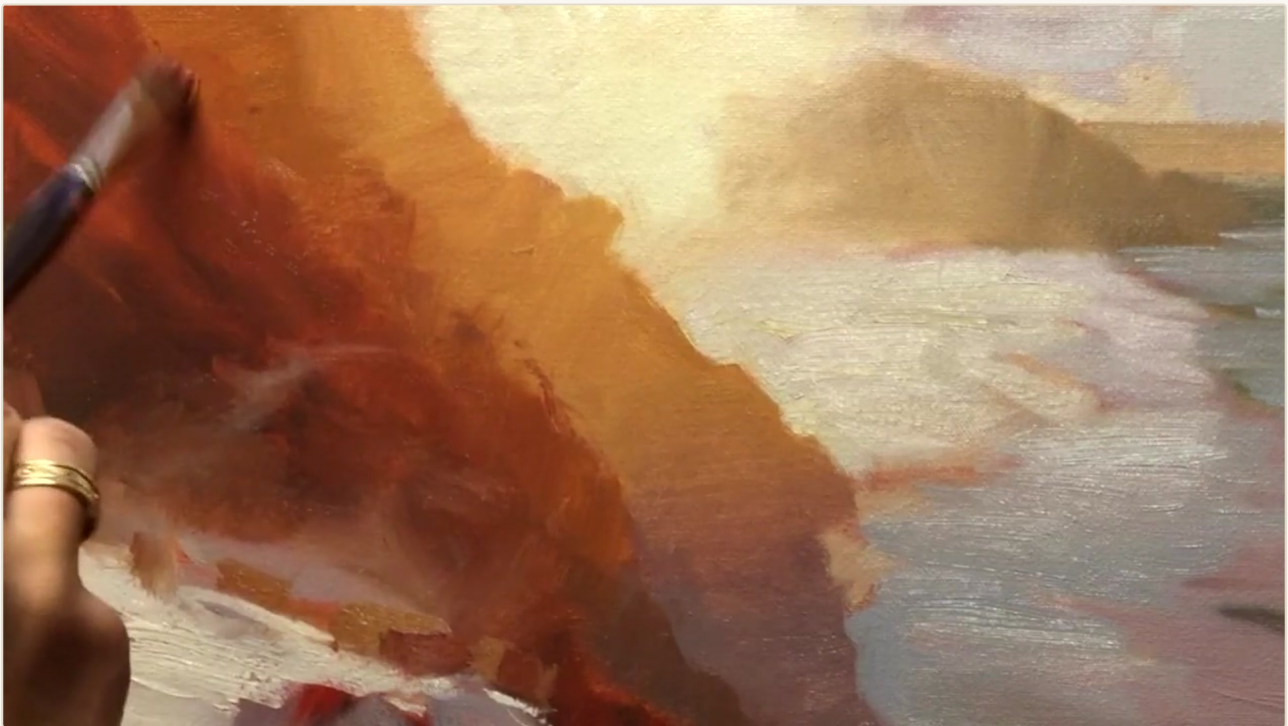
Aim for Expressive Simplicity

Strive to convey as much as possible with the fewest brushstrokes. This approach will lead to beautiful and expressive brushwork that enhances your painting.

PRO TIP

Experiment with varying brushstroke lengths and directions to add interest and texture.

24 Adding detail to hills and path



Add Detail to Hill Edges

Use a flat brush sideways to add trees and bushes to the edges of the hills. Dab the brush to create crisp little details that enhance the scene. This step adds depth and interest to the landscape.

Enhance Highlights

As you move closer in the painting, adjust the highlights to become more orange and slightly darker. Increase the size of these highlights and use thicker paint to create a sense of depth.

Avoid Repetitive Patterns

Vary the shapes of the trees and bushes to avoid creating a pattern. Aim for similarity without duplication to maintain a natural look.

Add Path Highlights

Apply a few highlights along the path to suggest sunlight catching it. This adds a touch of realism and guides the viewer's eye through the painting.

Create Sky Holes

Use a mixture of white and yellow to add small sky holes among the trees. This detail enhances the overall composition and adds interest.

PRO TIP

Use thicker paint and larger highlights as they get closer to create depth.

25 Highlight impact demonstration



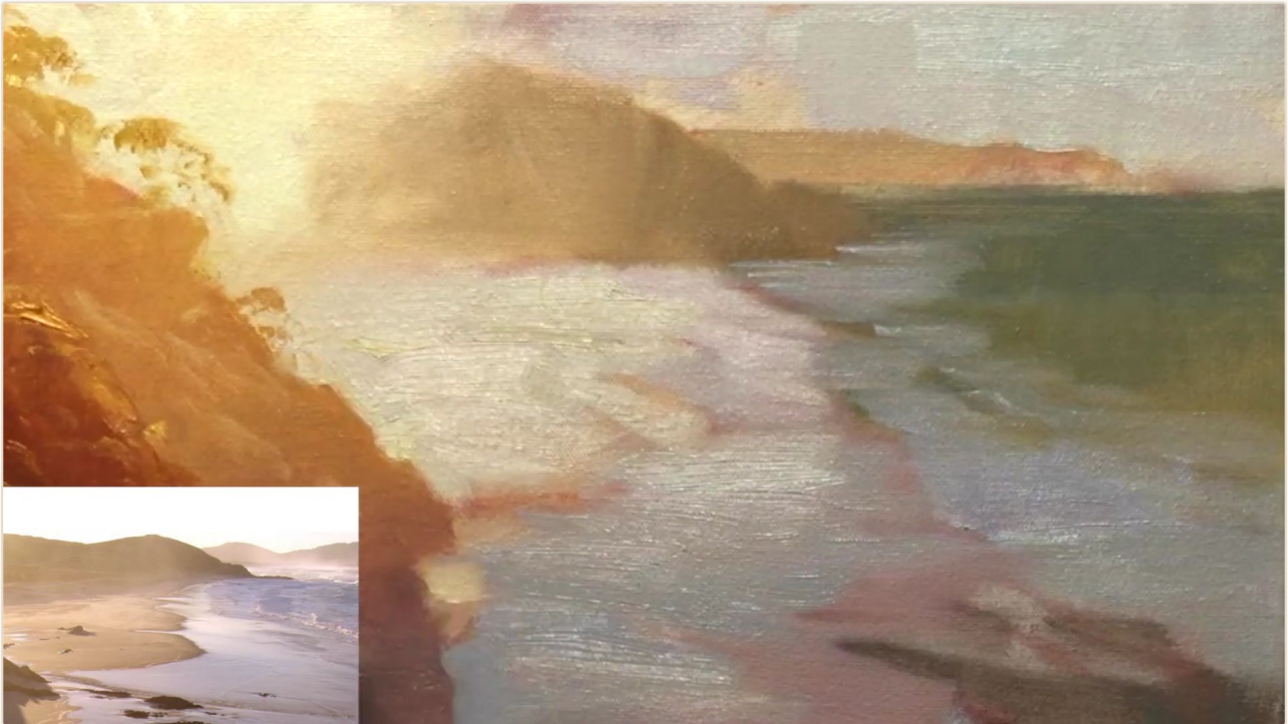
Observe the Impact of Highlights

Take a moment to compare your painting before and after adding highlights. Notice the significant difference they make in enhancing the overall vibrancy and depth of the scene.

PRO TIP

Highlights can dramatically transform a painting, adding vibrancy and depth.

26 Adding clouds and background details



Enhance Hills and Beach

Add more detail to the hills and beach to enrich the background. Spend a few minutes refining these areas to create depth and interest.

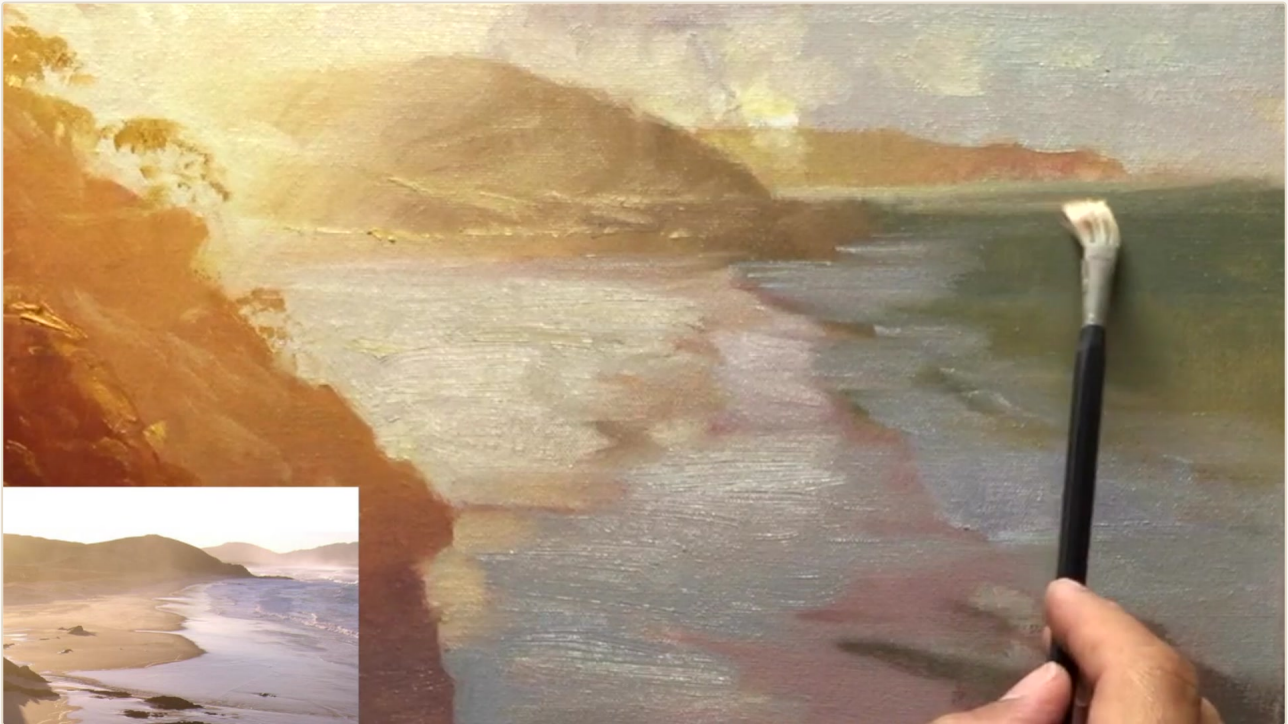
Add Sunlit Clouds

Introduce some sunlit clouds to the sky for added interest. Bring a bright cloud down to the top of the hill, blending it into the scene. This could also represent sea spray, adding a magical touch to the background.

PRO TIP

Use bright clouds to add a magical touch and interest to the sky.

27 Painting ocean light effects



Identify Light Areas

Observe the photo to see where the hill casts a shadow across the water. Identify the areas where sunlight breaks through onto the ocean.

Paint Sunlit Ocean

Use a light, warm color to paint the areas of the ocean where the sun is shining through. This contrast will highlight the shadowed areas and create depth in your painting.

PRO TIP

Use a warm color to depict sunlight on the water, enhancing the contrast with shadowed areas.

28 Adjusting white water highlights



Mix a Yellow Ochre Tint

Combine white with a small amount of yellow ochre to create a softer, more natural highlight color for the white water. This mixture will blend better with the surrounding colors, avoiding the starkness of pure white.

Apply the Highlight

Use the yellow ochre tint to paint the sunlit, foaming white water in front of the waves. This approach will create a more cohesive and realistic effect, allowing the highlights to integrate smoothly with the rest of the scene.

PRO TIP

Avoid using pure white for highlights; mix in a touch of yellow ochre for a more natural look.

29 Applying impasto highlights



Use the Tip of the Brush

Use the very tip of a large flat brush to create fine lines. This technique helps achieve precision in your highlights.

Mix Paint Lightly

Under mix your paint on the palette to create interesting effects. Avoid thorough mixing to achieve unique textures in your highlights.

Apply Thick Highlights

Apply the paint thickly for the highlights, focusing on the right side. Ensure these highlights are slightly darker than those on the left to enhance realism.

PRO TIP

Under mix your paint on the palette to achieve unique textures in your highlights.

30 Foreground and background separation



Use Impasto Highlights

Apply impasto highlights using your palette knife. For crisp, sharp edges, use the edge of the knife. For broad, textural effects, use the flat of the knife. Be mindful of where and how much paint is on the knife.

Add Dark Details

Introduce a few dark details in the rocks to enhance depth and interest. This will create contrast and help define the shapes within the scene.

Separate Foreground and Background

Mix a dark bluish gray and apply it to the bottom of the painting. This will help separate the foreground from the background, enhancing the sense of depth.

Create Textural Brush Strokes

Use thick, textural brush strokes in the foreground. The brokenness of these strokes suggests fine detail, adding interest without needing intricate work.

PRO TIP

Use the edge of the palette knife for sharp edges and the flat for broad textures.

31 Adding reflections and shimmer



Add Foreground Bushes

Include small bushes in the foreground, ensuring the shadows point towards the sun. This alignment will maintain consistency with the light source.

Create Sky Reflections

Apply a lighter blue to suggest the reflection of the sky in the water. This addition enhances the sense of depth and form in the painting.

Enhance Warm and Cool Contrast

Introduce a shimmer by contrasting warm and cool colors. This combination adds visual interest and beauty to the scene.

PRO TIP

Ensure all shadows in the foreground point towards the sun to maintain a consistent light source.

32 Final touches and signing



Enhance the Focal Area

Add a little more white and yellow to the focal area of your painting. Ensure your brush is very clean to maintain the brightness and clarity of these colors.

Sign Your Painting

Carefully sign your painting to complete it. Use a small brush and a color that contrasts well with your painting to make your signature visible without overpowering the artwork.

PRO TIP

Always use a clean brush when adding bright highlights to keep the colors pure and vibrant.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by preparing your canvas with a warm gradient, setting the stage for a glowing sunset scene. Begin with an initial sketch using a fluid, oily mixture to establish the composition's big shapes. As you move forward, focus on mixing a variety of dark and light colors to create depth and vibrancy in your hills and background.

As you progress, prioritize painting the lighter areas first to maintain their luminosity, especially in a sunset setting. Use a black and white reference to focus on values, allowing you to creatively build your own color palette. Pay attention to the natural textures of grass and bushes, and use subtle color adjustments to enhance the depth and glow of your scene.

In the final stages, concentrate on your brushwork to add texture and detail, particularly in the foreground and along the hills. Experiment with different brushstrokes to create dynamic and engaging textures. Make retrospective adjustments to ensure the sun's glow is enhanced and the overall composition is balanced and harmonious.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Moisten the canvas with water before applying acrylics for easier paint application.
- Use a very oily mixture of red and a touch of blue for a thin, fluid base to sketch your initial shapes.
- Paint light colors first to keep them vibrant in glowing light scenes.
- Use a black and white reference to focus on values and avoid being influenced by original colors.
- Use the brush sideways to create thin, clumpy grass with natural gaps.
- Darken the landmass to balance the depth of color with the ocean.
- Use thicker paint for highlights in the foreground to enhance their impact.
- Experiment with varying brushstroke lengths and directions to add interest and texture.



"Sunset Beach" 15.5 x 20" 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.

"Sunset Beach" by Denis King



"Sunset Beach" 16 x 12" Oil on Canvas by Denis King

Hi Denis, there's a lot working really well in this painting with just a wee adjustment needed to turn it into a real cracker. Your drawing is spot on, your shapes are nicely designed and the values are mostly perfect AND the brushwork is beautifully succinct. However... all that beautiful warmth in the hillside is not apparent enough in the background, which is looking chalky with too much white. When painting the hills back there start with a warm colour first like a light gray yellow ochre, then go from there, injecting warmth into the sky too and reflecting it in the beach and shallow water. THEN you'll have a complete glowing effect.

Beware those light diagonal sand shapes in the foreground that are creating a pattern of similar shapes. I would love to see this painting with those few changes made as I think it'll be outstanding. Great work Denis.

"Sunset Beach" by Marisa Comana Pessina



"Sunset Beach" Oil on canvas 25x30cm by Marisa Comana Pessina

Not too shabby Marisa! Nice glowing effect there. Hey see those purplish shadows on the beach? They're not really fitting in with the warm colours surrounding them. The darker area of brown at the base is not helping either. Take another look at my painting to compare. The hills in the distance are a good colour though you've outlined one a little with purple which spoils the effect.

Beware straight edged hills too! You've achieved a good variety of grass shapes in the foreground which is always tricky since we have a tendency to clone similar shapes in our paintings. The stark edge where the foreground sand meets the dark hill could be softened by breaking the edge with some stray grasses. Hope that helps. Overall you've achieved a nice effect.

"First Glimpse" by Kadee Hughes



"First Glimpse" 16 x 16" Oil on Canvas by Kadee Hughes

Hi Kadee, welcome to the group. Quite a striking painting you've made here with the contrast between the vibrant red and the gray greens in the ocean. I like the way you've compressed the image into a square format which has made the hills appear even steeper. You've grasped the idea of the glowing effect and the next step is to be a little more subtle with the colours. The yellows, oranges and reds could do with a little more gray in them, which you can do by adding the colour's complement, which is opposite it on the colour wheel. In general, our first paintings tend to be very bright and colourful and over time our colour sense develops greater subtlety. We can not only comprehend more subtle colour shifts in nature but we begin to be able to paint them. Yay! Just takes time.

Anyway, your drawing is very good, the grays are pretty good but the lights in your foreground sand could do with some variation. The distant hills should be the same value or darker than the ocean, not lighter. The cast shadow from the yellow section of the hill on the beach should not end with a dark line. Also, just have a look at the resource photo and see how close the colour of the hill is to the colour of the shadow. Very similar really.

Actually a lot of the colour problems in this painting could be solved by more carefully comparing one colour to another. Use the fuzzy one eye to help compare colours. Close one eye and make the other eye go out of focus so all you see is the big blurry shapes. Then compare colours that are similar. Ask yourself is it lighter or darker? Warmer or cooler? Grayer or more vibrant? That should help. Ok good luck and happy painting!

"Maui Morning" by Laurena Beirnes



"Maui Morning" Oil on Canvas 5x7 by Laurena Beirnes

You've got a pretty good glowing effect there Laurena, principally because of the background gradation from warm light to darker cool, and secondly from your effort to make the palm trees in the foreground a little warmer as well. The shadow cutting across the grass and beach is a nice touch too though I would expect the shadow on the beach to drop down slightly lower than shadow on the grass rather than curving upwards. The drawing of this and the curving edge of the distant beach are the two main things holding this painting back.

Compare it with the straight edge of the beach in my painting below.