



California Cliffs

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/72-California-Cliffs>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, we dive into the enchanting world of California's coastal cliffs, capturing their majestic beauty at sunset. The challenge here is to transform a midday reference into a breathtaking sunset scene, a task that requires both creativity and technique. I initially painted these cliffs on location, racing against time to capture the essence of the landscape. Back in the studio, I sought to enhance the drama of the lighting, using a Photoshop sketch to reimagine the scene. This lesson will guide you through the process of creating a glowing light effect, capturing the translucency of water, and simplifying the complex structures of the cliffs. We'll work methodically, starting with a solid foundation and building up layers to achieve a luminous, atmospheric painting. This subject offers a rewarding opportunity to experiment with light and color, pushing the boundaries of your artistic expression. Join me as we explore these techniques step by step, and discover the joy of painting this inspiring sunset beach scene.



"California Cliffs" 13 x 13" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson.



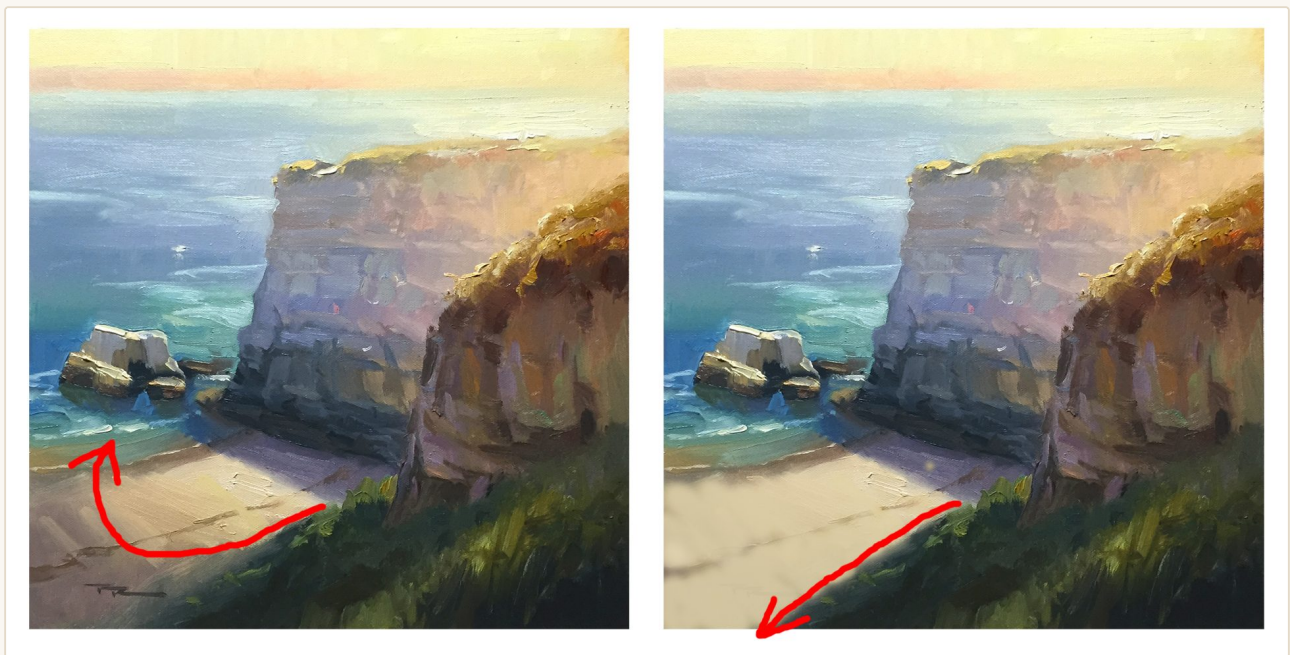
REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 2

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 3

The scene as Richard found it.

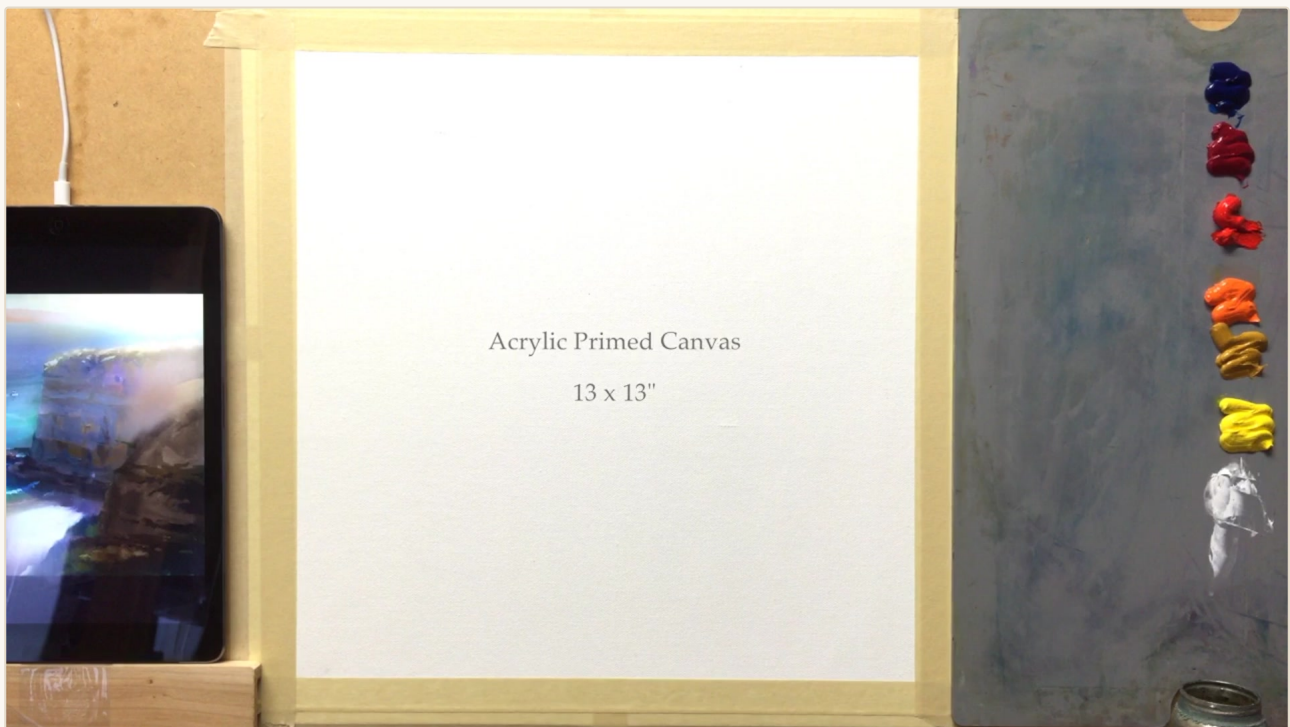
Materials

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 Canvas and materials preparation



Prepare Your Canvas

Tape a smooth canvas onto a board measuring 13 by 13 inches square. Ensure the canvas is securely attached to provide a stable surface for painting.

Set Up Your Palette

Arrange your palette with Cobra water mixable oils. Have your brushes ready, including one larger Rosemary & Co brush and several Robert Simmons brushes for versatility.

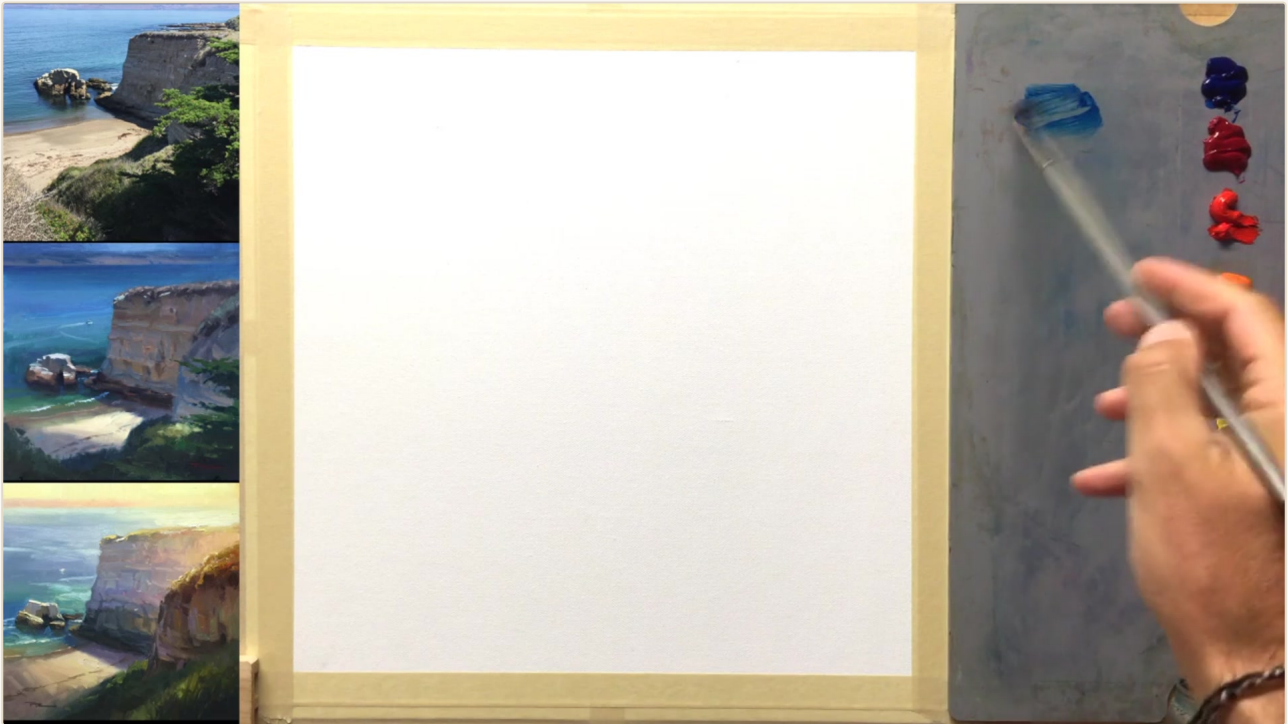
Mix Your White Paint

Add a little walnut oil to your white paint. Mix them together until the consistency resembles mayonnaise, making it more fluid and easier to work with.

PRO TIP

Mix walnut oil with white paint to achieve a mayonnaise-like consistency for smoother application.

2 Sketching the composition



Sketch the Composition

Use a brush to sketch in the composition, starting with a straight horizon line. Consider using a ruler for precision if needed.

Mark Big Shapes

Mark in the big shapes, ensuring variation in their sizes, angles, and distances from each other and the canvas edges. Avoid uniformity to create a more dynamic composition.

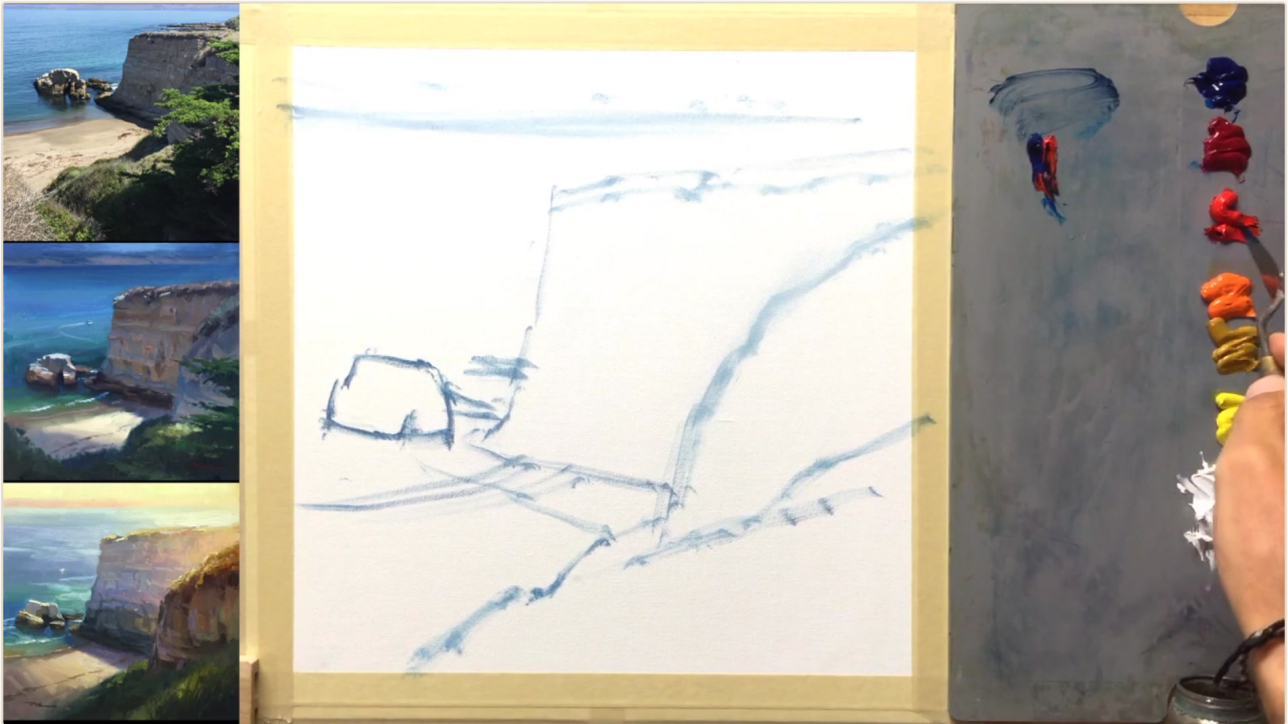
Adjust Paint Thickness

Rub off excess paint in the lightest areas with a cloth to prevent interference with the warm light paint you'll apply later.

PRO TIP

Ensure variation in shapes and distances to create a dynamic composition.

3 Mixing greys for the painting



Mix Cool Greys

Combine blue, red, and white to create a cool grey. Add a touch of yellow ochre to tone it down and achieve a subtle grey. Ensure the mixture is cooler in tone.

Mix Warm Greys

Use the same base colors: blue, red, yellow ochre, and white. Adjust the proportions to create a warmer grey, ensuring a distinct difference from the cool greys.

Create a Value Range

Mix variations of your greys to achieve a range from quite dark to slightly lighter than mid-value. This will provide depth and contrast in your painting.

PRO TIP

Use blue, red, yellow ochre, and white to mix both cool and warm greys, adjusting the proportions for subtle temperature differences.

4 Mixing colors for the sun glow



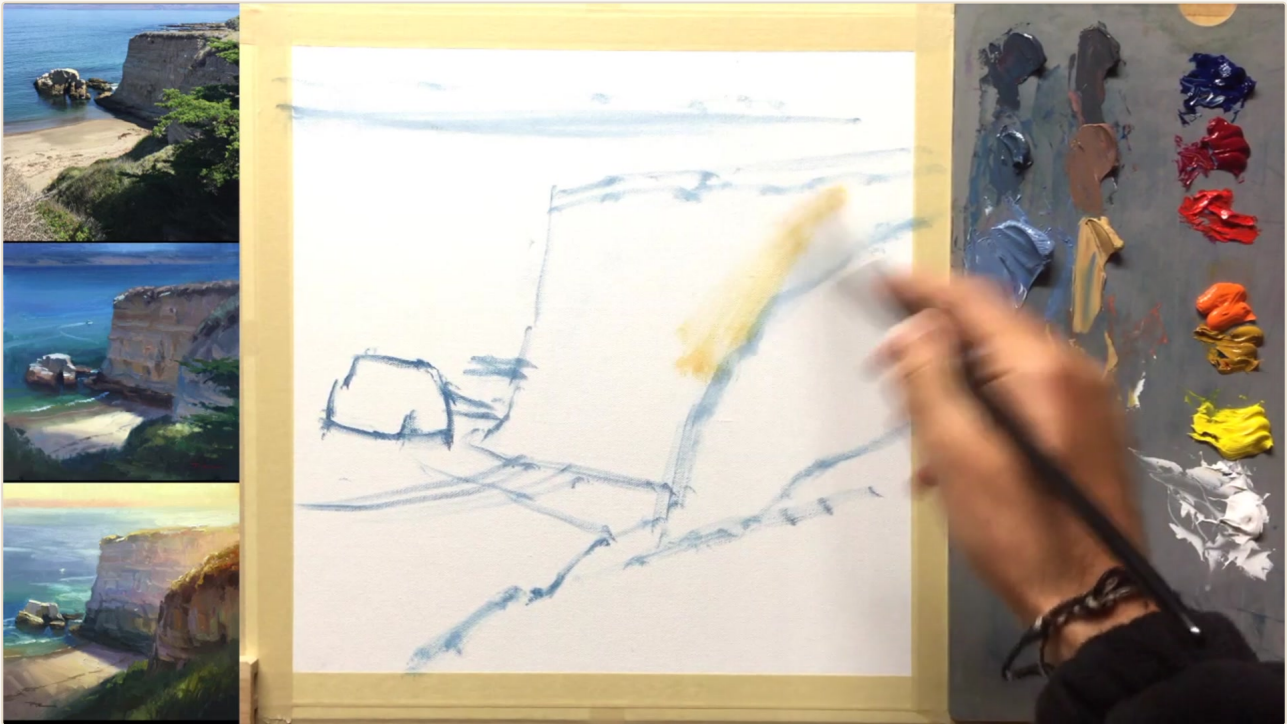
Mix a Glowing Sun Color

Combine a tiny bit of magenta or alizarin crimson with bright yellow to create a vibrant orange. This mixture tends to be cleaner and more vibrant when mixed with other colors compared to a tubed orange.

PRO TIP

Use a custom mix of magenta and yellow for a cleaner, more vibrant orange than tubed options.

5 Applying walnut oil for sun glow



Apply Walnut Oil for Sun Glow

Brush a small amount of walnut oil lightly onto the surface around the area where the sun should glow brightly. This will help the colors blend smoothly and create a glowing effect, making it easier to achieve the large light effect that spans a significant part of the painting.

PRO TIP

Use walnut oil to enhance color blending for a glowing sun effect.

6 Painting the glowing effect



Add Magenta Glow

Mix a little bit of magenta with white and brush it into the outer areas of the glowing effect. Apply this mixture to the beach and the distant mountains to enhance the glow.

Clean Your Brush

Thoroughly clean your brush using walnut oil to remove the magenta and white mixture. This ensures your brush is ready for painting the dark areas.

Use Separate Brushes

Consider using one brush for dark colors and another for light colors. This prevents color contamination and maintains the purity of your hues.

PRO TIP

Use separate brushes for darks and lights to avoid color contamination.

7 Painting the cliff face



Mix and Apply Dark Colors

Use a little walnut oil to mix a cool dark with a warm dark. Apply this mixture to the base of the rocks where the darkest areas are needed.

Soften with Lighter Warm Grey

Mix a slightly lighter, warmer grey and soften the dark area by applying it around the edges. This helps the dark area tuck behind the cliff face, creating depth.

Paint the Cliff Face

Focus on painting the entire cliff face first, as it is the key element of the painting. Begin with the darkest colors and gradually work towards the lighter tones until the cliff face is complete.

PRO TIP

Paint the darkest colors first and gradually work towards lighter tones for depth and dimension.

8 Understanding and exaggerating color differences



Identify Warm and Cool Areas

Observe the rock faces turned towards the beach; these are warm areas reflecting the beach's glow. Identify the rock faces turned up towards the sky as cooler areas reflecting the sky's cooler tones.

Enhance Color Saturation

Increase the saturation of colors in your painting to make the warm and cool areas more distinct. This will help you see the form of the rock more clearly and make the painting more visually interesting.

Consider Striations and Shadows

Notice the subtle striations of color across the rock. Darken the bottom of the rock and add a hint of blue to the left side where it curves towards the ocean. These details add depth and complexity to your painting.

Exaggerate Color Differences

Exaggerate the differences between warm and cool colors to enhance the rock's form and interest. Adjust the exaggeration to suit your personal taste, creating a more dynamic effect.

PRO TIP

Exaggerate color differences between warm and cool areas to enhance the rock's form and interest.

9 Mixing and applying color modifiers



Mix Mid-Value Colors

Mix a pinkish color using magenta and yellow, aiming for a mid-value. Then, create a mauve by combining magenta and blue, also at mid-value. These colors will help establish the big shapes on the cliff face.

Create a Warm Modifier

Mix a very warm color modifier to represent the sun glow on the cliff's right side. This will be the most prevalent color in that area, helping to achieve a large glowing effect.

Transition Colors Radially

Plan the cliff's color transition from warm to cool in a radial fashion. Use a neutral gray at the top, slightly lighter than mid-value, to judge other grays on your palette.

Add Pinkish Modifier

As you move the blue color to the right, incorporate some of the pinkish modifier to transition into lighter, warmer colors near the glowing area. Adjust the neutral gray at the top to be pinker and lighter as it transitions to the right.

PRO TIP

Mix color modifiers on your palette to simplify creating large glowing effects.

10 Painting the bushes and light effects



Add Shadow to Bushes

Mix yellow ochre with white to create a light shade for the shadow side of the bushes. Apply this mixture carefully to avoid making the shadows too dark, maintaining the illusion of light.

Create a Warm Glow

Use a light warm glow color to brush lightly outwards from the glowing area. Be cautious not to extend too far to prevent a chalky appearance.

Incorporate Pinkish Tones

Switch to a pinkish color and continue working outwards from the glowing area. This adds depth and variation to the light effects.

Add Darker Details

Introduce slightly darker details to the painting to enhance depth. Ensure your brush is clean to avoid muddiness, cleaning it between color changes.

PRO TIP

Keep your brush clean to prevent colors from becoming muddy and maintain the clarity of your light effects.

11 Reflected light and striations on the cliff



Enhance Reflected Light

Observe the reflected light coming off the beach onto the downward-facing planes of the rock. Exaggerate this reflected light to make the painting more interesting and exciting. Use warm tones to capture the light's effect on the cliff.

Add Striations

Notice how the reflected light helps define the striations on the cliff. Apply lighter tones to emphasize these natural patterns, ensuring they appear evident even higher up the cliff.

Adjust Bushes

Darken and cool the colors of the bushes slightly as they move to the left. This adjustment will create contrast and balance with the warm reflected light on the cliff.

PRO TIP

Exaggerate reflected light to add interest and excitement to your painting.

12 Painting the large rock and highlights



Prepare the Paint

Mix walnut oil into the white paint to achieve a consistency similar to mayonnaise. This will allow the highlights to be applied thickly and crisply.

Paint the Large Rock

Begin with a warm color at the bottom of the rock, transitioning to a cooler mid-gray. This simulates light bouncing off the beach and sunlit parts of the rocks.

Apply Highlights

Use thick, warm paint for the highlights. Apply with minimal brush strokes to create the impression of sunlit rock, capturing the essence without overcomplicating.

PRO TIP

Use as few brush strokes as possible to create the impression of the sunlit rock.

13 Foreground cliff painting



Highlight Rocky Areas

Use the same highlight color to add rocky highlights on the top of the cliff. This will enhance the visual interest even if these highlights aren't present in the reference photo.

Darken the Foreground Cliff

Make the foreground cliff a little darker and warmer to ensure it stands out in front of the other cliff. This creates a clear separation and emphasizes the distance between the two cliffs.

Block in Major Shapes

Start with a dark grey-brown to outline the major shapes in the rock. Consider the direction of these shapes to add structure to the cliff.

Add Glowing Light Effect

Mix yellow ochre with other colors to suggest a greenish glow from the bushes below the cliff. This adds depth and warmth to the scene.

Incorporate Sun Glow

Use a warmer, reddish brown at the top of the cliff to reflect the sun's glow. This enhances the natural lighting effect on the cliff.

Detail Smaller Shapes

After blocking in the large areas, focus on smaller shapes like the bushes on top of the hill. Ensure these are warm darks to maintain the glowing effect.

PRO TIP

Use warmer tones on the foreground cliff to create a sense of depth and separation from the background.

14 Contouring and detailing the foreground cliff



Contour the Cliff

Visualize the cliff as a rounded object with stripes. Notice how the contours become steeper towards the edge of the shape. Add purple or mauve to these steep planes to reflect the sky and help the cliff turn away from the viewer.

Adjust the Plane Colors

As the planes move towards you, use a slightly darker purple. Introduce warmer oranges on the right-hand side of these planes to enhance the effect of light and shadow.

Maintain Similar Values

Ensure all colors maintain a similar value to avoid making the reflected light appear too bright. This helps maintain the illusion of shadow rather than direct light.

Add Highlights

Use straight yellow ochre with a thick application and the side of the brush to dab on initial highlights. Enhance these highlights by adding white and yellow to the mixture and applying it more thickly in areas catching the light.

PRO TIP

Keep the reflected light in shadow areas at a similar value to avoid it appearing as direct light.

15 Painting the beach and shadows



Block in Foliage Shapes

Start with a cool dark color and add a little yellow ochre. Block in big shapes on the hill, considering where the light falls to create interesting patterns.

Create Greyish Green

Use the next lightest cool grey and mix in some yellow ochre to achieve a greyish green. This will add depth and variation to your foliage.

Add Color Variation

As you move up to the right, introduce a bit of orange to the mix. This variation will help unite the foliage with the orangey cliff.

Darken Foreground Corner

Apply a slightly darker tone to the foreground corner, leaving space for light. This contrast will enhance the composition.

Mix on Canvas

Grab yellow ochre and light blue, and paint directly onto the canvas. Mixing on the canvas can create beautiful painterly effects.

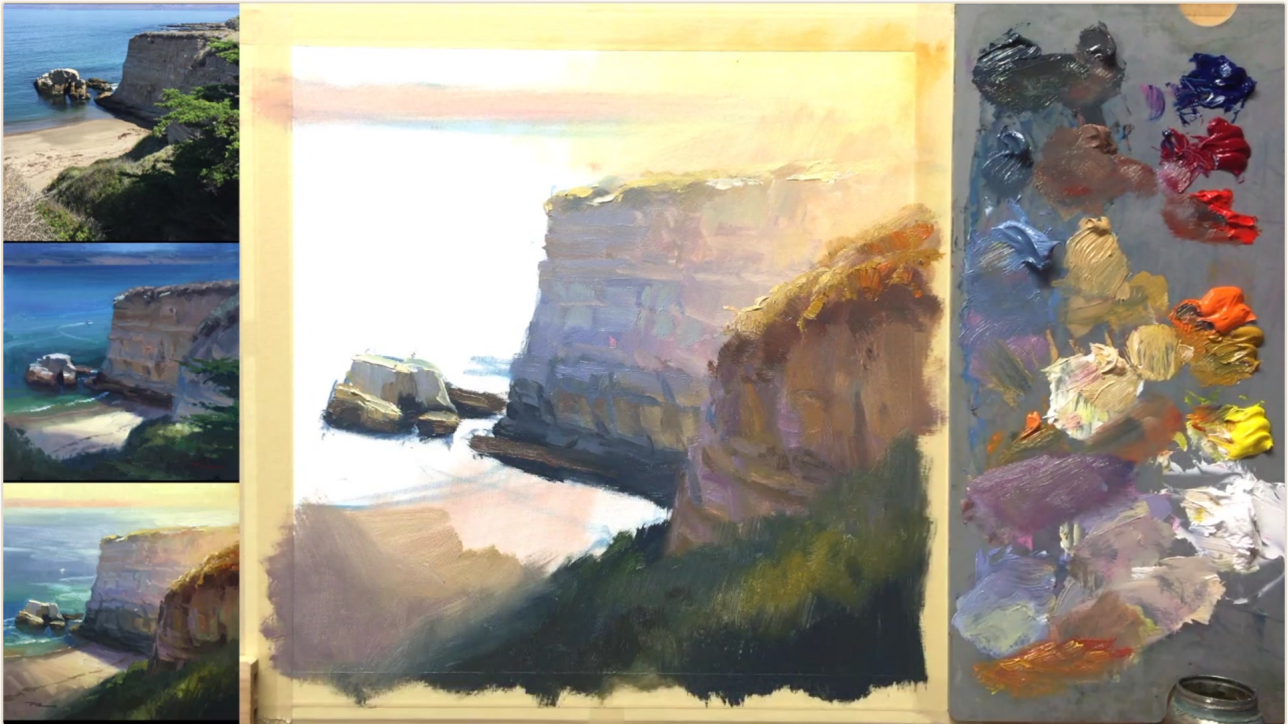
Paint Soft Shadow

Use a light grey painted thinly in the foreground to start a soft shadow across the beach. This soft shadow prevents a hard edge and keeps the viewer's eye within the painting.

PRO TIP

Mix colors directly on the canvas to achieve natural, painterly effects.

16 Painting the water and reflections



Add Cool Shadows

Work a purplish grey into the neutral shadow on the beach. This will create cooler shadows that contrast with the warm lights.

Paint the Cliff Shadow

Ensure there is a shadow at the bottom of the cliff. If needed, wipe out any mistakes and paint the shadow in to achieve the correct placement of light and darks.

Adjust Shadow Color Over Water

As the shadow moves over the water, make it darker and bluer. This transition is important for a realistic effect.

Create Blue-Green Transition

Add a slightly blue-green hue further down from the dark base of the water. This helps blend the shadow into the water.

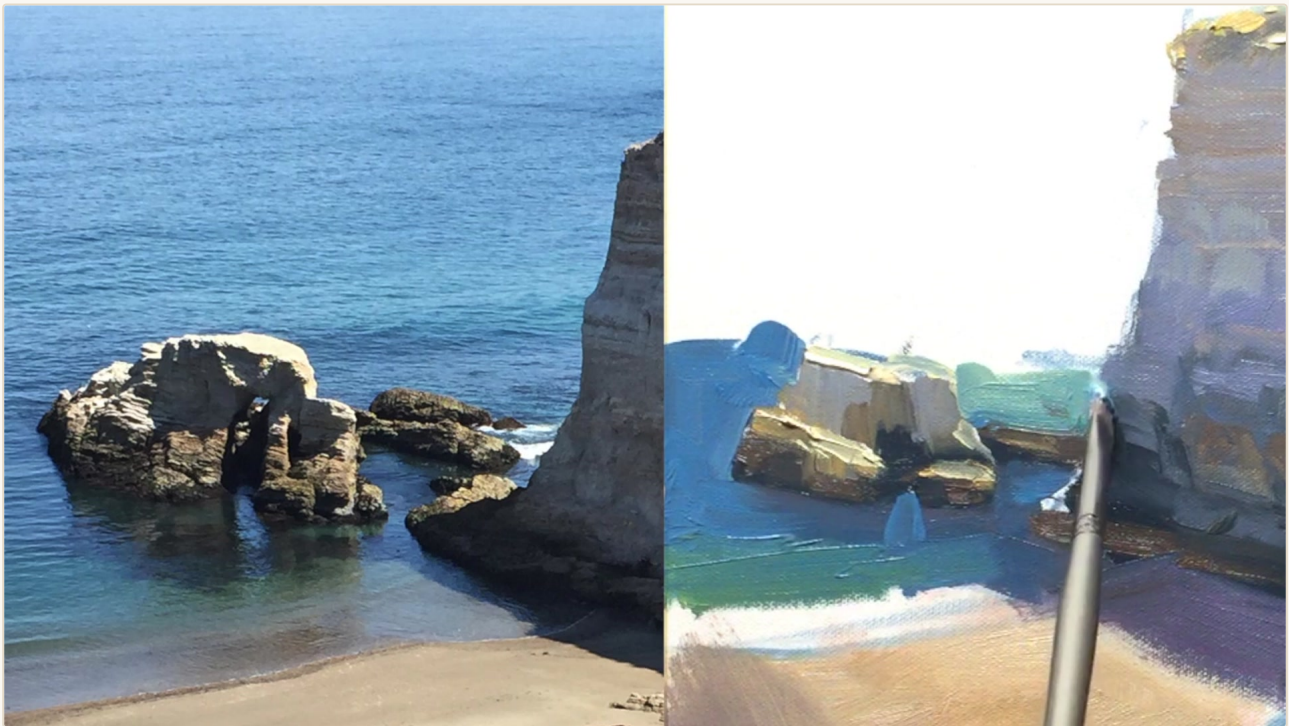
Reflect Sky and Shore

Use a lighter blue where the sky is reflected rather than the rock. As the water gets closer to the shore, it should appear greener and slightly lighter.

PRO TIP

Ensure shadows change color as they move over water, becoming darker and bluer.

17 Adding details and finishing touches



Enhance Water with Lighter Green

Add a lighter green to the water near the top of the rock to make this area more interesting and inviting. Keep the edge of the cliff sharp as you paint up to it, but if it softens, sharpen it later with the cliff colors.

Add Brown and Ochre to Foreground Water

Introduce more brown or ochre into the foreground water for depth. Use a darker brown for the wet sand, ensuring it darkens further as it transitions into shadow.

Soften Shadow Edges

Soften the edge where two darks meet in shadow to create a more natural transition. This helps blend the elements seamlessly.

Create Light Foam on Water

Apply a light bluish-grey thinly over the water to suggest foam. On the wave face, where foam is thicker and catches more light, use thicker paint with white and a touch of yellow. Transition to light blue in shadow areas.

Add Directional Brushwork to Beach

Introduce more exciting, directional brushwork on the beach. Add warmth into the cliff's shadow to better integrate it with the beach color, softening the edge for a cohesive look.

PRO TIP

Use a light bluish-grey to suggest foam on water, applying it thinly for a delicate effect.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by preparing your canvas and materials meticulously. Secure your canvas to ensure a stable painting surface and arrange your palette with Cobra water mixable oils. Begin by sketching your composition with a focus on dynamic shapes and a clear horizon line. Remember to mix your paints thoughtfully, adjusting the consistency with walnut oil for smoother application.

As you progress, pay attention to the interplay of colors and light. Mix both cool and warm greys to add depth and contrast, and create a vibrant sun glow using custom color mixes. Apply walnut oil strategically to enhance blending and achieve a glowing effect. Work from dark to light tones, especially on the cliff face, to build dimension and interest.

In the final stages, focus on details and finishing touches. Use color modifiers to simplify large glowing effects and exaggerate color differences to enhance the rock's form. Mix colors directly on the canvas for natural effects, and ensure shadows transition realistically over water. Keep your brush clean to maintain clarity in your light effects, and apply highlights with minimal strokes to capture the essence of sunlit rocks.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Mix walnut oil with white paint for a mayonnaise-like consistency.
- Ensure variation in shapes and distances for a dynamic composition.
- Use blue, red, yellow ochre, and white to mix cool and warm greys.
- Mix magenta and yellow for a cleaner, more vibrant orange.
- Use separate brushes for darks and lights to avoid color contamination.
- Exaggerate color differences between warm and cool areas.
- Mix color modifiers on your palette for glowing effects.
- Mix colors directly on the canvas for painterly effects.

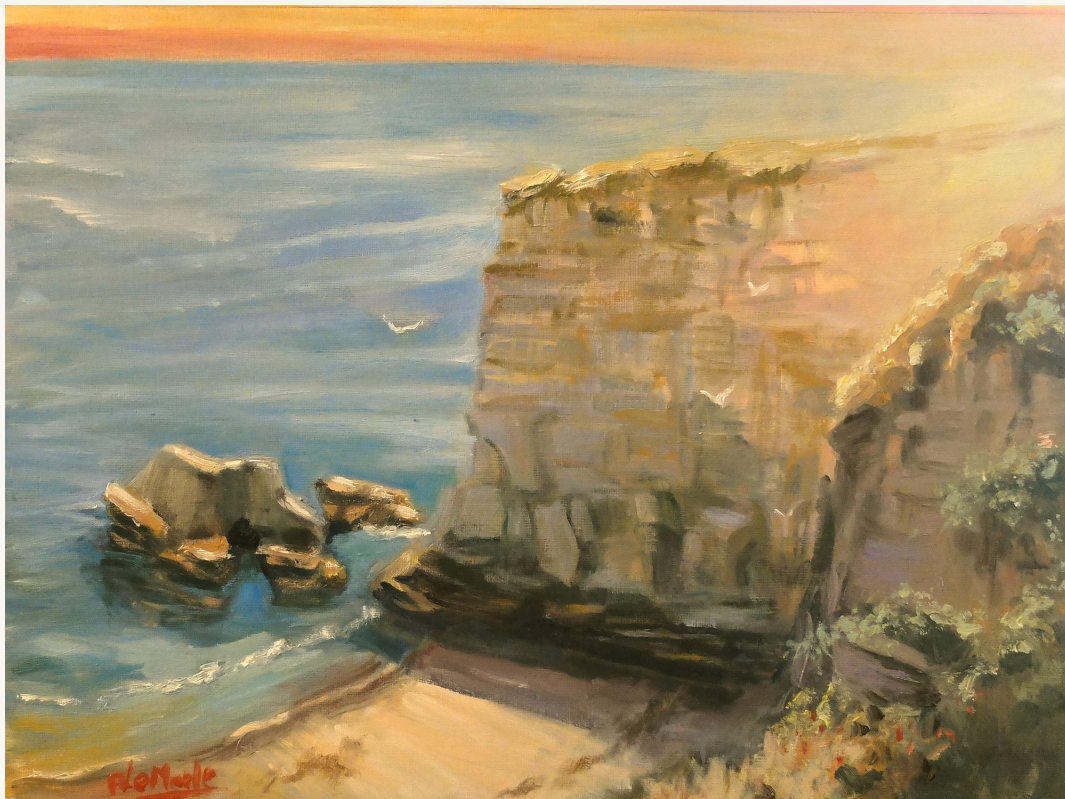


"California Cliffs" 13 x 13" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson.

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.

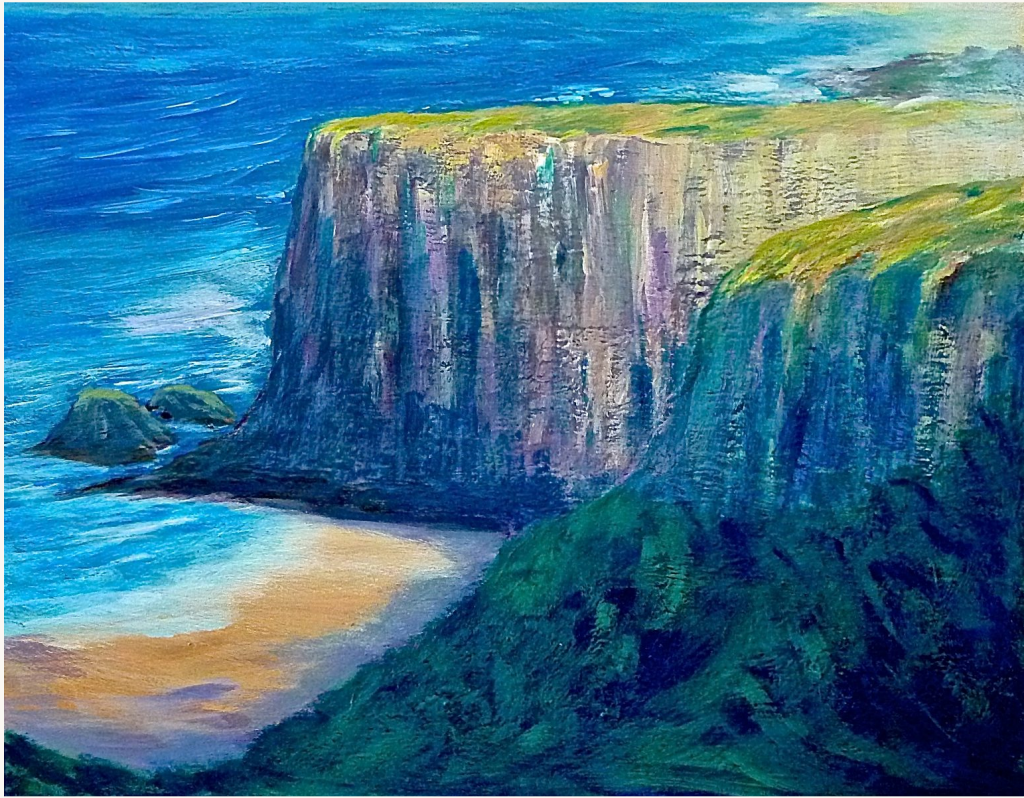
"Two Cliffs" by **Pauline Le Merle**



"Two Cliffs" 16x20" Oil on Canvas Paper by Pauline Le Merle

Hi Pauline, you just about hit the jackpot here. You're painted the majority of this beautifully and I just feel that it loses it in the ocean and sky. The ocean has too many conflicting lines in it and the orange in the sky seems out of place. I've adjusted those two things in Photoshop - see what you think.

"Lucky Bay" by Darby Swisst



"Lucky Bay" 9.5x12" Acrylic on Board by Darby Swisst

Great to see this different approach Darby which looks great. I love how you've utilised the texture of the paint to suit the different subjects and that works particularly well in the cliff face. I feel like you need to put some more work into the foreground cliff and bush. Seems to me that the texture in the foreground cliff should be even thicker, or show some more rock structure to differentiate it from the other cliff. The bush too looks a little formless. Other than that I love this painting. Great work.

"Central Coast Evening Glow" by Stuart J. Gourlay



"Central Coast Evening Glow" 12x12" Oil on Canvas by Stuart J. Gourlay

Nice one Stu. Good drawing and value control. Seems to have gotten muddy between the warms and lights in the cliff and the ocean. Keeping a separate brush for warms and cools will help. The peachy glow in the cliff is not yet consistent with the light in the scene behind it, which should be much more orange and light to produce that same colour in the cliff. Also the transition from pink outwards in the cliff could be smoother and more radial to indicate glowing light. Other than that it's all good.

"Sunlite Beach" by Sharon Bray



"Sunlite Beach" 11x14" Oil on Canvas by Sharon Bray

Good work Sharon. You've achieved an interesting variety of colour in both cliff faces while not getting muddy which seems to be one of the hardest parts of this project. I've made a few suggestions in Photoshop for you.

So I lightened sky and sea a little in the glowing area to make that effect more dramatic and at the same time I lightened the darks in the base of the cliff a little to tie in with that glowing effect and also to provide more separation between this and the foreground. I also softened the shadows on the beach because you have made them look like cast shadows from the hill rather than a soft cloud shadow which was my intention. The sun is the wrong position to cast shadows like that from the hill. I also broke up the hard straight line of the foreground hill against the beach to provide more shape interest. Small things to think about. Nice job.