



The French Alps

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/62-The-French-Alps>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

Ah, the French Alps in summer—truly magnifique! The hills resonate with the charming sound of cowbells, and one can almost imagine Heidi frolicking through the meadows. In this chapter, I invite you to join me in capturing the essence of this breathtaking alpine scene with acrylics. We'll embark on a step-by-step journey where you'll learn to paint the diffuse light effects that give the Alps their ethereal glow, and create a sense of vast atmospheric depth. Together, we'll explore dynamic brushwork techniques and the art of inventing convincing rocks, all while focusing on the beautiful rocks and dark trees as our main subject. By using the ascending valley and mountain tops as a backdrop, we'll create a painting with remarkable depth. With just a few brushes, a glass jar of water, and straight acrylics on an acrylic-primed canvas, you'll discover how to paint quickly and efficiently. Starting with the background and layering towards the foreground, you'll manage drying times seamlessly. This scene is not only a rewarding subject due to its natural beauty but also an excellent opportunity to refine your painting skills. Enjoy the process and the joy of bringing the French Alps to life on your canvas!



"The French Alps" 13 x 13" Acrylic 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. Acrylic Paints
- Alizarine Crimson
- Phthalo Blue
- Ultramarine Blue
- Burnt Sienna
- Cadmium Red
- Cadmium Orange
- Yellow Ochre
- Cadmium Yellow Light
- Titanium White
- 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
- Stay-wet palette
- Water spray bottle

1 Scene Selection and Materials



Select the Scene

Focus on the beautiful rocks and dark trees as your main subject. Use the ascending valley and mountain tops as a backdrop to create depth in your painting.

Prepare Your Materials

Use acrylic paints on an acrylic primed canvas. Gather a few brushes and a glass jar full of water. Avoid using any painting medium; work with straight acrylics.

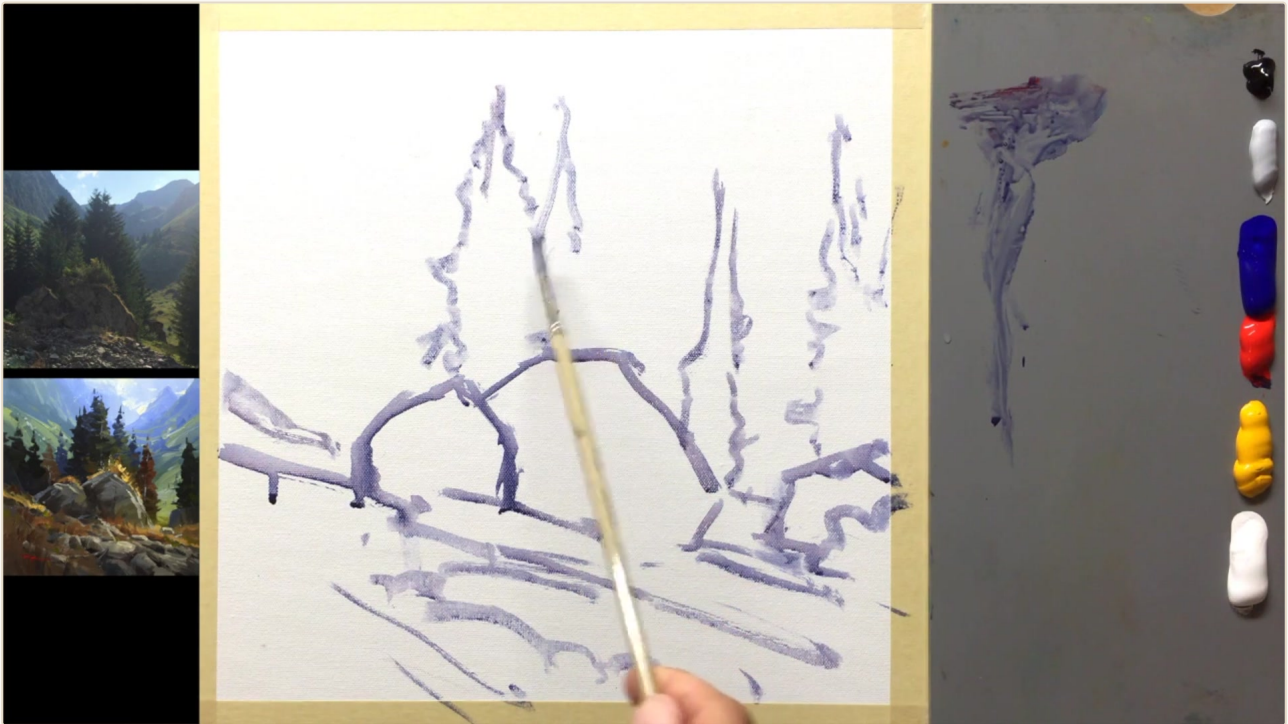
Plan Your Painting Approach

Paint quickly, starting with the background. Layer the mid-ground over the background, followed by the foreground. This approach helps manage drying times and keeps the process efficient.

PRO TIP

Work from background to foreground to effectively manage drying times with acrylics.

2 Grouping Elements Concept



Visualize Groupings

Think of rocks and trees as family groupings. Imagine a large father tree, a slightly smaller mother tree, and a few smaller trees as children or cousins. This helps create a natural and cohesive composition.

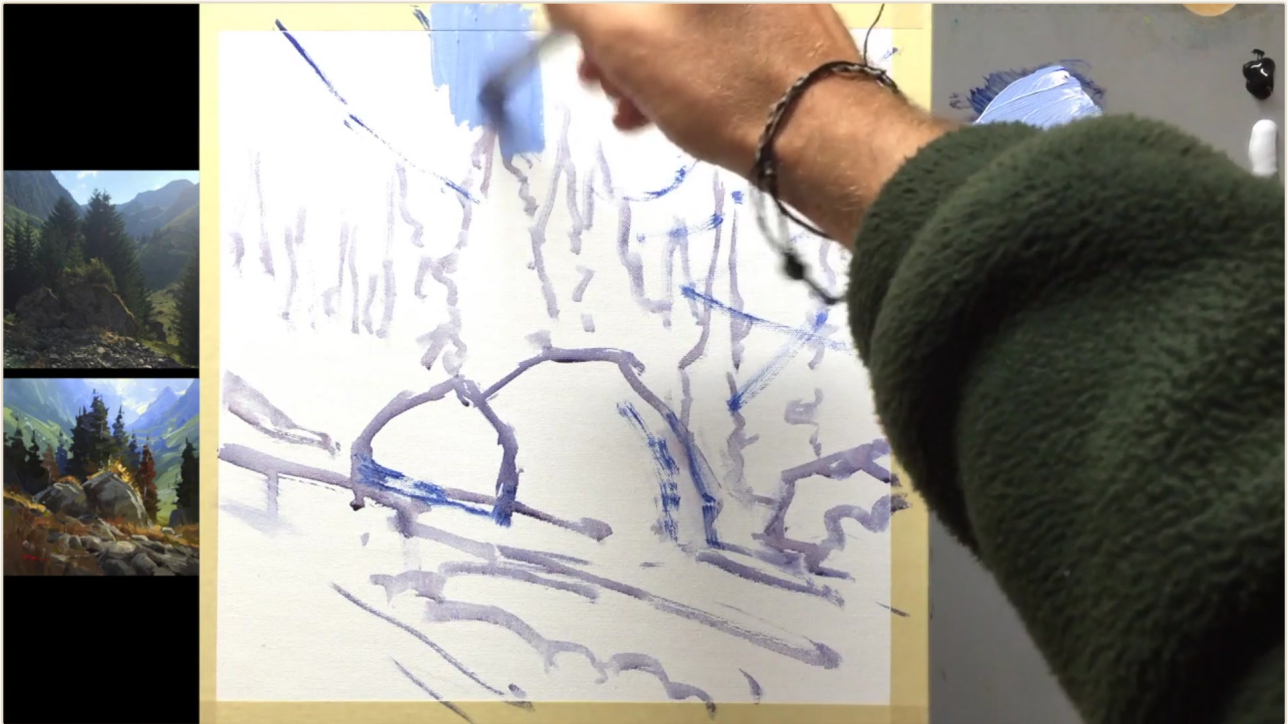
Sketch Lightly

Use a pencil to sketch these groupings lightly on your canvas. This will serve as a guide for your painting.

PRO TIP

Visualize elements as family groupings to create a cohesive composition.

3 Painting the Sky



Create the Base Sky

Start with a mixture of blue and white, applying it with down strokes to cover the sky area. This will serve as the base layer for your sky.

Add Warmth and Light

As you move towards the middle of the sky, mix in more white and a little yellow to lighten and warm the color. This creates a gradation from cool blue to a lighter, warmer tone in the center.

Balance the Sky

Allow the color to transition back to blue as you move to the right side. Avoid creating too many streaks to maintain a smooth gradation.

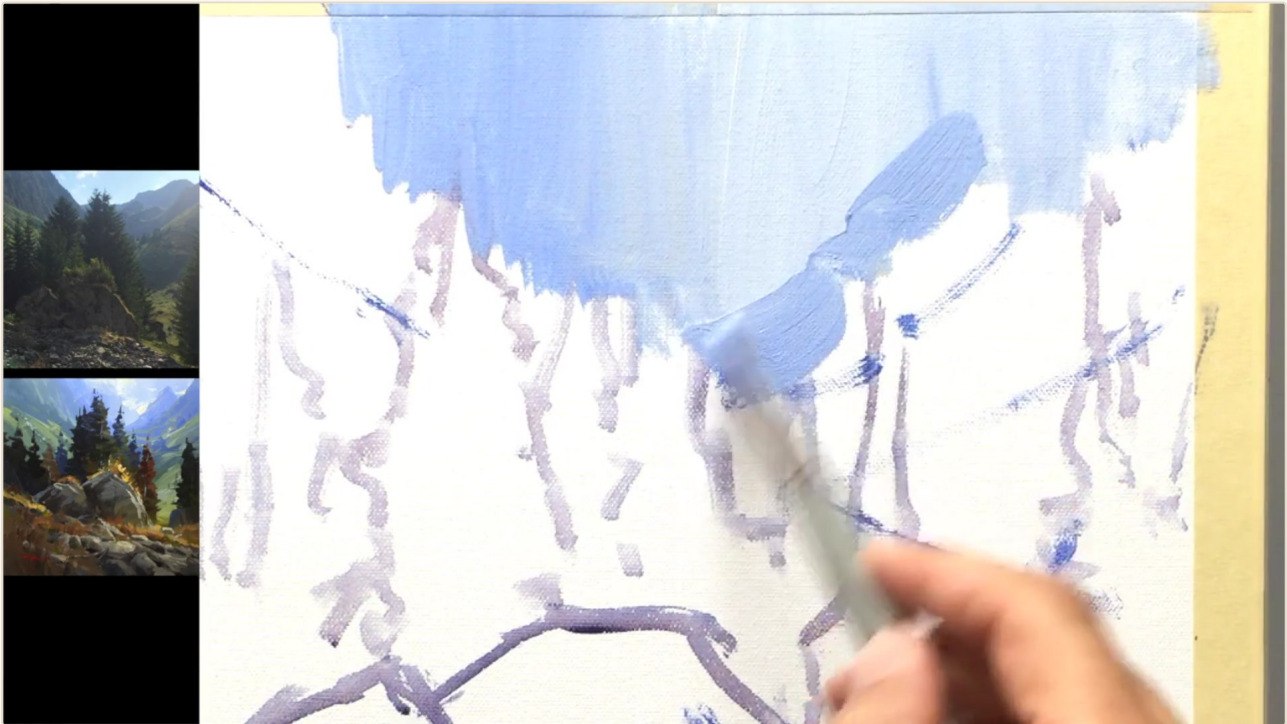
Be Flexible with Edges

Don't worry about painting over the lines, as the mountains will overlap the sky. Work quickly and roughly to establish the sky's background.

PRO TIP

Use down strokes to apply the base sky color for a consistent texture.

4 Blocking in the Mountains



Block in the Distant Mountain

Block in the shape of the distant mountain. Feel free to create your own interpretation rather than strictly following a reference. Capture the big swoosh that extends into the left side of the mountains for an interesting effect.

Add Color Variations

Add a little more blue and a tiny touch of yellow to the other side of the mountain. Use this mixture to paint the next section of the mountains, ensuring you vary the lines slightly to avoid duplication.

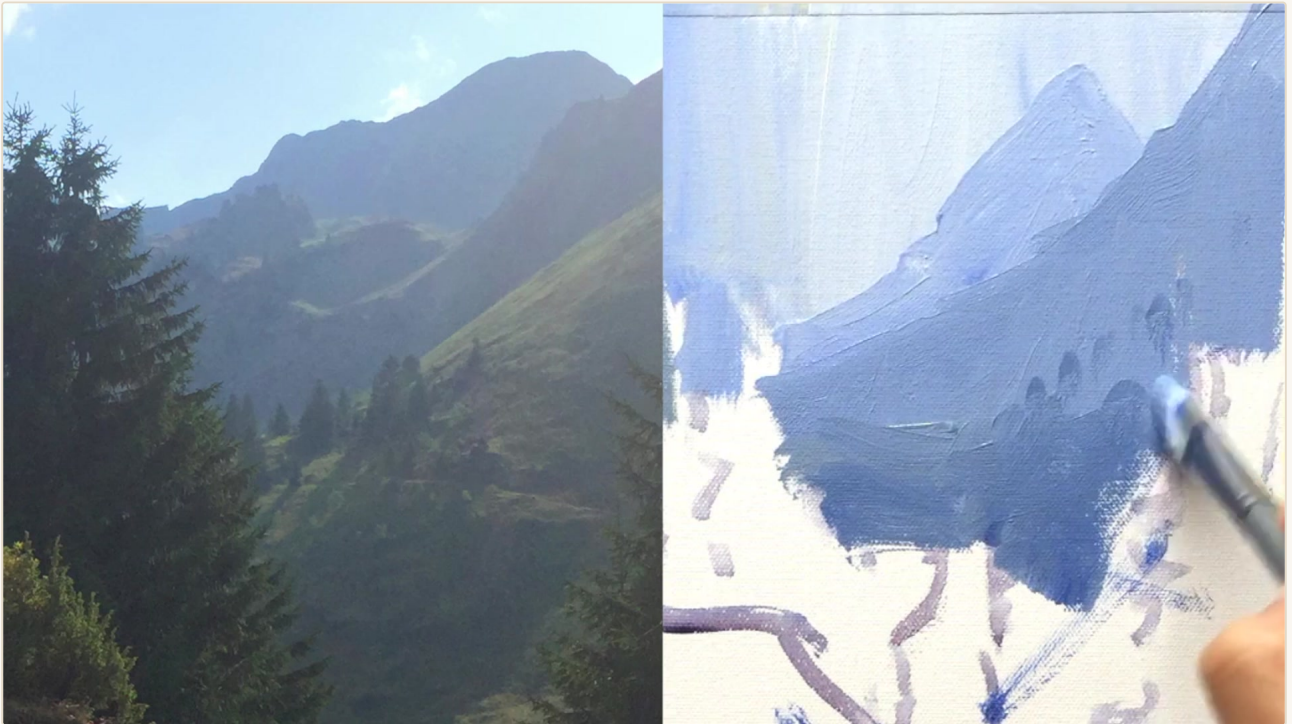
Darken the Foreground

As you move forward in the landscape, add more blue and a bit more yellow. This will make the landscape slightly darker and greener, indicating depth and distance.

PRO TIP

Vary the lines in the mountains to avoid creating a cloned appearance.

5 Adding Details to the Landscape



Indicate Trees and Details

Use a big brush to suggest small trees and details like cast shadows on the hillside. Focus on indicating rather than detailing, as subtle hints are sufficient.

Paint Shadow Colors

Apply shadow colors to the mountain areas, preparing for the lighter tones that will be added later. Ensure these shadows are slightly greener and darker as they approach the foreground.

PRO TIP

Use a big brush to suggest details without overworking them.

6 Mixing and Applying Light Colors



Mix Light Colors

Observe the shadow color you are painting over. Mix a color that is slightly lighter and greener than the shadow. Adjust the mix to become lighter and bluer as the mountains recede into the distance.

Apply Light Colors

Paint wet into wet to achieve a juicy look. Ensure your layers remain wet by using ample paint and working quickly, especially if using acrylics.

PRO TIP

Adjust the light color to become lighter and bluer as the mountains recede.

7 Acrylics Drying Time Tips



Use Large Piles of Paint

Mix up big piles of paint on your palette. The thicker the paint, the longer it takes to dry, giving you more time to work.

Incorporate Retarder Medium

Add a retarder medium to your paint mixtures and water bottle. This slows down the drying process, allowing for more flexibility.

Utilize a Stay Wet Palette

Use a stay wet palette to keep your acrylics moist. This helps maintain the paint's workability for longer periods.

Choose Slow-Drying Acrylics

Select acrylics with extended drying times, such as Golden Open or Chroma Interactive Acrylics. These options provide more time for reworking your painting.

PRO TIP

Mix large piles of paint to extend the drying time and give yourself more flexibility while painting.

8 Finishing the Background



Soften the Cloud

Mix a big blob of white with a little bit of yellow for the cloud. Use a paper towel to blur the edges, making the cloud more random and soft.

Add Rocky Features

Use a little tinting grey to add slightly rocky features and textures to the background hills. This adds depth and interest to the landscape.

Dark Accents in the Mid-ground

With a fine brush, add a few little dark accents in the mid-ground. This creates contrast and draws the eye into the scene.

PRO TIP

Use a paper towel to blur edges for a softer, more natural look.

9 Mid-ground Trees and Light Effects



Lighten and Blue the Tree Tops

Observe the photograph and notice the haze of light affecting the tops of the trees. Lighten and add a touch of blue to the tops of the mid-ground trees to replicate this effect.

Create Depth with Background Trees

Lighten and add more blue to the trees in the background. This will help create a sense of depth and enhance the atmospheric perspective in your painting.

PRO TIP

Lighten and blue the tops of the trees to mimic the haze of light from the sky.

10 Painting Trees with Depth



Mix Tree Colors

Prepare a dark grey-green color for the trees. Lighten and add blue to this mixture twice, creating three distinct shades on your palette. Use these as benchmarks for painting depth in your trees.

Select the Right Brush

Choose a crisp square brush to achieve sharp, dynamic marks. Ensure you use plenty of paint to cover the canvas in one stroke, avoiding multiple dabs that soften edges.

Paint Trees with Depth

Start painting the trees, making them more irregular and interesting than the reference photo. As the trees recede into the background or rise into the sky, make them lighter and bluer to reflect the infused light.

Apply Light Carefully

Add light to the trees by painting over the wet dark paint. Use minimal strokes to avoid blending into mud. Refill the brush as needed and continue with careful application.

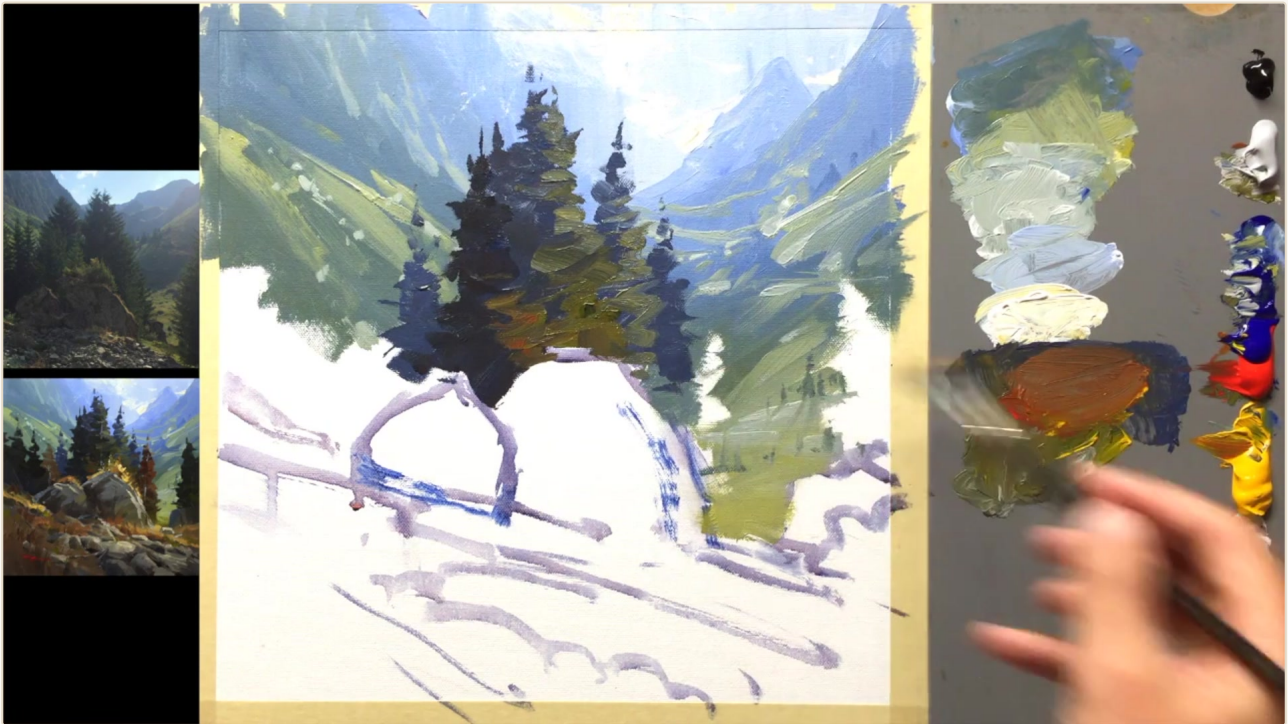
Adjust Background Trees

For trees in the background, adjust your green by adding white and blue. This ensures they appear lighter and bluer, maintaining the sense of depth.

PRO TIP

Use a crisp square brush with plenty of paint to create sharp, dynamic marks without softening the edges.

11 Adding Color Variations to Trees



Introduce Orange Tones

Add a subtle orangish color to the tree to create interest. Mix in a bit of blue to tone down the orange, avoiding a pure orange hue. Adjust the vibrancy to your preference, but consider graying the orange slightly for a more natural look.

Apply Darker Brown for Shadows

Use a darker brown to paint the shadow side of the tree. Apply this darker tone into the lighter areas, reversing the technique used on other trees. This adds depth and contrast to the composition.

Consider Tree Family Dynamics

Think of the trees as a family, considering their size, spacing, and shape. Ensure variety in light and dark shapes, aiming for a large light shape with smaller subsidiary shapes. Avoid uniform lighting across all trees.

Add Bluish Dark Grey

Introduce a bluish dark grey to the base of the trees in the background. This adds depth and variation to the scene, enhancing the overall composition.

Incorporate Green Tones

Add a touch of green to the tree on the right for subtle variation. This helps differentiate it from other trees and adds interest to the painting.

PRO TIP

Mix blue into orange to tone it down, creating a more natural and subtle color variation.

12 Painting Grasses and Textures



Prepare the Background

Add a warm golden color to the background area on top of the rock. This sets the stage for the sunlit grasses and ensures they appear vibrant and integrated.

Apply Thick Paint for Grasses

Use really thick paint for the lightest, brightest parts of the grasses. This will make them stand out and capture the sunlight effectively.

Create Random Texture

To achieve a natural, random texture, use your brush in a varied manner. Employ the side, point, and corner of the brush, dragging, pushing, and splatting to make diverse marks.

Develop a Bushy Feel

For the bottom area, use the side of the brush with thick paint, dragging it across in a staccato rhythm. This technique helps create a bushy feel with soft edges.

PRO TIP

Use thick paint and varied brush techniques to create dynamic, sunlit grasses with natural texture.

13 Mixing and Applying Rock Colors



Mix Rock Shadow Color

Create a gray color for the shadow side of the rock. Make it fairly neutral with a slight warmth by adding a little yellow. For rocks in greenish areas, include a touch of green to harmonize with the surrounding grass and trees.

Paint Foreground Rocks

Mix a slightly darker than mid-gray with a touch of red and yellow to warm it up. Apply this color thickly and gesturally to the foreground rocks. Avoid over-mixing to achieve a natural streaking effect that adds texture.

Deepen Rock Shadows

Mix a slightly darker brown for the deeper shadows in the rocks. Apply with confident strokes and avoid excessive dabbing to maintain the natural texture and form of the rocks.

Add Warm Reflections

Introduce a slightly warmer, lighter orange to the right side of the rock. This reflects the warm grasses nearby, enhancing the shadow side with their light.

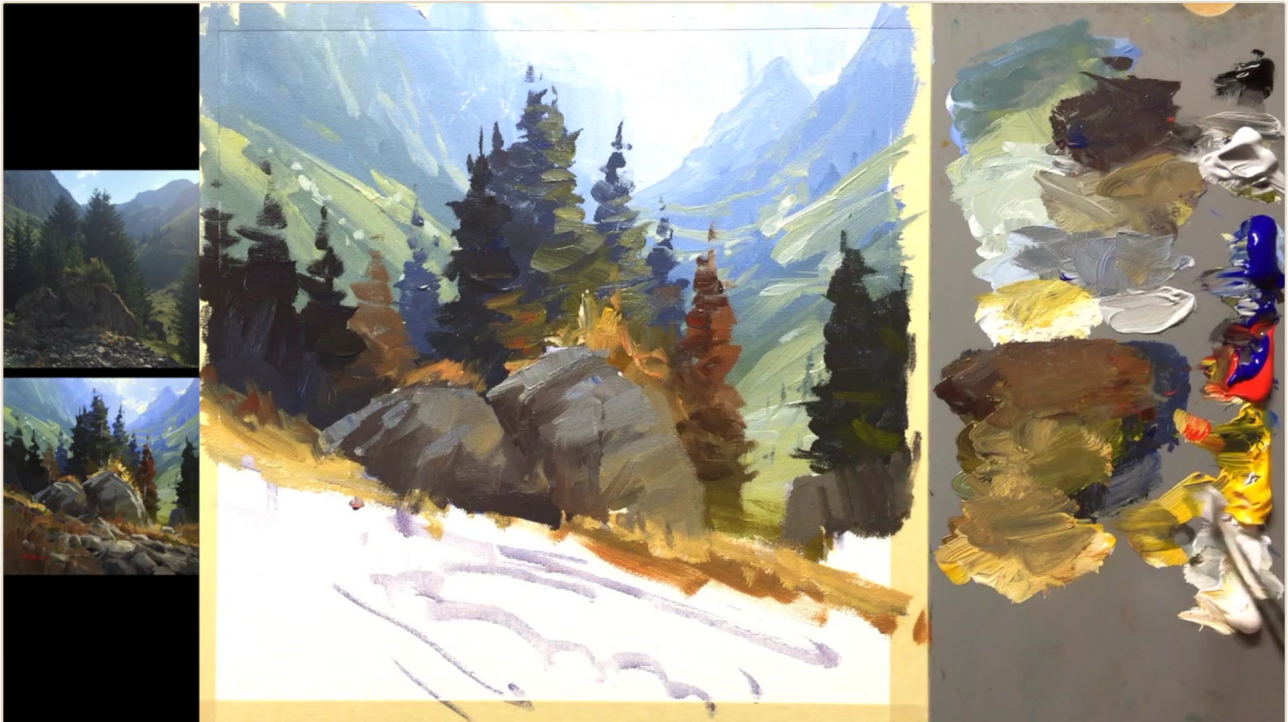
Enhance Shadow and Light

Strengthen shadows on the left with a warm, darker gray. Mix a bluish mid-gray for the top lights on the rock's left side, reflecting the sky. As these lights move deeper into shadow, they should become darker and bluer.

PRO TIP

Avoid over-mixing paint on the palette to create natural streaking effects that add texture to rocks.

14 Highlighting Rocks



Apply Warm Grey Highlights

Mix a warm grey and apply it thickly to the rocks. Carefully choose which contours to highlight, ensuring variety in your lines to avoid duplication.

Create Big Shapes

Consider joining some of the highlighted areas to form larger shapes. This helps to create a more cohesive and natural look in the rock formations.

Adjust Light and Dark Areas

Determine where the light naturally falls on the rocks, making some areas slightly lighter to suggest a glint of light. Extend these highlights into adjacent areas like the little rock in the grasses to unify the scene.

PRO TIP

Apply highlights thickly and thoughtfully to enhance the rock's natural contours and light reflections.

15 Backlighting and Rim Lighting



Add Golden Highlights

Apply small highlights of a golden grass color on top of the rock. Use a dry brush to soften any hard edges, creating a glowing effect.

Create Soft Glowing Edges

Use the side of a dry brush to gently scoop back hard edges, ensuring a soft, glowing transition between the grass and rock.

Paint Backlighting and Rim Lighting

Allow the brown grasses to mound up with a soft edge into the rock. Darken slightly to indicate the shadow side, emphasizing the backlighting effect where shadows face towards you and light outlines the objects.

PRO TIP

Use a dry brush to soften hard edges, creating a glowing effect.

16 Using Black and Creating Shadows



Create Warm Grey

Mix a warm grey to start adding roundness to the rocks in the foreground. This will help establish the form and depth of the landscape.

Darken the Grey

Mix a slightly darker warm grey to enhance the shadows and add more dimension to the rocks. This contrast will give a more realistic appearance to the scene.

Use Black Sparingly

If you choose to use black, apply it sparingly and only in the very dark mixtures. This will prevent the painting from becoming too grey and losing its vibrancy.

PRO TIP

Avoid using black in mid values and lights to maintain the vibrancy of your colors.

17 Foreground Details and Highlights



Create Tussock Grasses

Use mostly upstrokes to paint tussock grasses. This technique ensures a soft edge on the top of the stroke, mimicking the natural look of grasses.

Darken and Cool the Corners

Gradually darken and cool the corners by adding more blue to your brown mixture. This creates depth and contrast in the painting.

Add Highlights to Rocks

With the shadow and mid-value sides of the rocks blocked in, apply highlights to the top. Ensure the rocks appear smaller and closer together as they recede into the distance.

Incorporate Logs and Grasses

Quickly brush in logs in the middle and foreground. Darken and cool the shadow side with bluer, greyer tones, and add warmer dark accents where the logs tuck into the grasses. Brush up a few grasses in front of the logs to integrate them into the scene.

Enhance with Vibrant Green

Add a few spots of vibrant green to the painting to create lively accents and enhance the overall composition.

PRO TIP

Use upstrokes to create soft-edged tussock grasses that look natural.

18 Adjusting Foreground Elements



Darken the Foreground Tree

Darken the shadow side of the tallest tree in the foreground to enhance its depth and presence. Use a slightly darker shade to achieve this effect, ensuring the tree stands out against the background.

Add Bluish Reflected Light

Apply a bluish hue to the shadow sides of rocks and logs in the foreground. This will mimic the effect of reflected light and add a cohesive look to the scene.

PRO TIP

Use a bluish hue to enhance the shadow sides of foreground elements for a cohesive look.

19 Adding Final Details to Rocks



Add Branches and Trunks

Use a script liner brush to add tiny details of branches and trunks into the dark bushes. This will break up the forms and add vertical interest to your painting.

Intensify Rock Shadows

Focus on the rocks and intensify some of the shadows by adding dark accents. This will create more three-dimensionality and depth, making the rocks appear more realistic.

PRO TIP

Use a script liner brush for adding fine details like branches and trunks to enhance vertical interest.

20 Reflection on Painting Process



Embrace Fast Painting

Aim to paint quickly to achieve a fluid, wet-on-wet look with acrylics. This technique can be challenging due to their quick drying time, but it enhances your confidence and skill.

Use Big Globs of Paint

Apply large amounts of paint to your canvas. This approach helps in maintaining the wetness needed for fluidity and allows for more expressive brushwork.

PRO TIP

Practice painting the same subject multiple times to build speed and confidence.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by selecting a captivating scene from the French Alps, focusing on the interplay of rocks, trees, and the majestic mountains. Begin by laying down the background with a swift application of acrylics, moving from the sky to the distant mountains, and then gradually building up the mid-ground and foreground. This layered approach not only helps manage drying times but also establishes a sense of depth and perspective in your composition.

As you progress, think of the elements in your painting as a family, with trees and rocks forming cohesive groupings that guide the viewer's eye. Use a variety of brush techniques to suggest details and textures without overworking the scene. Pay attention to the play of light and shadow, adjusting colors to reflect the atmospheric perspective and the natural lighting of the landscape.

In the final stages, focus on adding highlights and refining details to bring your painting to life. Use thick paint and varied brushwork to create dynamic textures in grasses and rocks. Carefully apply highlights to accentuate the natural contours and lighting effects, ensuring a harmonious and vibrant composition. Remember, each stroke contributes to the overall mood and story of your alpine landscape.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Work from background to foreground to manage drying times.
- Visualize elements as family groupings for a cohesive composition.
- Use down strokes for a consistent sky texture.
- Vary mountain lines to avoid a cloned appearance.
- Use a big brush to suggest details without overworking.
- Adjust light colors to become lighter and bluer as they recede.
- Mix large piles of paint to extend drying time.
- Use a crisp square brush for sharp, dynamic tree marks.
- Mix blue into orange for natural color variation.
- Use thick paint and varied techniques for dynamic grasses.
- Avoid over-mixing to create natural rock textures.
- Apply highlights thickly to enhance contours and reflections.



"The French Alps" 13 x 13" Acrylic 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.

"The French Alps II" by Susan Burke



"The French Alps II" 8x10" Acrylic by Susan Burke

Your painting has good colour and tones Susan - good lights and darks that give a nice sense of sunlight. I like the blues that you have used to get a sense of distance into the mountains but you need to be careful when you apply the highlights to those distant peaks - they are too green for that distance. I like the colours used in your trees too but you may notice that the tops of the trees are in a straight line sloping down steeply to the left, as do the hills that we are standing on so that the painting has developed a strong feeling of sliding towards the bottom left corner.

When I look at your rocks, I get the feeling that you are painting what you know, not what you see. The shapes of your rocks and their whole character suggest that you are making them up. Probably the easiest way to solve that problem is to go outside, find some really nice boulders, and sketch and paint them. If you can get the choice of coastal and inland boulders, all the better!

“Explore III” by **Silke Sauritz**



"Explore III" 29x32" Oil on Canvas by Silke Sauritz

Wellâ€¦This is certainly different Silke. A painting loaded with nice colour and ambience.

Two things that I need to mention. The natural landscape is normally random in its design - we may see things that look like each other but they are more the exception rather than the rule. If, when we design a painting, we repeat shapes or have equidistant elements or perhaps have intersecting edges all at one point, then we eliminate that sense of random. Our painting begins to look like an arrangement.

You will notice when you look at your painting that the rocks and the trees behind those rocks are arranged neatly in the corners of the painting, that the hills coming down from both the left and the right sides of your painting are almost exactly the same angle and form a very nice 'u' in the centre of the picture, and that the band of trees in the centre of the valley look very neatly arranged - a man-made plantation. Small points but they can so easily take away the feeling of reality in your painting.

Painting or sketching from nature outdoors can often help.

“The Way to the Valley” by Nili Tunis



"The Way to the Valley" 10.5x11" Acrylic by Nili Tunis

This is a bold approach! Lots of colour and strong lights and shadows. A nice arrangement of the elements in the painting with the path helping us to get to the background.

Two things to be aware of though - yellow is the first colour to fade with distance. The yellow slopes back behind the trees and the path as it turns the corner are shouting for attention - their colour is too strong. The other slight problem is that the tallest tree and the mountain top on the right are too close to the edge/ frame- they are creating 'tension points.' Best avoided.

“Workshop 46” by Tammy Wolcott



"Workshop 46" 12x12" Acrylic by Tammy Wolcott

This too is a very good effort – lots of imagination in the way the rocks have been presented. They lead us back into the painting very nicely. The trees however are quite a visual barrier - they virtually forbid us from going any further! (This is true for several of the paintings). In this situation, I would lower the trees and simplify them into a more general shape rather than a series of conspicuous points.

Overall, the sense of colour, particularly in the background, is very good.