



Safe Harbour

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/61-Safe-Harbour>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

Welcome to the enchanting medieval village of Yvoire in France, a place that seems to pause in time as it closes for winter, yet during my visit, it was alive with warmth and beauty, a scene begging to be captured on canvas. In this chapter, we dive into painting this idyllic harbour scene, guiding you step by step through my acrylic techniques. You'll learn how to design with big shapes, invent warm light, create atmospheric depth, and paint reflections, all crucial skills for bringing this picturesque setting to life. We'll start with small thumbnail sketches to explore composition and balance, moving through black and white studies to grasp values and contrast, and then onto grayscale and color studies to refine tonal values and test color harmony. This process builds a solid foundation, allowing you to confidently develop your painting with accuracy and detail. I encourage you to pick up your brushes and immerse yourself in this rewarding subject, discovering new techniques and ideas to enrich your own artistic journey.



"Safe Harbour" 11 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.



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. 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 Initial Sketches and Studies



Create Thumbnail Sketches

Begin with small thumbnail sketches to explore different design ideas. Focus on composition and balance in each sketch. These quick studies help you visualize the overall layout before committing to a larger piece.

Develop a Black and White Study

Create a black and white study to focus on the values and contrast within your composition. This step allows you to see how light and shadow interact without the distraction of color.

Work on a Grayscale Study

Move on to a grayscale study to further refine the tonal values. This helps in understanding depth and form, providing a solid foundation for your painting.

Create a Small Color Study

Develop a small color study to experiment with your color palette. This step is crucial for testing color harmony and ensuring the colors work well together in your final piece.

Refine Your Sketch

Return to your sketches and refine them into a more detailed cartoon. This refined sketch will serve as a blueprint for your finished painting, ensuring accuracy and detail.

PRO TIP

Use thumbnail sketches to quickly explore and refine your composition ideas before starting on a larger piece.

2 Differences Between Painting and Photograph



Embrace Differences

Recognize that differences between your painting and a reference photograph can enhance the painting's interest. Focus on capturing the essence rather than replicating every detail.

PRO TIP

Allow your painting to have its own character by not strictly adhering to the photograph.

3 Design Changes for Interest



Identify the Center of Interest

Examine your reference photograph and determine what you find most interesting. If there is no clear focal point, consider adding an element, like a sailboat, to create a solid center of interest.

Adjust Competing Elements

If any elements in your painting compete with your focal point, modify them to reduce competition. For example, change a triangular castle top to a dome if it competes with the sailboat's shape.

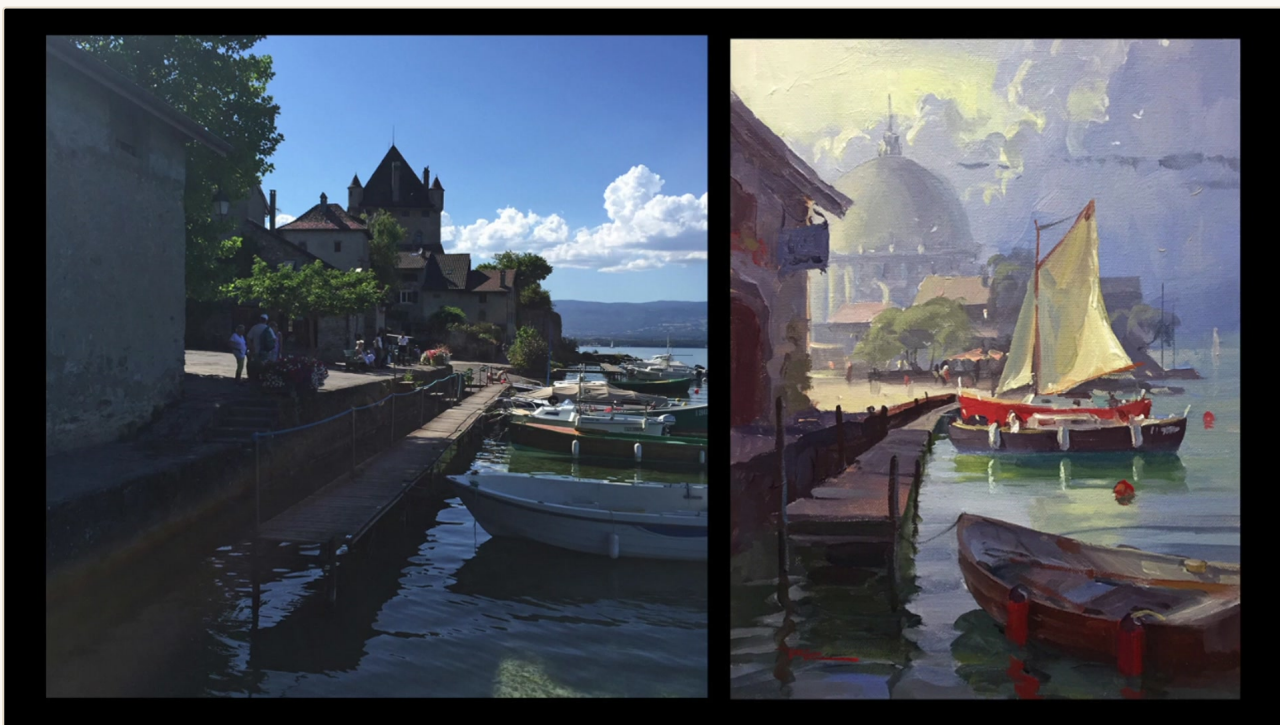
Enhance Foreground Interest

Add interest to the foreground by altering shapes. Slightly curve the dock and tilt the angle of the front boat to create a more dynamic and organic composition.

PRO TIP

Modify elements that compete with your focal point to enhance the painting's overall composition.

4 Color Adjustments



Warm Up the Colors

Adjust the overall color scheme by making it slightly warmer. This adds interest and vibrancy to the painting.

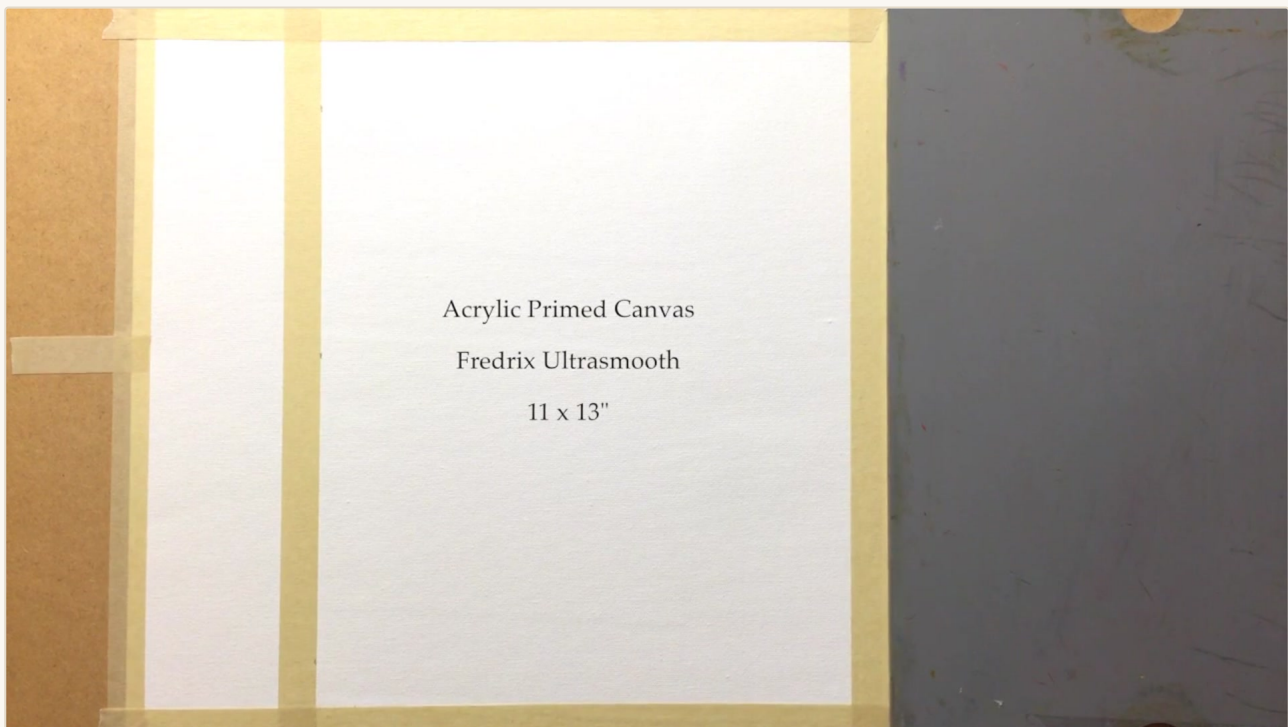
Lighten the Background

Lighten the background to help push it away visually. This creates a stronger contrast, making the mid-ground and foreground stand out more.

PRO TIP

Lightening the background enhances depth and contrast in your painting.

5 Medium Choice



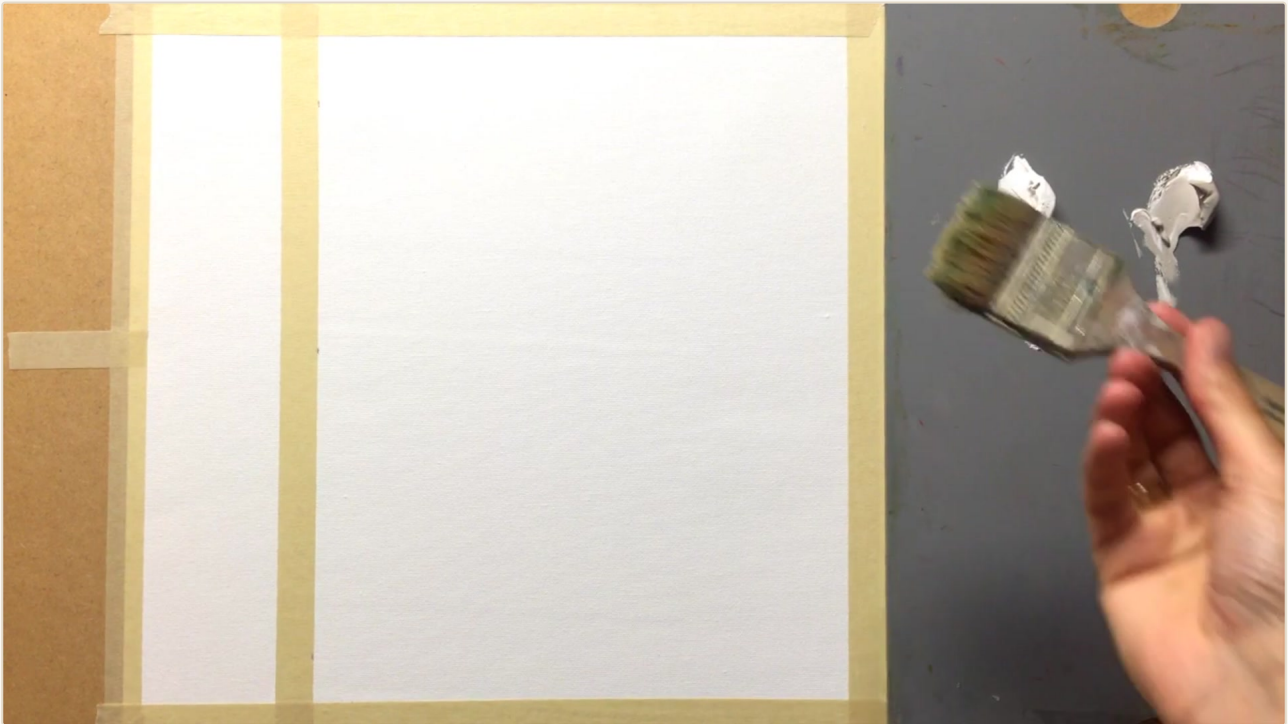
Choose Your Medium

Decide whether to use acrylics or oils for your painting. Both mediums can achieve similar effects using the same techniques.

PRO TIP

Select the medium you are most comfortable with, as both acrylics and oils can be used effectively for this painting.

6 Creating the Background Gradient



Prepare the Gesso

Mix a small amount of black into some gesso to create a slight grey tone. Keep another pile of pure white gesso ready for use.

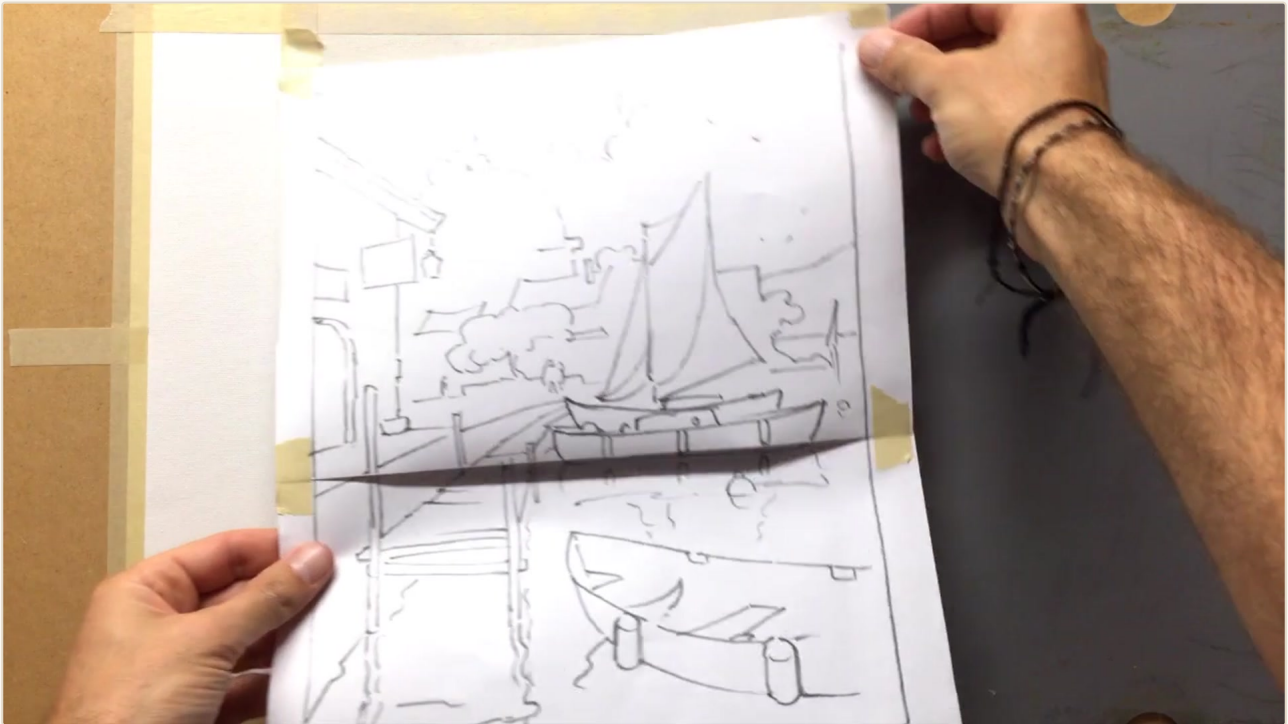
Create the Gradient

Use a big brush to block in the background, starting with the slight grey at the bottom. Gradually blend it into the white gesso towards the top to achieve a smooth gradient.

PRO TIP

Consider using acrylics for the background gradient even if working with oils, as they dry faster and help establish the base.

7 Transferring the Drawing



Prepare the Drawing

Print out the drawing to the desired size. Rub the back of the paper with a 6B pencil to cover it with graphite.

Position the Drawing

Place the drawing on the canvas where you want it. Draw small marks at the edges to ensure you can reposition it accurately if needed.

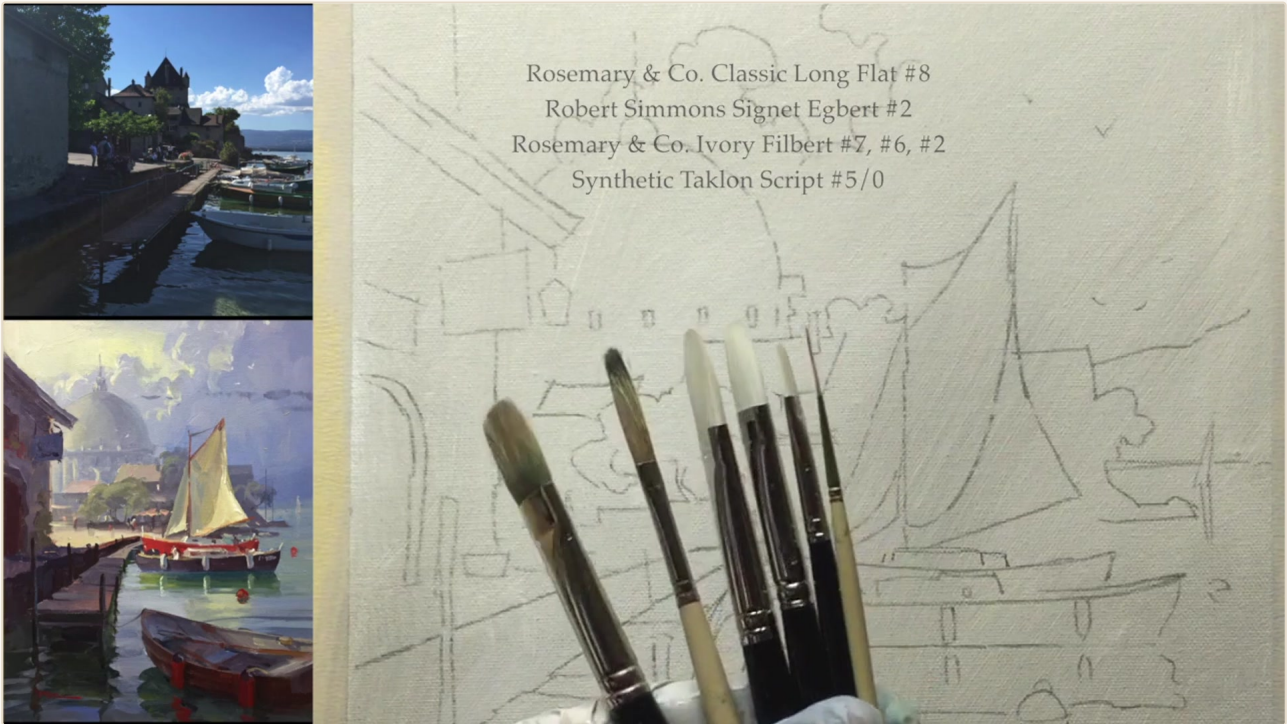
Transfer the Drawing

Press firmly with an HB pencil or a pen to transfer the drawing onto the canvas. Ensure you apply enough pressure to leave a clear outline.

PRO TIP

Use the grid transfer method if you can't print the image to the correct size.

8 Brushes and Painting Methodology



Select Your Brushes

Choose a few filbert brushes for this painting. Filberts are versatile and can help achieve a variety of strokes and textures.

Prepare Your Acrylics

Use interactive acrylics, which stay wet longer than regular acrylics. Avoid using any painting medium; just use the acrylics straight from the tube.

Adjust Paint Consistency

If needed, add a touch of water to thin the acrylics slightly. This will help maintain the desired consistency without using a retarding medium.

Plan Your Painting Method

Paint methodically, starting with the background, then the mid-ground, and finally the foreground. This approach allows you to work wet-on-wet, achieving a juicy, alla prima look.

PRO TIP

Work quickly to maintain the wet-on-wet effect by painting each area while the paint is still wet.

9 Painting the Sky



Mix the Base Sky Color

Start at the bottom with a mix of blue, white, and a little toning grey to create a slightly grayer hue. This helps achieve a faster painting process with acrylics.

Lighten and Warm the Sky

As you move upwards to the left, gradually lighten the mixture and add warmth. Introduce a touch of red through the middle, then add yellow and more white as you reach the warmer area of the sky where the sun is.

Add Cloud Highlights

Use a finer filbert brush and apply a mix of white, a tiny touch of yellow, and a little mixing grey. Apply the paint thickly to create bright silver edges on the clouds.

Soften Brush Strokes

If needed, use a clean brush with no paint to gently stroke out and soften the edges of your brush strokes. This creates more variation and a softer look in your brushwork.

PRO TIP

Use a clean brush to gently soften edges for more variation in your brushwork.

10 Painting the Background Buildings



Paint the Background Buildings

Begin with a light toning grey on the left side of the buildings. As you move to the right, gradually darken the tone by adding blue and a tiny bit of red. Use a light touch to create a smooth gradation.

Shape the Dome

Ensure the dome is symmetrical across its center line, regardless of its shape. Add slightly darker details, but avoid too much contrast to keep the area in the background.

Adjust Lighting and Color

On the side where the light hits, make the colors lighter and warmer. Remember the light source is from the top left, affecting how colors are perceived.

Minimize Contrast

Keep the background subtle by reducing value and color contrast. Use greyed tones for elements like roofs and trees, avoiding vibrant colors.

Utilize the Filbert Brush

Use the fine edge of a filbert brush to create details and smooth transitions. Roll the brush to shape rounded elements like tree foliage.

PRO TIP

Use toning grey to quickly mix subtle, greyed colors for the background, maintaining a simple palette.

11 Painting the Water Background



Mix the Background Water Color

Combine blue, white, a tiny bit of yellow, and some tinting grey to create a mixture. Ensure this mixture is slightly lighter and just a smidge greener than the background color.

Apply the Water Color

Paint the mixture all the way down the background quickly. It's fine if you go over the edges of objects.

Adjust for Light Reflection

Lighten the color slightly on the left side to reflect a lighter sky. Near the sail reflection, imagine and apply a slightly greener color.

PRO TIP

Soften edges with a finger or dry brush for a smoother transition.

12 Painting the Sailboat



Paint the Sail Base Color

Start with a warm gray base color, almost an orange, for the sail. Be careful with the edges to avoid repainting the sky. Cover the entire sail with this color.

Add Shadow Colors

Since the sail is semi-transparent, use neutral or slightly cool grays for shadows. These should be only slightly darker than the sail's base color. In the top corner, use a slightly browner gray.

Highlight the Sail

Mix a much lighter version of the base color, mainly white, and use impasto brushwork to catch the light on the sail. Vary the brightness slightly, making it darker as it curves into the middle.

Paint the Rigging

Use a rigger brush to add the rigging details. This brush is perfect for creating fine lines and details like rigging.

PRO TIP

Vary the brightness of the highlights on the sail to create a realistic sense of depth and curvature.

13 Painting the Red Boat



Create a Warm Red Base

Mix a nice red with a touch of toning grey to grey it down slightly. This will ensure the boat stands out as the center of attention without being too vibrant.

Darken the Boat's Curve

As the boat curves away from the light, add a little bit of blue to the red mix. This will create a darker tone, enhancing the three-dimensional effect.

Add Details and Shadows

Include a rudder and a tiller at the back of the boat for added detail. Use toning grey to paint shadows on the side of the boat, indicating fending buoys or fenders.

PRO TIP

Always include a little yellow in bright highlights to maintain warmth in the lighting.

14 Foreground Boat and Reflections



Add Details to the Boat

Include small elements like rollers, rollicks, and seats on the deck of the boat to suggest complexity. Use a very dark grey, almost black, for the boat's base color. Lighten the color as the boat curves towards the light to reflect its shape and lighting.

Paint the Water Line

Carefully paint the water line where the boat's color changes due to anti-fouling paint. This line is crucial for showing where the boat meets the water.

Create Boat Reflections

Paint the boat's reflection in the water, considering the dark color allows visibility into the water. Add the shadow of the boat on the lake's bottom, ensuring it has a soft edge.

Reflect Fenders and Ripples

Paint reflections of the fenders, ensuring they are at the opposite angle to the water. Make the fender highlights slightly wiggly and soften them with a darker sky color. Add light reflections on the sail in the water, sharpening the boat's reflection with lighter sky color.

Add Mooring Buoys

Place two red mooring buoys in the scene. The distant buoy should be smaller, grayer, and slightly lighter than the one in the foreground.

PRO TIP

Ensure reflections of objects at an angle to the water are painted at the opposite angle for realism.

15 Foreground Building and Details



Undercoat the Foreground

Apply a thin layer of grayish-brown to the building on the left and the rest of the foreground. This will add warmth to the painting, complementing the purplish shadows to come. Allow it to dry for 15 minutes before proceeding.

Prepare the Palette

Clean your palette to make space for a new set of colors. Start with a dark purplish grey to create depth and contrast in the foreground.

Use Larger Brush Strokes

Switch to a larger brush, like a number 8 filbert, to apply larger brush strokes in the foreground. This technique enhances the sense of depth by contrasting with the smaller strokes used in the background.

Paint Dark Areas First

Begin with the darkest colors under the eave or inside the archway. Gradually lighten these areas, ensuring soft edges to maintain the softness of shadows.

Add Details and Variations

Incorporate slight color variations, like a different shade for the sign, to add interest. Include red flowers in the planter box to continue the red accent theme. Add a dark interior for the doorway and some curly wrought iron details. Consider adding greenery or a vine for extra texture.

PRO TIP

Use larger brush strokes in the foreground to create a sense of depth compared to the detailed background.

16 Foreground Seawall and Dock



Paint the Seawall Shadow

Mix a warm dark purple to cover the shadow side of the seawall. Once covered, add a slightly lighter, bluer purple to the top in a few big strokes to suggest the block wall structure.

Create the Seawall Reflection

Add yellow to your purple mixture to create a dark green. Use this to paint the reflection of the seawall in the water, keeping it very dark as you're looking down into the water.

Paint the Dock Surface

Mix a very light warm gray for the top of the dock by adding warm colors like red or yellow to the gray. Dab away some wet paint to reveal warmer wood tones underneath, ensuring the first brown layer is dry.

Add Water Vibrancy

Enhance the water's vibrancy by working from the bottom with big strokes of dark bluish gray. Add reflective sky color to create soft undulations, keeping edges smooth to avoid a choppy appearance.

Paint Dock Reflection

Use a very dark green to paint the dock's reflection, capturing the underside's darkness. Employ sharp edges for the reflected shape's outline.

Darken Sky Reflections

Keep the sky reflections in the corner dark to prevent them from becoming a focal point. This area should lead into the painting without drawing too much attention.

PRO TIP

Dab away wet paint to reveal warmer tones underneath, but ensure the base layer is dry first.

17 Foreground Dinghy and Details



Paint the Boat Sides

Use a dark, subdued red for the sides of the boat in the foreground. Keep the boat in shadow to ensure the center of interest and light stand out more. Make the edge under the boat slightly darker with a soft edge to blend it smoothly.

Add Shadows and Fenders

Create soft shadows for the red fenders, starting with a vibrant red and darkening the edges to suggest curvature. Use a mid-gray for the top of the fender and the back of the boat, adding a bit of reflected light for realism.

Work on Boat Details

Apply the same gray for dark spots inside the boat in cool shadow, possibly adding a hint of blue. Use a slightly lighter, bluer gray for surfaces reflecting more sky. Add grayish-brown details around the boat's edge, reflecting the sky.

Highlight and Shadows

Add light on the back of the boat using white, yellow, and toning gray, blending into wet paint. Use large brush strokes for the foreground. Soften the sharp light edge, as it's cast by a distant building.

Finalize Details

Intensify the sky reflection and make the tops of the fenders black. Add oars and their shadows on the seats to complete the dinghy.

PRO TIP

Use large brush strokes in the foreground to maintain a sense of scale and depth.

18 Final Touches and Signing



Add Dock Poles

Paint the poles for the dock, ensuring they are placed accurately in the scene. Use a steady hand to maintain their vertical alignment.

Apply Reflected Light

Add a touch of greyish blue light on the right-hand side of the poles. This will mimic the reflected sky and enhance realism.

Include Reflections

Paint the reflections of the poles in the water. Ensure they align with the poles for a cohesive look.

Enhance with Final Details

Add a few more details throughout the painting to bring it to life. These small touches can add vibrancy and interest.

Remove Tape and Sign

Carefully remove the tape to reveal clean edges. Don't forget to sign your artwork to complete the piece.

PRO TIP

Use greyish blue light on the right side of objects to suggest reflected sky.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by laying a solid foundation with initial sketches and studies. Begin with thumbnail sketches to explore composition and balance, followed by black and white and grayscale studies to understand values and depth. Experiment with color studies to ensure harmony in your palette, and refine your sketches into a detailed blueprint for your painting.

As you progress, embrace the differences between your painting and reference photographs to add character and interest. Make design changes to enhance the focal point and adjust colors to create depth and vibrancy. Choose your medium wisely, and use techniques like creating a background gradient to set the scene.

In the final stages, focus on painting methodically from background to foreground, using the right brushes and techniques to bring your scene to life. Pay attention to details like reflections and highlights, ensuring each element contributes to the overall composition. With patience and practice, your painting will capture the essence of a safe harbor, inviting viewers into its tranquil beauty.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use thumbnail sketches to refine composition ideas.
- Allow your painting to have its own character, not just replicate a photo.
- Modify elements that compete with your focal point.
- Lighten the background to enhance depth and contrast.
- Select the medium you are most comfortable with.
- Use a clean brush to gently soften edges for variation.
- Vary the brightness of highlights on the sail for depth.
- Use larger brush strokes in the foreground for depth.



"Safe Harbour" 11 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.

"French Harbour" by Charles Post



"French Harbour" 11x14" Acrylic on Canvas by Charles Post

Charles you have an interesting style - crisp edges versus soft transitions, simplified forms versus fine details. I love the central boat - such good shapes. The drawing of the front 3 boats is at odds with each other because if you can see that much inside the front boat there should be a gradual reduction in the internal view of the other two, whereas you've drawn them with very little elevation, as they would be if placed further away from us. Beware of making soft shadows where you intend there to be strong sunlight because in most situations strong sunlight will produce hard edged shadows. Cast shadows from clouds and mountains are the usual exception to this. An overcast day will produce soft edged shadows. Great work!

"Come sail away on the Sloop RR47" by Lori Ippolito



"Come sail away on the Sloop RR47" 11x14" Oil on Canvas by Lori Ippolito

Great work Lori! I like the dramatic swoosh of the background echoing the smooth curves of the sail. Great atmospheric perspective there! The colours seem to be working very well together with a few blue exceptions in the reflection of the central boat and the midground water on the right becoming a bit too punchy. The drawing of the dock and buildings are very good but the boats could do with a little straightening, most notably the waterline of the black yacht needs to be flat and horizontal on the water. Nice to see you varying the colours in the shadows which many people have made too dark and colourless in this project.

"Hot Summer's Day (Yvoire - vue du port avec le ch teau)" by Jon Main



"Hot Summer's Day (Yvoire - vue du port avec le ch teau)" 50x65cm Oil on Canvas by Jon Main

You captured a great sense of warm light in this painting Jon which you mentioned was your particular goal for this piece. Mission accomplished! Beautiful greys in the shadows of the buildings particularly and great relationships with their counterpart sunlight colours. Subtle! You've also displayed excellent drawing skills and attention to detail without going overboard.

My only real concern with this piece is the confusion in the foreground water where you've tried to stick with the detail in the photograph instead of simplifying it a little so it is more easily readable. Australian artist Joseph Zbukvic does this exceedingly well - worth having a Google.

"Day Sailing" by Jim Baldoumas



"Day Sailing" 11x14" Oil on Canvas by Jim Baldoumas

Nice work Jim with strong colour and interesting variations throughout. The drawing is all good except for the shape of the dome which is a little squat. We're missing the strong shadow across the pier and the shadows cast by the white fenders onto the side of the boat. You've achieved a good light effect across the scene with the values getting much lighter and closer together in the background - not easy but you've done it well. Overall a solid result - good to see.