



The Grand Canyon

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/107-The-Grand-Canyon>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, we dive into the majestic and awe-inspiring landscape of the Grand Canyon, a place that offers an unparalleled opportunity to hone your skills in simplifying complex scenes. The Grand Canyon, with its vast expanse stretching 10 to 15 kilometers across and plunging 2 to 3 kilometers deep, presents an overwhelming amount of visual information. It's a scene so intricate that one could spend a lifetime trying to fully grasp its grandeur. As landscape painters, we often face the challenge of distilling such complexity into a manageable composition. Here, we'll explore how to tackle this by focusing on the light and shadow families, a technique that allows us to simplify the scene effectively. By identifying and labeling areas of light and shadow, and using a two-value statement to represent them, we can bring clarity and form to our paintings. This approach not only helps in managing the infinite colors of the canyon but also enhances the design and vibrancy of your work. Join me as we embark on this rewarding journey to capture the essence of one of Earth's most intricate landscapes.



"Sunrise, Grand Canyon" 10x8" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson



REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 2

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 3

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 4

The scene as Richard found it.

Materials

Gather these materials before you start. If you don't have the exact same supplies, use what you have and substitute freely.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- M. Graham & Co. Oil Paints
- Alizarine Crimson
- 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 Simplifying with Light and Shadow Families



Identify Light and Shadow Families

Determine which areas of your scene are in light and which are in shadow. Label these as the light family and the shadow family.

Simplify Colors

For each object in your scene, choose one color to represent the light and one color to represent the shadow. This simplification helps manage the infinite colors present in the scene.

Apply Two Value Statement

Use the chosen colors to create a two value statement for each object. This involves painting one value for the light and one for the shadow, enhancing the form and design of your painting.

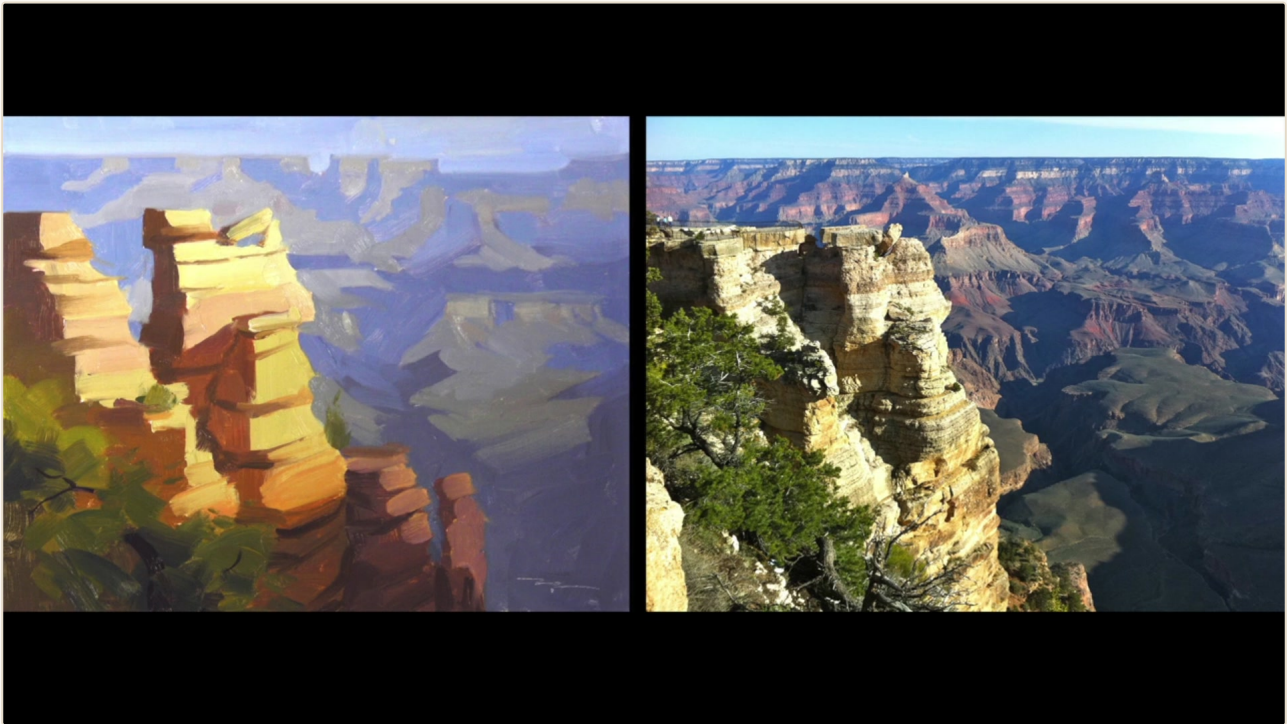
Maintain Color Purity

Keep the light and shadow colors distinct on your canvas to maintain their purity and vibrancy. Avoid mixing them to prevent muddling the colors.

PRO TIP

Choose one color for the light and one for the shadow to simplify and strengthen your painting's design.

2 Black and White Shadow Exercise



Prepare Your Materials

Print out a black and white version of your reference photo and gather some black acrylic paint. This will help you focus on the light and shadow families without the distraction of color.

Simplify Shadow Shapes

Paint over all the shadow areas in your black and white printout using the black acrylic paint. Simplify the shapes by joining them together where possible, retaining the general character but ignoring fine details.

Handle Tricky Areas

Identify areas like the tree in the corner, which is a dark shape in the light. Paint around it with the shadow family in the rock, using artistic license to introduce your own shadows for interest.

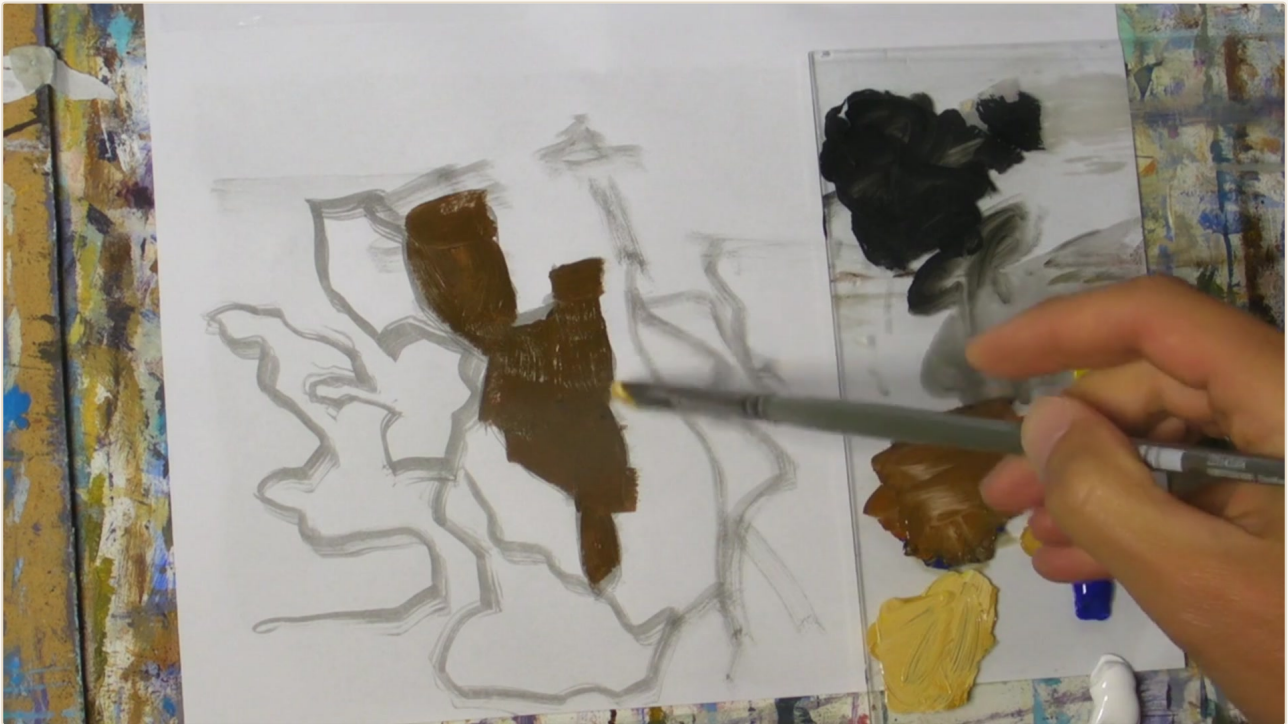
Design Light and Shadow

As you design shadow shapes, also consider the light shapes. Look for opportunities to join dark shapes together to unify them, guide the viewer's eye, and simplify the composition.

PRO TIP

Join shadow shapes together to unify them and simplify your composition.

3 Mixing Colors for Light and Shadow



Mix Colors for Shadow and Light

Mix a single color for the large shadow shape and another for the large light shape. Focus on creating distinct colors for each area to maintain clarity in your painting.

Define the Edge

Carefully define the edge where the shadow and light shapes meet. Choose to make this edge either sharp or soft, but avoid blending the two large shapes together.

PRO TIP

Use distinct colors for shadow and light areas to maintain clarity.

4 Setting Darkest Dark and Lightest Light



Prepare Your Canvas

Use a 10x8 wood acrylic prime panel for your painting. Gather your Gamblin oil colors and a medium-sized synthetic filbert brush.

Sketch the Horizon

Sketch in the horizon line using a pencil. Make any necessary adjustments to the design, but generally stick to your initial plan.

Block in Shadow Families

Block in all of the shadow families using a very thin mixture of red and a bit of walnut oil. Consider casting a shadow across the bottom of the foreground rocks for added depth.

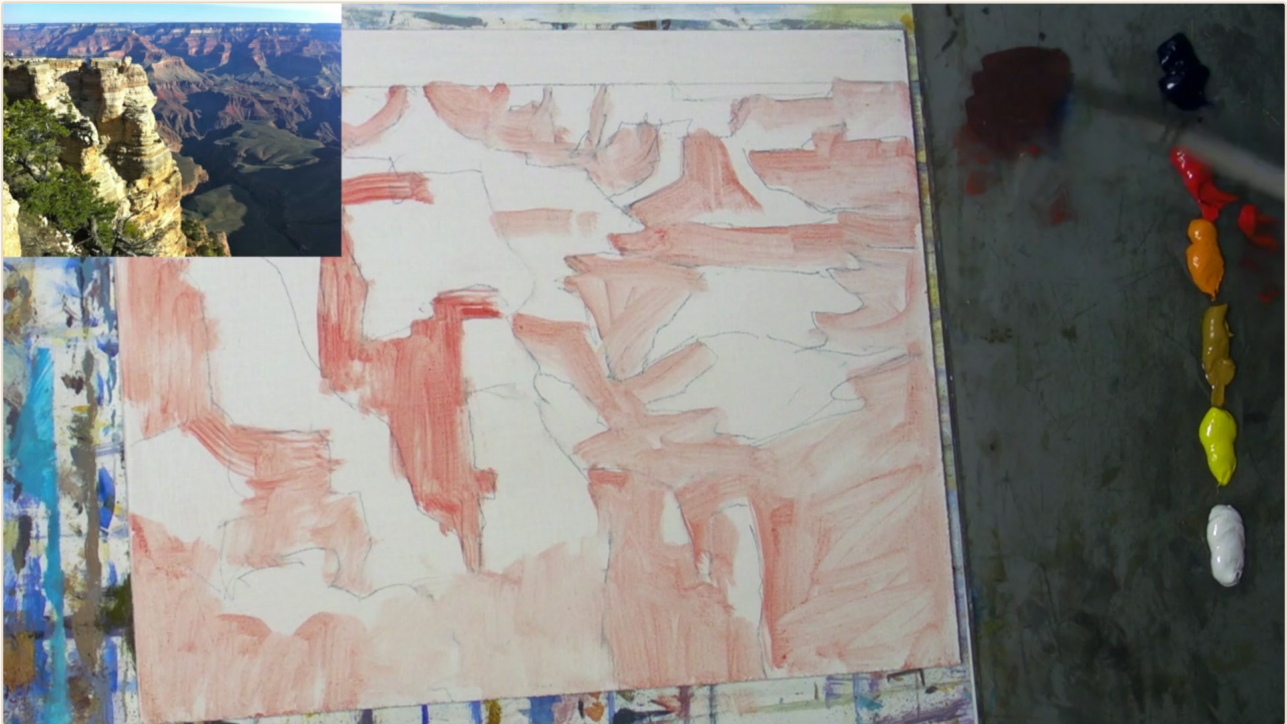
Set Darkest Dark and Lightest Light

Identify and paint your darkest dark and lightest light on the canvas. This sets the limits for your painting, ensuring nothing will be darker or lighter than these points.

PRO TIP

Use a pencil to sketch the horizon for precise adjustments before painting.

5 Foreground Rock Colors and Temperature



Establish Dark Values

Use the darkest colors on your palette to create a dark value. Focus on achieving the correct value rather than the exact color. Lighten the mixture slightly with white to keep it above pure black.

Define Lightest Lights

Mix white with yellow ochre to create a bright, light color for the rocks. Apply this mixture to make the rocks stand out as the lightest light in your painting.

Block in Foreground Rock Color

Identify the easiest color to see, which is often closest to a tube color. Use yellow ochre mixed with white to lighten it and block in a good-sized area of this color for the foreground rocks.

Mix and Apply Shadow Color

Create a shadow color for the rocks and apply it. Ensure there is a consistent value difference, such as four values, between the light and shadow on the rocks.

Consider Temperature Differences

Remember that in the Grand Canyon, warm colored rock walls reflect light into the shadows, creating a significant temperature difference between light and shadow areas.

PRO TIP

Use yellow ochre mixed with white to easily block in the light color of the rocks.

6 Systematic Approach to Foreground Shapes



Soften Edges for Rounded Rocks

Soften the edges of your shapes to help them appear like rounded rocks. This technique will enhance the realism of your painting.

Adjust Hue in Light and Shadow

Change the hue of colors in the light and shadow areas. Add blue to the top areas to make them cooler. As you move down around the tree, add yellow to create a cooler, greener effect.

Create Interest with Color Variation

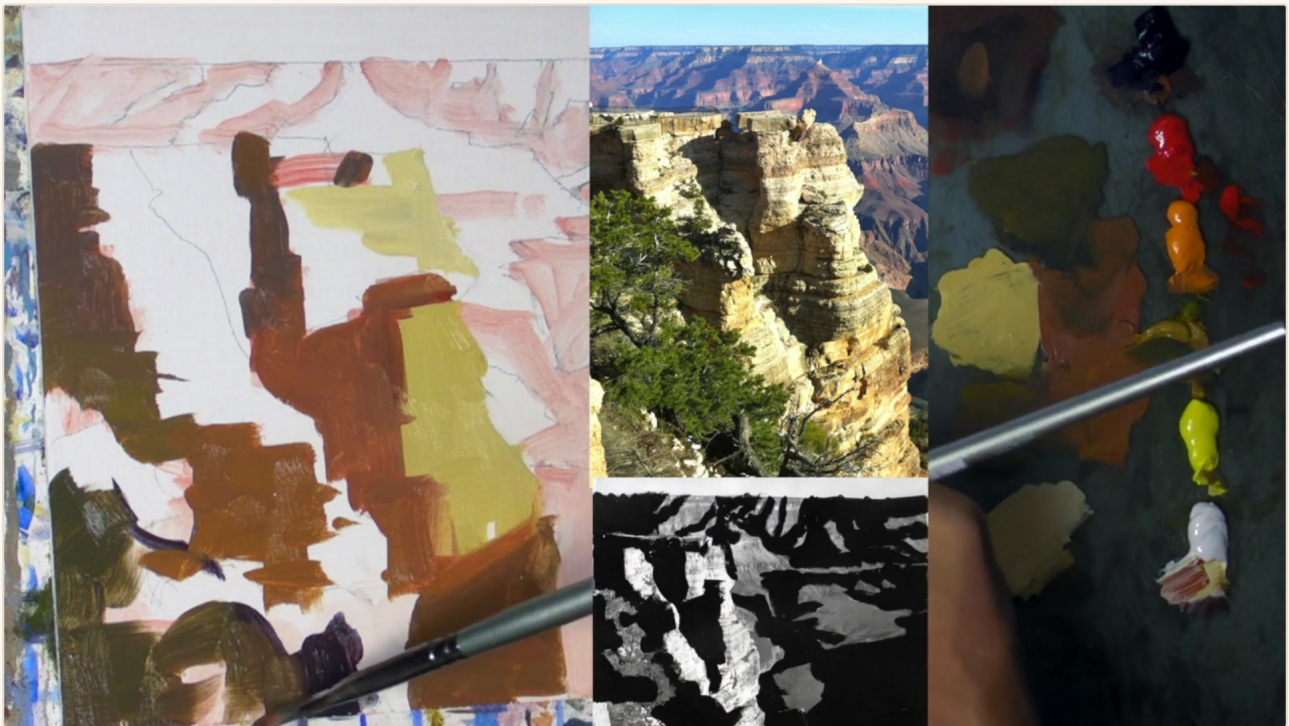
Introduce color changes in the foreground areas to add interest. Feel free to keep these areas flat like a mosaic if preferred, but varying colors can enhance the visual appeal.

Work systematically through all the shadow shapes in the foreground first. Then proceed to paint all the light shapes in the foreground.

PRO TIP

Soften edges to make shapes appear rounded and more realistic.

7 Painting Light Shapes and Color Bands



Paint Light Shapes

Focus on painting the light shapes in the rock columns. Keep the color consistent across the two columns to reflect the natural bands of color caused by the rock strata.

Add Pinkish Hue

Introduce a little bit of red to your mix to create a pinkish hue. Ensure the value remains unchanged while maintaining the color consistency across the rock columns.

Incorporate Orange and Yellow

Apply more orange towards the bottom of the rocks to enhance the effect of a soft shadow. Intensify the light with more yellow as it ascends the rock, simulating natural light progression.

Enhance with Reflected Light

Use rich, vibrant colors in the cracks and overhangs where reflected light brightens these areas. A little twist of the brush can create interesting shapes.

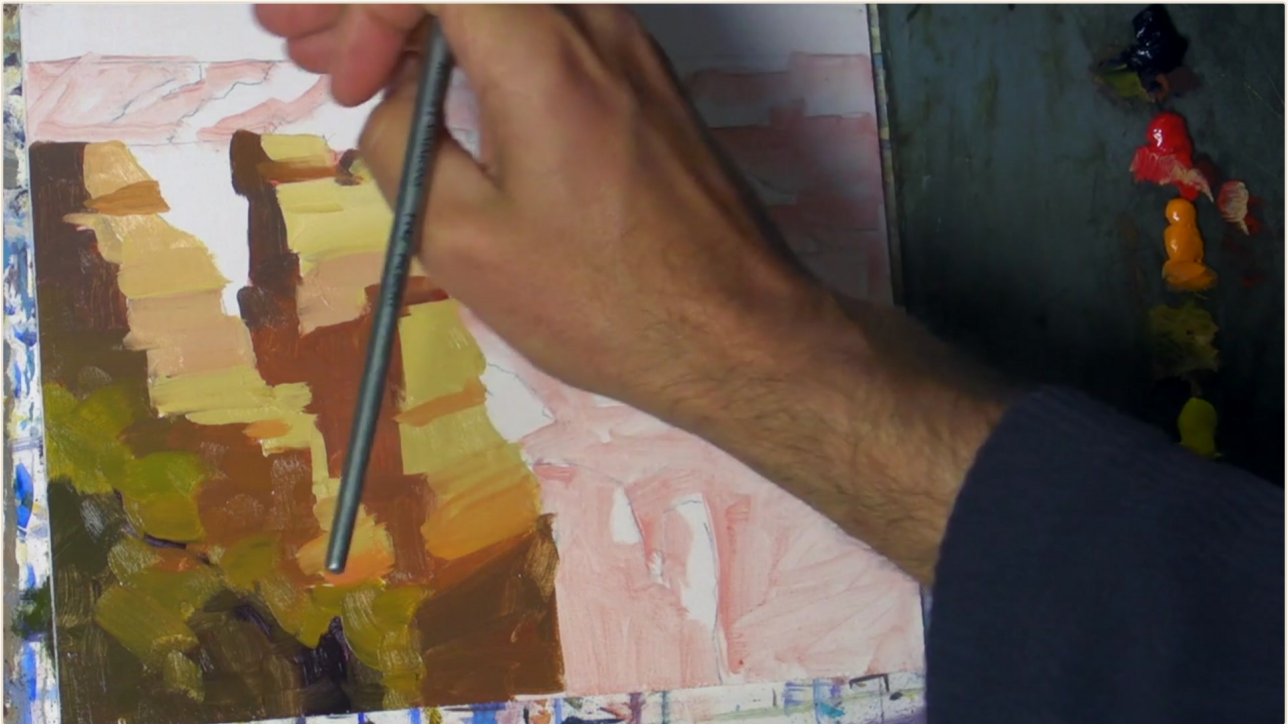
Adjust Tree Colors

Use a lighter green for the light areas in the tree. Start with an orange-green to match the orange light on the rock base, then add more yellow as it moves upwards.

PRO TIP

Maintain consistent color bands across rock columns to reflect natural rock strata.

8 Background and Atmospheric Perspective



Paint Foreground Rocks

Add the large rocks in the foreground to create a transition between the foreground and background. These rocks help to establish depth and should be painted before tackling the background.

Mix and Apply Shadow Colors

Start with the darkest blue-grey for the shadow area in the background. Mix blue and red to create purple, then lighten with white. Add a touch of orange to subdue the blue, making it more grey. Test the color with a dab before applying it broadly.

Create Atmospheric Perspective

As the colors recede, make them lighter and bluer. Use three steps to gradually lighten and blue the colors, softening edges to avoid harsh transitions. This technique enhances the sense of distance.

Add Light Areas

Begin with the darkest lights, slightly lighter and greener than the shadow color. Ensure the light areas also become lighter and bluer as they ascend, reflecting atmospheric perspective. Focus on maintaining the distinct shapes to convey the scene accurately.

PRO TIP

Test your color mix with a small dab before applying it to the canvas to ensure it matches your intended value and hue.

9 Adjusting Light and Shadow Values



Adjust Light and Shadow Values

Ensure that the light areas in your painting are slightly lighter in value than the shadow areas. This subtle difference will help create depth and realism in your work.

Add Variation to the Rocks

Introduce some variation by making the color of the rocks warmer and lighter. This will add interest and dimension to the rocky surfaces.

PRO TIP

Aim for light areas to be just a bit lighter than shadow areas to enhance depth.

10 Blocking in the Sky



Mix Sky Color

Combine ultramarine and white to create the sky color. Ensure it is lighter than the distant hills but not lighter than the lightest rock color in your painting.

Add Variation to Horizon

Include small chinks in the horizon line to add interest and variation. These variations can enhance the overall composition and break up the straight line of the horizon.

Soften the Horizon Edge

Gently soften the edge of the horizon to help push it back into space, creating a sense of depth.

Introduce Warmth

Add a touch of warmth to the sky color for variation. This subtle change can enrich the sky and add visual interest.

PRO TIP

Ensure the sky color is lighter than the distant hills but not lighter than the lightest rock color.

11 Adding Detail and Evaluating Simplicity



Adjust Foreground Tree

Darken the light areas of the tree in the foreground to make it more convincing and align with the rest of the painting. Strengthen the shadow areas to enhance realism.

Add Green for Balance

Introduce green in other parts of the painting to help guide the viewer's eye through the composition. This will create a harmonious balance and connection across the canvas.

Evaluate Simplicity

Consider taking a photo of your painting at this stage. This will allow you to compare the current simplicity with the final result after adding more detail.

Add Subtle Details

Carefully add small details to enhance realism without overwhelming the painting. Remember, this exercise focuses on simplifying light and shadow families.

PRO TIP

Take a photo of your painting before adding more detail to evaluate the impact of additional elements.

12 Benefits of Two Value Statement



Understand the Two Value Statement

Recognize that a two value statement involves using just two tones to create a strong painting. This technique is particularly effective on a small canvas, where simplicity is key.

Simplify Your Subject

Use the two value statement to break down the complexity of a landscape. Focus on analyzing your scene in terms of light and shade to simplify and understand it better.

Create a Convincing Illusion of Reality

Apply the two value statement to give your painting a convincing illusion of reality. This method allows you to paint simply and directly, enhancing the overall strength of your artwork.

PRO TIP

Use a two value statement to simplify complex landscapes into light and shade.

13 Comparing Paintings



Compare Paintings

Examine the plein air painting created at the Grand Canyon alongside the final painting. Notice the additional details and information present in the plein air version compared to today's work. Decide for yourself which aspects you prefer, keeping in mind that art is subjective and personal preferences vary.

PRO TIP

Art is subjective; focus on what elements you personally enjoy in each painting.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by simplifying your scene into light and shadow families. This foundational step allows you to manage the complexity of colors and shapes, setting a strong design for your painting. As you progress, focus on maintaining distinct colors for light and shadow areas to preserve clarity and vibrancy.

As you develop your painting, pay attention to the interplay of light and shadow, especially in the Grand Canyon's rocky landscapes. Use a systematic approach to soften edges and introduce color variations, enhancing realism and depth. Remember to adjust your values to create a convincing sense of distance and atmospheric perspective.

In the final stages, evaluate your painting's simplicity and detail. Use the two value statement to strengthen your composition and consider the subjective nature of art as you compare different versions of your work. Focus on the elements that resonate with you personally, ensuring your painting reflects your unique artistic vision.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Choose one color for light and one for shadow to simplify your painting's design.
- Join shadow shapes together to unify them and simplify your composition.
- Use distinct colors for shadow and light areas to maintain clarity.
- Use a pencil to sketch the horizon for precise adjustments before painting.
- Soften edges to make shapes appear rounded and more realistic.
- Maintain consistent color bands across rock columns to reflect natural rock strata.
- Test your color mix with a small dab before applying it to the canvas.
- Aim for light areas to be just a bit lighter than shadow areas to enhance depth.



"Sunrise, Grand Canyon" 10x8" 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.

"From Up High" by Sandra Kelly



"From Up High" 29x42cm" Oil by Sandra Kelly

Great work Sandra. Finding simplicity was the goal of this exercise and you've managed to keep things simplified despite the larger canvas and the complex subject. You've even managed to simplify the colour banding of the rock strata into four distinct layers. Making all the background have soft edges was a really nice idea and that's lent a real photographic crispness to the foreground rocks.

All the the colours have a lovely warmth to them which is great to see and in that respect you've jumped ahead of my small study and created colour unity throughout the whole painting which is something I only managed to achieve in my larger studio painting after 2 weeks! Beautiful subtle work there with warm grays in the background and you managed to keep all the values in good relationship with each other there which is not an easy task at all. I do feel that I would like to add a little area of slightly lighter interest in the background area somewhere to the the eye more reason to travel back there.

The one thing that is spoiling the effect of light on your foreground rocks is the colour of the cracks there. If you make those cracks that are within large areas of light just a slightly darker version of the rock colour rather than adding blue to them it will really help with the illusion of strong light. Keep up the good work!

“Grand Canyon, Study 2, Bock-in” by Jim Delk



"Grand Canyon, Study 2, Bock-in" by Jim Delk

That's getting there Jim. You've certainly been looking at simplifying the scene and figuring out the major light and shadow families. It looks to me like you copied my own study as much as you looked at the photograph, which is fine but I think you'll get even more learning done next time by trying to figure out how you want to simplify the scene.

As is often the case your painting was actually working better at the end of the block in stage (shown on the left) before you started fiddling with it. By viewing both paintings in grayscale we can see clearly why the block in reads better. You've lost the background's dark/light value structure you had achieved in the block-in. It looks like what you did was lighten all the blue-gray shadow family in the background but left all the lights which made the lights too dark comparatively. You've also exaggerated some warm colours there (that big patch of brown in the middle background) which is out of place - it needs to be much cooler due to atmospheric perspective.

Squinting at your scene really helps with this. Our common problem is that as soon as we focus in on one small area of the scene we lose it's relationship with the rest and in fact our brains go ahead and exaggerate the differences in colour and contrast there so that we can see it better, but that is really confusing for us painters.

That reflected light you have added into the shadows in the foreground rocks has really livened them up and you managed to hold back from adding too much detail there which is great. In fact the foreground is looking pretty good and I would just like to see you tackle the background again. Nearly there! Great to see you have already done two separate studies too - great work!

“Red Rock Canyon” by Ivana Jackson

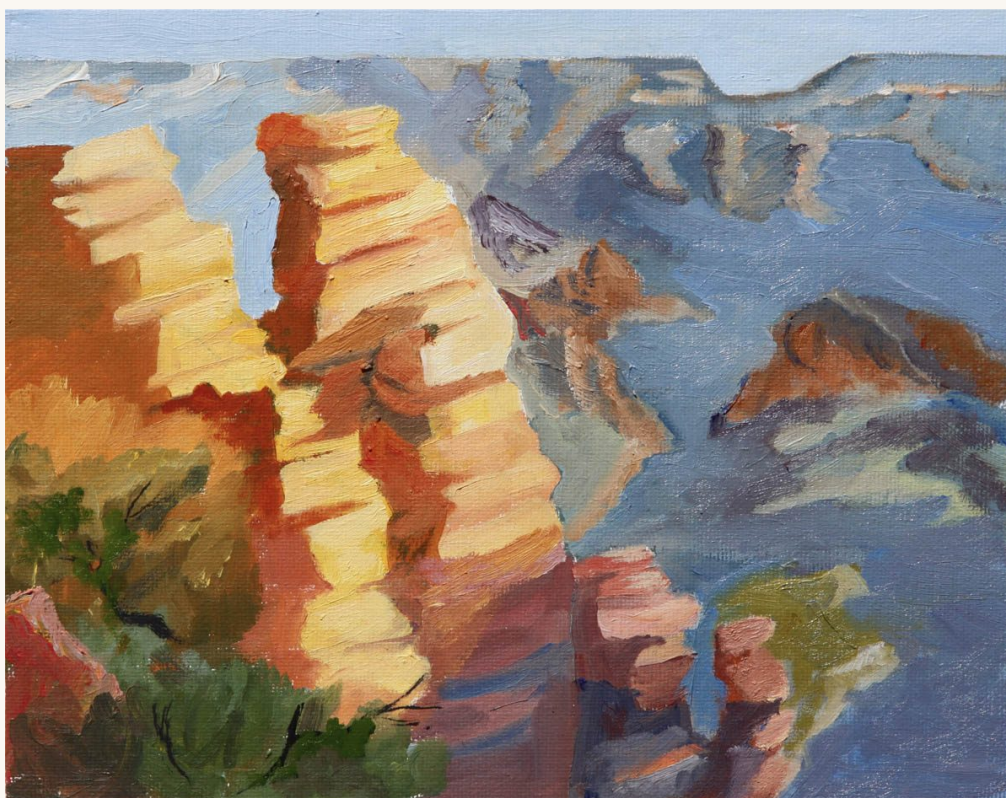


"Red Rock Canyon" 10x8" Oil by Ivana Jackson

Very nicely done Ivana. Firstly your drawing is very accurate. Compared to the photo you seem to have transferred the image to the canvas remarkably well - so much so that I assume it was traced on. No sin there in my book if you did trace it. The only trouble I ever find with tracing is that it's very easy to then become a slave to the drawing. Either way the drawing is good here and the scene itself is already cropped and organized fairly well in the photo so you can't really go wrong there, and you have made a few conscious changes to the layout that have helped it along a little like removing the little noble of rock in the top left corner which would otherwise attract the eye to the edge of the canvas. You've also given the tree a little more breathing space which is a good idea and introduced a subtle pathway of light in the foreground. Nice work!

In terms of your colour decisions it looks like you have some knowledge of plein air painting because you've corrected the under-exposed shadows by lightening them which is great to see but personally I feel that you've missed a couple of opportunities to introduce some slightly punchier colour in the foreground and midground which would have helped to spice up the scene. You have thought clearly about the light and shadow families which is great to see but perhaps added a little more detail than I would have expected when the goal of this exercise was really about simplifying our subject. Hard to stop sometimes! Anyway, I hope you're proud of this painting because you've certainly done a lot of things well in it and I hope you'll enjoy the next workshop challenge too which leads smoothly on from this one.

“Grand Canyon, Study 2, Final” by Jim Delk



"Grand Canyon, Study 2, Final" by Jim Delk

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