



Petunias

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/65-Petunias>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, I invite you to join me in capturing the delicate beauty of petunias, a subject that unexpectedly caught my eye during a visit to the flower store. Originally intending to buy pansies, I was drawn instead to the sculptural elegance of these petunias, which promise to be a joy to paint. This lesson is the third in a series of four, where we delve into the art of painting flowers, focusing on building a textural background, premixing greys, and painting with shapes. We'll also explore the power of focusing with edges, a technique that not only enhances your painting skills but also offers insights into your personal style as an artist. Using acrylics and oils, or a combination of both, we'll spend time arranging the flowers to capture them in the best light, highlighting the individual beauty of each bloom. By zooming in and cropping out distractions, we create a composition that exudes a stark, almost Japanese or Oriental feel, emphasizing the elegance and grace of these flowers. This rewarding subject offers a rich opportunity to deepen your understanding of painting while celebrating the exquisite allure of petunias.



"Petunias" 11 x 11" 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

Here's everything I use for this painting. Don't worry 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 Setting up the composition

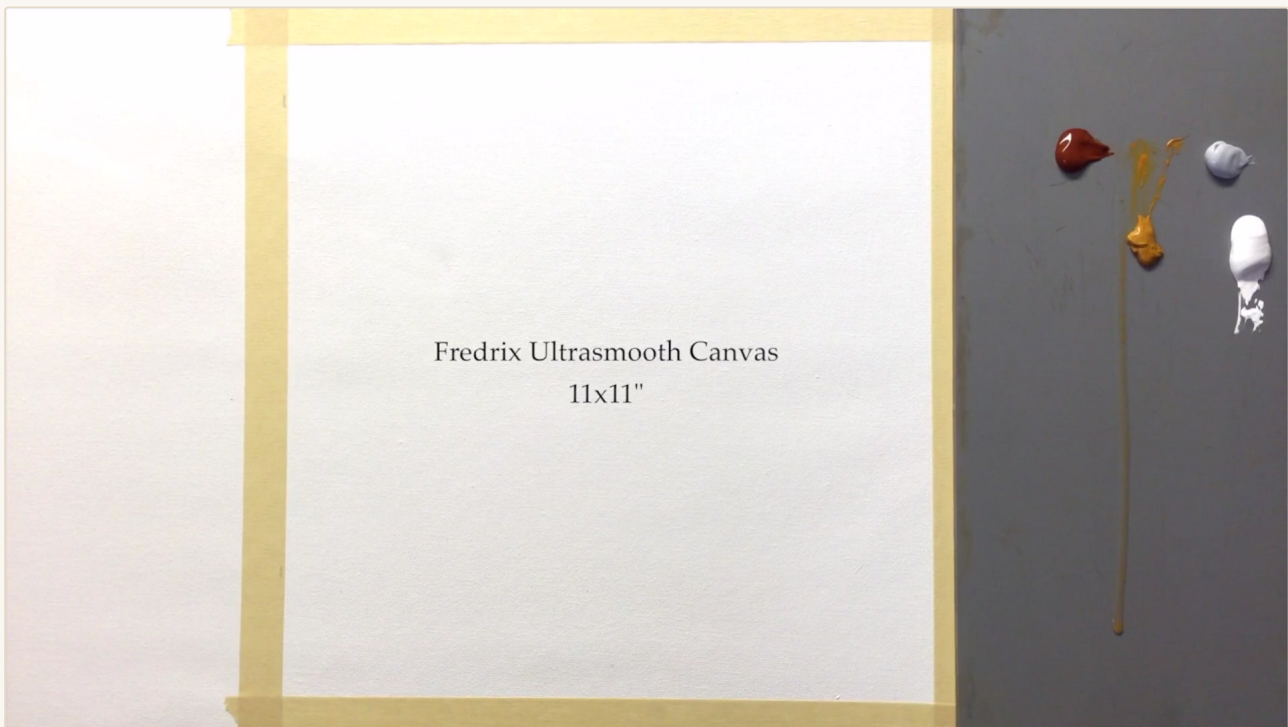


I spend a couple of hours arranging the flowers to capture them in the best light. I focus on highlighting the beauty of the individual flowers. I zoom in and crop out any distractions, centering the composition on the flowers themselves. This approach gives the painting a stark, almost Japanese or Oriental feel, emphasizing the elegance of the flowers.

PRO TIP

Zoom in on your subject to eliminate distractions and focus on its essential beauty.

2 Preparing the canvas



Prepare the Canvas

I tape my canvas and apply an extra coat of gesso, letting it dry overnight. This helps the canvas accept paint more easily.

Tone the Canvas

I use a big brush with a little water to mix burnt sienna, yellow ochre, toning gray, and some white. I add a touch of blue to achieve a warm mid-grey tone.

Create Gradation

I darken the top slightly to introduce some gradation in value. This adds depth to the canvas.

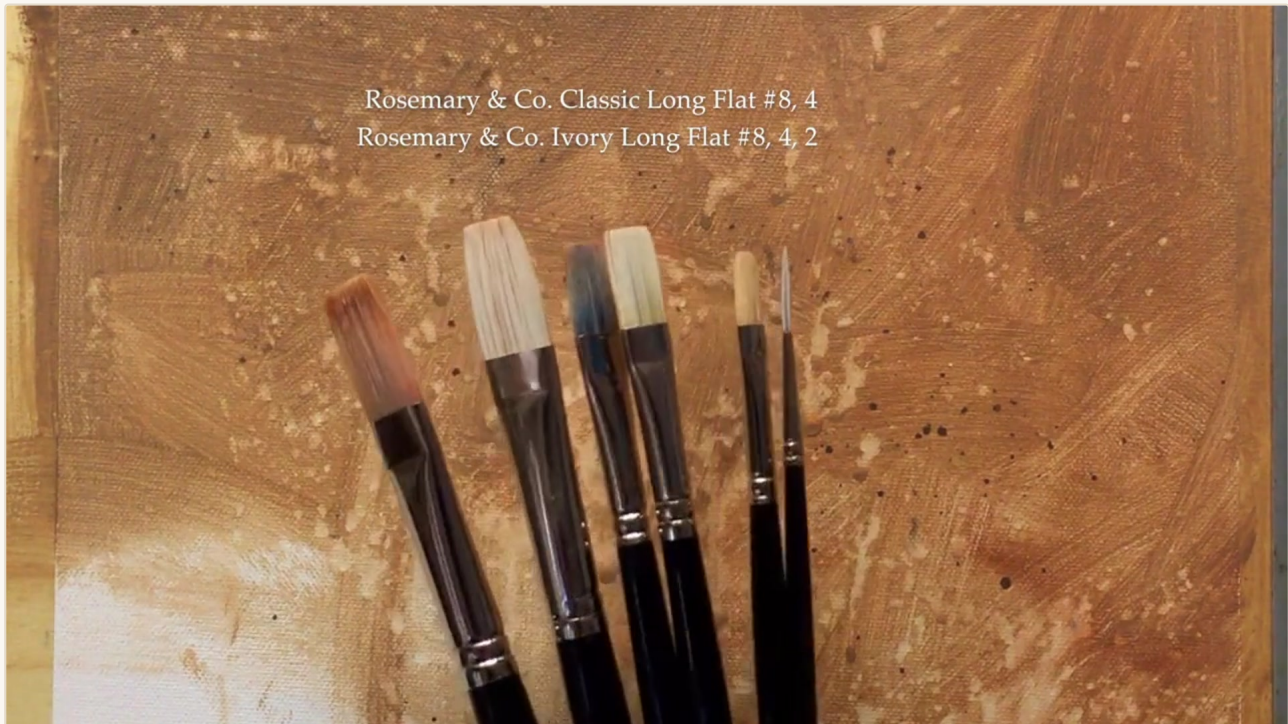
Add Texture

Using a clean brush dipped in water, I flick it onto the canvas to create interesting textures with splattered effects. I add a few dark splatters for variety.

PRO TIP

Applying an extra coat of gesso helps the canvas accept paint more easily.

3 Background preparation



Select Brushes

I choose a range of brushes, starting with large natural bristle brushes, then moving to medium-sized synthetics, and finishing with smaller ones for detail work.

Plan the Composition

I focus on making the painting a study of the major shapes of the flowers, keeping the background loose and less detailed to emphasize the beauty of the flowers.

Adjust Background Color

I find the background wash in acrylic is too intense, so I mix a gray tone with oils to apply a thin wash over it, softening the color and letting it dry slightly before working on the flowers.

PRO TIP

I use larger brushes for the background to keep it loose and less detailed, allowing the flowers to stand out.

4 Mixing and applying grey tones



Mixing Grey Tones

I start by mixing ultramarine blue and burnt sienna to create a grey. If I want the grey warmer, I add more burnt sienna, and for a cooler grey, I add more blue.

Applying Grey Tones

I dip my brush into Gamsol to thin the paint slightly. I scumble the grey over the background, ensuring not to lose the underlying layers.

Creating Contrast

I focus on making the background darkest near the center of interest to enhance contrast with the brightest flowers. I lighten the grey as I move away from this area, modifying the color for interesting transitions.

Working the Surface

I press the paint down firmly and then wipe some off to create texture. I continue to work the surface to add more visual interest.

PRO TIP

Adjust the warmth of your grey by varying the ratio of burnt sienna and ultramarine blue.

5 Drawing the big shapes



Prepare the Surface

I let the surface dry for two days since I was away for the weekend. If you're using acrylics, you can paint over it after about half an hour, or in an hour if you've painted thinly using Gamsol or another oil solvent.

Draw the Big Shapes

I decide to draw in the big shapes instead of tracing them, which might save time and be more accurate. I find that the pencil isn't visible enough, so I switch to a white watercolor pencil to outline the big shapes.

PRO TIP

Approach your painting as a study rather than a finished piece to reduce timidity and encourage experimentation.

6 Mixing greys and greens



Mixing a Cool Grey

I take a little bit of burnt sienna and a little bit of blue, mixing them with a lot of white. My palette is a neutral mid-gray, which helps me judge the mixture. This combination gives me a slightly cool light grey, lighter than mid-grey.

Mixing a Warm Grey

I adjust the mixture by adding more burnt sienna and using less blue. This results in a slightly warm light grey, maintaining the same value as the cool grey.

Mixing a Green

I mix a small amount of blue with yellow to create a strong green. It's surprising how little blue is needed to change yellow into a vibrant green.

PRO TIP

Using a neutral mid-gray palette helps me accurately judge the subtle differences in my grey mixtures.

7 Blocking in the petals



Select the Brush

I start with a fairly small brush, a number 4 Ivory Long Flat, to ensure a careful study of the petals.

Use Gel Medium

I use a Gamblin solvent-free gel medium to thin the paint, allowing for a more delicate application suitable for the petunias.

Block in Petal Colors

I look at my subject and identify where I see the color or something close to it, applying it in big blocks. I focus on the halftones, which are cooler grays halfway between light and shadow.

Adjust for Light and Shadow

I note that the light is cool, so the lights will tend towards cool, blue, or even green. I ensure the cool grays in shadow areas reflect this.

Focus on Big Shapes

I squint my eyes to see the big shapes of the same color in my subject, painting these shapes in the block-in stage to capture the essence of the petals.

PRO TIP

Squinting helps to see the big shapes and colors, making it easier to block in accurately.

8 Adding light and shadow



Mixing Warm Grey

I take that warm grey and darken it slightly, adding a little yellow to warm it even more. I test the color to see how it looks on the canvas.

Creating Sharp Edges

I use the very tip of my crisp brush to achieve sharp edges where needed, ensuring precision in my work.

Adding Cooler Grey

I mix a slightly darker, cooler grey and apply it in areas that need shadow, being careful not to draw too much attention.

Painting Greenish Centers

I reach for a dark green, lighten it with cool grey, and adjust the tone to suit the centers of the flowers.

Painting Beyond Edges

I paint past the intended finish line, allowing the next layers to blend smoothly into the space, creating a seamless transition.

Lightening Buds

I lighten the tops of the inside of the buds, preparing them for highlights later to give a glowing effect.

PRO TIP

When painting light areas, I often paint past the intended edge to allow for smoother transitions with subsequent layers.

9 Refining highlights and edges



Select a Smaller Brush

I switch to a number 2 ivory flat brush with long bristles. This brush holds a lot of paint and lays it smoothly onto the canvas.

Mix Cool Highlights

I mix cool colors with white to create highlight colors, since the lighting is cool and coming from the sky. I avoid using pure white as it doesn't appear naturally in this setting.

Apply Highlights with Sharp and Soft Edges

I apply the highlight colors, focusing on sharp edges along the outside and soft edges as the light dissolves into mid values. This creates a natural transition.

Refine Shapes and Edges

I carefully work on the small kinks and convoluted shapes of the flower, enjoying the process. I compare the painted area with the subject to refine and add subtle variations.

PRO TIP

Take your time to create subtle variations and shapes for a more beautiful result.

10 Adjusting colors and edges



Adding Blue Halftones

I notice more blue in this halftone, so I add it carefully. I pay attention to the edges, ensuring they are soft rather than sharp.

Mindful Brush Strokes

I make sure each brush stroke has a purpose, considering the shape, color, and edges. I think about where the shape starts, stops, and any transitions.

Cutting Back Edges

I use a clean brush with a little solvent to cut back into the edges against the dry background. This creates a crisp edge, but I clean the brush frequently to avoid smudging.

PRO TIP

A clean brush with solvent helps create crisp edges against a dry background.

11 Final adjustments



Tone Down Highlights

I tone down the highlights in the lower area so they don't compete with the brighter highlights above. This helps to create a sense of depth and focus.

Soften Background Edges

I take the edge off the green in the background by adding a bit more brown, making it fade back. I use a clean brush with a little solvent to soften the edges, ensuring the sharp edge of the stem stands out.

Enhance Crisp Highlights

For crisp highlights, I flatten the paint and scoop it onto the brush tip. I lay it down with one stroke, then pick up more paint for another stroke, ensuring a clean, sharp edge.

Darken Background for Contrast

I carefully darken the background to increase contrast, making the flowers appear brighter. It's risky, but it can enhance the overall effect if done carefully.

PRO TIP

When softening edges, use a clean brush and a bit of solvent to gently blend without disturbing the main elements.

Summary & Key Takeaways

In this lesson, I set out to capture the delicate beauty of petunias by focusing on their elegance and simplicity. By zooming in on the flowers and eliminating distractions, I aimed to create a composition that highlights their natural grace. Throughout the process, I emphasized the importance of preparation, from setting up the composition to applying an extra coat of gesso on the canvas, ensuring a smooth painting experience.

As we progressed through the steps, I encouraged an exploration of color and texture, using a variety of brushes and techniques to create depth and interest. By mixing greys and greens and carefully blocking in the petals, I aimed to guide you in capturing the essence of the flowers. The journey involved refining highlights and edges, adjusting colors, and making final touches to bring out the vibrancy and contrast of the petunias.

I hope this lesson has inspired you to approach your painting as a study, allowing for experimentation and growth. Remember to focus on the big shapes, use subtle variations, and take your time to enjoy the process. With these techniques, you can create a painting that not only captures the beauty of petunias but also reflects your unique artistic vision.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Zoom in on your subject to eliminate distractions and focus on its essential beauty.
- Applying an extra coat of gesso helps the canvas accept paint more easily.
- Use larger brushes for the background to keep it loose and less detailed, allowing the flowers to stand out.
- Adjust the warmth of your grey by varying the ratio of burnt sienna and ultramarine blue.
- Approach your painting as a study rather than a finished piece to reduce timidity and encourage experimentation.
- Using a neutral mid-gray palette helps me accurately judge the subtle differences in my grey mixtures.
- Squinting helps to see the big shapes and colors, making it easier to block in accurately.
- When painting light areas, I often paint past the intended edge to allow for smoother transitions with subsequent layers.



"Petunias" 11 x 11" 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.

'Petunias' 11x11" Oil on Canvas by James Delk



'Petunias' 11x11" Oil on Canvas by James Delk

A nice painting James. Good tonal work, very nice colour, and the brushwork looks easy, competent. Three things you could look at in the future.

1. Which flower is your focal point - the tallest one or the one on the left? They are competing with each other.
2. Hard edges shout for attention - soft edges are less strident! See how the far edges on those two main flowers are leaping to the front. Make closer hard, more distant slightly softer.
3. Avoid making halo effects with your brushstrokes. See how your brushstrokes in the background go around the flowers, stems, etc.

'Japanese Anemones' 6 x 6" Water Soluble Oils on Canvas by Candi Hogan



'Japanese Anemones' 6 x 6" Water Soluble Oils on Canvas by Candi Hogan

Some very nice colour Candi. Good to see some leaves in there too. I would like to see a little more variation though in your background. You will have read in my general comment about overlapping some of the flowers to help form a focal point. However, I did not mean that you form a bunch quite as tightly as you have! They need a little more breathing space— perhaps some gaps here and there.

I think it would be good for you to try working on slightly larger canvasses. 6" x 6" is very small and immediately limits the broad brush strokes that flowers 'thrive' on!

Flower Study 11x14" Oil on Panel by Thomas M Sarradet



Flower Study 11x14" Oil on Panel by Thomas M Sarradet

Thomas, the flowers in your painting have a lovely fresh feeling with good tonal work and nice colour. The background colour you have chosen at the top of the painting works very well around those flowers but it would have been better if you had carried more of that colour down towards the bottom edge. You can see that those top flowers sing but those at the bottom simply can't match up.

My other comment is that you have spread their stems too far apart and given a feeling of disunity at the bottom of the picture. They would've been better, looking as if they came from a common source and some of them painted a darker tone so that the flowers felt as if they had something solid holding them up.

'Petunias' 30x30cm Oil on Canvas by Marisa Comana Pessina



'Petunias' 30x30cm Oil on Canvas by Marisa Comana Pessina

This is a very nice piece of work Marisa. Very sensitive tones and colours on the flowers that work well with the warm russet colours in the background. You have a similar problem to the one I mentioned in James' paintingâ€”you have two flowers competing to be 'number one. 'It's good to see that you have run one of the flowers off the edge of the painting but you may also notice that those particular two flowers at the bottom right corner are a matching pair. Much better if they are different in size, or set at different angles, or perhaps one in the shade and one catching the lightâ€”anything that makes them look different would be good.

I do particularly like the two dominant flowersâ€”they are very well painted.