



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 the studio as we embark on the delightful journey of painting petunias. These exquisite flowers, which I stumbled upon unexpectedly at the flower store, captivated me with their delicate, sculptural beauty. They offer a wonderful opportunity to explore the nuances of floral painting. We'll dive into the process using both acrylics and oils, allowing you the flexibility to choose your medium or experiment with both. Our focus will be on creating a textural background, premixing greys, and painting with shapes to bring out the unique character of each petunia. You'll learn how to use edges to draw attention and create a composition that highlights the flowers' elegance. By zooming in on the flowers and cropping out distractions, we'll craft a composition that resembles a flower study, perhaps with a touch of Japanese or Oriental design simplicity. This lesson is not just about painting flowers; it's an exploration of your artistic identity. Let's enjoy this creative process together.



"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

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 Setting up the composition



Focus on the Flowers

Zoom in on the flowers to highlight their beauty. Crop out any unnecessary elements to create a composition that emphasizes the individual flowers.

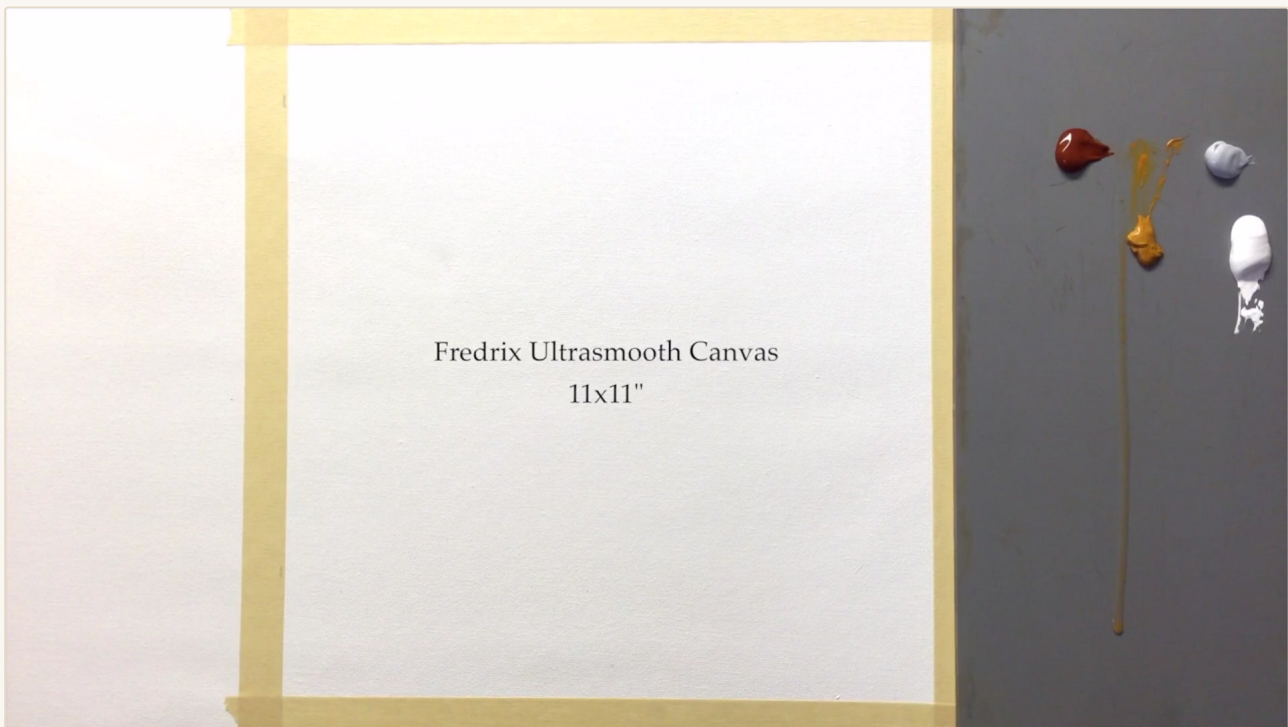
Create a Stark Design

Aim for a composition that resembles a flower study. Consider a design that has a Japanese or Oriental feel, with a simple and striking arrangement.

PRO TIP

Zoom in and crop to focus on the beauty of individual flowers.

2 Preparing the canvas



Prepare the Canvas

Tape your canvas securely and apply an extra coat of gesso. Allow it to dry overnight to help the canvas accept paint more easily.

Tone the Canvas

Mix burnt sienna, yellow ochre, toning gray, and some white with a bit of water using a big brush. Add a touch of blue to achieve a warm mid-grey tone. Apply this mixture to the canvas, darkening the top slightly to create a gradation in value.

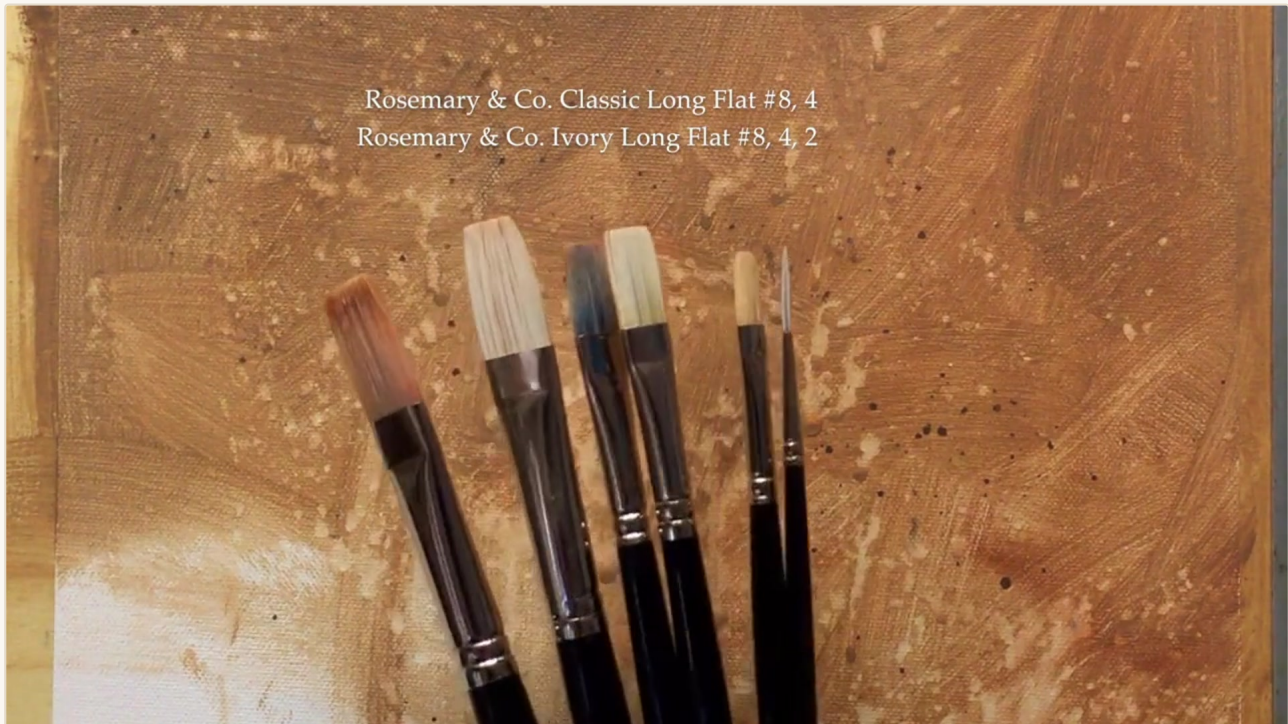
Add Texture

Use a clean brush, dip it in water, and flick it onto the canvas to create interesting textures. Dab the water spots to achieve a splattered effect. Add a few dark splatters for contrast. Allow the canvas to dry.

PRO TIP

Apply an extra coat of gesso to help the canvas accept paint more easily.

3 Background preparation



Select Brushes

Choose a set of brushes ranging from large to small. Start with the big brushes for broad strokes, then move to medium and finish with the small ones for detail work.

Plan Background

Focus on the major shapes of the flowers, keeping the background loose. Allow the lower part of the painting to fade out, emphasizing the detailed beauty of the flowers above.

Adjust Background Color

If the background wash in acrylic is too intense, gray it down slightly. Use oils to apply a thin wash over the existing background and let it dry slightly before proceeding with the flowers.

PRO TIP

Use a thin oil wash to tone down an overly intense acrylic background.

4 Mixing and applying grey tones



Mix Grey Tones

Combine ultramarine blue and burnt sienna to create a grey tone. Adjust the warmth by adding more burnt sienna for a warmer grey or more blue for a cooler grey.

Apply Grey to Background

Dip your brush into Gamsol solvent and scumble the grey over the background. Focus on keeping the background darkest near the center of interest to create strong contrast with the brightest flowers.

Modify and Lighten Grey

Lighten the grey as you move away from the center of interest. Modify the color slightly to create interesting transitions and maintain visual interest.

Work the Surface

Press the paint down firmly and blend it into the surface. Wipe off excess paint to refine the texture and continue working the surface for added interest.

PRO TIP

Adjust the grey's temperature by adding more burnt sienna for warmth or more blue for coolness.

5 Drawing the big shapes



Prepare the Surface

Ensure your painting surface is dry. If using acrylics, you can paint over it after about half an hour. For oil paints thinned with Gamsol or another solvent, wait about an hour.

Choose a Drawing Tool

Select a white watercolor pencil to draw the big shapes. This will be more visible on your surface compared to a regular pencil.

Draw the Big Shapes

Approach your painting as a study. Draw the large shapes with confidence, allowing yourself the freedom to experiment and adjust as needed.

PRO TIP

Use a white watercolor pencil for better visibility when drawing on your painting surface.

6 Mixing greys and greens



Mix a Cool Light Grey

Combine equal amounts of burnt sienna and blue with a lot of white to create a neutral grey. Adjust by adding more blue to achieve a slightly cooler tone. Ensure the mixture is lighter than mid-grey for subtlety in your painting.

Mix a Warm Light Grey

Add more burnt sienna and reduce the blue in your mixture to create a warm light grey. Keep the value similar to the cool grey, but with a warmer hue. This provides a balanced contrast in your painting.

Mix a Strong Green

Add a small amount of blue to yellow to create a strong green. Be cautious with the blue, as only a little is needed to transform the yellow. This green will be useful for the abundant greenery in your painting.

PRO TIP

Use a neutral mid-grey palette to accurately judge the subtle differences in your grey mixtures.

7 Blocking in the petals



Select the Right Brush

Choose a number 4 Ivory Long Flat brush for this painting. This smaller brush allows for a more delicate touch, suitable for capturing the intricate details of the petunias.

Use Gel Medium

Mix your paint with a Gamblin solvent-free gel medium. This medium helps to thin the paint, making it easier to apply in the delicate manner required for the petals.

Block in Petal Colors

Observe your subject and identify where the colors appear. Apply these colors in large blocks, keeping in mind that the surrounding warm gray will make them appear cooler than they are.

Focus on Halftones

Identify the halftones, which are the areas between light and shadow. Use a cool gray for these regions, transitioning to warm gray as they move into shadow.

Squint to See Big Shapes

Squint your eyes to simplify the subject into large shapes of similar color. Paint these shapes during the blocking in stage to establish the composition.

PRO TIP

Use a smaller brush and gel medium for a delicate touch when painting intricate details like petunias.

8 Adding light and shadow



Adjust Warm Grey

Take the warm grey and darken it slightly. Add a little yellow to warm it even more. Use this mixture to create sharp edges with the crisp brush tip.

Create Darker, Cooler Grey

Mix a slightly darker, cooler grey. Use this color in areas where you want to add depth without drawing too much attention.

Add Greenish Centers

Mix a dark green and lighten it with the cool grey. Apply this to the centers of the flowers, adjusting the lightness as needed.

Paint Beyond Edges

When painting areas that aren't highlights, paint slightly beyond the intended edge. This allows you to blend the next layers smoothly into the space.

Lighten Buds for Glow

Lighten the top of the inside of the buds to create a glowing effect. This simulates light coming through the thin petals like a stained glass window.

PRO TIP

Use the very tip of a crisp brush to achieve sharp edges where needed.

9 Refining highlights and edges



Select a Smaller Brush

Switch to a number 2 ivory flat brush. This brush has long bristles that hold a lot of paint and are flexible enough to lay paint smoothly onto the canvas.

Mix Cool Highlights

Since the lighting is cool, mix your highlights using mainly cool colors with white. Avoid using pure white; instead, add subtle variations of cool colors to create a light color suitable for the indoor lighting effect.

Apply Highlights and Edges

Focus on the shapes and decide where to apply the highlight color. Create sharp edges along the outside and soft edges as the light transitions into mid values and half tones. Use the brush to achieve the desired edge effect.

Refine Shapes and Details

Pay attention to the kinks and convoluted shapes of the flower, as these add character. Take your time to create subtle variations and refine the drawing until you are satisfied with the result.

PRO TIP

Use cool colors mixed with white for highlights to reflect the indoor lighting effect.

10 Adjusting colors and edges



Add Blue to Halftones

Observe the halftones in your painting and identify areas where more blue is needed. Carefully apply the blue, being mindful of the edges to avoid creating sharp lines. Aim for a soft transition to enhance the depth and realism.

Focus on Brush Strokes

With each brush stroke, consider the shape, color, and edges you want to achieve. Ensure that you are not just dabbing without purpose. Think about where the shape starts and stops, and any transitions within it.

Refine Edges with Solvent

To create crisp edges, use a clean brush with a small amount of solvent. Carefully cut back into the edges of your shapes, lifting off excess paint. Clean your brush frequently to avoid smudging and maintain sharpness.

PRO TIP

Use a clean brush with solvent to refine edges and prevent smudging.

11 Final adjustments



Tone Down Highlights

Reduce the intensity of the highlights in the lower areas so they don't stand out as much as the upper highlights. This helps create a balanced composition.

Adjust Green Background

Add a bit more brown to the green in the background to soften its edge and help it fade into the background. This will allow the foreground elements to stand out more.

Enhance Foreground Highlights

For crisp edges on the highlights, flatten the paint and scoop it onto the brush tip. Apply it with a single stroke, then reload the brush for another stroke to maintain sharpness.

Soften Background Edges

Use a clean brush with a little solvent to soften the edges in the background. This will push the background back and bring the sharp edges of the foreground forward.

Increase Contrast Carefully

Darken the background slightly to enhance the contrast and make the flowers appear brighter. Be cautious to avoid disturbing the detailed work on the flowers.

PRO TIP

Use a clean brush with a bit of solvent to soften edges and push elements into the background.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by setting up a compelling composition that highlights the beauty of individual petunias. Begin by preparing your canvas with an extra coat of gesso and a warm mid-grey tone, setting the stage for a textured and dynamic background. As you progress, focus on the major shapes of the flowers, keeping the background loose to emphasize the detailed beauty of the blooms.

Mix and apply grey tones to create depth and contrast, ensuring the background complements the vibrant petals. Use a white watercolor pencil to confidently draw the big shapes, treating your painting as a study. Block in the petals with a delicate touch, using a smaller brush and gel medium to capture the intricate details of the petunias.

As you refine your painting, pay attention to the interplay of light and shadow, using cool colors for highlights to reflect the indoor lighting effect. Adjust colors and edges with precision, ensuring soft transitions and crisp edges where needed. Make final adjustments to balance the composition, enhancing contrast to make the flowers stand out against a softened background.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Zoom in and crop to focus on the beauty of individual flowers.
- Apply an extra coat of gesso to help the canvas accept paint more easily.
- Use a thin oil wash to tone down an overly intense acrylic background.
- Adjust the grey's temperature by adding more burnt sienna for warmth or more blue for coolness.
- Use a white watercolor pencil for better visibility when drawing on your painting surface.
- Use a smaller brush and gel medium for a delicate touch when painting intricate details like petunias.
- Use cool colors mixed with white for highlights to reflect the indoor lighting effect.
- Use a clean brush with solvent to refine edges and prevent smudging.



"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.