



Half Dome

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/16-Half-Dome>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, we'll embark on an artistic journey to capture the majestic beauty of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park. This iconic landscape, with its towering granite cliffs and ethereal atmosphere, presents both a challenge and an opportunity for us as painters. The sheer scale of Yosemite can be daunting, but it also invites us to exercise our creative freedom, allowing us to manipulate the scene to fit our canvas. Together, we'll explore the techniques needed to convey the misty atmospherics and the intense, glowing light that make this location so captivating. Through this lesson, you'll learn how to use juicy impasto brushwork to add texture and depth, bringing the scene to life with vibrant energy. Painting Half Dome is not just about replicating a view; it's about interpreting the light and atmosphere to create a piece that resonates with the awe-inspiring grandeur of nature. Join me as we delve into this rewarding subject, and discover the joy of transforming a vast landscape into a personal masterpiece.



"Half Dome, Yosemite" 11 x 11" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson.

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 Yosemite Scene Description

Capture the Essence

Use your artistic license to creatively rearrange elements of the Yosemite scene. This helps capture the essence of the landscape while maintaining a balanced composition.

2 Photoshop Adjustments and Painting Plan

Adjust Colors in Photoshop

Intensify the glowing effect to create a warm, punchy light. Adjust the composition by adding a bit of tree and altering the rock shape for balance.

Plan Your Color Scheme

Use a warm, cool color scheme to create contrast. Focus on a warm, punchy glowing light in the foreground against a cool, soft, misty background.

Create Warm Glow Effects

Emphasize the light bouncing off a light-colored trail, warming the underside of rocks and trees. Contrast this warm area with the cool background, allowing light from the right to warm up the background slightly before transitioning into blue grays.

Enhance Depth with Contrast

Use sharp edges and strong contrast in the foreground to draw attention and create depth. Keep the background soft and misty to enhance the mystical effect of the scene.

3 Initial Wash and Sketch

Prepare the Initial Wash

Dip the largest brush into Gamsol to wet it. Use this brush to lay in a wash with yellow ochre, indicating where the glowing light effect will occur in the foreground.

Create the Glowing Light Effect

Use yellow ochre to sketch the rough shape of the rocks and glowing areas. Add more yellow ochre to the center of the glowing area and soften it out for a smooth transition.

Block in the Background

Mix blue, a little bit of red, and white with solvent to create a soupy mixture. Use this to block in the background, forming the basic structure of the painting.

Let the Wash Dry

Allow the initial wash to dry until it becomes tacky. This ensures better layering and control when working into the painting.

4 Background Painting Strategy

Start with the Background

Begin by painting the background first to achieve a soft and atmospheric effect. This technique is particularly effective for the Half Dome subject, as it creates depth before adding foreground details.

5 Sketching Rock Placement

Mix Cool Grey

Combine blue, red, and white to create a cool grey. Use this mixture as the mother color for the background. It provides a neutral base that complements the other elements of the painting.

Sketch Rock Placement

Sketch in the rock placement to establish where the rocks will be positioned. This step is crucial for planning the composition. Ensure that the elements of your painting are balanced and harmonious.

6 Background Color Blocking

Select a Big Brush

Use a big brush along with an alkyd painting medium to achieve the desired effect and coverage for the background.

Determine Mid-Value Color

Observe how a blue hue disappears into the gray of the plastic palette when squinted at. This indicates the color is a mid-value, neither darker nor lighter than the gray.

Create Depth with Color

Ensure the background gets lighter and bluer towards the half dome. This creates a sense of depth and atmospheric perspective, making the half dome appear more distant.

Keep Paint Thin for Layering

Apply thin layers of paint in certain areas of the background. This allows for the addition of warm colors later, helping build layers and achieve a glowing effect.

Transition to a Glowing Effect

As the background color moves towards the glowing effect area, transition from very cool to warmer and lighter tones. This gradual change enhances the glowing effect and adds dimension.

7 Adding Trees and Mist

Create Tree Effect

Use a slightly lighter green than the blue in your painting. Apply it with small downward brushstrokes to achieve a vertical mottled effect, mimicking the appearance of trees from a distance.

Add Mist

Incorporate lighter blue tones to create the soft, diffused look of mist around elements like waterfalls. This adds a gentle atmospheric quality to your painting.

Adjust Tree Color

Make the color of the trees slightly lighter than the surrounding blue. This helps them stand out and adds depth, enhancing the realism and visual appeal of the landscape.

Create Depth with Color

As you move across the painting, transition to lighter and warmer colors. This shift creates a sense of depth and atmosphere in the landscape.

8 Foreground Rocks and Trees

Mix Base Color for Rocks

Create the base color for the foreground rocks by starting with the mother color. Add a little bit of red, yellow ochre, and white to lighten it slightly.

Apply Big Brush Strokes

Use big brush strokes to apply the colors for the rocks and trees in the foreground. Blend the colors without striving for perfect blending to achieve a natural look.

Layer Light Colors

Start with darker colors and then add lighter colors on top. This creates a sparkling effect, enhancing contrast and depth in the painting.

Use Walnut Medium

Incorporate walnut medium to help blend the colors smoothly. This allows for more fluid brush strokes and contributes to the texture and finish of the painting.

9 Detailing Background and Waterfall

Mix Dark Background Trees

Combine red, blue, a little bit of yellow, and walnut medium to create the dark trees in the background. Adjust the mixture to be slightly darker than the surrounding area to ensure depth and contrast.

Add Light to Trees

Use the mother color and mix in a little bright yellow and white to lighten and add a greenish tint. Apply this mixture with small vertical strokes and daubs to simulate light hitting the trees.

Adjust Green Tones

If the color appears too green, add white to cool it towards blue. This adjustment helps achieve a more balanced tone.

Position the Waterfall

Place the waterfall slightly off-center in the painting. This positioning creates a more balanced composition and avoids a static appearance.

10 Background Softening and Detailing

Create a Soft Glowing Background

Ensure the background has a soft glowing light effect. Avoid adding any sharp details that might distract from the foreground. This approach keeps the viewer's focus on the main subject while allowing them to imagine the background details.

Mix Colors for Rocks

Start with the mother color and mix in some white, a little bit of red, and a little bit of yellow. This combination warms and lightens the color slightly, giving the rocks a more natural appearance.

Use Ansel Adams' Photo for Reference

Refer to Ansel Adams' black and white photo to accurately capture the rock faces. His photography provides clear textures and forms that can be translated into your painting.

Adjust Dark Areas

Take the mother color and add a little bit of yellow to adjust the dark areas. Ensure it matches the value of the existing dark blue to resemble trees and shadows rather than a flat blue color.

Limit Background Detail

Avoid adding too much detail in the background to keep the foreground as the focal point. By suggesting the background, you allow viewers to use their imagination, enhancing the painting's engagement.

11 Waterfall and Mist Effects

Paint the Waterfall Base

Use a bigger brush with blue and white paint to start painting the waterfall. Work down in a long triangle shape, beginning with the darkest value in the mist and spray. This creates depth and dimension, laying the foundation for the waterfall.

Create Misty Effects

Utilize the big brush to make soft edge misty effects with larger, softer brushstrokes. This technique results in a natural and blended look as the mist spreads across the canvas.

Soften Edges

As you work downwards, allow the paint to naturally thin out, softening the edges. This creates a gradual transition and a more realistic mist effect.

Add Detail with a Smaller Brush

Switch to a smaller brush to go lighter with the colors, using white and blue. This adds more detail and refinement to the waterfall, creating contrast and highlights within the mist.

Enhance Depth and Complexity

Introduce another part of the waterfall with a darker blue and add additional mist. This layering technique enhances the overall effect and adds complexity to the scene.

12 Half Dome Detailing

Apply Broad Strokes

Start with a big brush to apply the broader strokes and colors on Half Dome. This establishes the main shapes and sets the foundation for finer details.

Switch to Smaller Brush

Move to a smaller brush to create specific highlights and textures. This allows for more precision in detailing the painting.

Paint the Edge

Use a color that is lighter and bluer than the previous mother color to paint the edge of Half Dome. This creates a softer transition and adds depth.

Add Highlights

Lighten the mother color and add a bit of yellow ochre or bright yellow to create a highlight. Apply this lighter, warmer highlight right on the edge to capture the light effectively.

Depict Dark Stain

Slightly darken the mother color with some red and use down strokes to depict the dark stain on Half Dome. This subtle darkening adds texture and realism.

Suggest Distant Trees and Rocks

Use horizontal strokes to blend trees and rocks into the distant landscape. This breaks up large shapes and adds interest to the painting.

13 Background Completion

Illuminate Distant Trees

Introduce lighter tones into the tree area on the distant shore to create a sense of depth and illumination. This will suggest sunlight hitting the trees, enhancing the realism of your painting.

Add Grass and Bushes

Include some grass and a few bushes in the background to create a more detailed and realistic scene. These elements will add texture and interest to your painting.

Enhance Water with Blue-Green Tones

Use a blue-green color for the water in the background. This choice will help to create a natural and cohesive look in your painting.

14 Foreground Path and Rocks

Mix a Dark Cool Grey

Create a dark cool grey by mixing blue, red, a little bit of white, and a touch of yellow ochre. This combination of the three primary colors helps achieve a graded color, which is often desired in landscape painting.

Add Variation to Foreground Path and Rocks

Adjust the color of the path and rocks by making it a little bit darker and warmer. As you approach the center of a glowing area, add more yellow ochre, bright yellow, and lighten it with some white to create a dynamic and realistic effect.

Cool Down Warm Rock Shadows

To cool down warm rock shadows, add a blue-grey mix and a little bit of white. This helps to take the edge off the warmth and create a more balanced color palette.

Create Natural Path Shapes

Avoid making the path a straight line by paying careful attention to the shapes you create. Ensure they reflect a natural, rocky path rather than a straight concrete one to maintain the natural feel of the landscape.

15 Foreground Trees and Foliage

Build Up to Highlights

Avoid starting with the brightest highlight to prevent overusing bright spots. Gradually work up to the brightest areas to ensure they stand out and appear more realistic.

Create a Glowing Effect

As you approach the center of a glowing area, lighten the highlight and incorporate more color, such as yellow or orange. This adds realism and dynamism to the effect.

Soften Transitions

In areas where dark and light meet, like moss growing into light, vary the light color slightly and soften the edges. This creates a natural transition, as moss edges are not as sharp as rock.

Emphasize Highlights

Use very thick paint in specific areas to create strong highlights. This technique ensures the highlight stands out and adds depth to your painting.

Use Warm Colors for Glow

Apply a light yellow-orange color in the foreground to create a glowing effect on rocks or surfaces catching warm light. This choice extends the glow and adds warmth to the scene.

Convey Depth with Color

Vary light and dark colors to create depth and realism. As elements move away from the light source, they should become darker and slightly cooler to convey distance and form.

Add Cool Reflected Light

Incorporate dark blue into rocks to simulate cool reflected skylight. This technique helps to curve the rock and adds dimension, enhancing realism.

16 Tree Trunks and Moss

Create Glowing Light Effect

Use a yellow or orange hue as the base color for the background trees to simulate glowing light. Mix yellow with a little red and blue to create a slightly grey tone for the tree trunks. This helps the trees blend into the glowing light of the background.

Soften Tree Edges

Use a clean brush to gently whisk over the edges of the background trees. This technique blends the trees into the background, creating a more cohesive and natural look. Softening the edges is crucial for achieving depth in your painting.

Add Rhythm to Foliage

Use a combination of big and little brush strokes to create a flow in the foliage. Vary the size and shape of your strokes to form a dynamic and natural-looking pattern. This approach adds interest and movement to your painting.

Mix Colors for Tree Trunks and Moss

Prepare four colors: a cool gray for the trunk, a dark gray orange for the moss, and lighter versions of each. The cool gray should have more blue than red, with a touch of yellow ochre. The dark gray orange for the moss should be darker than the trunk color. Mix the dark colors with white for the lighter versions, and use straight yellow ochre for the lighter moss.

Create Fine Lines with a Brush

Ensure the paint is only on the end of the bristles to create fine lines. Use a walnut medium to thin the paint slightly for smoother application. Avoid getting paint further up the bristles to prevent the brush from spreading out, and regularly clean the brush to maintain control over line thickness.

17 Tree Trunk Detailing

Create Natural Tree Trunk Texture

Start from the middle of the tree trunk and move upwards with a single stroke to create interesting wiggles. This technique maintains a natural flow and texture in your painting.

Maintain Brush Cleanliness

Clean your brush if it picks up too much paint to prevent unwanted gunk on your painting. A clean brush helps maintain the clarity and detail of your strokes.

Keep Paint Thin

Apply thin layers of paint to allow for additional details later. Thick paint can make it difficult to add finer details.

Add Warmth to the Trunk

Warm up the paint as you move towards the bottom of the trunk to create a natural and pleasing transition.

Create Texture with Sideways Strokes

Use sideways strokes and drag them to add interesting texture to the tree trunk. This technique adds variety and depth to the painting.

Blend Trunk into Ground

Soften your brush strokes as you near the bottom of the trunk to make it appear as though grasses are growing up into it. This creates a seamless transition between the trunk and the ground.

Soften Prominent Branches

Use a big brush to gently soften branches that poke out too much. This helps integrate the branches more naturally into the painting.

18 Final Touches on Trees

Create a Crisp Edge

Ensure the paint is right on the end of the bristles, not up in the ferrule. Flatten the paint out and push the brush into it to build up a nice little layer on the edge of the brush. This technique helps achieve a very crisp edge.

Maintain a Clean Brush

Keep the brush clean to prevent dirt from affecting the paint application. If the brush picks up dirt, clean it or remove the dirt on the palette before continuing. This ensures that your brush strokes remain clean and precise.

Add Highlights

For areas where the light is more intense, add white and yellow to your paint. This combination creates a nice highlight that can be applied as thick as you like.

Vary Moss Placement

Avoid making the moss sections look uniform by not banding them at the same heights or wrapping them around the tree like a maypole. Make the spacing random to create a more natural appearance.

Paint Light-Catching Leaves

Use white and yellow to create small clumps of leaves with sharp edges. Randomize your brush strokes and vary the size and angle of the leaves to avoid a uniform look.

19 Reflected Light and Final Details

Add Reflected Light to Tree Trunks

Introduce a light blue color to the left-hand side of the tree trunks. This light blue should be lighter and bluer than the existing grey to enhance the three-dimensional effect. This technique helps to round out the trunks and gives them more dimension.

Incorporate Small Details

Add small details like birds to your painting of Half Dome. Placing a little bird or two in the distance can add an interesting element to your composition.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by capturing the majestic essence of Yosemite's Half Dome. Begin by creatively rearranging the elements of the landscape to achieve a balanced composition that resonates with your artistic vision. Use the power of warm, glowing light in the foreground to contrast with the cool, misty background, creating a sense of depth and intrigue.

As you progress, focus on layering your colors effectively. Start with an initial wash to establish the glowing areas, and allow it to dry to a tacky finish for better control. Build the background first to set a soft, atmospheric tone, then gradually add details to the foreground, ensuring the rocks and trees stand out with sharp contrasts and natural textures.

In the final stages, refine your details with precision, using smaller brushes for highlights and textures on Half Dome. Keep the background soft and glowing to maintain focus on the foreground, and use graded colors to create a harmonious and realistic scene. By the end, your painting will capture the breathtaking beauty of Yosemite, inviting viewers to explore its depths.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Rearrange elements to fit the expansive Yosemite scenery into your painting.
- Focus on creating a warm glow in the foreground to contrast with a cool, misty background for depth and interest.
- Let the initial wash dry until tacky for better layering and control.
- Paint the background first for a softer, more atmospheric effect, enhancing depth.
- Use small downward brushstrokes with a lighter green to mimic distant trees.
- Add lighter colors on top of darks to create a sparkling effect and enhance contrast.
- Ensure the background remains soft and glowing to maintain focus on the foreground.
- Mixing graded colors is important in landscape painting to create more realistic and harmonious scenes.



"Half Dome, Yosemite" 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.

'Half Dome' 11x11" Acrylic on Canvas Paper by Kym West



'Half Dome' 11x11" Acrylic on Canvas Paper by Kym West

Hi Kym, lots of good work in here. The drawing is good, you've created a lot of depth with your colours and by making the foreground brushwork larger than that in the background, which is beautifully atmospheric. Just two things I would caution you on. The first is the very dark values in the foreground shadows. This is perhaps due to the photography of your painting. If it's not, just compare your darks to mine in the foreground. Yours have gone so dark it's lost a lot of the opportunity for colour in the shadows and this always tends to make a scene look foreboding. The second thing is the tree being too close to the edge of the canvas, like it's just about to leave, unsure whether it should be in the scene or not. Put your main actors in the spotlight, not in the wings.

'Half Dome Yosemite' 11x11" Oil on Canvas by Denis King



'Half Dome Yosemite' 11x11" Oil on Canvas by Denis King

Hi Denis, this is a very good copy - nearly stroke for stroke! The only noticeable difference worth mentioning is the big blue shadow in the main rock could do with warming up with brown a little because the blue seems a little too strong. Other than that it's pretty much verbatim - great work! I hope you learned a lot copying so closely.

'The other side of Half Dome' 11x14" Acrylic on Paper by Robert Barker



'The other side of Half Dome' 11x14" Acrylic on Paper by Robert Barker

Hi Robert, I think your other painting of Half Dome was more successful than this one, but I chose this to critique because there are more learning points available. I've photoshopped your image to illustrate a few of those points. Now you can play spot the difference.

The biggest changes I made were to do with lighting. The sky in yours suggests the sun is on the right, whereas the mountain and trees suggest light from the left. I also introduced large soft shadows across the foreground and shadows cast onto the land by the large group of trees on the left, in keeping with the altered light source. The sunlight trees in the middle needed some pruning so that one was the star of the show and the others subdued into supporting roles. I brought Half Dome in from the edge and softened the edges there too. One of the right hand banks of the river was altered to avoid repetition. I hope that helps.

'Half Dome, Yosemite National Park' 11x11" Oil on Canvas by Fay Thomson



'Half Dome, Yosemite National Park' 11x11" Oil on Canvas by Fay Thomson

Good work, Fay. The drawing is all good, the value structure is good and you've achieved a pretty good glowing light effect in the path and trees. Note that if you had made all the darks around the base of the trees and rocks slightly warmer and lighter, avoiding cool purple colours, then the glowing light effect there would have been even stronger. Your edges, hard and soft are very good all over, but there's just one sneaky sharp edge along the mountain's edge drawing my eye to the top of the canvas. It competes with the foreground tree. Notice in my demo painting how I've softened that edge to avoid that happening? Boy am I picky! A very good job overall.