



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

Welcome to the breathtaking Yosemite National Park in California, where we're about to embark on the exciting challenge of painting Half Dome. This iconic landmark, with its towering granite cliffs and majestic sequoia trees, offers a view so vast and awe-inspiring that it can be quite a task to capture it all on canvas. But fear not, as I guide you through this lesson, you'll learn how to use your artistic license to rearrange elements and create a composition that truly captures the essence of Yosemite. Together, we'll explore the art of painting with light and atmosphere, focusing on misty atmospherics and the intense, glowing light effects that make this scene so rewarding. You'll also discover the joy of using juicy impasto brushwork to bring texture and depth to your work. By the end of this chapter, you'll have not only a beautiful painting of Half Dome but also a deeper understanding of how to convey the grandeur of nature in your art.



"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



Understand the Scene

Yosemite offers towering granite cliffs and tall sequoia trees, creating a vast and majestic view. Recognize that capturing the entire scene in a painting can be challenging due to its immense scale.

Use Artistic License

Feel free to rearrange elements of the scene to fit them into your composition. This flexibility allows you to create a balanced and cohesive painting that captures the essence of Yosemite.

PRO TIP

Use your artistic license to rearrange elements for a balanced composition.

2 Photoshop Adjustments and Painting Plan



Enhance Glowing Effect

Intensify the glowing light effect by using very warm, punchy colors. This will create the illusion of light bouncing off a light-colored trail and illuminating the underside of the rocks and trees.

Create Warm and Cool Contrast

Develop a warm, cool color scheme by contrasting the warm glowing area with a cool background. This contrast will add depth and interest to your painting.

Focus on Foreground Details

Add sharp edges and strong contrast in the foreground to draw attention. This will make the foreground elements stand out against the softer background.

Soften the Background

Use soft, misty, and mystical effects for the background. This will create a sense of depth and atmosphere, enhancing the overall composition.

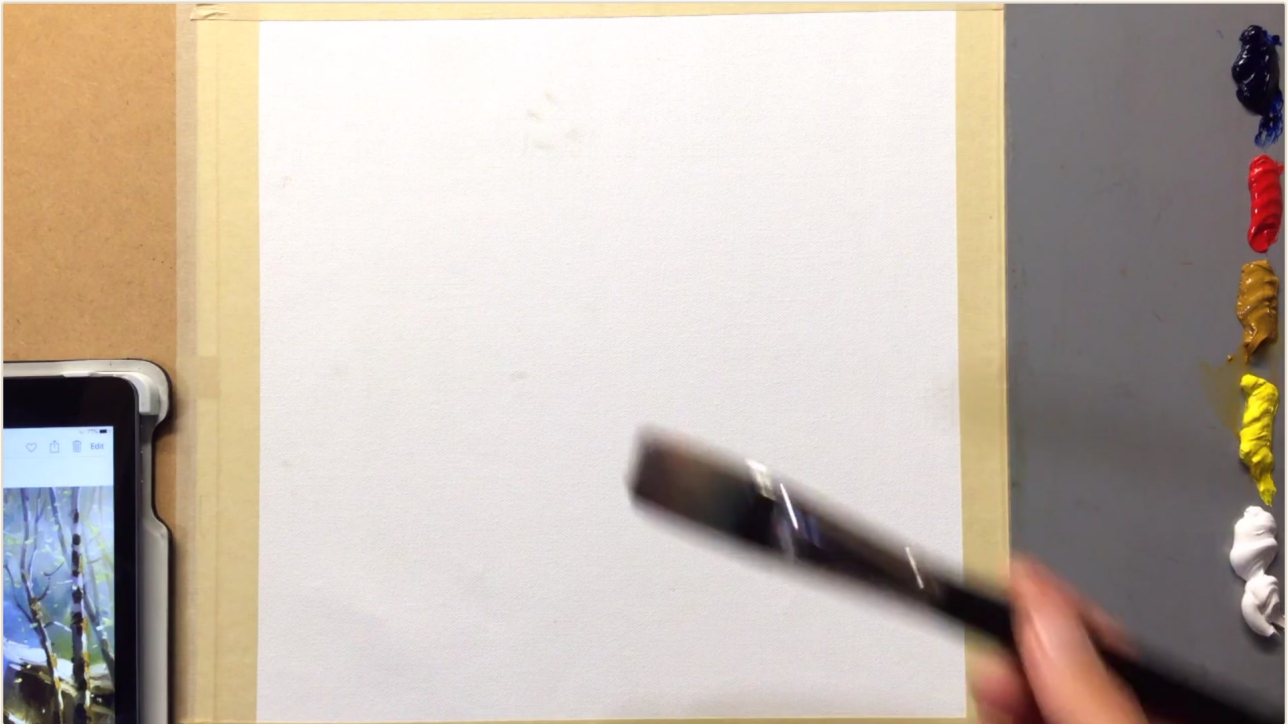
Adjust Light and Color

Introduce a warm light coming from the right to slightly warm up the background. Gradually transition to blue grays as you move away from the light source.

PRO TIP

Use a warm, cool color scheme to create contrast and depth in your painting.

3 Initial Wash and Sketch



Prepare Your Brush

Dip your largest brush into Gamsol to wet it. This will help in laying down a smooth initial wash.

Lay In the Initial Wash

Use yellow ochre to indicate the big glowing light effect in the foreground. Sketch the rough shape of the rocks and the glowing light effect in the background.

Enhance the Glowing Area

Add more yellow ochre to the center of the glowing area to soften it. Clean your brush with solvent to remove excess paint.

Block In the Background

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

PRO TIP

Clean your brush thoroughly with solvent before switching colors to maintain clarity in your painting.

4 Background Painting Strategy



Paint the Background First

Begin by focusing on the background of your painting. This approach allows you to create a soft, atmospheric effect that suits the scene. Painting the background first will help set the tone and mood before adding the foreground details.

PRO TIP

Start with the background to establish the atmosphere and mood of the painting.

5 Sketching Rock Placement



Mix a Cool Grey

Create a cool grey by mixing blue, red, and white. This will serve as the mother color for the background.

Sketch Rock Placement

Use the cool grey to sketch in the placement of the rocks. This will help you determine where they will go in the composition.

PRO TIP

Use a cool grey mix to establish the background and guide rock placement.

6 Background Color Blocking



Select and Prepare the Brush

Use a big brush with alkyd painting medium. This will help you cover large areas smoothly and quickly.

Mix and Apply the Blue

Start with a mid-value blue. Ensure it matches the mid-value of your palette by checking if it blends into the gray when you squint. Apply this blue to the background area, making sure it gets lighter and bluer as it approaches the half dome.

Consider the Glowing Effect

Be mindful of the glowing effect in the painting. Keep the blue application thin in areas where you plan to add warm colors later. This will allow you to easily blend and adjust the warmth as needed.

PRO TIP

Keep the paint thin in areas where you plan to add warm colors later for easier blending.

7 Adding Trees and Mist



Add Green for Trees

Introduce a touch of green into the area designated for trees. Ensure this green is slightly lighter than the blue already present. Use small downward brushstrokes to mimic the vertical, mottled effect of trees from a distance.

Create Mist

Use lighter blue to depict the waterfall and create mist in the designated area. This will add depth and atmosphere to the scene.

PRO TIP

Use small downward brushstrokes to create a vertical, mottled effect for distant trees.

8 Foreground Rocks and Trees



Blend the Base Color

Mix a bit of the base color with white, yellow, and a little walnut medium. Blend it into the canvas using big brush strokes. Aim for a good blend, but it doesn't need to be perfect.

Add Rock Colors

Mix the base color with a little red, yellow ochre, and white to create slightly cooler and warmer rock colors. Ensure this mix is lighter than the base color. Apply these colors to indicate rocks, placing them where the waterfall will be and in surrounding areas.

PRO TIP

Use big brush strokes for blending to create a natural look.

9 Detailing Background and Waterfall



Paint Dark Trees

Mix red, blue, and a little yellow with walnut medium to create a dark tone. Use vertical strokes to paint the dark trees, ensuring the color is slightly darker than the background. Add more blue to fade the trees into a secondary layer, creating depth.

Add Grassy Plain

Darken the area just beneath the trees to suggest a grassy plain. Adjust the height if necessary to enhance the composition.

Highlight Trees and Rocks

Mix the mother color with bright yellow and white to create a lighter, greener tone. Use vertical strokes and daubs to add highlights to the tops of the trees and rocks, suggesting light hitting them. Ensure these highlights are subtle, as they are in the distance.

Position the Waterfall

Decide on the waterfall's position, avoiding the center to maintain balance. Consider placing it slightly off-center where it was initially planned.

Adjust Green Tones

If the green appears too strong, add white to cool it down and reduce its intensity. This helps blend the background without any details standing out too much.

PRO TIP

Use white to cool down a yellowy green, reducing its intensity for a more subtle background effect.

10 Background Softening and Detailing



Create a Soft Glowing Background

Ensure the background remains soft and glowing by avoiding any sharp details. This will maintain the desired light effect.

Mix Colors for the Rocks

Switch to a suitable brush and start with the mother color. Add some white, a little red, and a little yellow to warm and lighten the mix slightly.

Add Rock Faces

Refer to Ansel Adams' black and white photo for inspiration. Use your mixed colors to suggest rock faces in the background, keeping them subtle.

Enhance Dark Areas with Green

Add a little yellow to the mother color to create a greenish hue. Apply this over the dark areas, matching the value of the existing dark blue to suggest trees and shadows.

Keep Background Details Minimal

Avoid adding too much detail in the background. This ensures the foreground holds the viewer's attention, allowing them to imagine the finer details themselves.

PRO TIP

Use subtle color variations to suggest details without overpowering the foreground.

11 Waterfall and Mist Effects



Establish the Waterfall Base

Use a bigger brush to mix blue and white. Apply the paint in a long triangle shape to represent the waterfall, starting with the darkest value in the mist and spray. This creates a foundation for the waterfall with soft edges.

Create Misty Effects

Continue using the big brush to add larger and softer brushstrokes, enhancing the misty effect. Gradually lighten the values as you layer the paint, which helps to build depth and softness in the mist.

Add Details with a Smaller Brush

Switch to a smaller brush and mix white and blue for a lighter tone. Apply this lighter paint to add more detail to the waterfall, allowing the paint to thin naturally as you work downward, which softens the effect.

Enhance with Additional Mist

Mix a slightly darker blue and add more mist around the waterfall. Consider adding another section of the waterfall above for more interest. Use soft edges to maintain the misty appearance.

PRO TIP

Use a big brush to create soft edges and misty effects by layering lighter values over darker ones.

12 Half Dome Detailing



Prepare the Base Color

Use a big brush to mix a lighter and bluer color than the previous base color. Apply this to the edge of Half Dome, working it softly down to blend and soften the edge.

Add Highlights

Mix some white with a little yellow to lighten the base color. Use a smaller brush to create a wedge of light on top of Half Dome, adding a slightly lighter, warmer highlight along the edge.

Introduce Dark Stains

Darken the base color slightly with a touch of red. Use down strokes to introduce the dark stain running down the front of Half Dome.

Add Light to Trees and Rocks

Catch a little light on the distant trees with horizontal strokes, as they blend into the background. Add a few light touches to suggest rocks catching the light, breaking up the large shape for more interest.

PRO TIP

Use horizontal strokes for distant trees to blend them into the background effectively.

13 Background Completion



Add Light to Distant Trees

Introduce a touch of light into the trees on the distant shore. This will give them a bit of dimension and make them stand out against the background.

Include Grass and Bushes

Paint in some grass and a few small bushes to add detail and interest to the scene. These elements will help create a natural transition between the trees and the water.

Apply Blue-Green for Water

Use a blue-green mix to depict the water at the bottom of the scene. This color will complement the surrounding elements and enhance the overall harmony of the painting.

PRO TIP

Use a blue-green mix to depict the water, adding harmony to the scene.

14 Foreground Path and Rocks



Mix a Dark Cool Grey

Combine blue, red, a little bit of white, and a touch of yellow ochre to create a dark cool grey. Use the three primaries to achieve a graded color rather than a pure one, which is essential for landscape painting.

Add Variation to the Path

Introduce some variation by making areas a little darker and warmer. As you approach the center of the glowing area, increase the yellow ochre and bright yellow, and lighten with white to enhance the glow.

Cool the Rock Shadows

Apply the blue-grey mix to cool down the warm rock shadows. Add a little white to soften the warmth without introducing any lights yet.

Shape the Natural Path

Avoid creating a straight line for the path. Focus on forming irregular, natural shapes to reflect a rocky, natural path rather than a straight concrete one.

PRO TIP

Pay careful attention to the shapes you make to avoid a straight path, aiming for a natural, rocky appearance.

15 Foreground Trees and Foliage



Start with Light Grey

Mix a very light grey using yellow, blue, and red. Avoid starting with your brightest highlight to ensure that one area can shine more than others. Gradually build up to the brightest highlights.

Adjust Highlight Colors

As the highlight approaches the center of the glowing area, make it lighter and more yellow or orange. This creates a more natural transition and enhances the glowing effect.

Vary Light Colors

In areas where the dark moves into the light, vary the light color slightly. This could represent dark moss transitioning into light, requiring a softer edge than rock.

Add Strong Highlights

Use straight yellow ochre for a half tone and soften the edges. Add a strong highlight with very thick paint in selected areas to create focal points.

Create Light Path on Rocks

Paint the little rocks with a very light yellow-orange to match the glowing color. Ensure the bushes and grasses catching the light are darker and cooler as they move away.

Add Cool Reflected Light

Introduce dark blue to add other planes in the rocks, simulating cool reflected skylight. This helps to curve the rock around and enhance the three-dimensional effect.

PRO TIP

Avoid starting with your brightest highlight; build up to it for a more dynamic effect.

16 Tree Trunks and Moss



Paint Background Trees

Mix yellow with a little red and blue to create a slightly grey color for the tree trunks. Apply this mix to the background trees, allowing them to reflect the glowing light. Use a clean brush to whisk over the painted areas, softening the edges to blend them into the background.

Add Background Foliage

Create a mix with yellow, white, and a touch of blue for the foliage. Use big and small brush strokes to add foliage shapes, creating a rhythm and flow. Adjust the color slightly more orange to represent autumn trees.

Mix Colors for Tree Trunks and Moss

Prepare four colors: a cool gray for the trunk (more blue than red, with yellow ochre), a dark gray-orange for the moss, a light trunk color by adding white to the dark trunk mix, and a light moss color using straight yellow ochre.

Apply Tree Trunk and Moss Colors

Thin the paint with walnut medium and load it onto the end of a big brush. Smooth out the paint to create fine lines for the tree trunks and moss. Ensure the paint stays on the brush tip to maintain fine lines, cleaning the brush as needed.

PRO TIP

Keep the paint on the brush tip to achieve fine lines for tree trunks and moss.

17 Tree Trunk Detailing



Begin Tree Trunk Detailing

Start from the middle of the tree trunk and work your way up. Use a single stroke with a few interesting wriggles to add character. Clean your brush to remove any excess paint buildup.

Maintain Thin Paint Layers

Keep the paint layer thin to allow for easier detailing later. Avoid using thick paint at this stage to prevent difficulties when adding other details.

Add Warmth and Texture

Warm up the color as you move towards the bottom of the trunk. Use sideways strokes to drag the paint and create interesting textures. Soften the brush strokes near the bottom to blend with the grasses.

Soften Branches

Use a big brush to soften any branches that protrude too much. This helps integrate them naturally into the scene.

PRO TIP

Keep the paint layer thin to allow for easier detailing later.

18 Final Touches on Trees



Apply Light to the Trunk

Load the paint onto the end of the bristles, avoiding the ferrule. Flatten the paint and push the brush into it to create a crisp edge. Keep the brush clean by removing any dirt picked up during strokes.

Enhance Light Intensity

In areas where the light is more intense, mix white and yellow to create a thick highlight. Apply this mixture to the trunk for a bright effect.

Add Moss Details

Use straight yellow ochre with a touch of bright yellow to add color spots. Avoid creating bands around the tree at the same height; instead, space them randomly.

Highlight Leaves

Mix white and yellow for the leaves catching the light. Apply in small clumps with sharp edges, varying the size and angle of each stroke to avoid uniformity.

PRO TIP

Keep the brush clean to maintain crisp edges in your strokes.

19 Reflected Light and Final Details



Adjust Tree Color

Add more orange to the trees to enhance their warmth and create a more vibrant scene. Consider having some of the orange cut in front of the tree to add depth.

Add Distant Birds

Include a small bird or two in the distance to add life and interest to the scene. Keep them subtle to maintain the focus on the main elements.

Reflect Light on Tree Trunks

Mix a light blue color slightly lighter and bluer than the existing grey. Apply this to the left side of the tree trunks to simulate reflected light, rounding them out and adding dimension.

PRO TIP

Reflect light onto the left side of tree trunks to enhance their three-dimensional appearance.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by embracing the grandeur of Yosemite's Half Dome. Begin by visualizing the majestic scene and feel free to rearrange elements to suit your composition. Use your artistic license to capture the essence of the landscape while maintaining a balanced and cohesive painting.

As you progress, focus on establishing a warm and cool color scheme to create depth and contrast. Start with the background to set the atmosphere, using soft, misty effects to enhance the sense of depth. Gradually build up the foreground with sharp edges and strong contrasts to draw attention and add interest.

In the final stages, pay attention to the details that bring your painting to life. Use a combination of brush techniques to create texture and dimension in the trees, rocks, and water. Remember to keep the background subtle, allowing the foreground to capture the viewer's attention and imagination.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use your artistic license to rearrange elements for a balanced composition.
- Start with the background to establish the atmosphere and mood of the painting.
- Use a warm, cool color scheme to create contrast and depth in your painting.
- Keep the paint thin in areas where you plan to add warm colors later for easier blending.
- Use small downward brushstrokes to create a vertical, mottled effect for distant trees.
- Avoid starting with your brightest highlight; build up to it for a more dynamic effect.
- Use subtle color variations to suggest details without overpowering the foreground.
- Pay careful attention to the shapes you make to avoid a straight path, aiming for a natural, rocky appearance.



"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.