



Shark Fin Cove

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/14-Shark-Fin-Cove>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

Welcome to the chapter on painting the breathtaking Shark Fin Cove, a stunning gem along the California coastline near Santa Cruz. I had the pleasure of painting there with a group of 30 enthusiastic students, alongside fellow artists John Crump and Scott Hamill. The day was perfect, and the experience was truly inspiring, which is why I'm excited to share this scene with you. In this lesson, you'll learn how to capture the grandeur of the towering cliffs and the dynamic energy of the ocean. We'll explore techniques for painting with bold, sweeping strokes, focusing on large color movements within the darks, and how to handle the expansive, blank beach without getting bogged down in unnecessary details. This scene offers a rewarding challenge that will enhance your ability to see and paint with confidence. So, let's dive in and see how we can bring this captivating coastal landscape to life on canvas.



"Shark Fin Cove" 13 x 13" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson.



REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 2

The scene as Richard found it.

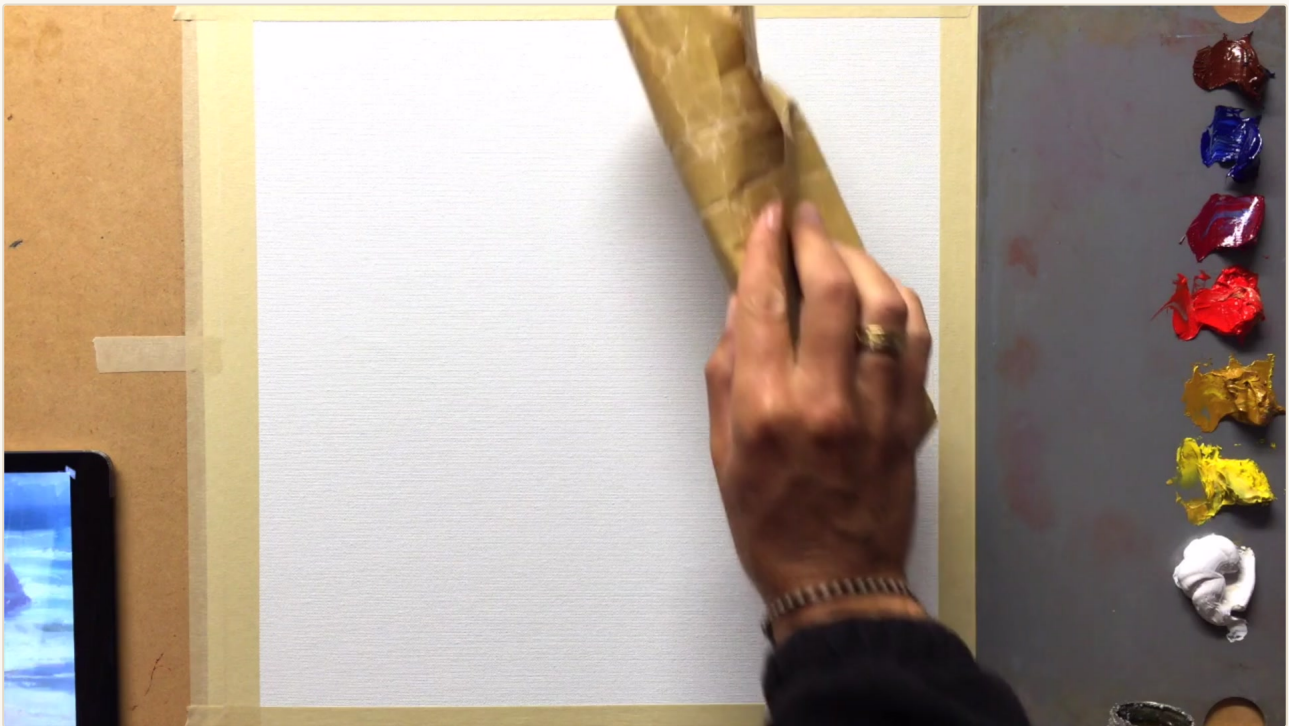
Materials

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 Canvas Preparation



Sand the Canvas

Use a 220 grit sandpaper to gently sand the canvas. This removes any furriness and makes the surface less absorbent and smoother to paint on.

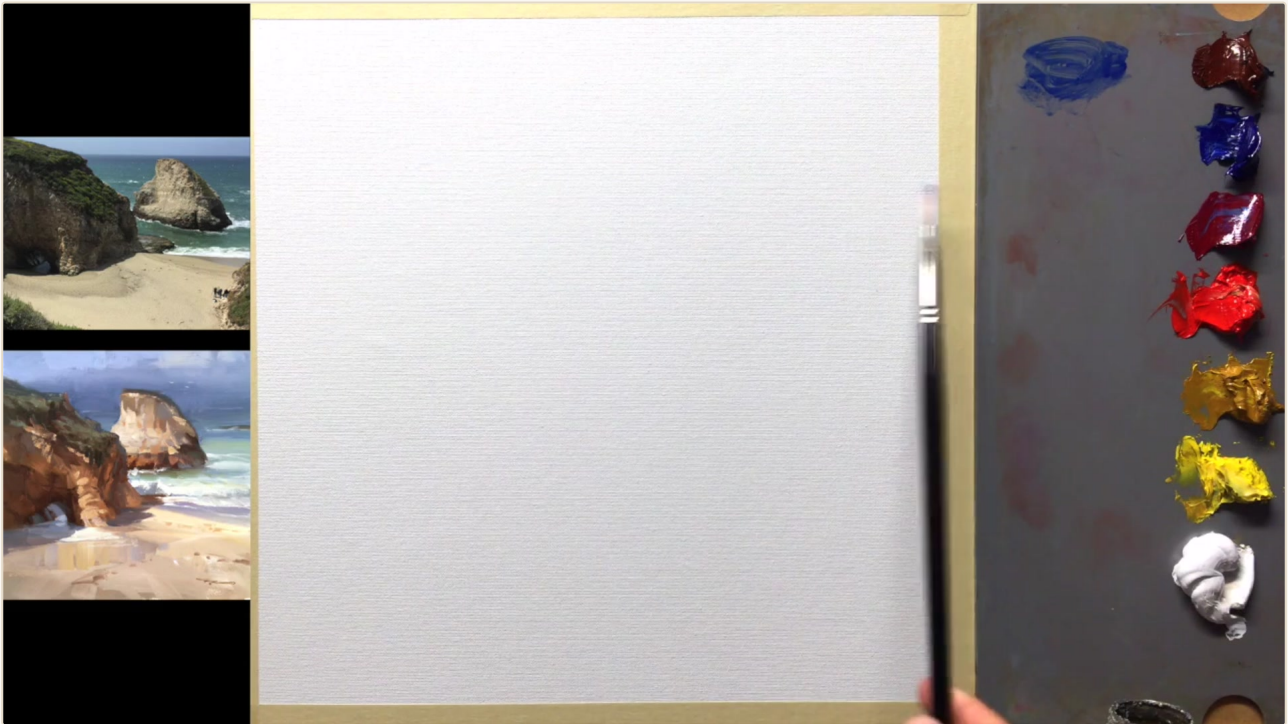
Clean the Canvas

Wipe the dust off the canvas after sanding to ensure a clean surface for painting.

PRO TIP

Use a well-used 220 grit sandpaper, which may feel more like a 300 grit, for a smoother finish.

2 Compositional Planning



Determine the Horizon Line

Decide where to place your horizon line on the canvas. Ensure it is positioned so that no main objects intersect with it, as clear overlaps are easier to read from a distance.

Position Main Objects

Bring the shark fin island closer to the headland to create a single visual unit. This positioning allows the dark area of the island to stand out against the lighter rock area, enhancing contrast and interest.

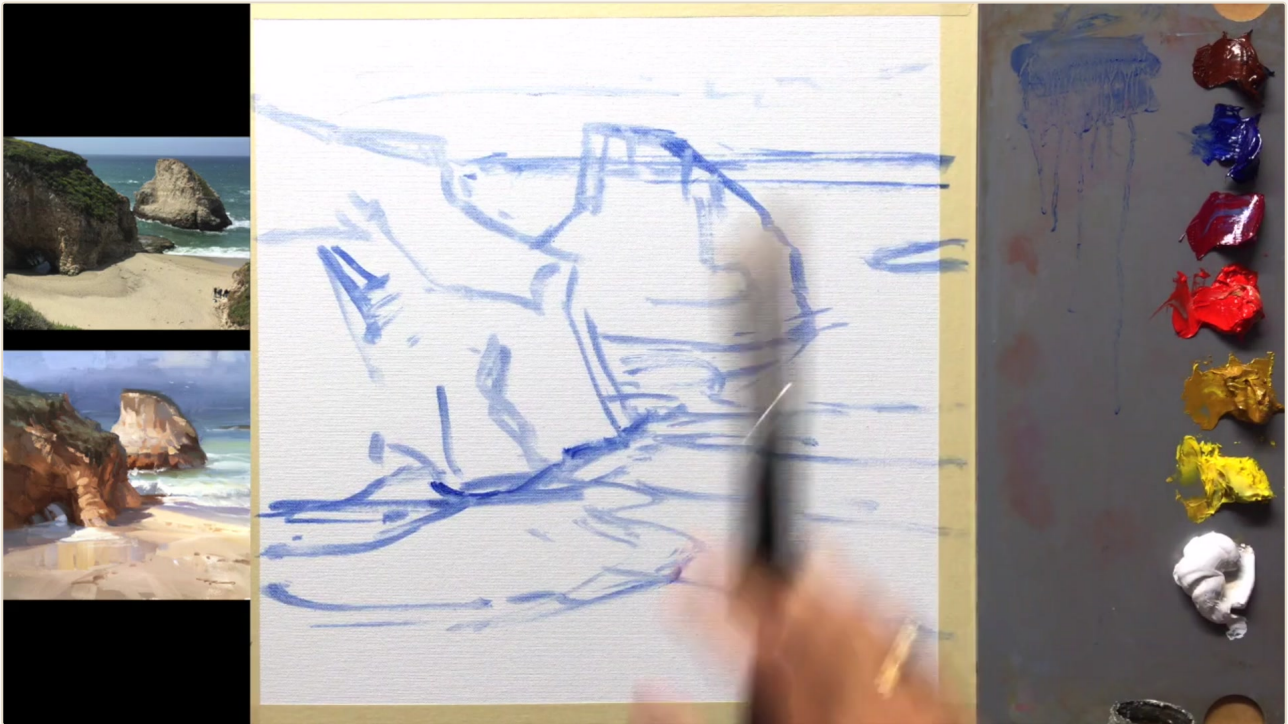
Adjust Object Heights

Raise the island above the horizon line. Avoid having objects nearly touch the horizon, as this can create confusing lines. By elevating the island, you add interest and clarity to the composition.

PRO TIP

Ensure main objects either clearly overlap or are distinctly separate from the horizon to enhance readability.

3 Dark to Light Technique



Begin with the Darks

Start by applying the dark colors using a thinner consistency. Use Gamsol to achieve this thinner application. This will allow the darks to sit back in the painting, creating depth.

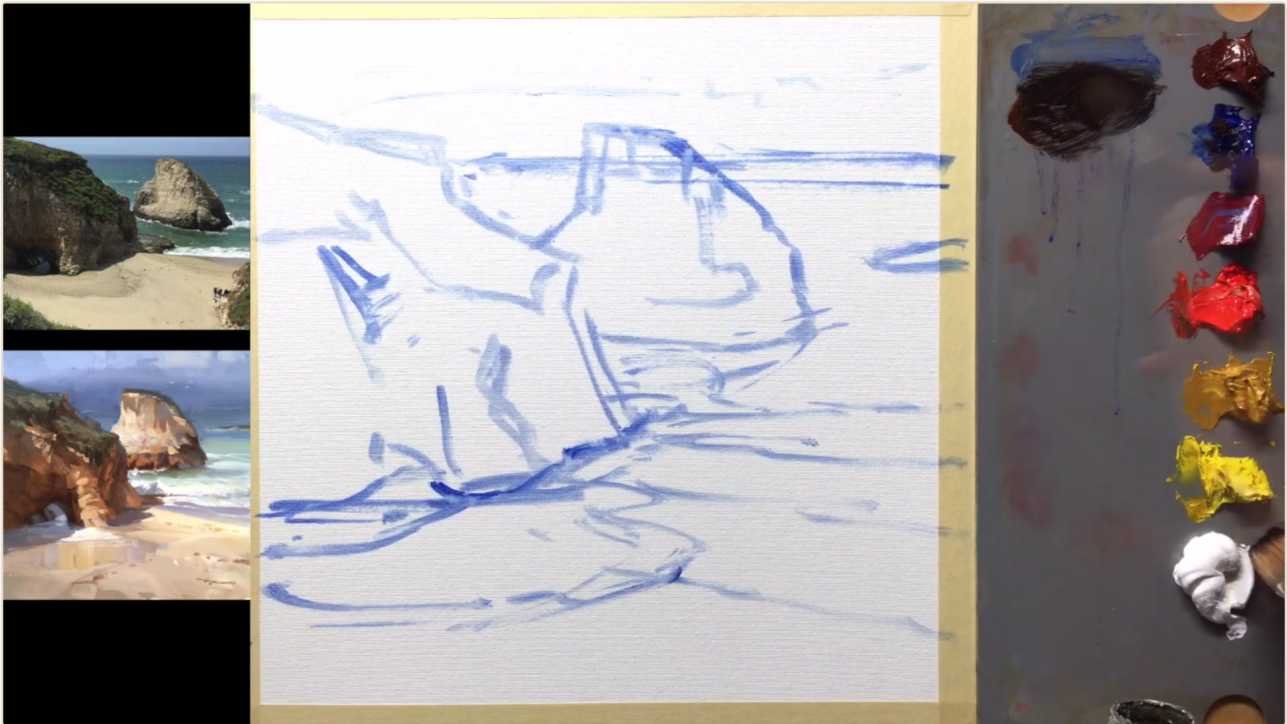
Transition to Lights

Gradually move from dark to light colors. Apply the lighter colors with a thicker consistency. This will help the lights stand out and add dimension to the painting.

PRO TIP

Apply dark colors thinly to create depth and allow for thicker light colors later.

4 Painting the Shadows



Prepare the Dark Base

Mix a warm dark color by adding a touch of white to black, ensuring it's not too dark. Add a little Gamsol to thin the mixture just enough to cover the canvas. This will be the darkest area in your painting.

Add Reflected Light

Introduce reflected light by warming up the dark base slightly. Keep it dark but make it a little lighter than the base. Adjust the color to be lighter and warmer for stronger reflected light.

Adjust for Cooler Tones

As you move to the top of the area, add some white and a little blue to cool the tone. This reflects the cooler light from the sky as the planes of the rock tilt upwards.

Observe and Paint Big Color Movements

Close one eye and make the other go blurry or squint to see the big color shapes within the dark area. Focus on painting these large color movements, leaving gaps for texture and cracks.

Maintain Shadow Integrity

Ensure your reflected lights remain in the shadow range by comparing them to a mid-gray value. Avoid going too light, as this can spoil the form by making it hard to distinguish between lights and shadows.

PRO TIP

Squint to see big color movements and maintain the integrity of shadows by keeping reflected lights within the dark range.

5 Shark Fin Details



Mix a Dark Base

Prepare a dark mixture to begin working on the shark fin. This will serve as the foundation for adding details and depth.

Add Color to the Scene

Introduce a bit more color than what is present in the actual scene. This personal touch can enhance the vibrancy and interest of your painting.

Work on Shadow Details

Apply a cooler shadow on one side of the shark fin and a warmer shadow on the other side. This contrast will enhance the glowing light effect in your painting.

PRO TIP

Use warmer shadows to create a glowing light effect.

6 Adding Greens and Distant Blues



Mix Dark Green for Shadows

Combine yellow and blue to create a green. Adjust the mixture to a darker shade for the shadows. Painting the darks first prevents muddiness when adding lighter colors later.

Add Blue for Distance

As you approach the edges, incorporate more blue into your green mix. This will help create a sense of distance in the painting.

Refine Edges with Sky

Paint slightly beyond your intended edge. Later, refine this edge by painting back into it with the sky color for a soft transition.

PRO TIP

Paint the darks first to avoid muddiness when layering lighter colors.

7 Shadow Details and Foam



Mix a Neutral Grey

Use a new brush to mix a fairly neutral grey for the shadow on the sand. Focus on getting the value right first, as this is crucial. Once surrounded by other colors, adjust the grey to be warmer or cooler if needed.

Add Foam Details

Introduce foam coming through the gap, using a lighter, cooler color. This foam is a neat feature and should contrast with the shadowed areas.

Understand Shadow Placement

Visualize the cliff casting a shadow across the sand and foam. Ensure the bright white foam extends into the sunlight, creating a dynamic contrast with the shadowed areas.

PRO TIP

Focus on getting the value of the neutral grey right before adjusting its temperature.

8 Cave and Foam Details



Darken the Cave

Paint the cave area slightly darker, leaving a small gap to represent the crack in the rocks. This adds depth and detail to the cave.

Adjust Foam Shadows

Darken some of the foam areas to create a contrast with the lighter parts. This will enhance the texture and movement of the water.

Add Foam Details on Rocks

Use a similar dark color to depict foam dribbling down the rocks. Make it slightly lighter and cooler to suggest the foam's translucency and interaction with light.

Begin Splash Details

Start painting the initial stages of a splash with a slightly lighter tone. This will add dynamic movement to the scene.

PRO TIP

Leave small gaps to represent cracks in the rocks, enhancing the natural texture.

9 Mid Values and Sky



Prepare Mid Values

Switch to a different brush and use walnut oil instead of camsol. Mix larger, thicker piles of paint to create a grayed down blue that is around a mid-value.

Paint the Ocean

Apply the grayed down blue to the ocean, making it darker than before. This will help the lighter elements in the painting stand out in contrast.

Adjust the Sky

Move on to the sky, making it slightly lighter and a bit bluer than the ocean. Ensure the sky remains subtle to enhance the contrast with the cliffs and island.

Blur the Horizon

Blur the entire horizon line to push it back visually. This will make the sharp edges of the cliff and island more prominent.

PRO TIP

Use walnut oil to mix larger, thicker piles of paint for mid values.

10 Sky and Ocean Details



Ensure Horizon is Level

Make sure your horizon line is horizontal and level. Use a zigzag motion with your brush to lightly blend the edge, ensuring a smooth transition.

Add Warmth to the Sky

Mix a slightly lighter and warmer tone by adding a touch of red to your paint. Apply this to the cloud bank or fog area to suggest warmth from the light source.

Create Cooler Areas

Switch to a cooler tone for some sections of the sky by adjusting your color mix. This variation adds depth and interest to the sky, simulating different atmospheric conditions.

Add Texture with Thick Paint

Apply thick paint to areas where you want to emphasize texture, such as warmer clouds. This technique helps create a dynamic and engaging sky.

PRO TIP

Use a zigzag motion to blend edges and ensure a smooth, level horizon line.

11 Ocean and Rock Interaction



Enhance Sky with Color

Mix yellow with a little bit of red and some white. Apply this mixture to the sky area to add color interest and warmth.

Lighten and Green the Ocean

Clean your brush slightly and move to the ocean section. Mix a lighter, greener tone and apply it to the ocean to create a sense of depth and vibrancy.

Darken the Water Near the Rock

Add a darker green tone where the rock meets the water. This contrast helps the rock appear as if it's submerging into the ocean.

Prepare for Splash Effect

Leave a small space near the rock for the splash effect. This will create a dynamic interaction between the rock and the water.

PRO TIP

Use a darker green where the rock meets the water to enhance the illusion of depth.

12 Light on Shark Fin



Start with Light Neutrals

Begin by applying a very light neutral color to the shark fin area. Ensure the color is slightly warm to create a base for the light spot.

Build Up Light and Warmth

Gradually lighten the color and add warmth as you work towards the lightest area. Introduce a bit of blue to vary the color while maintaining its lightness.

Create a Spotlight Effect

Continue to lighten and warm the color to achieve a spotlight effect on the shark fin. This will enhance the focal point.

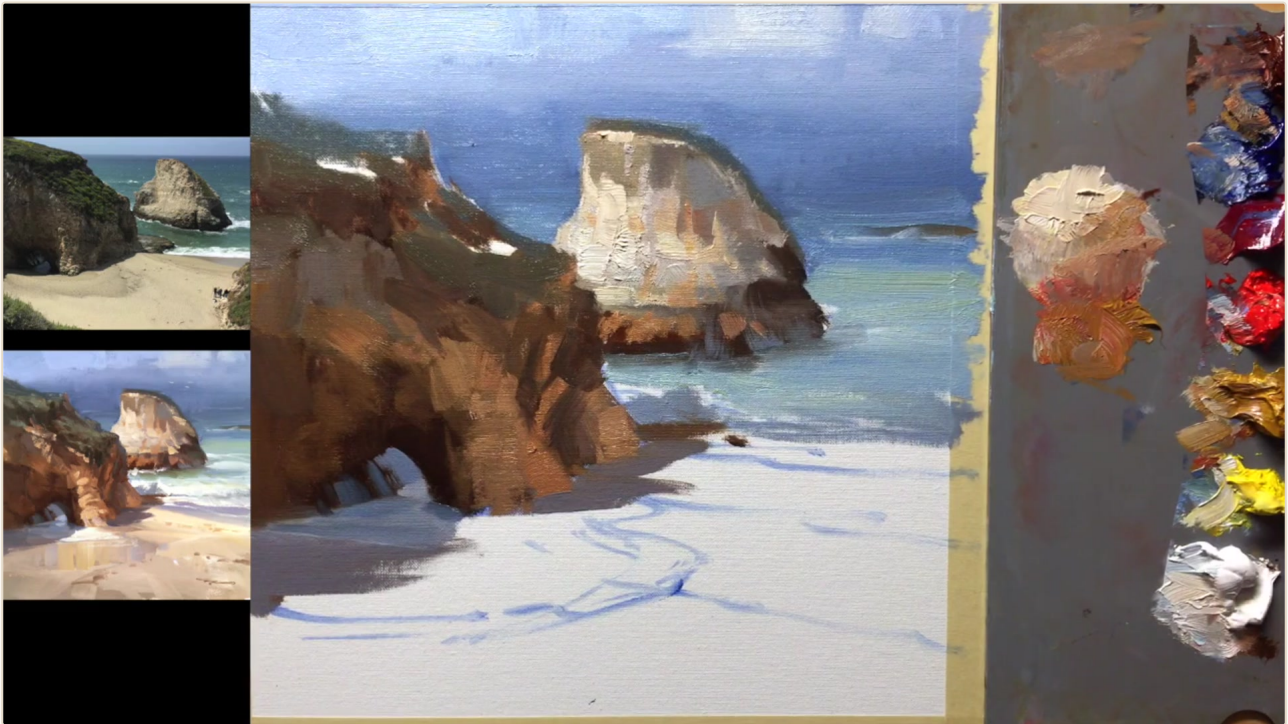
Add Richer Colors

Introduce richer colors to certain areas, but be cautious not to overdo it. If the color becomes too rich, adjust by mixing in the shadow color with some orange to maintain balance.

PRO TIP

Vary the light and shadow colors to add depth and interest to the shark fin.

13 Sand and Reflections



Fill in the Big Shapes

Focus on filling the canvas with the big shapes, ignoring the details for now. This will create a strong foundation for your painting.

Paint the Wet Sand

Use a brown tone to represent the wet sand, ensuring it has a slightly darker hue. Add striations of color to make the area more interesting, creating a soft spotlight effect with subtle variations of grey.

Add Reflections

Reflect some of the light onto the wet sand by using yellow ochre mixed with white. Brush this mixture downward to mimic the light reflections on the sand.

PRO TIP

Create subtle variations in grey to add depth and interest to large areas like sand.

14 Cliff Lights and Texture



Adjust Sand Color

Make a change in the sand color by lightening it slightly. Ensure the darker areas are where shadows naturally fall, and the lighter areas highlight the sunlit portions. This contrast will add depth to your painting.

Enhance Sky Reflection

Add a hint of mauve to the water to suggest a reflection of the sky. Use the same mauve to subtly enhance the beach area, creating a cohesive look.

Modify Green on Cliffs

Apply a lighter and warmer green to the cliff tops, but avoid using a bright green. Tone down the green to maintain a natural appearance. Later, add darker green accents to enhance the depth and contrast.

Apply Thick Paint to Cliff

Use very thick paint on the cliff, pushing it into the bristles for a textured effect. This technique will give the cliff a more realistic and tactile appearance.

PRO TIP

Use thick paint to create texture on the cliff, enhancing its realism.

15 Foam and Splash Details



Add Light to Rocks

Use as few brush strokes as possible to add light raking across the rocks. Consider adding a little bit of blue to achieve the desired effect. Be cautious not to overdo it.

Mix Foam Color

Prepare a mix of lots of white with a touch of bright yellow to warm it up, reflecting sunlight. Avoid using any painting medium; use straight paint for this step.

Apply Foam to Canvas

Lightly brush the foam mixture across the canvas to create broken areas that suggest broken foam. Focus on the top of the splash and brush outwards. Soften the effect with a dry brush or your finger if needed.

Create Small Foam Ripples

Use the tip of the brush to flatten the paint and push it in, creating a faint line of small foam ripples. Ensure these ripples are subtle to maintain a natural look.

PRO TIP

Use the tip of the brush to create faint lines of small foam ripples for a natural effect.

16 Final Touches and Accents



Add Dark Accents

Enhance the shadow side of the bushes by adding more dark accents. This will create depth and contrast in the painting.

Introduce Blue Reflected Light

Add a touch of blue reflected light to the cave area. This helps to round off the cave and adds a realistic touch to the scene.

Enhance Blue Reflections

Apply a little more blue to certain areas to push them away visually. Ensure these sections remain dark to maintain the glowing effect of the light burning out the edge of the foreground cliff.

Darken Cliff Shadows

Deepen the shadow near the base of the cliff. Adjust the value if needed by adding white and red to lighten any areas that become too dark.

Add Light Green Definition

Introduce very light green with directional strokes to add definition. Apply these strokes in specific areas to enhance the texture and detail.

PRO TIP

Use blue to create depth and enhance the glowing effect by pushing certain sections visually away.

17 Cracks and Beach Details



Add Cracks with Character

Paint cracks with a calligraphic stroke, ensuring the lines are broken and vary in thickness. Avoid creating lines that are uniform in width or too straight, as they can appear too drawn. Keep the cracks subtle to maintain the natural look.

Enhance Water with Color

Introduce more vibrant colors into the water to add interest and depth. Use punchy colors sparingly to avoid overpowering the scene.

Detail the Beach

Add subtle details to the beach using a color slightly darker than mid-gray. Ensure these details are not too dark to prevent them from standing out excessively. Adjust the color based on the specific area of the beach you are painting.

PRO TIP

Avoid using dark accents in light areas to maintain the glowing light effect.

18 Horizon and Pelicans



Check and Adjust the Horizon

Examine the horizon line for any irregularities, such as lumps or uneven areas. Soften and straighten the horizon to ensure it appears natural and continuous. This will enhance the overall balance of your painting.

Add Pelicans for Local Flavor

Include pelicans flying along the coast to capture the essence of the area. Use small, delicate brushstrokes to suggest their shapes in the sky, adding movement and interest to your scene.

PRO TIP

Soften and straighten the horizon to maintain a natural and balanced composition.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by preparing your canvas with a smooth surface, ensuring a clean slate for your creative expression. As you plan your composition, position the horizon line thoughtfully to enhance the visual clarity and interest of your scene. Begin your painting with the dark-to-light technique, laying down the darks first to establish depth and dimension, and gradually build up to the lighter tones.

As you progress, focus on capturing the dynamic interplay of light and shadow. Use warm and cool tones to create contrast and bring life to the shark fin and surrounding elements. Pay attention to the details in the shadows and foam, ensuring they add texture and movement to your painting. Incorporate greens and distant blues to suggest depth and distance, refining edges for a seamless transition.

In the final stages, enhance textures and add finishing touches to bring your painting to life. Use thick paint to create realistic textures on cliffs and subtle brushstrokes to suggest foam and ripples. Balance vibrant colors with natural tones to maintain harmony and depth. With each stroke, aim to capture the essence of Shark Fin Cove, creating a captivating and immersive scene.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use a well-used 220 grit sandpaper for a smoother canvas finish.
- Ensure main objects either clearly overlap or are distinctly separate from the horizon.
- Apply dark colors thinly to create depth and allow for thicker light colors later.
- Squint to see big color movements and maintain the integrity of shadows.
- Paint the darks first to avoid muddiness when layering lighter colors.
- Use a zigzag motion to blend edges and ensure a smooth, level horizon line.
- Use thick paint to create texture on the cliff, enhancing its realism.
- Avoid using dark accents in light areas to maintain the glowing light effect.



"Shark Fin Cove" 13 x 13" 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.

'Shark Fin Cove' 30x40cm Acrylic on Canvas by Shoman Mohamed



'Shark Fin Cove' 30x40cm Acrylic on Canvas by Shoman Mohamed

Nice happy colour scheme. Speaks of joy. I think your photo is actually a bit light so I fiddled with it. I also darkened the water around the base of the rocks and tried to darken the shadows in the rocks. These aren't dark enough in your painting so it makes it hard to see what's in the shadow and what's in the light, which flattens the painting. Be clear from the beginning sketch about where your shadows and lights are going to be.

'Shark Fin Cove' 13x13" Oil on Canvas by Robert H. Smith



'Shark Fin Cove' 13x13" Oil on Canvas by Robert H. Smith

Good work Robert. Great to see you using a variety of paint thickness and really plastering it on in the highlights. Good drawing, but do be careful to keep a straight horizon - no one likes a tsunami. If that big bump is a distant land then just avoid running it into the top of the island like that because when we don't overlap objects clearly it tends to flatten that part of the image.

'Shark Fin Cove' 12x12" Acrylic on Canvas by Sharon Repple



'Shark Fin Cove' 12x12" Acrylic on Canvas by Sharon Repple

Beautiful colour Sharon! Very rich. Interesting that you gave the scene more room around the edges which gives a more spacious feeling. Your cast shadows on the sand could do with a touch more red in them to connect them better to the colour of the sand in the light. Beautiful subtle colour shifts you've achieved in the central rock. Nice one!

'Shark Fin Cove' 16x16" Oil on Canvas by Ken McAlice



'Shark Fin Cove' 16x16" Oil on Canvas by Ken McAlice

Good work Ken. Great movement. Suggest you have a closer look at the drawing next time - perhaps grid it out or use some other transfer method. Also squint down and see how your shadow colours in the cliff are poking out a bit like they're actually lights instead of darks? So the cliff in shadow needs to be darker. Also the sea and sky can get darker as it recedes which makes a great backdrop for the brightly lit island.