



Jonathan Seagull

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/28-Jonathan-Seagull>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

Here at One Tree Point in New Zealand, I'm excited to guide you through painting a portrait of a seagull, a subject that is often overlooked despite its beauty and elegance. Seagulls are a common sight along the coast, and their graceful flight and sculptural form make them a rewarding subject for any artist. In this chapter, we'll focus on capturing the essence of these magnificent birds, honing in on their simple yet striking black, grey, and white plumage. You'll learn to draw a seagull with accuracy, sculpt its form using large planes, and create an elegantly subdued color scheme with a simple palette. By incorporating just a few sharp details, we'll bring our seagull to life on the canvas. Whether you follow my step-by-step guidance or use the resource photos to create something uniquely yours, this lesson will enhance your skills and deepen your appreciation for these beautiful creatures. Let's embark on this artistic journey together and transform a commonplace sight into a captivating work of art.



"Jonathan Seagull" 15 x 15" 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.

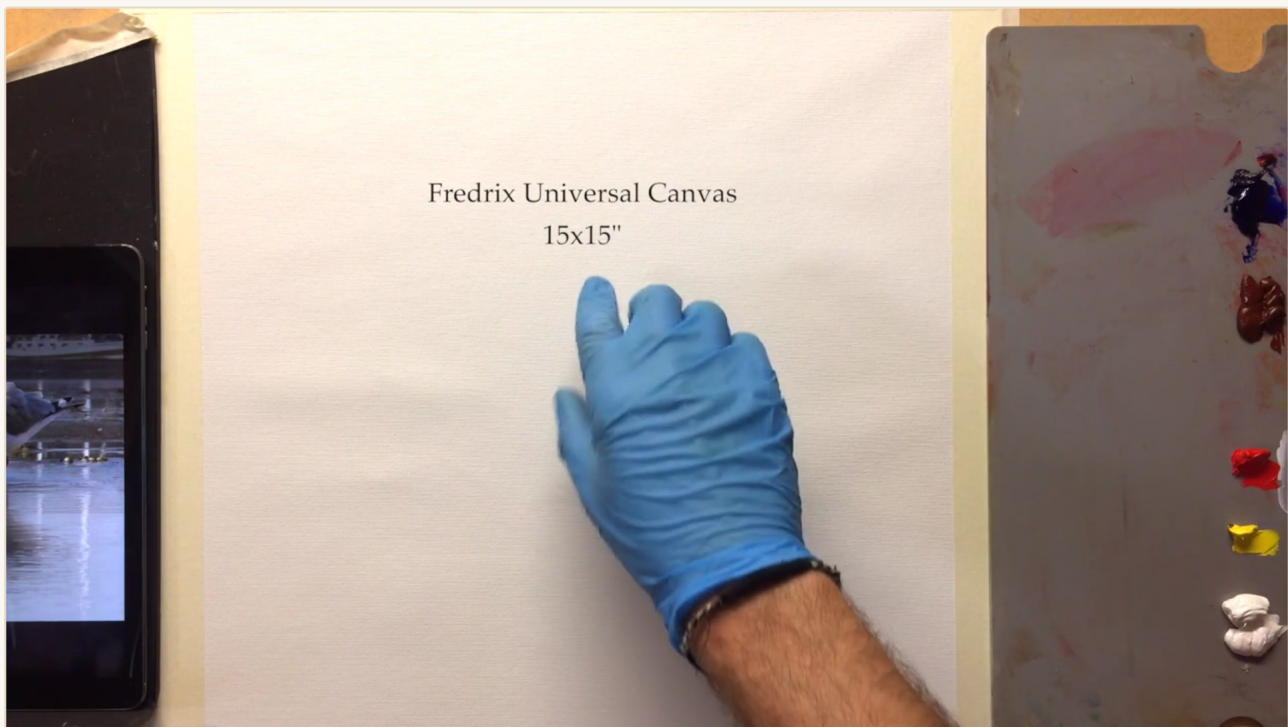
Materials

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
- Ultramarine Blue
- Burnt Sienna
- Cadmium Red
- Cadmium Yellow Light
- Titanium White
- Painting medium
- M. Graham & Co. Walnut Alkyd Medium
- Solvent
- Gamsol
- Canvas
- 15×15" Fredrix Universal
- Brushes
- [Rosemary & Co. Richard Robinson Brush Set](#)
- Palette Knife
- Paper Towels
- Container for solvent
- Container for painting medium

1 Canvas Preparation



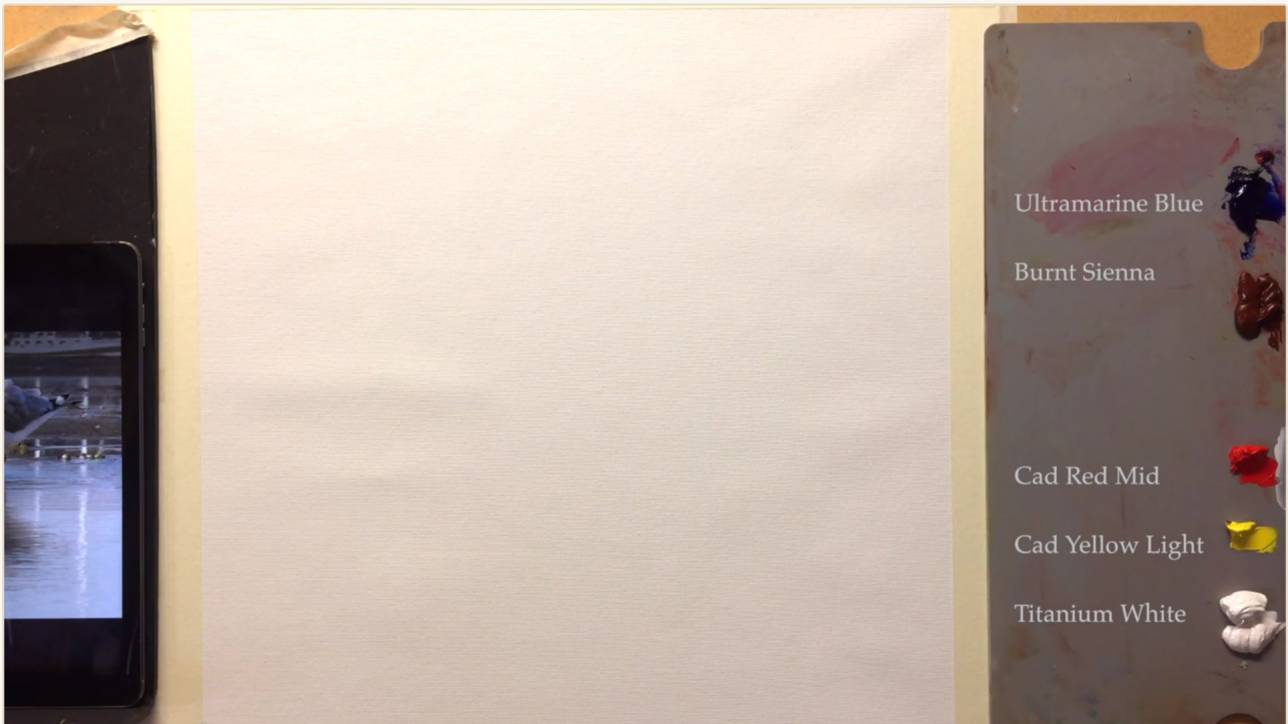
Prepare the Canvas

Use a square canvas for this painting. Ensure it is stretched out properly to avoid buckling. Lightly sand the surface to create a smooth base for your paint application.

PRO TIP

Lightly sand the canvas to ensure a smooth painting surface.

2 Palette and Color Mixing



Prepare Your Palette

Set up a simple palette with ultramarine blue and burnt sienna. These two colors will be used to create a neutral dark tone.

Mix Neutral Dark

Combine ultramarine blue and burnt sienna to achieve a neutral dark color. This mixture will serve as a base for various values throughout the painting.

Create Value Piles

Mix several different value piles of the neutral dark. Adjust the proportions of blue and sienna to vary the darkness and lightness, ensuring you have a range to work with.

PRO TIP

Use ultramarine blue and burnt sienna to simplify your color palette and maintain harmony in your painting.

3 Brushes and Materials



Select Your Brushes

Use a Rosemary & Co. Synthetic Long Flat No. 6 for detailed work. Choose a No. 10 bristle brush for medium-sized areas. Opt for a No. 12 bristle brush for covering larger areas.

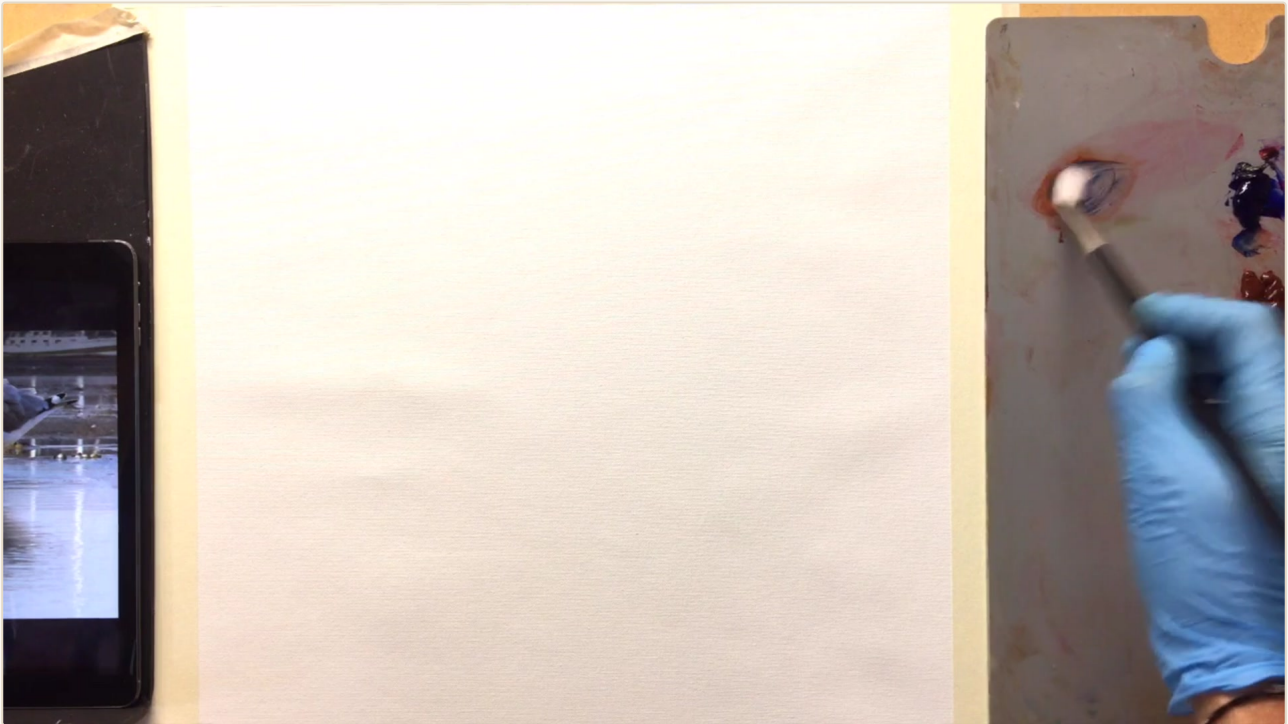
Prepare Your Materials

Have Gamsol ready in a small container for cleaning brushes. Use M. Graham's Alkyde Walnut Oil to modify paint consistency. Keep paper towels handy for wiping brushes and cleaning spills.

PRO TIP

Use different brush sizes to efficiently cover various areas of your painting.

4 Initial Drawing Techniques



Choose Your Drawing Tool

Select either a pencil or charcoal for your initial drawing. These tools provide flexibility and ease for adjustments.

Trace from a Printout

Consider tracing the bird from a black and white printout. This method simplifies capturing the basic outline accurately.

Draw a Guiding Rectangle

Draw a rectangle around the bird. Use the rectangle's sides to compare and set the angles of the bird's features accurately.

Sketch Key Points

Sketch the bottom of the feet, top of the body, bottom of the body, end of the tail, and end of the head. Establishing these dimensions early helps in filling in the angles later.

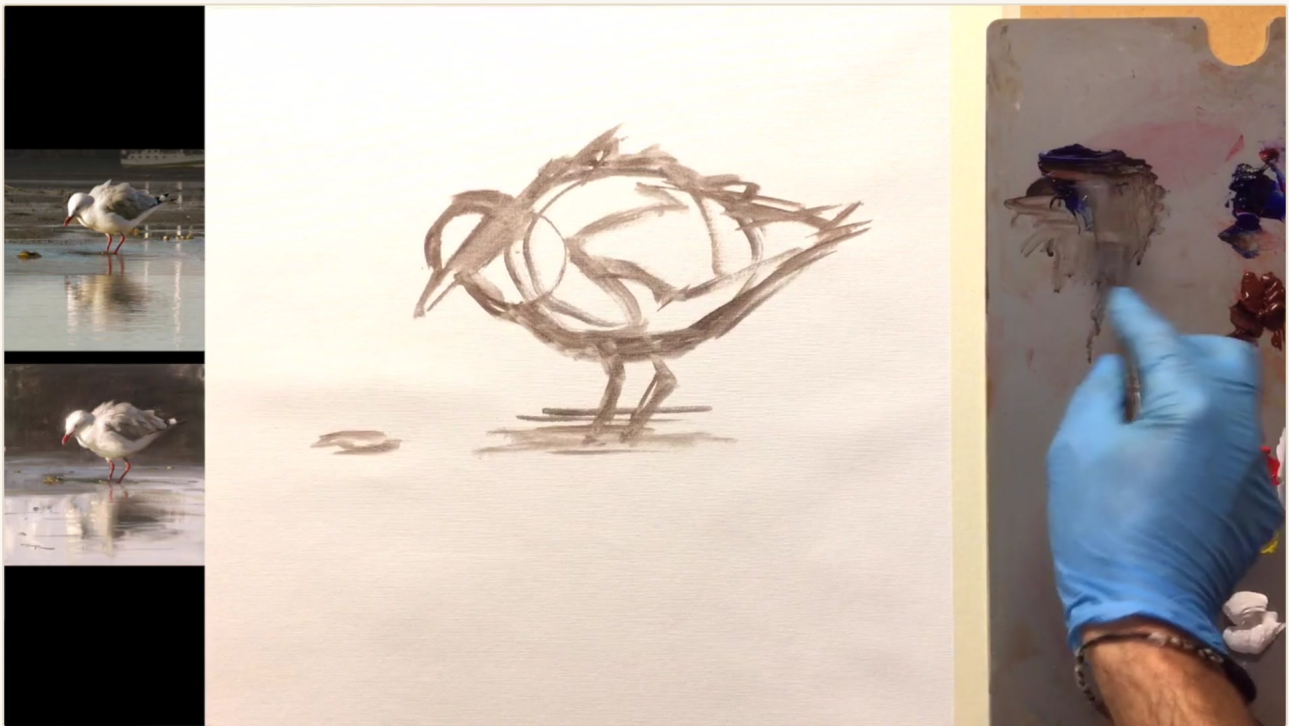
Visualize Basic Shapes

Visualize the bird's body as a series of round, egg-like shapes. This approach helps in capturing the natural form of the bird.

PRO TIP

Take your time with the drawing to ensure a better final result.

5 Mixing Neutral Values



Mix Neutral Dark

Combine blue and burnt sienna to create a neutral dark color, which is essentially black. This will serve as the darkest value in your range.

Lighten the Dark

Add white to the neutral dark mixture to create a lighter value. This will help you achieve a range of neutral values for your painting.

Create a Range of Values

Continue adding white to portions of the mixture to create a total of five distinct values. Ensure you mix generous amounts, as you may need more than anticipated.

Prepare to Block In

With your range of five neutral values plus pure white, you now have six values to work with. Use a big brush to start blocking in your painting.

PRO TIP

Mix generous amounts of each value to ensure you have enough for your painting.

6 Blocking in Shadows



Block in Big Shapes

Dip your brush into Gamsol and use a dark grey to block in the big areas. Squint at your reference photograph to blur the details and focus on painting only the large shapes.

Add Blue to Shadows

Mix a touch of blue into your grey to create a slightly lighter value. Apply this to the shadow areas, moving from one similar value to the next.

Judge White in Shadow

Place some paint down to test the value of white in shadow, as it can be deceptive. Squint at your photo to compare values accurately.

Visualize the Form

Think of the bird as an egg shape to understand how light falls across it. Focus on the overall light and shadow, rather than small details.

Add Warm Reflected Light

Mix in a little yellow and a tiny touch of red to capture the warm reflected light. Paint thinly to avoid committing too strongly at this stage.

PRO TIP

Squint at your reference to simplify the scene into big shapes and values.

7 Blocking in Lights



Prepare Your Brush

Switch to a slightly smaller, clean brush. Dip it into Alkyde Walnut Oil to prepare for blocking in the lights.

Block in the Lights

Take a lighter value of your paint and begin blocking in the lights. Focus on painting big shapes, as these are crucial for defining the subject.

Pay Attention to Edges

Be aware of the edges while painting. Aim for mostly soft edges to create a natural look, especially around the big shapes.

PRO TIP

The lights should be painted a little thicker than the darks to add depth and dimension.

8 Detailing the Bird



Add Lighter Highlights

Apply lighter highlights to the bird to enhance its form. Ensure these highlights are slightly lighter than the existing ones to create contrast.

Block in Tail Feathers

Use a smaller brush to apply a real dark color to the tail feathers. Keep the paint thin to maintain control and precision. Focus on blocking in the shape to capture the essence of the bird.

PRO TIP

Use a smaller brush for detailed areas like the tail feathers to maintain precision.

9 Painting the Background



Prepare the Brush

Use a big brush and dip it into Gamsol to clean off excess white paint. Add a little more blue to the brush for the background.

Paint the Background

Work the background in with broad, rough strokes. Focus on creating square angles as if chiseling out of stone to make it easier to judge the shapes and angles against each other.

Define Critical Angles

Pay attention to the angles when cutting into the shape of the bird. Notice the angle of the top of the head compared to the front of the face and how it joins the beak. Observe the angle of the bottom of the beak compared to the front of the chest and how it turns the corner.

PRO TIP

Use square angles to make it easier to judge the shapes and angles against each other.

10 Painting Reflections



Add Blue to the Foreground

Introduce more blue into the foreground area of your painting. This adds depth and interest, preventing the painting from becoming monotone. Aim for subtle color variations to give the scene a gentle lift.

Embrace Imperfect Mixing

Avoid mixing the paint too thoroughly. This can lead to happy accidents on the canvas, creating unexpected and pleasing effects.

Paint the Reflection

Focus on painting the reflection at this stage. Don't worry about the legs or other details right now; concentrate on capturing the essence of the reflection.

PRO TIP

Avoid over-mixing your paint to allow for spontaneous and interesting effects on the canvas.

11 Aligning Reflections



Mix the Grey

Mix more of the grey color needed for the reflection. Ensure it matches the tone used for the body of the seagull.

Align the Reflection

Position the reflection at the correct distance from the body. Remember, the distance from the base of the body to where the legs hit the water should be doubled.

Shape the Reflection

Squint at the reflection to assess its overall shape. Aim for an egg shape, ensuring the dark and light sections align vertically with the body.

PRO TIP

Double the distance from the base of the body to the waterline when painting the reflection.

12 Adding Water Details



Add Yellow Reflections

Switch to a light brush and add yellow reflections in the water. Use downward strokes to enhance the reflective qualities of the water.

Incorporate Sky Reflections

Brush some sky reflection into the water to create a cohesive look. Focus on the lighter areas in the center to mimic natural reflections.

Avoid Overworking Details

Keep squinting at your work to avoid getting too finicky with the details. Aim for a balance between detail and overall impression.

Paint Cast Shadow

Add a cast shadow beneath the bird to show where it is disturbing the water. This adds depth and realism to the scene.

PRO TIP

Use downward strokes with the light brush to enhance water reflections.

13 Finalizing Block-in



Prepare a Fluid Light Grey Mixture

Use a lighter brush to mix light grey paint, adding a touch more blue to the mixture. Incorporate Gamsol to make it a fluid, dribbly consistency.

Apply the Mixture for Texture

Brush and drag the fluid mixture quickly across the canvas. This technique creates a unique broken texture that enhances the painting's surface.

PRO TIP

Use Gamsol to achieve a dribbly consistency for creating unique textures.

14 Detailing Feathers



Switch to a Smaller Brush

Use a smaller brush to start detailing within the large shapes. Focus on the dark areas first by mixing blue and brown to recreate the dark tones.

Avoid Using GAMSOL

Do not use GAMSOL in your mixtures at this stage as it can damage the surface. Stick to walnut oil or use straight paint to maintain the integrity of the surface.

Detail Feather Shapes

Observe the individual feather shapes within the wing and aim to capture them with as few brushstrokes as possible. Utilize the fine bristles of your brush to achieve crisp edges and fine lines.

Adjust Shadow Colors

As the form moves into the light, lighten and warm the shadow colors. Avoid using the same shadow color throughout; adjust it to reflect the light and warmth in the illuminated areas.

Focus on Big Shapes

To manage the complexity of details, squint at your subject to simplify the view into big shapes. Even when detailing, avoid painting every ripple and feather; focus on the overall form.

PRO TIP

Use as few brushstrokes as possible to capture the essence of the feather shapes.

15 Reflected Light and Halftones



Paint Big Shapes

Focus on painting the big shapes you see in the detail of the seagull. This helps in capturing the essence without getting bogged down by the number of feathers or their exact placement.

Add Cool Grey

Switch to a cool grey to capture the reflected light from the sky on the seagull's back. Mix in a little blue to maintain subtle color variations.

Adjust Reflected Light

Ensure the reflected light is slightly lighter than the shadow color. This subtle difference is key to achieving a realistic effect.

Incorporate Halftones

Transition from shadow to halftone and then into light on the seagull's body. Notice how light penetrating through feathers warms up the color, especially in the halftone areas.

Reflect Warm Light

Add warmth to the halftone areas by incorporating warm light bouncing off the sand. This enhances the natural light effect on the seagull's body.

PRO TIP

Ensure reflected light is slightly lighter than the shadow color for realism.

16 Texturing Feathers



Observe the Bird

Squint at the bird to identify the big shapes. This helps in focusing on the overall form rather than getting lost in details.

Mix and Apply Color

Mix a bit of yellow into your paint to achieve the desired hue for the feathers. Use a very light touch to apply the paint, aiming for a textured feather look.

Create Feather Texture

Drag the brush lightly across the surface, lifting it as you go. Aim to complete the texture in one stroke, as a second stroke can erase the effect.

PRO TIP

Use a very light touch and aim for one stroke to maintain the textured look of the feathers.

17 Detailing the Head



Add Blue Shadow

Focus on the shadow at the back of the head. Use a blue tone to reflect the sky, creating a soft transition from light to shade.

Create Halftone Warmth

Observe the halftone area and add warmth to it. This subtle transition from shadow to halftone enhances the rounded appearance of the bird.

PRO TIP

Squint at the shape to better see the big shape and transitions.

18 Highlighting the Bird



Add Light to the Bird's Chest

Apply a thick layer of paint to the chest area of the bird. Use no medium to maintain the paint's thickness. Mix a little yellow with white to warm up the tone slightly, creating a natural light effect.

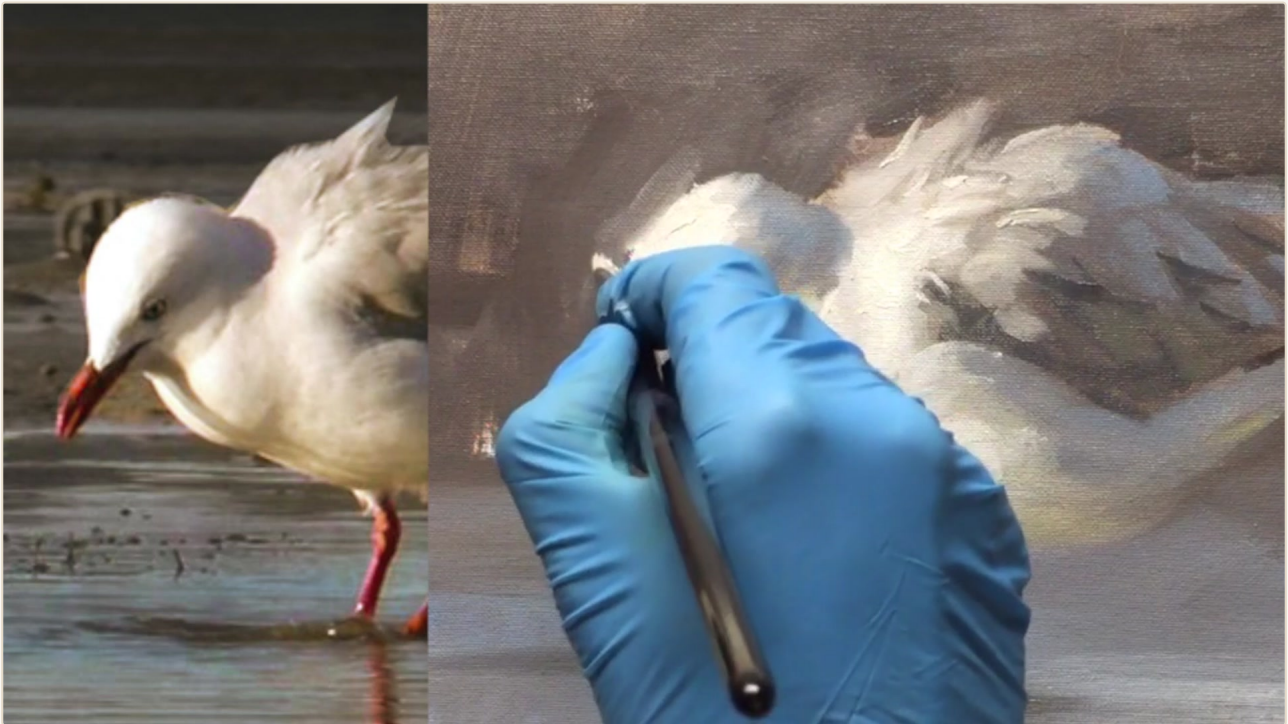
Highlight the Head

Focus on the top of the bird's head, applying the same thick, warm white paint. These areas should be the lightest in the entire painting, adding a shimmer or sheen to the feathers.

PRO TIP

Use thick, warm white paint without medium for the lightest highlights to create a shimmering effect.

19 Painting Beak and Legs



Prepare the Paint Mix

Mix red, burnt sienna, and a little bit of blue to create a color for the beak and legs. This combination will give you a natural and vibrant tone.

Mark the Beak and Legs

Carefully mark the beak and legs with light strokes. It's easy to get the angle wrong, so take your time and proceed cautiously.

Refer to Your Photo

Constantly refer to your reference photo to ensure accuracy. The initial drawing may have been lost, so use the photo to guide your details.

Consider Redrawing

If needed, redraw the beak and legs with a pencil before using a brush. This step helps in capturing these crucial details accurately.

PRO TIP

Use a pencil to lightly sketch the beak and legs before painting to ensure precision.

20 Refining Reflections and Details



Refine the Angles and Knee Joints

Check the angles of the legs to ensure they match. The top angles may align, but adjust the bottom ones if necessary. Observe the knee joints and their relation to each other for accuracy.

Add Darker Sections to Feathers

Notice any darker sections in the feathers and apply them with a suitable color. This adds depth and realism to the painting.

Enhance with Lighter Reds and Oranges

Use a lighter red, which is more of an orange, for the front of the leg. Vary the brightness to create dimension, avoiding uniformity.

Highlight the Beak

Apply a spot of pure red on the beak in the halftone area. This contrast with the grey background will make it pop. Add a lighter orange on top for additional highlights.

Add Sparkles and Accents

Create a sparkle effect on the beak and water with even lighter tones. Introduce a touch of green in the water as a complementary accent to the red legs.

PRO TIP

Use pure red on the beak to create a striking contrast against the grey background.

21 Adjusting Reflections



Observe Reflections

Examine the photo closely to understand the reflections of the legs. Notice that they are not exact reflections and differ in color and tone.

Adjust Colors

Identify the reflection that is not as dark or as red. Tone it down by using a softer color palette to match the subtlety seen in the reference.

Define Edges

Begin with soft edges for the reflection and gradually introduce crisper lines where necessary. Ensure the reflection has a light side as well.

Add Foreground Ripples

Incorporate slightly darker ripples in the foreground to enhance the realism of the water surface.

PRO TIP

Pay attention to the subtle differences in color and tone when painting reflections.

22 Painting the Eye



Select a Small Brush

Choose a small brush specifically for painting the eye. This allows for precise detail work in this delicate area.

Position the Eye

Carefully observe the placement of the eye in relation to the beak, the top of the head, and the front of the head. Accurate positioning is crucial for a realistic appearance.

Paint the Eye

With your small brush, paint the eye, paying attention to any distinctive features like a furrowed brow. Take your time to get it right, as this detail can significantly impact the expression of the seagull.

PRO TIP

Use a small brush for detailed work on the eye to ensure precision and accuracy.

23 Final Touches



Darken the Background

Evaluate the background to ensure it sufficiently contrasts with the bird. If it appears too light, mix a slightly darker shade and apply it thinly to enhance the bird's prominence. Allow the painting to dry for a couple of days if needed before making adjustments.

Sign Your Painting

Once satisfied with the background and overall composition, sign your painting to mark its completion. Choose a discreet yet visible spot for your signature to maintain the painting's balance.

PRO TIP

Ensure the background is dark enough to make the subject stand out effectively.

24 Tips for Painting Multiple Seagulls

DESIGNING a Seagull Party

Arrange Seagulls for Design

Cut out individual seagulls from different photos taken at the same location and angle. Move them around to create a pleasing design on your canvas.

Blur the Image

Blur the image of the seagulls to avoid getting caught up in details. This helps you paint broadly and focus on the overall composition.

Use a Grid

Place a grid over the blurred image to accurately transfer the shapes onto your canvas. This ensures correct proportions and positioning.

Alternative Arrangement Method

If you can't use a computer, print the seagull images at the desired size in black and white or color. Cut and paste them onto paper to arrange them, or sketch them with pencil.

Consider Size and Angle

Ensure the comparative sizes of the seagulls are correct for their distances from each other. Keep the camera angle consistent to maintain realism in size and lighting.

PRO TIP

Blur the image to avoid focusing on unnecessary details and maintain a broad painting style.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by preparing your canvas meticulously. A smooth, well-stretched canvas sets the foundation for your artwork. As you begin, simplify your palette with ultramarine blue and burnt sienna to create a harmonious base of neutral tones. These will guide your values throughout the painting process, allowing you to focus on form and light.

As you progress, use a variety of brush sizes to efficiently block in shadows and lights, paying close attention to the overall shapes and values. Squint at your reference to simplify the scene into large, manageable shapes. This approach helps in capturing the essence of the subject without getting lost in the details. Remember to mix generous amounts of your color values to ensure a consistent application.

In the final stages, focus on refining details and adding texture. Use a light touch to create the illusion of feathers and apply highlights with thick, warm paint to add depth and shimmer. Pay attention to the reflections and ensure they align with the body of the bird. By maintaining a balance between detail and overall impression, you bring your painting to life with realism and vibrancy.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Lightly sand the canvas for a smooth painting surface.
- Use ultramarine blue and burnt sienna for a harmonious palette.
- Mix generous amounts of each value to ensure consistency.
- Squint at your reference to simplify the scene into big shapes.
- Paint lights thicker than darks for depth.
- Use a smaller brush for detailed areas like tail feathers.
- Avoid over-mixing paint to allow for spontaneous effects.
- Use thick, warm white paint without medium for highlights.



"Jonathan Seagull" 15 x 15" 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.

"Seagull Snack Time" by Jessica Futerman



"Seagull Snack Time" 25x30cm Acrylic and Oil on Canvas by Jessica Futerman

Nice work Jessica. The drawing is good, the surrounding colours too. Modelling of the head is good but unfortunately you've gone a bit too light in the shadows so we're not getting that round feeling as in the head. I spent a few minutes darkening the bird's shadow areas in Photoshop to show you what it would look like. Note that I didn't touch the lights - the darker darks also make the lights look brighter. If you remember I talked in the video about thinking of the large egg shaped form of the bird throughout the painting of the details therein so that we don't lose sight of the big shape, the big effect of light on form. Squinting always helps us to see the forest for the trees.

"Gail Gulls" by Gail Richardson



"Gail Gulls" 10x10" Oil on Canvas by Gail Richardson

Good work Gail. A polar opposite to Tone Larsen's painting, above where you've carefully delineated each segment. Great job capturing the form of the birds including beautiful warm halftones. Same goes for the translucent and reflective water. Not easy but you did it well. If it were my painting the only thing I made change would be to add more glowing light bouncing of the brightly lit chests as I demonstrated in the video. It's just one of those little touches we painters can add to out-do the photograph.

"Flying Seagull" by Elena Sokolova



"Flying Seagull" 24x30cm Oil on Canvas by Elena Sokolova

Elena I love this painting and also the other one you did of the seagull on the post. I've been trying to figure out how you did this because it seems to be a departure from your usual work. There are parts of this that almost look photographic and other parts that are so painterly they speak well of the action and spirit of flight. Frame it!

"Jonathan and his girlfriend" by Tone Larsen



"Jonathan and his girlfriend" 12x16" Acrylic on Canvas by Tone Larsen

Great work, Tone - I love the painterliness of this. The drawing of the birds could be a little better but they have a certain sweet charm about them anyway. A viewer will be entranced by your suggestive brushwork, making them much more a part of the painting as they try to decipher the strokes. Love it!