



Kingfisher

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/27-Kingfisher>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, we're diving into the vibrant world of painting a stunning kingfisher, a subject that offers both beauty and challenge. With its striking colors and delicate features, the kingfisher is a rewarding subject that allows us to explore a variety of techniques. We'll use synthetic brushes from Rosemary & Co., including long flats, a rigger brush, and a filbert, perfect for the intricate details of this small-scale project. M. Graham's acrylics will bring our kingfisher to life, and with just a jar of water and some cotton buds, we'll keep our process simple and effective. You'll learn how to create a soft-focus background using a spray bottle to mist the canvas lightly, allowing the paint to blend smoothly for an artistic effect. I'll guide you through an easy drawing cheat and demonstrate simple techniques to achieve complex details. Whether you follow along step by step or adapt the techniques to your own style, this lesson promises to enhance your painting skills and bring joy to your creative journey.



"Kingfisher" 15 x 15" Acrylic 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. Acrylic Paints
- Burnt Sienna
- Pthalo Blue
- Ultramarine Blue
- Alizarine Crimson
- Cadmium Red
- Cadmium Yellow Light
- Titanium White
- Canvas
- Fredrix Universal Canvas
- (Give it a light sanding first)
- Brushes
- [Rosemary & Co. Richard Robinson Brush Set](#)
- Paper Towels
- Q tips / Cotton buds
- Water Jar
- Water spray bottle

1 Background redo



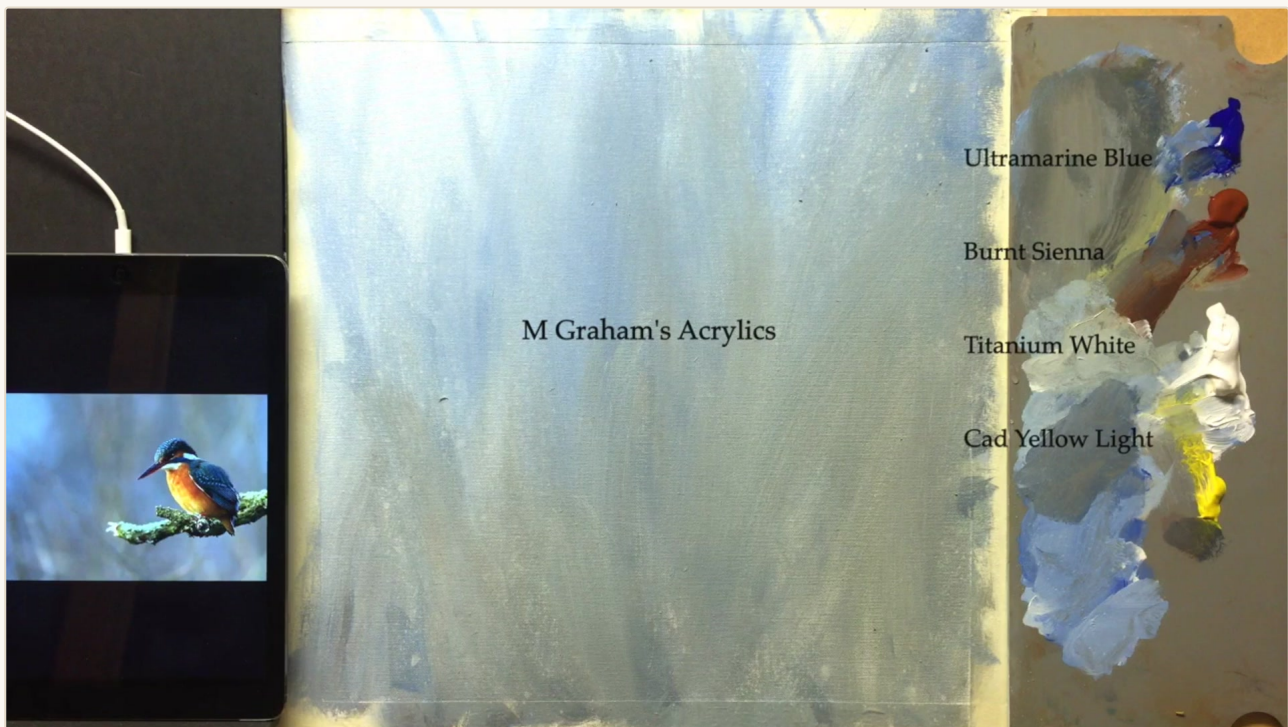
Prepare the Background

Use a spray bottle to lightly mist the background. This will help the paint to blend smoothly and create a more artistic effect.

PRO TIP

Use a spray bottle to keep the background surface moist for easier blending and a more artistic look.

2 Painting the background



Prepare the Canvas

Spray the canvas lightly with water to help the paint cover the surface smoothly. Use Frederick's Universal Canvas and M. Graham's Acrylics for best results.

Apply Base Colors

Mix blue and white and apply them to the top area of the canvas. Aim for a soft gradient with no sharp edges to make the bird stand out later.

Create a Gradient

Gradually transition from the blue and white to browns as you move across the canvas. Keep the colors soft and blended to maintain a smooth background.

Maintain Wetness

Continue to spray the canvas with water to keep the surface wet. This helps in creating soft edges with acrylics, which can be challenging.

Soften Edges

Use a large brush to gently whisk over the painted areas, softening any sharp edges. This ensures the background remains subtle and allows the bird to pop.

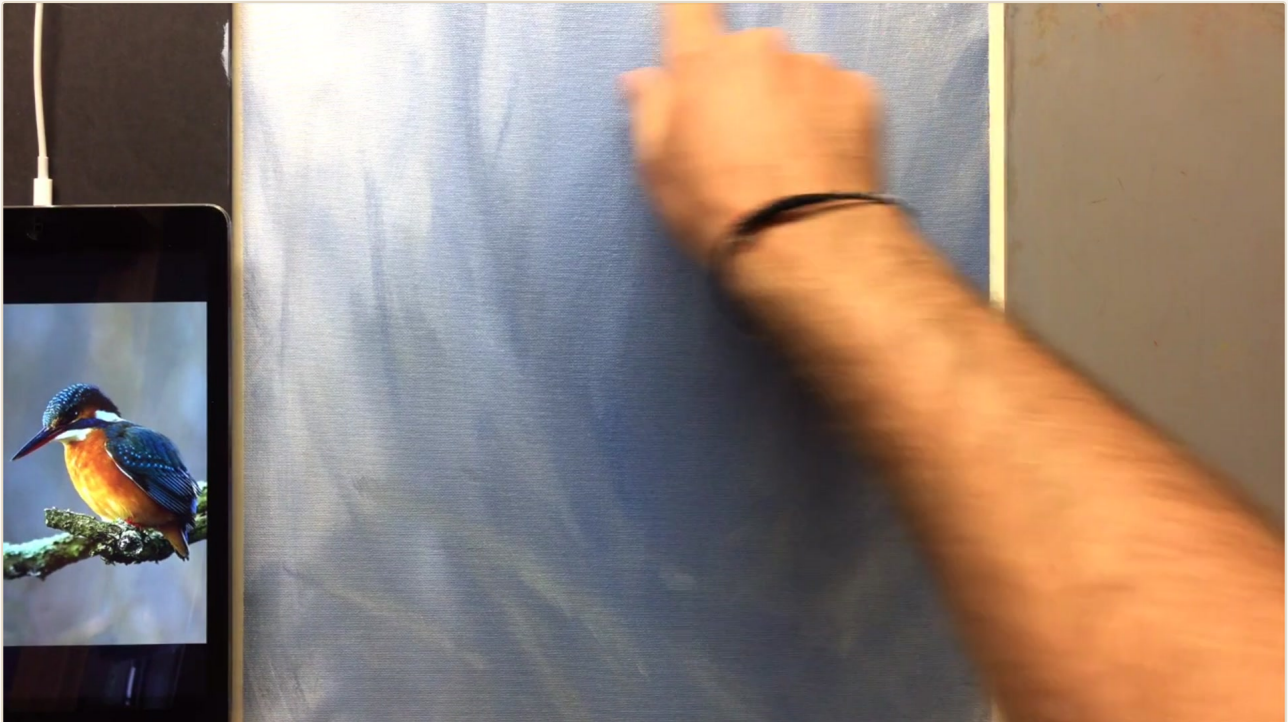
Add Subtle Details

With a smaller brush, introduce additional colors or subtle details like branches. Soften these details by whisking over them to maintain the soft background effect.

PRO TIP

Keep the canvas wet by spraying it with water to help create soft edges with acrylics.

3 Transferring the drawing



Prepare the Canvas

Ensure your canvas is completely dry and re-tape it to keep it stretched. This prevents buckling, especially with Frederick's Universal canvas.

Prepare the Drawing

Print out your drawing to the desired size. Use a 6B graphite pencil to fill in the back of the paper with graphite.

Position the Drawing

Decide where you want the drawing on the canvas. Consider placing the subject slightly higher rather than centered. Make small marks on the canvas to remember the position of the paper.

Transfer the Drawing

Trace around the bird on the paper, pressing firmly enough to transfer the graphite onto the canvas. Avoid denting the canvas while ensuring the graphite transfers clearly.

PRO TIP

Make small marks on the canvas to easily reposition the paper if needed.

4 Preparing for vibrant colors



Prepare for Vibrant Colors

Identify the areas on the bird where you want to achieve a light, glowing color, such as the golden yellow-orange breast. Apply a layer of white paint to these areas. This will ensure that the vibrant colors you apply later will not become dull or mix undesirably with the underlying colors.

Allow the White to Dry

Let the white paint dry completely before applying any other colors. With acrylics, this drying process will take about 20 minutes, much faster than oils.

PRO TIP

Use a base layer of white paint to ensure vibrant colors stand out against darker backgrounds.

5 Painting the beak



Mix a Dark Purple

Use ultramarine blue, alizarin crimson, and a little red to mix a dark purple. This will serve as the base color for the beak.

Paint the Beak

Use a small brush to apply the dark purple to the beak. Twist the brush as you move up the beak to create a larger brush stroke at the end. Constantly compare your work to the reference photograph to capture the details accurately.

Add Highlights and Details

While the paint is still wet, add a little white and possibly more blue to the mix. Stroke downwards, leaving a dark edge along the bottom where the beak curves under. Add more white to highlight bumps and details.

Adjust the Underside

Mix alizarin crimson with a touch of blue to paint the underside of the beak, making it slightly darker as it moves upward. If you make a mistake, use a wet cotton bud or Q-tip to remove it.

PRO TIP

Remember that acrylics dry darker and duller, so paint your lights a little lighter than you think.

6 Painting the head



Mix Turquoise for the Forehead

Use phthalo blue with a tiny touch of yellow to create a turquoise color. Remember, phthalo is a powerful color, so a little goes a long way.

Lighten the Turquoise

Add a bit of white to your turquoise mix to lighten it. Apply this to the back of the head, creating a smooth transition from the forehead.

Darken the Back of the Head

Introduce a touch of alizarin to the mix for the darker sections at the back of the head. This adds depth and richness to the plumage.

Add Highlights

Incorporate a little white to reflect the sky and background color. This will help the head appear rounded rather than flat.

Detail the Feathers

With the base color in place, use the edge of your brush to add fine details. You can choose to count and paint each feather for more detail.

PRO TIP

Use the edge of your brush to add fine details to the feathers, enhancing the realism of the plumage.

7 Painting the eye



Mix Dark Color for the Eye

Combine both blues with a touch of red to create a very dark blue-black color. This will serve as the base for the eye.

Paint the Eye

Use the dark blue-black mixture to paint the entire eye. This establishes a strong foundation for the details.

Add Reflection

Mix a small amount of blue with white. Apply this mixture to the back of the eye to suggest a reflective surface.

Highlight the Reflection

Mix white with ultramarine blue and apply it to the bottom of the reflective area. This adds depth and dimension to the eye.

PRO TIP

Use a very dark color as the base for the eye to create contrast and depth.

8 Painting the wing



Create the Base Layer

Mix phthalo blue with a bit of white and softly work it into the top of the wing. Use a larger brush to cover the area, focusing on the color transitions. The top should be lighter, gradually darkening as you move down.

Add Darker Tones

Mix ultramarine blue, phthalo blue, alizarin crimson, and a touch of red for the darker areas. Paint the lower wing section with these colors, twisting the brush to create individual feather ends.

Transition to Greener Hues

Mix phthalo blue with a touch of yellow and white for the greener area. Use crisp brushstrokes to define feather ends as you transition into the darker section.

Highlight with Lighter Blues

Use phthalo blue and white to create lighter blue accents on the wing's edge. This highlights the body's curve and adds depth to the painting.

Add Dark Accents

Apply straight phthalo blue for subtle shadow areas under the feathers. Mix blue and yellow with a touch of red for greenish dark accents, rotating the brush to form feather shapes.

Apply Lighter Accents

Use a Rig-A-Brush for precise lighter accents. Carefully place the brush to create arcs, noting that feathers are closer together at the top. Add more white to highlight specific feathers.

PRO TIP

Use a Rig-A-Brush for precise arcs and feather details, adjusting paint consistency for desired effects.

9 Painting the body



Prepare the Palette

Scrape off any excess paint and wash out the brushes thoroughly to avoid contamination. Add burnt sienna to the palette to work with browns and oranges. Ensure your water is clean to maintain the purity of your colors.

Paint the Base Colors

Use a large brush to apply the dark colors first, then work into the lighter areas. Focus on painting the big color shifts and shapes before adding details. Remember, acrylics dry darker and duller, so make your colors slightly more vibrant and lighter than you think.

Create Soft Transitions

Mix pure oranges using yellow and red while the paint is still wet to achieve soft transitions. Clean your brush to prevent brown from mixing into the purer colors. Squint at your subject to identify big shapes and color transitions.

Add Highlights and Details

Wash your brush properly and mix white, yellow, and a tiny touch of red for highlights. Use the big brush to apply these highlights. Add little brown bits using the colors on your palette, and mix white with brown, blue, and a touch of yellow to create a grey-green for the reflective areas.

PRO TIP

Acrylics dry darker and duller, so make your colors slightly more vibrant and lighter than you think.

10 Adding final details to the bird



Add the White Highlight

Mix brown and white to create an orangey white. Start with the darkest part first. Use a watered-down acrylic to sketch a light rendition of the stroke as a tester before committing to a more powerful stroke.

Paint the Bird's Foot

Use a rigor brush to add the foot with a mix of red and a little shadow underneath. Alizarin Crimson is perfect for this shadow.

Add Stray Feathers

Mix white, yellow, and a touch of red to paint a few stray feathers, enhancing the bird's vibrant appearance.

PRO TIP

Use a watered-down acrylic to sketch a light rendition of a stroke before committing to it.

11 Painting the branch



Mix Colors for the Branch

Prepare several piles of color for the branch. Use ultramarine and yellow for a dark green. Mix phthalo, a little burnt sienna, and some yellow for the dark underside. Create a brighter green with yellow and a bit of both blues. For a mid-range grey-green, combine blue, yellow, burnt sienna, and a little white. Lastly, mix mainly white with a touch of ultramarine and yellow for the highlight.

Paint the Out-of-Focus Branch

Apply the mixed colors to the branch, focusing on the out-of-focus areas first. Use a soft brush to lightly brush over the edges to create a blurry effect. Work quickly while the paint is wet to maintain the soft edges.

Soften the Edges

Use a Q-tip or a soft brush to dab along the edges, softening them further. Wetting the area with a little water on your finger can give you more time to blur the edges. Ensure no sharp edges remain, maintaining the out-of-focus look.

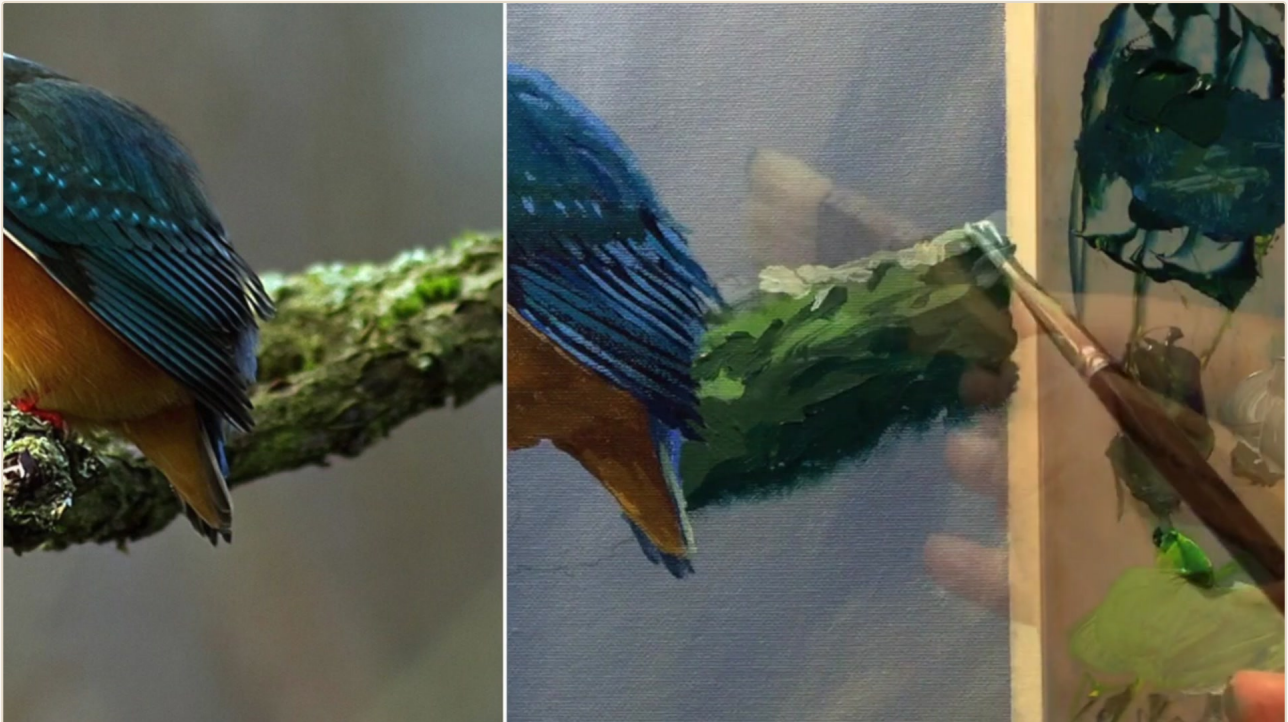
Add Highlights and Details

Apply a yellowish mixture first, then add the whiter highlights inside that. Use a Q-tip to ensure the edges stay soft. Add a few grey details and reflected light underneath. Finally, reintroduce some dark accents to enhance depth.

PRO TIP

Use a Q-tip to soften edges and maintain the out-of-focus effect.

12 Final touches and signing



Enhance Branch Details

Darken the branch slightly to add depth. Use a rigger brush to create crisp, squiggly lines for texture. Add a touch of grey by mixing red, blue, and yellow to introduce interesting details.

Add Dangly Bits

Brush a little water onto the branch to create a few more dangly bits. This will make the branch appear more dynamic and engaging.

Sign Your Painting

Sign your painting in a spot that balances the composition, such as the lower corner. This adds a personal touch and completes your artwork.

PRO TIP

Use the tip of the rigger brush for precise, crisp lines to enhance details.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by setting the stage with a beautifully blended background. Use water to keep the canvas moist, allowing for smooth transitions and soft edges. This will create a subtle backdrop that lets your kingfisher take center stage. As you progress, carefully transfer your drawing onto the canvas, ensuring it's positioned just right to capture the bird's dynamic presence.

With the groundwork laid, it's time to bring the kingfisher to life with vibrant colors. Start by preparing areas for glowing hues with a base of white, ensuring your colors pop against the background. Pay attention to the beak, head, and eye, using a mix of blues, reds, and whites to capture the intricate details and depth. As you paint the wings and body, focus on color transitions and feather details, using precise brushstrokes to enhance realism.

In the final stages, add the finishing touches to the bird and its perch. Use a variety of greens and browns to paint the branch, keeping edges soft for an out-of-focus effect. Finally, add crisp details with a rigger brush and sign your work to complete the piece. Remember, each stroke contributes to the overall harmony and vibrancy of your painting.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Keep the canvas wet by spraying it with water for smooth blending.
- Use a base layer of white paint to ensure vibrant colors stand out.
- Paint your lights a little lighter than you think, as acrylics dry darker.
- Use the edge of your brush to add fine details to feathers.
- Start with a very dark color for the eye to create contrast and depth.
- Use a Rig-A-Brush for precise arcs and feather details.
- Sketch light renditions with watered-down acrylic before committing.
- Use a Q-tip to soften edges and maintain an out-of-focus effect.



"Kingfisher" 15 x 15" Acrylic 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.

"Kingfisher" by Sharon Pelicano



"Kingfisher" 9x12" Oil on Canvas by Sharon Pelicano

Nice work Sharon. The bird's colours and form have been very carefully rendered - beautifully crisp against the soft background, which perhaps could have done with a little more work to adding more branches etc to make it as convincing as the foreground. The end of your branch could do with some thinning down since it's currently thicker at its end than its beginning. (Oh mine's on the verge of doing that too now that I look!). A few minor points. Overall this is great work!

"Kingfisher Study" by Laurel Hinz



"Kingfisher Study" 12x12" Oil on Canvas by Laurel Hinz

Beautiful work, Laurel! Excellent drawing and painting skills, subtle colour perception and you've achieved an overall colour harmony by adding more green into the background. The only tweak I could suggest is to beware of muddy colour in the background which has developed a little through painting a few lights into the darks and then smooshing them together. Moving from one colour group to another in a blurry situation like this can so quickly be spoiled by overworking with a brush that contains a little of every colour there, making grey. My solution to that as you saw in the video is to work gradually into the darks in one colour group and then at the very last, introduce the new colour and try to apply that with minimal fussing.

"Kingfisher" by Kym West



"Kingfisher" 30x30cm Acrylic on Board by Kym West

Hi Kym, a very striking painting! Love those shafts of light and the green tone that carries through into the branch. The painting was looking a little flat to me so I deepened the shadows around the bottom half of the body, the head, and the underside of the branch which has given the elements a little stronger sense of roundness and realism. The biggest change was darkening the light blue along the bird's back so that it didn't jump out so much. Also a little stronger highlight on the moss. Hope that helps.

"Kingfisher" by Elise Mahaffie



"Kingfisher" 16x8" Oil on Linen Board by Elise Mahaffie

Great work Elise! Interesting to see the difference in effects between Kym West's painting done in acrylic on board, and yours done in oil on linen. You've done an outstanding job here with excellent drawing and subtle colour transitions both large and small - a real gem. I can't suggest any improvements. Beautiful!