



# Red-Crested Cardinal

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A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/26-Red-Crested-Cardinal>

MY PAINTING CLUB

# Introduction

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While working on some pieces for my gallery in Hawaii, I stumbled upon a captivating photograph by David Lennard of a red-crested cardinal. This stunning songbird, native to South America and introduced to Hawaii, inspired me to imagine it perched in the breathtaking Kalalau Valley on Kauai. With a bit of creative photoshopping, I combined elements from various photos to create a scene that truly captures the essence of this beautiful bird in its new habitat. In this chapter, I'll guide you through the process of painting this environment portrait on a smaller scale, using a 16-inch canvas. We'll explore how to craft a glowing background that enhances the cardinal's vibrant presence, and I'll share simple techniques for achieving intricate details. Whether you follow my steps closely or adapt the techniques to create your own masterpiece, you'll find this scene a rewarding subject that combines the allure of nature with the joy of painting. Let's embark on this artistic journey together and bring the red-crested cardinal to life on canvas.



*"Kalalau Opera 2" 16 x 16" Acrylic on Canvas by Richard Robinson.*





**REFERENCE PHOTO 1**

*The scene as Richard found it.*



**REFERENCE PHOTO 2**

*The scene as Richard found it.*

# Materials

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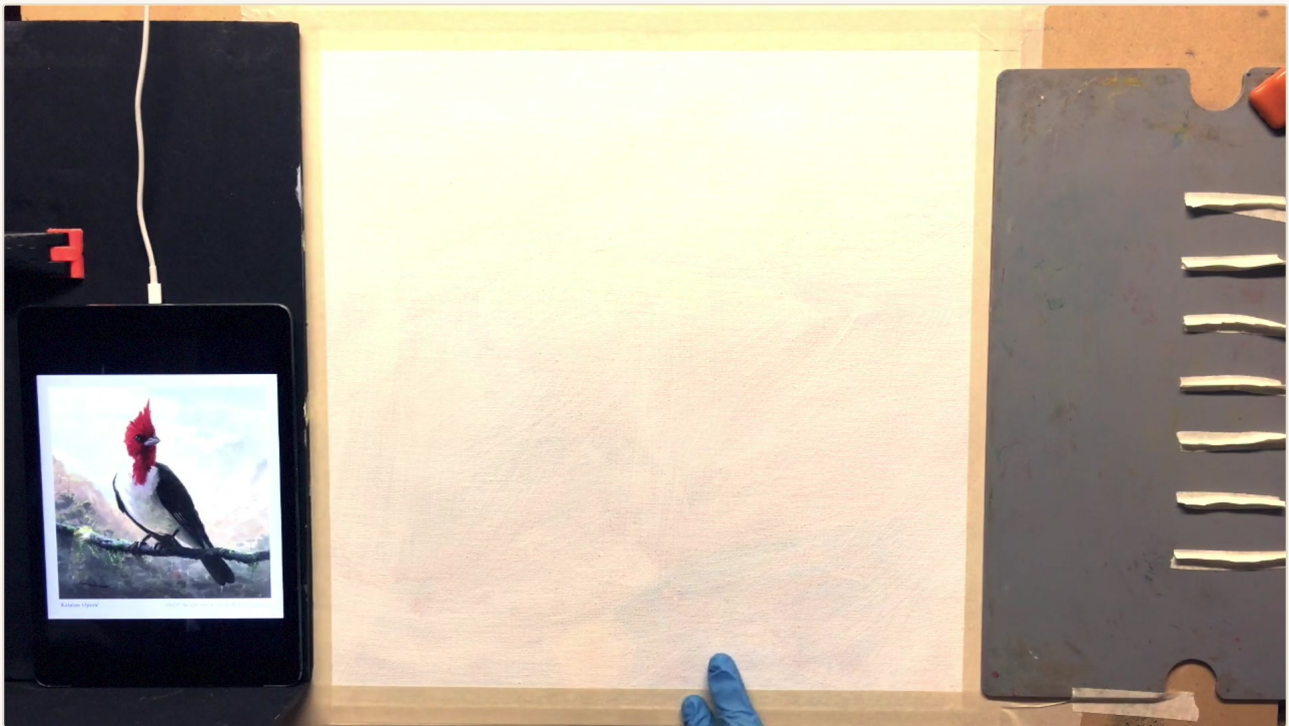
Gather these materials before you start. If you don't have the exact same supplies, use what you have and substitute freely.

## WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- M. Graham & Co. Acrylic Paints
- Black
- 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 Canvas preparation



### Prepare the Canvas

Use a 16-inch canvas and apply a couple of coats of gesso to create a smooth surface. Lightly sand the canvas after the gesso has dried to ensure an even texture. If there is an old acrylic painting on the canvas, cover it with gesso and sand lightly to prepare it for the new painting.

#### PRO TIP

*Always sand the canvas lightly after applying gesso to achieve a smooth painting surface.*

## 2 Brush selection



### Select Your Brushes

Choose a variety of Rosemary & Co synthetic brushes for this painting. Include a couple of flat brushes and a couple of filbert brushes for versatility. Use a long rigger brush for adding fine details at the end.

#### PRO TIP

*Use a long rigger brush for intricate details.*



### 3 Painting the glowing light effect



#### Prepare Your Materials

Set up two jars of water: one for cleaning brushes and one for clean water. Have a spray bottle with water and a rag or old tea towel ready for wiping brushes.

#### Mix Initial Colors

Use ultramarine blue, cad red light, cad yellow light, and titanium white. Lightly spray the canvas and your paints to keep them moist.

#### Start the Glowing Light Effect

Wet your brush to prevent paint from drying in the ferrule. Begin with white paint, adding a small amount of yellow. Apply broadly across the canvas, focusing on the center.

#### Enhance the Glow

Add a little more yellow and a tiny touch of red to the mix. Spray the canvas again to maintain moisture and blend quickly.

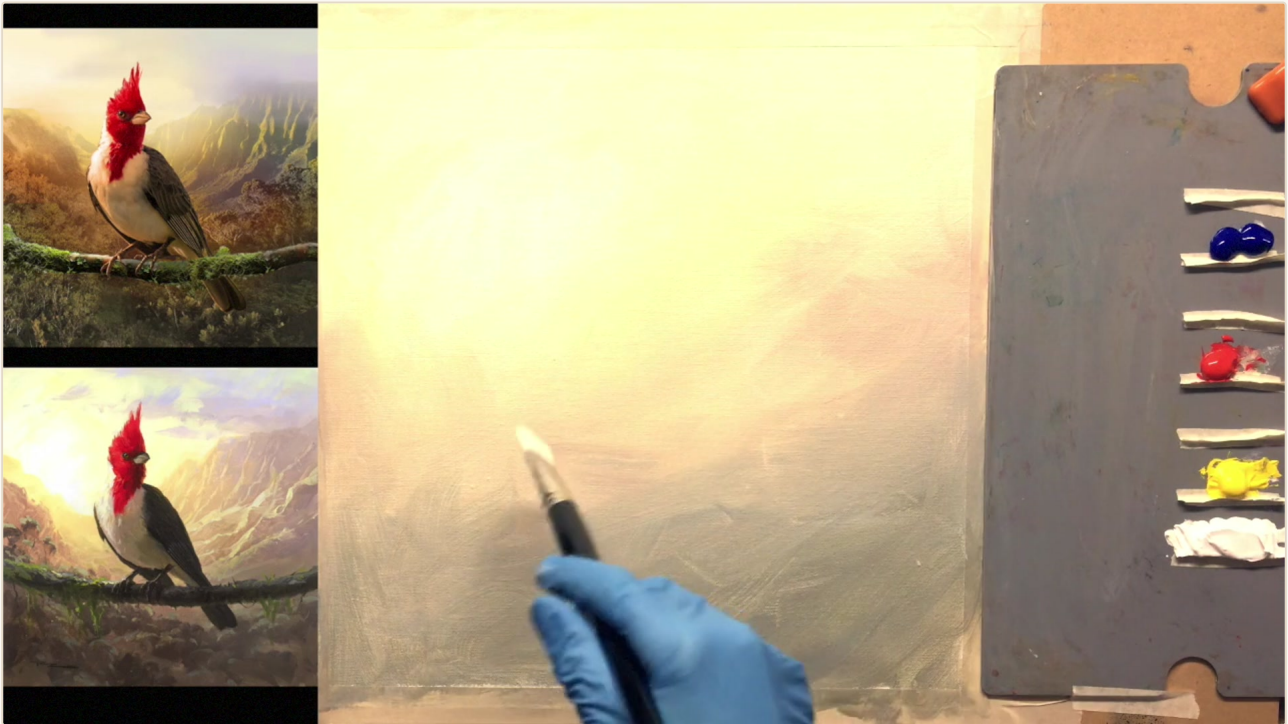
#### Create an Aqua Sky

Mix more white, yellow, a touch of red, and a little blue. Spray and apply to the top right corner to achieve an aqua effect. Wash your brush and finish this area with a final spray and blend.

#### PRO TIP

*Keep the canvas and paints wet to create smooth blends with acrylics.*

## 4 Painting the landscape background



### Prepare the Brush and Base Color

Wet your big brush and start with white paint. Add a tiny touch of yellow to the white, and apply it to the landscape area. Be gestural with your strokes, or use a big soft brush to smooth it out if preferred.

### Create the Glow Effect

Mix mainly white with a bit of yellow and a tiny touch of red. Apply this mixture near the center of the glowing light effect, keeping it very light. Gradually add more red and yellow as you work outwards, making it slightly darker and more orange.

### Add Green Tones

As you move further from the glow, begin to incorporate more green by adding a little red and a touch of blue. Avoid repeating shapes or angles to maintain a natural look.

### Define Mountain Ridges

Add more blue and yellow to create a slightly warmer tone for the second ridge of land. Make this area darker and warmer, smudging the edge with your finger if desired. Paint small trees on top of the ridges for detail.

### Enhance Foreground Details

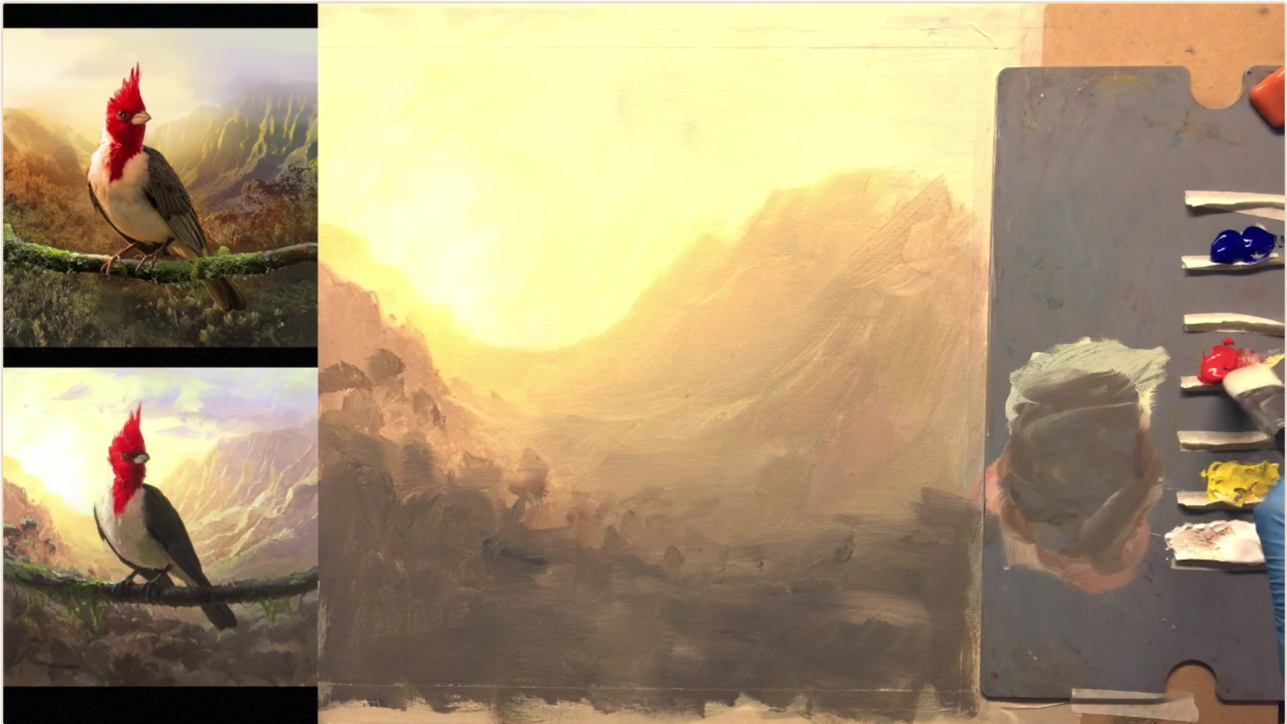
As you approach the foreground, increase the darkness and green tones. Use larger brush strokes to create a sense of depth and distance. Add darker details and lighter accents to enhance the landscape.

**PRO TIP**

*Keep your brush and paint wet to allow for smooth blending and easier adjustments.*



## 5 Adding clouds



### Mix Cloud Colors

Combine red, white, and blue with a little more white to create a color slightly darker than the sky. Add a touch of yellow to harmonize the cloud color with the sky, ensuring it doesn't stand out too much.

### Paint Cloud Shapes

Consider a large cloud mass with an interesting shape, surrounded by smaller shapes. As the clouds approach the sun, make them lighter and warmer by adding white and a little yellow.

### Blend Clouds with Landscape

Integrate the clouds with the top of the mountain, ensuring the mountain remains slightly darker to maintain an atmospheric feel.

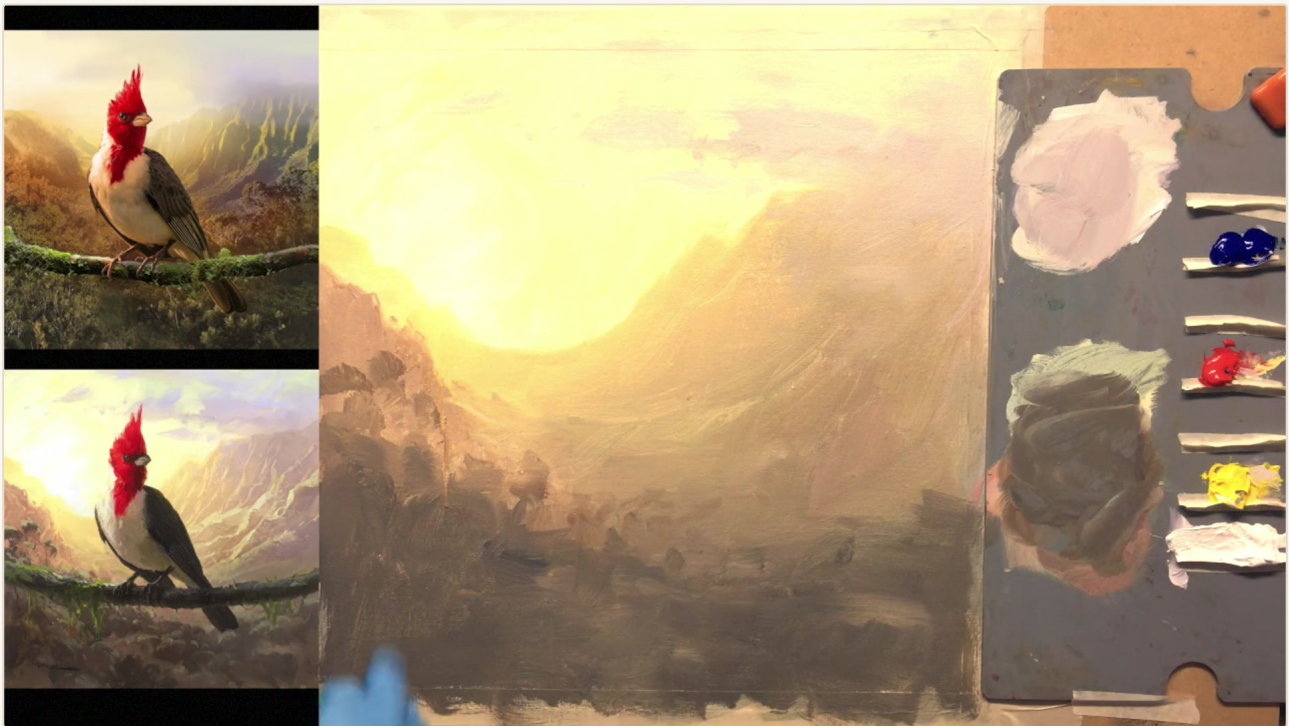
### Soften Cloud Edges

Before the paint dries, lightly spray the area and use a dry brush to soften the cloud edges, reducing sharpness for a more natural appearance.

#### PRO TIP

*Add a touch of yellow to cloud colors to harmonize them with the sky.*

## 6 Adding depth and details to landscape



### Maintain a Wet Surface

Keep the area wet as you work into it. This will allow for smoother blending and easier manipulation of the paint.

### Add Depth to Mountain Shapes

Mix white, yellow, and a little blue. Refer to the resource photo and start carving out the mountain shapes with variety in thickness and angle. Begin with a fresh load of paint where the light is strongest and work outwards as the paint runs out.

### Create Tree Details

Use dabbing motions to suggest individual trees and add detail. As you move closer to the local color, make the shapes darker and greener. Closer to the sun, lighten them with white and yellow.

### Reveal Lighter Background

With water on your brush, remove some foreground paint to reveal the lighter background, creating contours. This benefits from the glowing effect painted earlier.

### Add Darker Accents

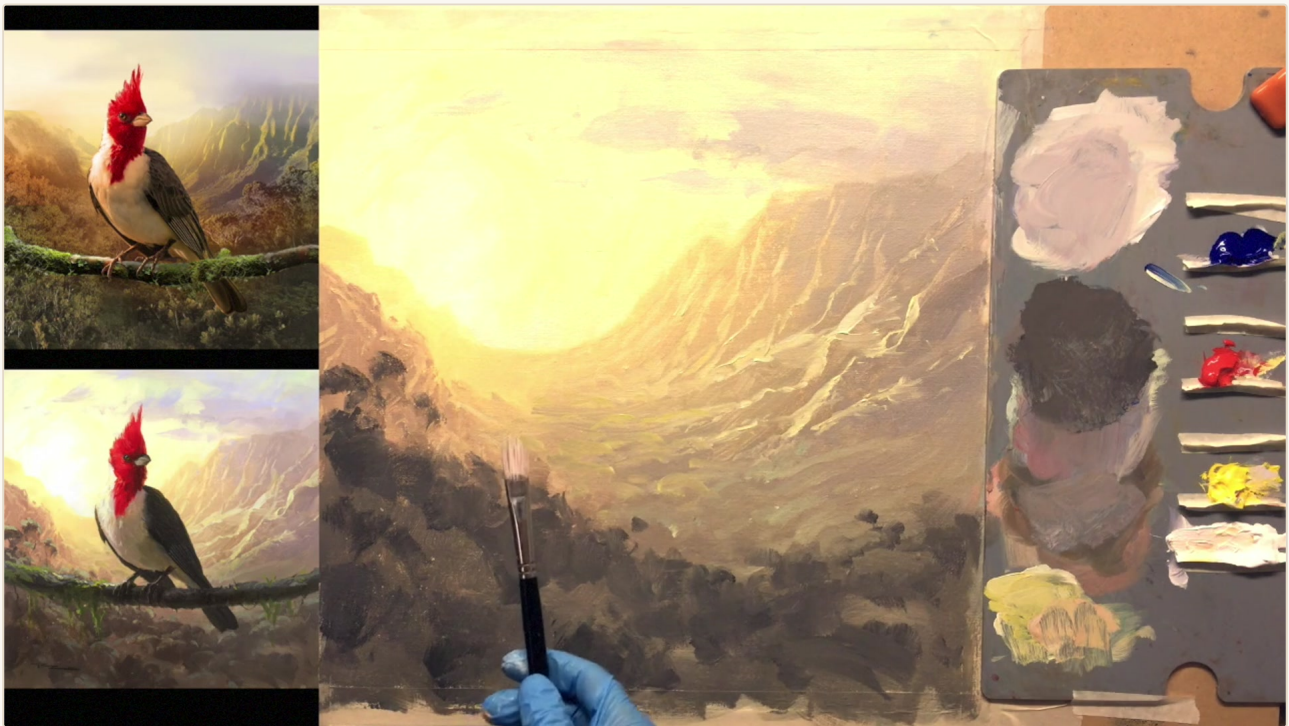
Mix a darker version of your existing colors using blue, red, and yellow. Paint dark gaps under the trees, capturing the shapes seen in the resource photo. Join dark shapes into larger ones for continuity and harmony.

**PRO TIP**

*Join dark shapes into larger ones to avoid a bitsy look and create shape harmony.*



## 7 Highlighting and detailing landscape



### Prepare Your Brush

Clean your brush thoroughly and give it a misting. This ensures that the colors you apply are fresh and vibrant.

### Mix the Base Color

Combine yellow, blue, and a little red to create a toned-down green. Add white to lighten it, resulting in a bluish-green suitable for shadow areas.

### Apply the Base Color

Dab the bluish-green along the top of the trees in a semi-circular motion, creating arcs that mimic the natural shape of the foliage.

### Lighten the Highlights

Add more yellow and a touch of white to your mix to brighten the color. Use a filbert brush to roll the paint onto the canvas, following the curve of the tree tops.

### Enhance Brightness

As you move across the landscape, increase the brightness and greenness of the highlights. Connect light areas to avoid a disjointed pattern.

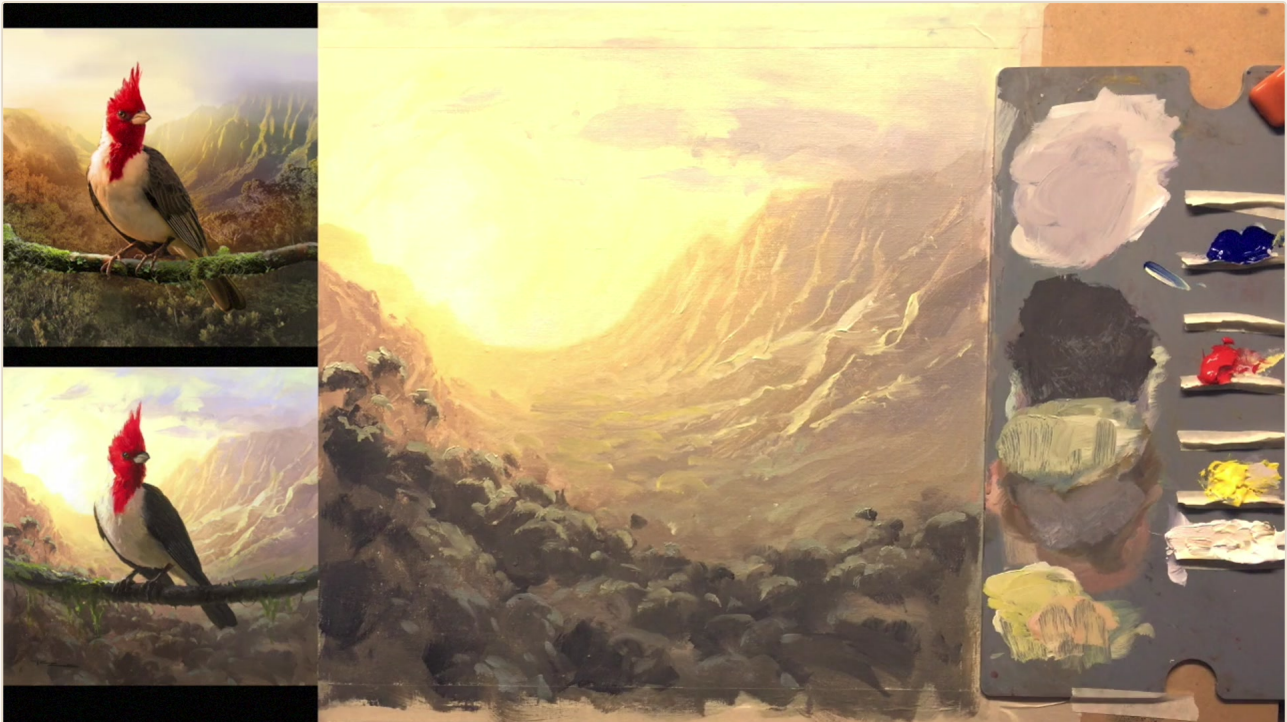
### Detail the Rimlet Trees

For the rimlet trees, smooth out the paint and push the tip of the brush into it to create a ridge. Use this ridge to form lumps or lines that catch the light, enhancing the brightness and detail.

#### PRO TIP

*Use a filbert brush for highlighting tree tops, as its curved shape naturally follows the foliage contours.*

## 8 Transferring the bird outline



### Prepare the Outline

Print the bird image at the desired size and scribble on the back with a soft 6B pencil. This will create a transferable outline for your painting.

### Position the Bird

Trace the bird onto your canvas, ensuring it is positioned on a branch rather than a post. Adjust the feet to wrap naturally around the branch, considering their position and orientation.

### Draw the Branch

Sketch the branch first, visualizing it as a three-dimensional tube. This helps in accurately positioning the bird's feet as they wrap around the branch.

### Adjust the Feet

Study the bird's feet, noting the longest toe and the position of the ankle. Use reference images if needed to ensure the feet look natural and realistic.

#### PRO TIP

*Mark the edges of the paper to maintain the correct position when tracing the bird onto the canvas.*

## 9 Painting the bird's head and beak



### Paint the Red Head

Spray the canvas lightly and apply pure red with a large brush to the bird's head area. Feather the paint upwards to create the top of the feathers, referring to the resource photo for the correct angle and curve of the feathers.

### Darken the Red

Mix alizarin crimson with the red to create a darker shade. Squint at the resource photo to identify the big shapes of dark and blend them into the lighter areas with a light touch. Adjust the darkness by adding black or blue to the mix as needed.

### Add Highlights

Mix a little yellow and white to create highlights on the feathers. Use a small brush to pick out a few feathers with light, ensuring the brush is clean and slightly wet to soften any overly solid areas.

### Paint the Beak

Start with a mix of black, white, and a touch of red for the darkest parts near the feathers. Gradually lighten the mix for the beak's mouth line, adding bright yellow and more white for highlights. Add a touch of red or alizarin to reflect the red feathers on the beak's base.

### Add Reflections

Use light grey to reflect the sky on the beak. Add yellow or orange reflections down the side of the face to integrate the bird with the background, applying the paint in a feathery manner to blend with the surroundings.

**PRO TIP**

*Use a clean, slightly wet brush to soften overly solid areas and create smooth transitions.*



## 10 Painting the bird's eye



### Outline the Eye

Mix black and red with a touch of yellow ochre. Carefully observe the shape of the eye and apply a dark outline to define it against the bright background.

### Paint the Eye Center

Use pure black to fill in the center of the eye, creating a strong focal point.

### Add the Iris

Switch to a liner brush and mix yellow ochre with a little black. Apply this mixture around the eye's center to form the iris.

### Create the Reflection

First, apply a touch of grey across the eye area. Then, mix white with yellow ochre and dot it in to suggest light reflection.

### Detail the Eye Area

Mix yellow ochre, red, black, and a little white to add small brown details around the eye, enhancing its natural appearance.

#### PRO TIP

*Observe the eye shape carefully before painting to ensure accuracy and balance.*

## 11 Painting the bird's wing



### Paint the Wing Base

Use a big brush to apply pure black paint to the initial section of the wing. Cover the area all the way down to create a solid base.

### Add Color to the Wing

Mix a little white with a touch of yellow ochre and paint the next section of the wing. Gradually introduce more yellow ochre to create a soft curve, adding warmth and depth to the wing.

### Soften the Edges

Soften the edge where the wing meets the breast area, preparing for the grey of the breast. Ensure the transition is smooth to maintain a natural look.

### Create Feather Textures

Use a smaller brush to add feather shapes with a lighter grey. Refer to your resource photo to accurately place the feather details. Avoid making the grey too light to maintain the shadow effect.

### Detail the Feather Sections

Observe the feather sections carefully before painting. Note the top half over the shoulder, the central larger feathers, and the long flight feathers. Use a light touch with the brush to glide along the surface, capturing the natural texture.

**PRO TIP**

*Leave some brush strokes visible to mimic the texture of feathers, ensuring they are placed accurately based on your reference photo.*

## 12 Painting the bird's body



### Prepare Your Brush Technique

Hold the brush at the back to minimize handshakes affecting the brush tip. Place the brush on the canvas gently, allowing it to glide down without pressure. Consider using a Rigor brush for more precision.

### Add Shadows

Carefully apply black to create shadows where the feathers separate. Look for areas where shadows naturally occur to add depth to the painting.

### Mix and Apply Base Colors

Start with greys modified with other colors: yellows and greens for the lower body, reds and yellows for the upper body. Mix black, white, and a little yellow ochre for the darker areas. Add more black for shadows under sections.

### Introduce Highlights

Add bright yellow with a touch of white to create soft edges. Squint at your subject to see the big shapes and adjust colors. Add a touch of red near the head to reflect the influence of the red feathers.

### Refine with Light and Detail

As you move up the body, add more white to lighten the area. Clean the brush and use white and yellow for the brightest spots. Use the tip of the brush or a Rigor brush to create tiny feathers catching the light.



#### PRO TIP

*Squint at your subject to better see the big shapes and subtle color shifts.*

## 13 Painting the bird's feet



### Mix the Base Color for the Feet

Combine black with a little bit of white and yellow ochre. Add a touch of red to achieve a dark brown tone suitable for the bird's feet.

### Add Reflected Light

Incorporate a small amount of mid green into your mix to represent the reflected light from nearby foliage on the backside of the legs and feet.

### Highlight the Feet

Mix white, yellow ochre, a little bit of black, and a touch of red to create a color for the glinting light on the top of the legs. Use this to add highlights.

### Enhance the Highlights

Lighten the mixture further with additional white to emphasize the highlights on the feet.

#### PRO TIP

*Use a Rig-A-Brush to add fine details and highlights to the bird's feet.*

## 14 Painting the branch



### Create the Branch Shadow

Use black paint to create a soft shadow under the claws, indicating the shadow cast onto the branch.

### Paint the Branch Base

Mix black with yellow ochre to create a dark green. Use a big brush and apply this color in swirling motions along the underside of the branch.

### Add Midtones

Mix in a little white with your dark green and apply it using a combination of swirling and straight strokes. Think of dots and dashes like Morse code to add texture.

### Apply Reflected Light

Add bright yellow to your mixture and work it underneath the branch to represent reflected light from the forest below. Don't worry about painting over the legs; they can be fixed later.

### Shape the Branch

Use just white and black to shape the top of the branch, creating light, half tone, core shadow, and reflected light. This will give the branch a three-dimensional appearance.

### Highlight the Branch

Add more white and a little yellow to highlight sections of the branch, avoiding areas in the shadow of the bird. Aim for a textured, old crusty branch look.

### Add Moss Details

Mix yellow and blue to create a stronger green for moss. Add hanging moss details and use a lot of yellow, a little blue, and a touch of white for rim lighting around these green areas.

**PRO TIP**

*Use dabbing motions to create interesting textures and highlights on the branch, enhancing its natural appearance.*

# Summary & Key Takeaways

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Embark on your painting journey by preparing your canvas with care. Begin with a smooth surface by applying gesso and lightly sanding it down. Select a range of brushes, including flat and filbert brushes, to give you the versatility needed for different textures and details. As you start painting, keep your canvas and paints moist to achieve smooth blends and vibrant colors.

Create a glowing light effect by layering colors and maintaining moisture on your canvas. Progress to painting the landscape, using gestural strokes to build depth and dimension. Pay attention to the natural flow of colors, from the warm glow at the center to the cooler tones at the edges. Add clouds and landscape details, ensuring they integrate seamlessly with the background for a harmonious composition.

As you bring the red-crested cardinal to life, focus on the intricate details of its feathers, eye, and beak. Use a combination of bold and subtle strokes to capture the bird's vibrant colors and delicate features. Carefully position the bird on a branch, ensuring natural placement and realistic anatomy. Finish with the bird's feet and the branch, adding shadows and highlights to enhance the overall realism of your painting.

## LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Always sand the canvas lightly after applying gesso for a smooth surface.
- Use a long rigger brush for intricate details.
- Keep the canvas and paints wet to create smooth blends with acrylics.
- Add a touch of yellow to cloud colors to harmonize them with the sky.
- Join dark shapes into larger ones to avoid a bitsy look and create shape harmony.
- Use a filbert brush for highlighting tree tops, as its curved shape naturally follows the foliage contours.
- Squint at your subject to better see the big shapes and subtle color shifts.
- Use a Rig-A-Brush to add fine details and highlights to the bird's feet.





*"Kalalau Opera 2" 16 x 16" Acrylic on Canvas by Richard Robinson.*

# Student Critiques

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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.

## 'Displaced Cardinal' 12x16" Oil on Paper by Mairo Piroue



*'Displaced Cardinal' 12x16" Oil on Paper by Mairo Piroue*

Good work Mairo. You've drawn the bird very well and its form is quite rounded and believable due to your subtle handling of values. Nice to see you stretching yourself and placing him in a different background. I think you're right - the bird could have been bigger in the scene, since that's your centre of interest, but perhaps just cropping the top 3 inches would achieve the same result. There's not much happening in the sky so a small slice of it can say the same thing as a big piece of it.

I would have made the dark trees on the left slightly lighter so their darkness didn't compete with the bird's. You've gone a bit grey in the rock shadows, losing some of their local colour. The sharp edges in the landscape behind the bird's crest are competing with it. They could be lowered and softened. The trees are too evenly balanced between left and right. See what you think of my quick Photoshop makeover. I haven't touched the bird at all, just the background.



**'Free and Breezy' 9x12" Pastel on Paper by Pam Walker**



*'Free and Breezy' 9x12" Pastel on Paper by Pam Walker*

Wow this is really captivating, Pam, with all it's energy and colour. Beautiful work! I love a painting like this that looks like the artist had fun doing it, rather than deliberating over it. Great contrast between the detail in the head and the looseness of the rest of the painting. I like how you've abstracted the background while maintaining the overall idea of light to dark. I wondered if you could make more of that idea so I darkened the bottom of the painting a little in Photoshop. See what you think.

## 'Red Crested Cardinal' 16x20" Oil on Canvas by Mark Price



*'Red Crested Cardinal' 16x20" Oil on Canvas by Mark Price*

There's some really good work in here Mark with great attention to detail, especially in the head and wing. You've nearly got that glowing effect working, though it could do with a subtler light to dark transition through that big yellow area on the left because that looks a bit flat at the moment. The underneath of body seems to be too light - you could have made it a bit darker which would have made the bird seem rounder.



## 'The Cardinal' 16x16" Oil on Canvas Paper by Eibhlin Ni Dhrisceoil



*'The Cardinal' 16x16" Oil on Canvas Paper by Eibhlin Ni Dhrisceoil*

Colour-wise this certainly has a lighter, cooler feel to it Eibhlin. I'd be interested to know if that was on purpose of it that's just the way it came out. Painting in mainly lighter values is called 'high-key' and you've achieved that in the background though I feel you could have connected the branch to the bird better if you'd use the same depth of darks in the branch as you did in the bird.

There's a wee problem with the drawing of the bird's neck on the left that you'll see if you have a closer look at the original photograph. You've cut away some of the neck with the background. That's probably largely due to my own demo painting where I regret making the value of the neck there the same as the background adjacent to it. Hindsight's a wonderful thing. Your bird has an exceptionally pointy hat! It must be for a special occasion. A few things to think about there. Good work!