



John Singer Sargent

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/24-John-Singer-Sargent>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, we delve into the world of John Singer Sargent, one of my favorite artists and a master of both portrait and landscape painting. Sargent's journey began in Florence, Italy, where he was born in 1856 to American expatriates. His early exposure to Europe's rich artistic heritage shaped his incredible talent, which he honed at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. By the age of 18, he was already creating remarkable works. Sargent's reputation as the finest portrait artist of his era was well-earned, yet in his later years, he turned his focus to landscapes, often incorporating figures into these scenes. One such painting, created in the idyllic setting of San Virgilio on Lake Garda, Italy, stands out as a personal favorite of mine. Painted in 1913, just before the outbreak of war in Europe, this piece captures a serene and timeless beauty. In this lesson, we'll explore Sargent's techniques by recreating this masterpiece. You'll learn how to prepare your canvas, sketch the composition, and capture the essence of Sargent's style. Let's embark on this journey together and see what we can learn from Sargent's genius.



Portrait of Carolus Duran by John Singer Sargent



REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 2

The scene as Richard found it.

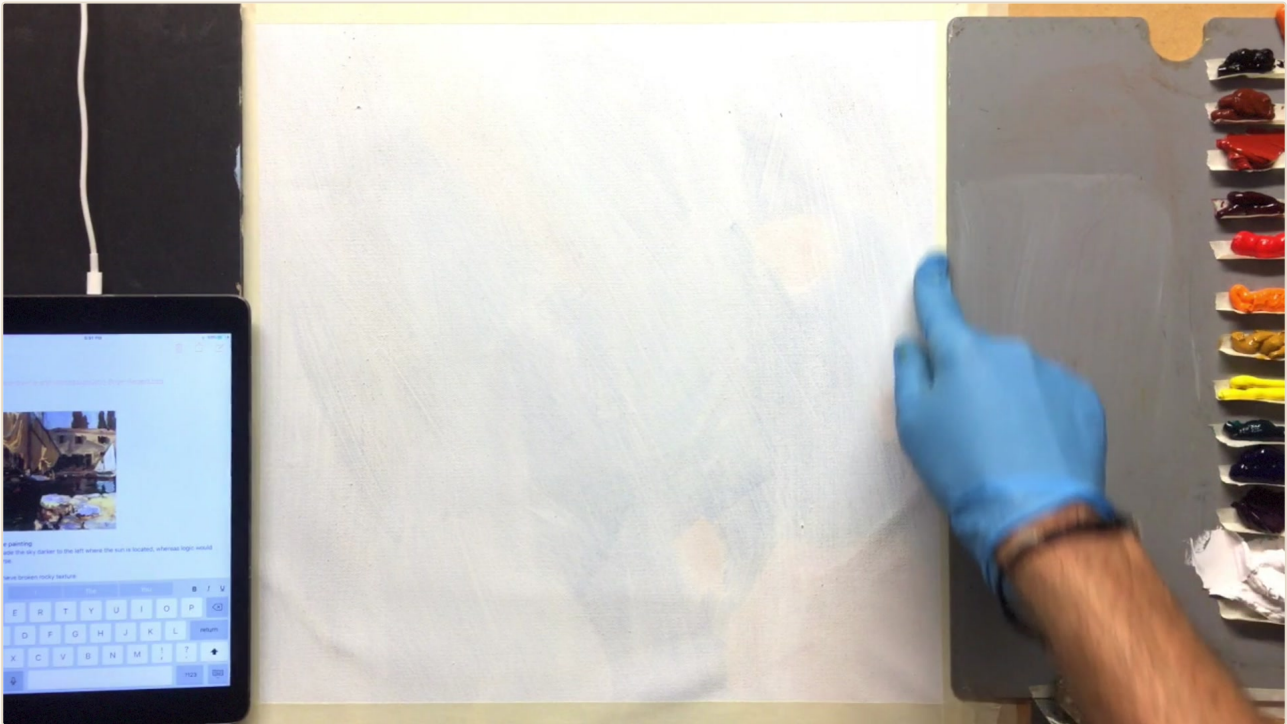
Materials

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

- Oil Paints
- Ivory Black
- Burnt Sienna
- Venetian Red
- Permanent Alizarine
- Cad Red Light
- Cad Orange
- Yellow Ochre
- Cad Yellow Light
- Phthalo Green
- Ultramarine Blue
- Cobalt Violet
- Titanium/Zinc White (Permalba White)
- Canvas
- Fredrix Ultrasmooth Canvas
- (Give it a light sanding first)
- Brushes
- Rosemary & Co. Richard Robinson Brush Set
- Gamsol by Gamblin
- Alkyd walnut medium by M. Graham
- Paper Towels

1 Canvas preparation and Sargent's technique



Prepare the Canvas

Use a smooth canvas, such as Frederick's Ultra Smooth Canvas, for better brush stroke visibility. If reusing a canvas, apply two or three coats of gesso and sand lightly for a smooth finish.

Apply a Ground

Consider applying a coat of mid-grey to light grey on the canvas, especially for portraiture work. This helps create a neutral starting point for your painting.

Draw the Composition

Lightly sketch the main shapes and key elements with charcoal, such as the envelope around the sitter or objects. Carefully note the positions of important features like the eyes, nose, and mouth.

PRO TIP

Use a smooth canvas to enhance the visibility of your brush strokes.

2 Sargent's brushwork style



Understand Sargent's Brushwork

Study the sketches of John Singer Sargent to gain insight into his ideas about line and form. Notice how his pencil strokes reveal the character of his brush strokes.

Observe Calligraphic Strokes

Identify Sargent's preference for long, beautiful calligraphic strokes in his paintings. Contrast this with the short strokes used by Impressionists of his time.

Embrace Fluidity

Appreciate the beauty and fluidity in Sargent's brushwork. Aim to incorporate similar long, fluid strokes in your own painting to capture this elegance.

PRO TIP

Focus on creating long, fluid strokes to emulate Sargent's calligraphic brushwork style.

3 Brush selection



Select Appropriate Brushes

Choose hair brushes instead of synthetic ones, as synthetic brushes were not available during Sargent's time. Opt for flat brushes, which Sargent commonly used, though older flats may naturally become filberts over time.

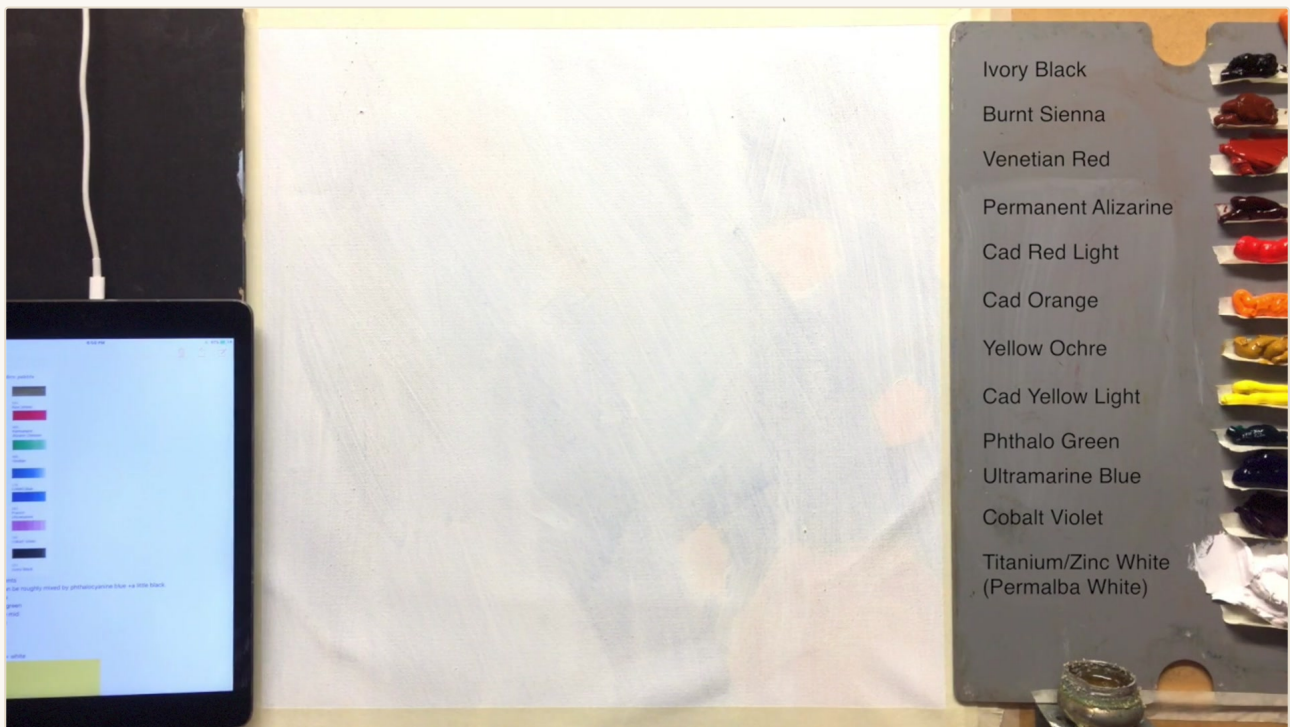
Choose Larger Brushes

Select a larger brush than you might initially think necessary. For example, use an inch-wide brush for a 15-inch-wide canvas. If working on a larger canvas, increase the brush size accordingly.

PRO TIP

Use larger brushes than you think necessary to cover the canvas efficiently, as recommended by Sargent.

4 Palette and color selection



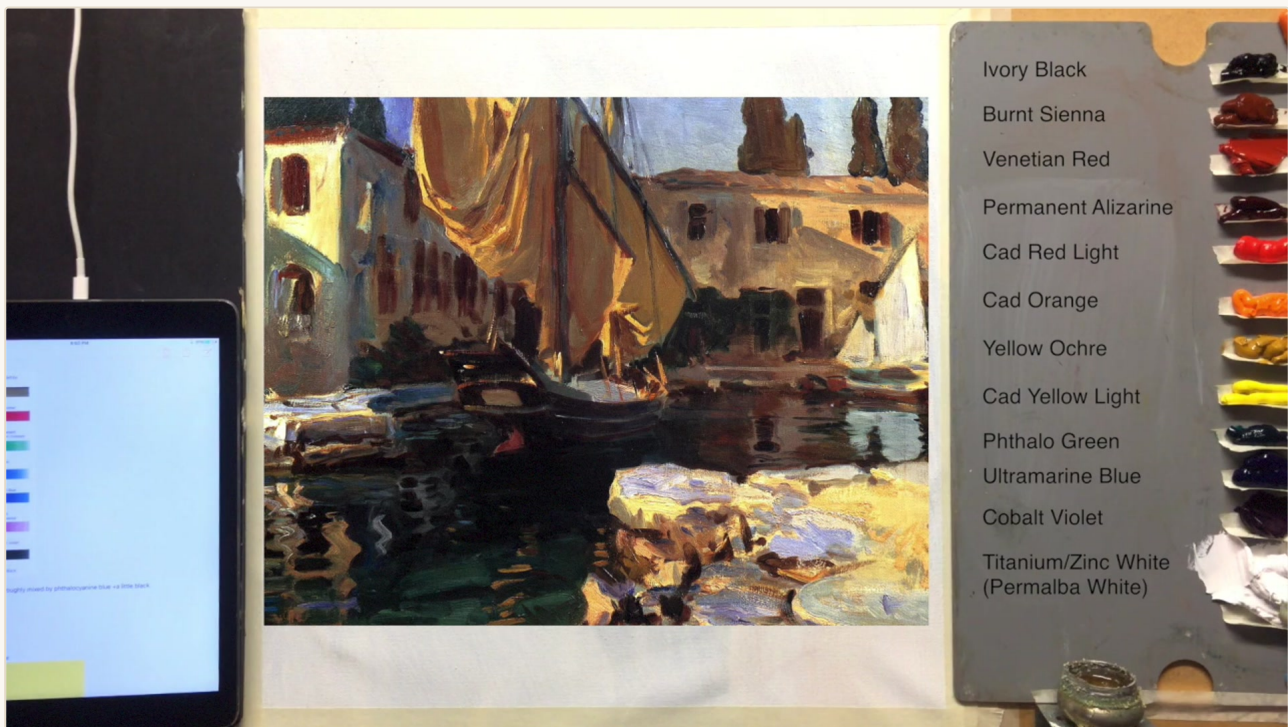
Prepare Your Palette

Select a modern equivalent palette inspired by John Singer Sargent's colors. Include a variety of hues, even if not all will be used, to give yourself flexibility in color selection. Consider the scene you are painting and choose colors that will best suit it.

PRO TIP

Don't feel obligated to use every color on your palette; select those that best capture the essence of your scene.

5 Mixing Permalba white



Understanding Permalba White

Permalba white combines the properties of titanium white and zinc white. Zinc white is less opaque and ideal for mixing, while titanium white is very opaque and can overpower colors. Permalba white balances these qualities, offering a versatile medium for painting.

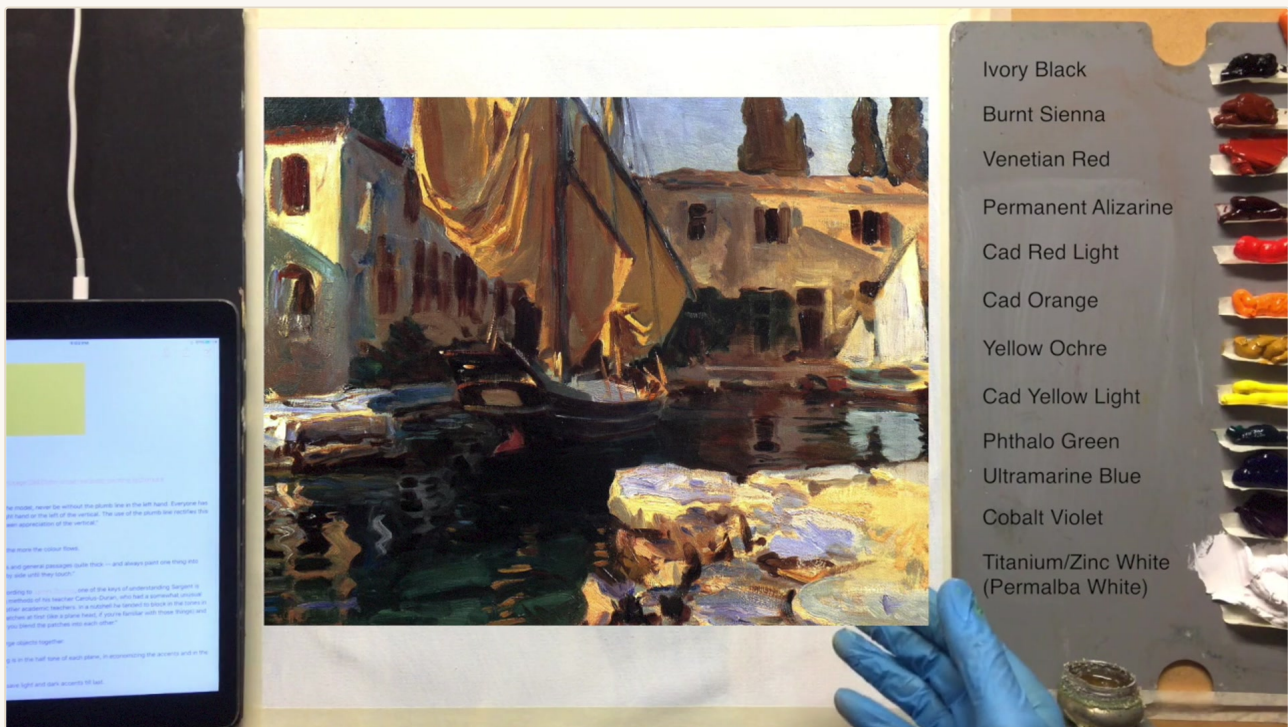
Mixing Your Own Permalba White

If you don't have access to permalba white, create your own by mixing 50% titanium white with 50% zinc white. Add a little bit of oil to the mixture to achieve the desired consistency and properties.

PRO TIP

Mix equal parts titanium white and zinc white with a touch of oil to create a versatile permalba white substitute.

6 Using generous amounts of paint



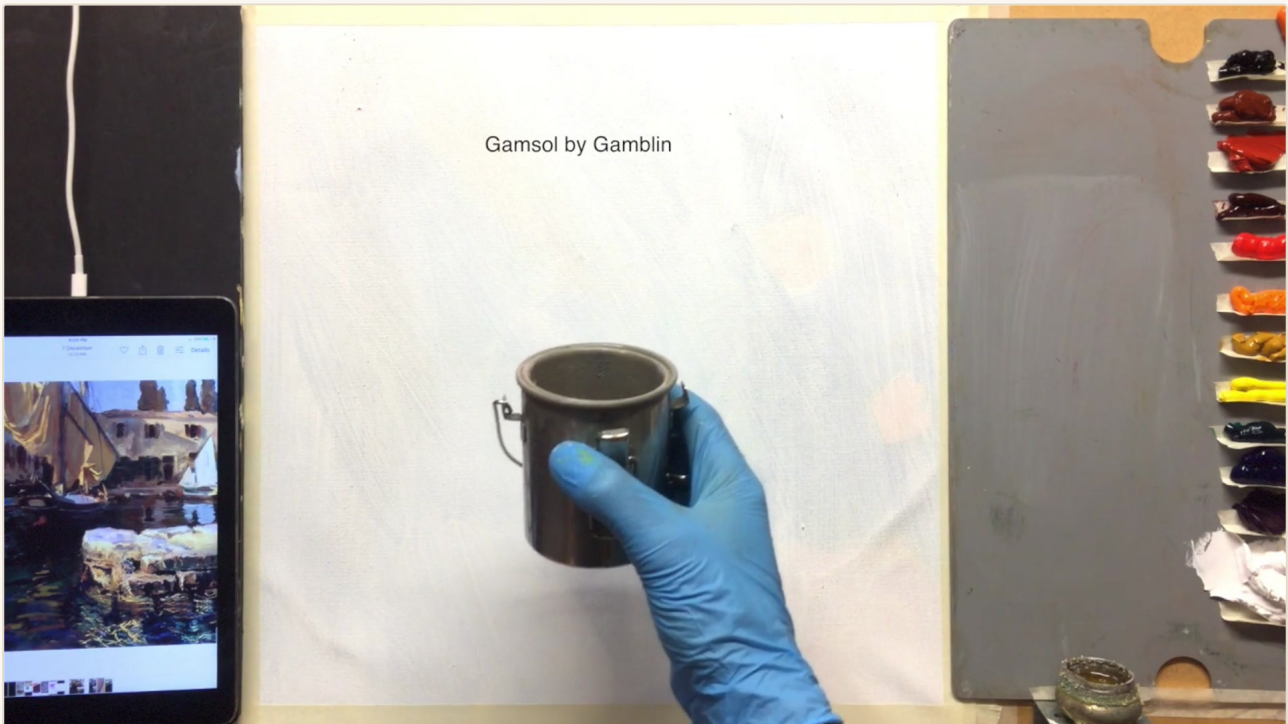
Prepare Your Palette Generously

Squeeze out a generous amount of paint onto your palette. This approach follows John Singer Sargent's technique of using ample paint to allow colors to flow more freely. Aim to have enough paint as if you were preparing for multiple paintings.

PRO TIP

Use a generous amount of paint to enhance color flow and richness.

7 Mediums and solvents



Prepare Your Mediums and Solvents

Use Gamsol as your odourless terps for thinning paint. Prepare M. Graham's Walnut Alkyd Medium to speed up drying time. Alternatively, use straight Walnut Medium if drying time is not a concern.

Understand Sargent's Approach

Sargent used terps and stand oil in the field. These modern equivalents offer similar effects with less odor, making them suitable for both studio and outdoor work.

PRO TIP

Use Walnut Alkyd Medium to speed up drying time without compromising the paint's quality.

8 Sketching the composition



Prepare Your Sketching Tools

Dip your brush into Gamsol to start preparing for the sketch. Use burnt sienna mixed with a little bit of blue to create a versatile sketching color.

Extend the Foreground

Extend the foreground in your composition to capture the beautiful transparent water and reflections of the rocks. This adjustment will help you include more elements from the longer painting into your square format.

Sketch the Big Shapes

Focus on sketching the big shapes of the composition. Avoid getting caught up in the details at this stage to maintain a clear and strong foundation for your painting.

PRO TIP

Use burnt sienna mixed with a bit of blue for a versatile sketching color.

9 Analyzing Sargent's composition choices



John Singer Sargent

Observe Composition Choices

Notice how Sargent places the sail close to the edge of the canvas. This choice draws the eye to the edge, which is unconventional as it typically directs focus away from the center.

Understand the Intent

Consider that Sargent might be aiming to capture a moment in time, giving the impression of a casually glimpsed scene. This approach suggests spontaneity rather than a carefully composed image.

Recognize Impressionist Influence

Acknowledge the influence of Impressionism in Sargent's work. His friendship with Claude Monet, a leader of the Impressionists, may have inspired this modern, casual design sense.

PRO TIP

Embrace unconventional composition to create a sense of spontaneity and capture a moment in time.

10 Understanding light and color in the painting



Analyze the Light Source

Consider the angle of the light in the painting. Notice how the sail is illuminated as if the sun is over in the west, suggesting it was painted first. This approach helps establish the center of interest.

Observe Shadow and Direction

Notice how the directional shadow guides the viewer back to the boat. This technique prevents the light from detracting from the sail, emphasizing it as the focal point.

Darken the Sky Strategically

Darken the sky on the left side of the painting to contrast with the lighter area on the right. This contrast enhances the golden folds in the sail, making them the center of interest.

Start with Mid-Tones

Begin painting with mid-tones, especially in the center of interest like the sail. Gradually move to lighter and darker tones, saving the darkest darks and lightest lights for last to avoid false accents.

Enhance Color in Mid Values

Focus on mid values to achieve higher color intensity. Dark colors can obscure color visibility, and adding white can reduce vibrancy, so maintain color richness in the mid-tones.

PRO TIP

Start with mid-tones and gradually work towards the darkest darks and lightest lights to maintain color vibrancy and avoid false accents.

11 Starting with the sail



Mix the Base Color for the Sail

Combine yellow ochre, burnt sienna, and a touch of blue on your palette. Add a small amount of medium to the mixture to achieve the right consistency.

Adjust the Tone

If the color appears too vibrant, tone it down by incorporating a small amount of black. This will help achieve a more muted, realistic color for the sail.

PRO TIP

Use black sparingly to gray down colors and achieve a more natural look.

12 Adjusting colors and learning from Sargent



Observe Sargent's Modulation

Carefully examine the photograph of Sargent's work to understand how he modulated color in the painting. Notice the subtle variations and reflections of the sky and water in the surface.

Experiment with Color

Introduce a bit of green to your painting to mimic the reflections. Be cautious, as a strong green may not be suitable and can overpower the intended effect.

Check Value Differences

Switch to a black and white version of your painting to assess the value differences. Ensure that the value in the area of reflected light remains very close to the surrounding colors, as Sargent did.

Adjust and Retry

If the color appears too green or incorrect, scrape it off and try again. Embrace the process of adjustment, as Sargent often did, to achieve the desired effect.

PRO TIP

Use a black and white version to check minimal value differences in your painting.

13 Painting the sail and learning from masters



Mix the Base Color

Combine ochre with a little yellow and a touch of black. Add some white to adjust the tone. Aim for a thick consistency to match the desired area. If needed, add more black to push the color towards green.

Subdue the Color

Add a bit of violet to the mix to bring it closer to the target color. Increase the amount of violet and white, and introduce a little blue to subdue the strong colors. This grays down the color, making it less obvious.

Create Shadow Areas

For the darker central area of the sail, mix purple with yellow and a little black. This combination will help depict the shadow where the sail folds around the mast.

Paint the Halftones

Switch to a smaller brush and mix ochre, yellow, and white. Focus on the darkest areas of light to capture the halftones between shadow and light, especially where light penetrates the sail fabric.

Lighten the Colors

Lighten the mix with two yellows and some white. Enjoy painting the subtle differences in color and value on the sail, considering the master's techniques as you work.

PRO TIP

Add violet to subdue strong colors and achieve a closer match to the desired tone.

14 Painting the mast and brushwork details



Prepare Your Brush and Colors

Switch to a number four brush. Mix a combination of black, Burnt Sienna, violet, and a touch of white to create the base color for the mast.

Paint the Mast with Dynamic Brushwork

Apply the paint to the canvas, avoiding a solid straight line. Use small flicks of the brush to create interesting textures and variations, mimicking the intricate brushwork seen in Sargent's painting.

Add Reflected Light

Mix some white and blue to capture the reflected light on the right-hand side of the mast. Focus on the top area, making it quite blue and lighter to simulate the effect of the sky's light pushing past the objects.

PRO TIP

Use small flicks of the brush to create dynamic textures instead of a solid line.

15 Warm and cool color contrasts



Observe Color Contrast

Notice the strong blue used in the reflected lights. This creates a vibrant effect against the warm colors.

Understand Warm and Cool Interaction

Recognize how warm and cool colors work together, creating a dynamic vibration when placed next to each other.

PRO TIP

Use strong blues in reflected lights to create contrast with warm colors.

16 Painting the background buildings



Mix Background Colors

Use a larger brush to mix ochre, violet, blue, and a little white. This will form the base color for the background buildings.

Block in Dark Areas

With a different brush, block in the dark areas using black and burnt sienna. Add a touch of white if needed to adjust the tone.

Maintain Perspective

Carefully draw the perspective lines of the windows. Even though the painting may appear rough, accurate perspective is crucial.

Create Shadow Colors

Mix a variety of colors including both yellows, black, violet, and blue to create shadow colors. This variation adds interest to the painting.

Consider Light Sources

Observe where the light is coming from. Apply bluer tones where the sky reflects and warmer tones where the warm stones or boat reflect.

PRO TIP

Accurate perspective lines are essential, even in quick, rough painting.

17 Glazing and shadow techniques



Thin and Mix Colors

Thin the paint slightly and add a fair amount of blue with some white. The blue will darken the mix, while the white will bring the value back to its original state.

Apply Brisk Brushstrokes

Use brisk brushstrokes to apply the mix to the canvas. This technique mimics the glazing effect seen in Sargent's work, adding depth and interest to the painting.

Add Darker Spots

Incorporate a few darker spots within the area to create visual interest. This can give the impression of a palette falling over the painting, adding a dynamic element.

Paint the Shadow

Instead of painting the area light and then adding a shadow later, directly paint the shadow. This approach simplifies the process and aligns with Sargent's technique of glazing or scumbling over dry areas.

PRO TIP

Use brisk brushstrokes to mimic the glazing effect and add depth.

18 Painting trees and sky



Paint the Trees

Mix blue, yellow ochre, a little white, and a touch of black. Apply this mixture to the right-hand side of the trees, adding slightly more blue for a lighter effect. These cypress trees are dark and characteristic of the region, so ensure they stand out.

Add the Sky

Mix white and blue for the sky. Be careful when painting next to the dark tree shapes to avoid muddying the sky. Keep your brush clean as you cut into these areas.

Darken the Left Side

As you move to the left side of the painting, gradually darken the sky. This can be done a la prima, following the natural progression of light in the scene.

Block in Light Areas

Use yellow ochre and white to block in lighter areas. Add a little burnt sienna and ochre to enhance the color, and apply this to the roof as well.

PRO TIP

When painting the sky next to dark shapes, keep your brush clean to prevent muddy colors.

19 Adding details to buildings



Add Light to the Sail

Mix a little yellow with white to create a lighter tone. Apply this mixture to the sail, making it slightly lighter than the background values. This will give the impression that the top of the sail is catching some light.

Paint Dark Accents

Use burnt sienna mixed with a little black to create a dark tone. Apply this to the windows and shutters, adding contrast to the building. Notice how unevenly spacing these elements avoids creating a predictable pattern.

Create Shadows

Mix burnt sienna with a little yellow ochre to form a shadow color. Apply this to areas needing shadow, enhancing the depth and dimension of the building.

Mix Dark Green

Combine black and yellow to create a nice dark green. Use this for any areas where a dark green tone is needed.

PRO TIP

Avoid evenly spacing elements like windows and doors to prevent predictable patterns in your painting.

20 Painting rocks and texture



Block in the Big Areas

Use yellow ochre, violet, and a little bit of blue to block in the big areas of the rocky section. Approach this in a mosaic fashion, focusing on the larger shapes before adding details. This method helps establish the foundation of the painting.

Paint Thickly

Apply paint thickly, even in darker areas where you might usually paint thinly. This technique allows the color to flow more effectively and mimics the style of John Singer Sargent, who painted with a thick application throughout.

Add Lighter Values

Transition into lighter values for the half tones of the rock, which are half in light and half in shadow. Mix ochre, white, and a bit of bright yellow to achieve these lighter tones. This step adds dimension and depth to the rocks.

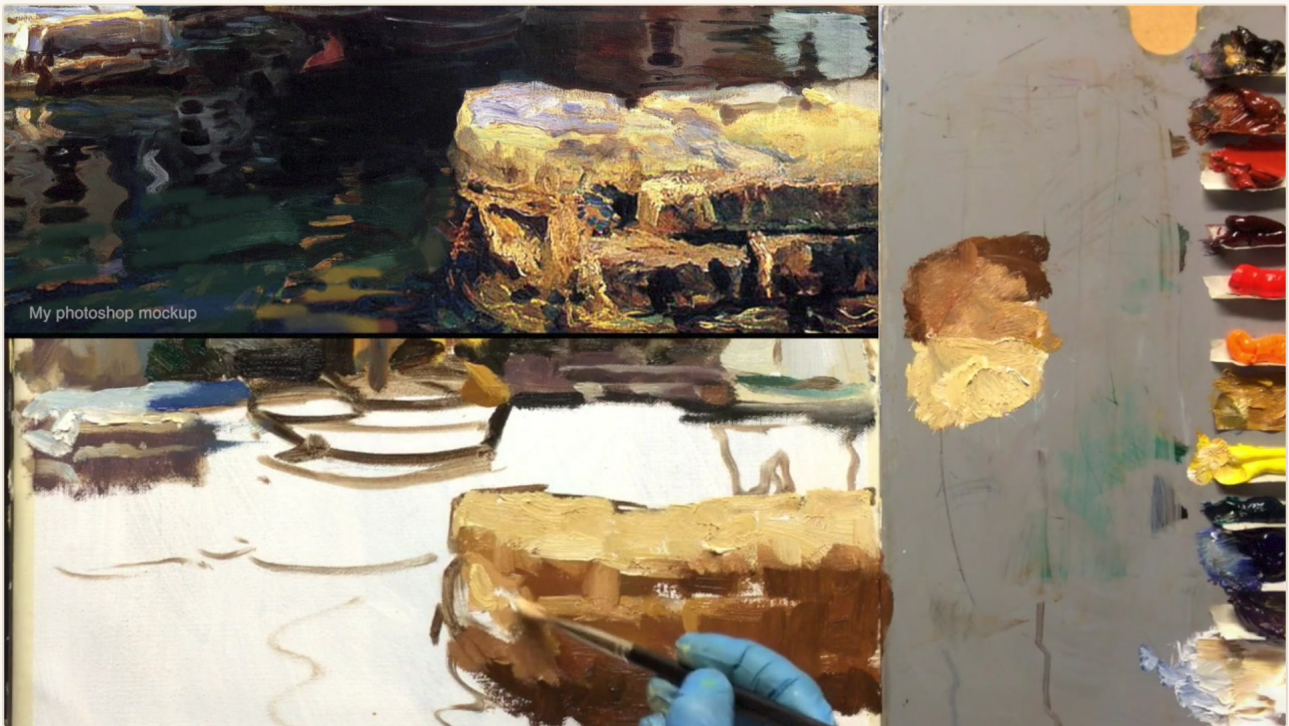
Create Texture

Use a wriggling motion with the brush to create texture and the illusion of detail. Avoid using a small brush; instead, focus on creating texture with varied strokes. This technique adds interest and realism to the rocky surfaces.

PRO TIP

Apply paint thickly to allow colors to flow and create texture, even in darker areas.

21 Color variation and using black



Add Blue Reflections

Use a separate brush to apply blue to the top of the rocks, reflecting the sky. Ensure the blue is the same value as the underlying color to maintain realism. If viewed in black and white, the blue should blend seamlessly with the base color.

Create Complex Texture

Observe the photo for complex textures and consider overpainting and glazing techniques. Apply light blue glazes to build beautiful paintwork and enhance texture.

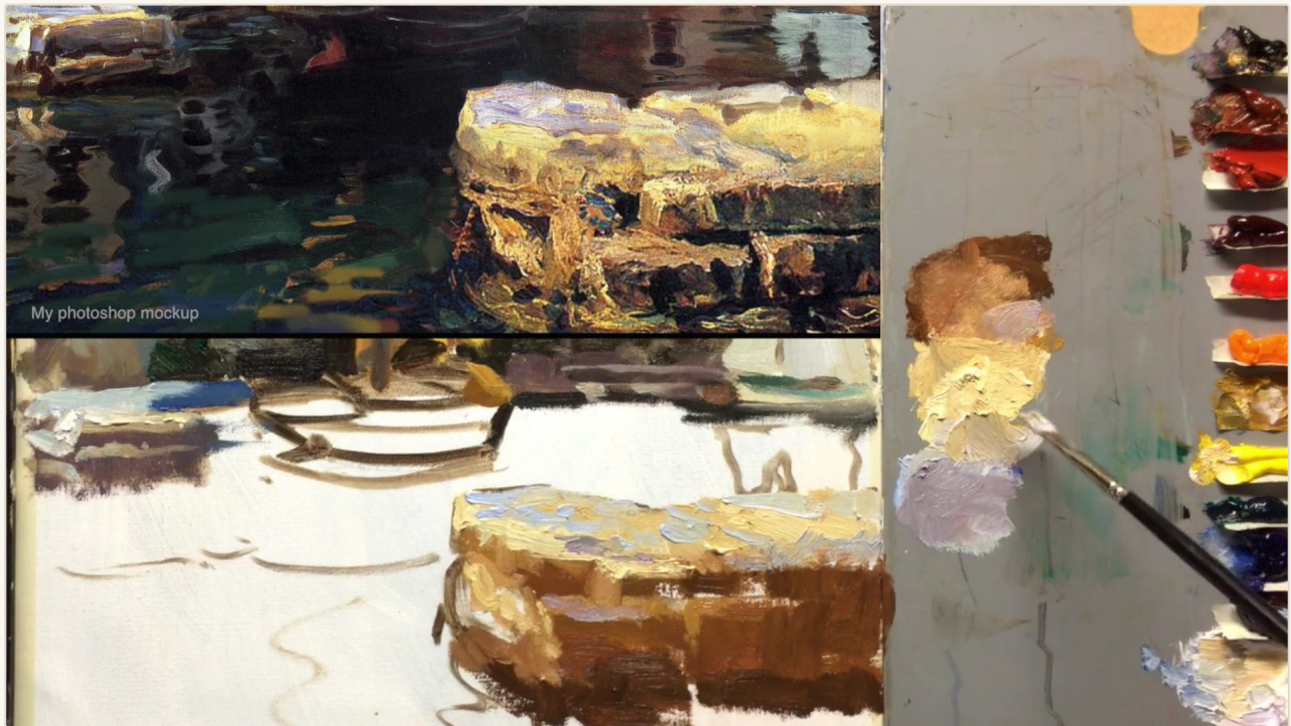
Use Black for Greying Colors

Incorporate black to grey down colors, particularly in the dark areas. This technique provides a more muted and restrained feel compared to using complementary colors for greying.

PRO TIP

Ensure the blue reflection on the rocks is the same value as the base color for a realistic effect.

22 Painting the boat and transitions



Analyze Color Variations

Observe the subtle color variations in each area of the painting. Notice how the artist uses different colors to create intricate forms and planes that reflect light differently.

Work Blues into Shadows

Mix blue, black, and a little yellow to create a shadow color. Apply this mixture to the shadow sides, creating a glaze effect for a darker appearance.

Paint the Boat

Use pure black for the darkest areas of the boat, such as the back. This will give a strong contrast and depth to the painting.

Create Smooth Transitions

Paint one object into another rather than side by side. Extend the paint of the boat into the water, then paint the water back into the boat. This technique allows for smooth transitions and adjustable edges.

PRO TIP

Paint objects into each other for smooth transitions and adjustable edges.

23 Reflection and outlining techniques



Create Soft Edges

Control the sharpness or softness of edges to make objects merge into their background. This technique is useful for creating a seamless transition, like merging a sail into the sky.

Paint Larger Forms

Paint larger blocks of the subject and background, then refine the subject by painting the background back into it. This helps achieve a beautiful, rounded form that blends smoothly into the background.

Add Color Variations

Introduce a little green into the black as you move into the water area. On the side of the boat, add a grey purplish reflection to capture subtle details.

Consider Outlining

Notice the use of a slightly darker value to outline the boat. While conventional wisdom advises against outlining due to flattening effects, observe how it affects the composition.

PRO TIP

Paint larger forms initially and refine by painting the background back into the subject for smoother transitions.

24 Painting water reflections



Map the Reflection

Extend the painting downward to create space for the water reflection. Plot the general shape of the reflection, starting vertically from the sound and extending outward. This sets the foundation for adding color and detail.

Add Darker Reflection Colors

Mix a slightly darker and greener color for the reflection. Use a radial pattern to mimic the effect of waves hitting a wall and bouncing back. This adds depth and realism to the water.

Incorporate Sky Reflections

Transition into dark greens and blues to represent the sky reflecting on the water. Mix green, black, and a touch of white for the darker areas. This creates a natural blend of colors in the reflection.

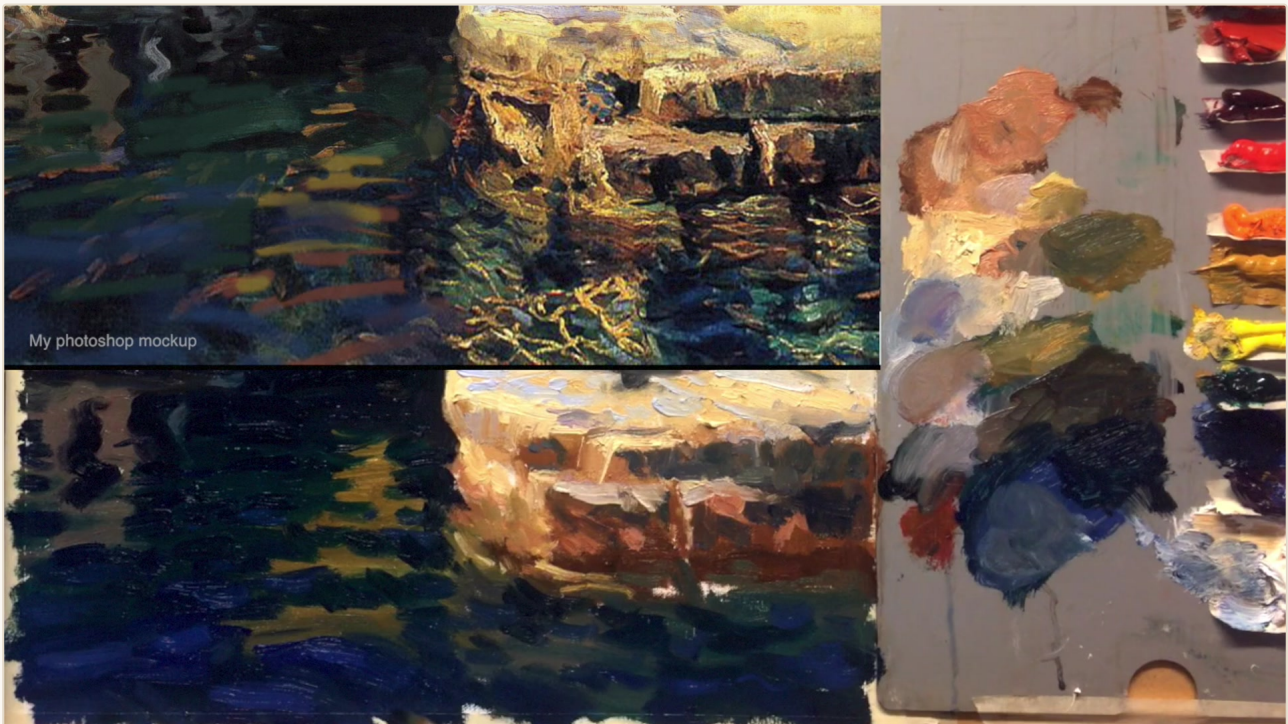
Create Ripple Effects

Use a lighter blue by mixing ultramarine, a little white, and a touch of violet. Apply this slightly lighter color within the darker shapes to create a ripple effect. Ensure the shapes are larger in the foreground and become smaller and thinner as they recede into the distance.

PRO TIP

Make reflection shapes larger in the front and smaller as they go back to create depth.

25 Final details and Sargent's painting process



Add Dark Accents

Use black with a little blue to add dark accents. Be careful when painting darks into lights to keep your brush clean to avoid creating mud.

Enhance Water with Color Flicks

Switch to a smaller brush to add flicks of color in the water. These small additions can create beautiful effects.

Refine Boat Details

Add a few more details to the boat to enhance its appearance. Focus on the small elements that bring the scene to life.

Step Back to Evaluate

After every few brush strokes, step back about ten feet from your canvas. This helps you see how the painting reads from a distance and allows you to compare shapes and colors effectively.

PRO TIP

Keep your brush clean when adding darks to lights to prevent muddy colors.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Begin your painting journey by preparing a smooth canvas, which will enhance the visibility of your brush strokes. Start with a neutral grey tone to provide a balanced backdrop for your composition. Sketch your main elements lightly with charcoal, setting the stage for your painting with careful attention to the placement of key features.

Embrace Sargent's style by using long, fluid brush strokes and selecting larger brushes than you might initially consider. This approach allows you to cover the canvas efficiently and capture the elegance of Sargent's calligraphic brushwork. Choose a modern palette inspired by Sargent's colors, but focus on the hues that best capture the essence of your scene.

As you progress, work with generous amounts of paint to allow for rich color flow. Pay attention to the interplay of light and shadow, starting with mid-tones and gradually working towards the extremes. Use glazing techniques to add depth and interest, and embrace unconventional compositions to capture a moment in time. Throughout, learn from Sargent's mastery by adjusting colors and values to achieve the desired effect.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use a smooth canvas to enhance brush stroke visibility.
- Focus on creating long, fluid strokes to emulate Sargent's style.
- Use larger brushes than you think necessary to cover the canvas efficiently.
- Don't feel obligated to use every color on your palette; select those that best capture the essence of your scene.
- Mix equal parts titanium white and zinc white with a touch of oil to create a versatile permalba white substitute.
- Use a generous amount of paint to enhance color flow and richness.
- Start with mid-tones and gradually work towards the darkest darks and lightest lights to maintain color vibrancy and avoid false accents.
- Use small flicks of the brush to create dynamic textures instead of a solid line.



Portrait of Carolus Duran by John Singer Sargent

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.

“After Sargent” 14” x 14” Oil on Canvas by Candi Hogan



“After Sargent” 14” x 14” Oil on Canvas by Candi Hogan

Lovely feeling of movement in this Candi with your expressive brushwork strutting its stuff — great! The colour is all good. One little drawing issue — just check the bottom of the boat where it sits on the water — run a ruler along Sargent’s one to get the angle right. It looks to me like you photographed your painting in full sunlight since every weave of the canvas has a strong highlight on it which is most evident in the darks.

The lesson for you — always photograph oil paintings in the shade. Great work!

“Tranquil Harbour” 30 x 30cm Oil on Canvas by Sue Denny



“Tranquil Harbour” 30 x 30cm Oil on Canvas by Sue Denny

You have a good feeling for brushwork and edges Sue – great to see. Your values are good too – though the foreground water could use a little more light and colour. Using more yellow in your lights and less white will give you warmer, less chalky looking lights.

Using stronger blues in some of your shadows will also add to the overall feeling of strong light and warmth. Those two things alone, warmer lights and cooler darks, will turn this from a slightly overcast day into that golden evening sunlight.

“A day in paradise” 18" x 24" Acrylic on Canvas by Adrienne DeSaulniers



“A day in paradise” 18" x 24" Acrylic on Canvas by Adrienne DeSaulniers

Nice to see a slightly different take on this Adrienne. The first thing that strikes me is the strong spotlight effect you’ve made in the foreground – really nicely done. The translucency of the water is great there too – beautiful!

I love all the detail there in the foreground but I’d like to add a few more hard edges in there to avoid it looking spongy. Let rocks be rocks. The water inside the port is a little too blue for its surroundings and as we move towards the small boat the water has stopped reflecting the building suddenly – too dark and blue.

The depth of the shadows in the foreground is not concurrent with those in the buildings and sail, so our eye is drawn back again and again to the foreground, instead of the sail, which is supposedly the star of the show. Overall a very pleasing painting and a solid effort. Great!

“Boat with a Golden Sail” by George



“Boat with a Golden Sail” by George

Some beautiful work in here George – all in the top half of the painting, which is excellent. The water and the rocks could do with another look though. Have a good old squint at Sargent’s rocks (or mine) and compare them to yours while you’re squinting – back and forth. See the difference?

It’s the shadows and halftones – yours have gotten themselves lost. The water in front of the rocks too is the victim of indecision and speed. Please do take another look at the video and fix this corner of the painting because you’ll have a great work of art on your hands when you do that. Good luck!