



Sunset Dunes

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/18-Sunset-Dunes>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

As we gather our brushes and palettes to capture the enchanting beauty of the 'Sunset Dunes,' we're stepping into a scene that offers a wealth of learning opportunities and artistic satisfaction. This chapter invites you to join me in painting a sumptuous, impressionistic beach scene, set against the backdrop of a beautiful evening at the end of summer. Together, we'll explore the art of designing with large organic shapes and the efficiency of using pre-mixed grays to speed up your painting process. You'll discover the magic of color variety within big masses and learn to harness the power of warm and cool color contrasts to make your colors more vibrant than nature itself. We'll dive into the rich textures achievable through varied brushwork, including the use of a palette knife and the technique of under-mixing paint. I'll guide you in creating dynamic compositions by balancing soft and hard edges and introduce you to the wonders of atmospheric perspective and dramatic light effects. Whether you follow along with the provided resource photos or let these techniques inspire your own creations, this scene promises to be a rewarding subject for your artistic journey.



"Sunset Dunes" 11.5 x 25" 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.

Materials

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

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- M. Graham & Co. Oil Paints
- Alizarine Crimson
- Phthalo Blue
- Ultramarine Blue
- Burnt Sienna
- Cadmium Red
- Cadmium Orange
- Yellow Ochre
- Cadmium Yellow Light
- Titanium White
- Painting medium
- M. Graham & Co. Walnut Alkyd Medium or Walnut Oil
- Solvent
- Gamsol
- Canvas
- Fredrix ultrasmooth canvas (Giving it a light sanding first helps the paint stick better).
- You could use a canvas panel or anything you prefer.
- Brushes
- [Rosemary & Co. Richard Robinson Brush Set](#)
- Palette Knife
- Paper Towels
- Container for solvent
- Container for painting medium

1 Using an Umbrella



Use an Umbrella for Shade

Attach an umbrella to your easel to protect your canvas from sun, rain, and snow. Painting in the shade helps maintain accurate colors and prevents glare.

Be Cautious of Wind

Monitor the wind conditions as a strong gust can topple your easel if the umbrella is attached. Always be mindful of the wind to avoid accidents.

Secure the Umbrella When Stepping Away

Remove the umbrella and place it on the ground when you step away from your easel, even on calm days. This prevents unexpected wind from disrupting your setup and saves you from cleaning sand or dirt from your materials.

PRO TIP

Always take down your umbrella when stepping away from your easel to prevent wind from causing a mess.

2 Managing Paper Towels



Flatten the Paper Towels

Squash the paper towels so they are flat. This prevents them from unraveling in the wind, which could cause a mess or create a tripping hazard.

Secure the Trash Bag

Place your trash bag nearby for convenience. Use tape to secure it to your setup, or add a rock, sand, or dirt to the bottom to weigh it down. This prevents the bag from blowing around and potentially spilling paint or debris.

PRO TIP

Always flatten your paper towels to prevent them from unraveling in the wind.

3 Importance of Painting in the Shade



Keep Your Canvas in the Shade

Ensure your canvas is always in the shade while painting outdoors. Use an umbrella or adjust the canvas position to avoid direct sunlight. This prevents your painting from appearing too dark when viewed indoors.

Adjust Easel Position

As the sun moves, periodically adjust your easel to maintain shade on your canvas. This small adjustment helps maintain consistent lighting and color accuracy throughout your painting session.

PRO TIP

Always paint with your canvas in the shade to avoid unexpected darkening when viewed indoors.

4 Canvas and Brushes



Prepare the Canvas

Lightly sand your Frederick's Ultra Smooth canvas to help the paint adhere better. This creates a smoother surface for your brushwork.

Select Your Brushes

Choose mainly bristle brushes to emphasize texture and interest in your brushwork. Opt for flat brushes to achieve a chiseled look and use the edge for crisp lines.

Set Up Your Palette

Use a limited palette of colors to simplify your painting process. Have Gamsol ready for blocking in and cleaning brushes, and keep walnut oil as your painting medium.

PRO TIP

Use flat brushes for both broad strokes and precise lines by utilizing their chiseled edge.

5 Sketching and Designing Big Shapes



Sketch the Horizon

Use a synthetic brush with Gamsol and ultramarine blue to sketch in the horizon. Place it high on the canvas to emphasize the foreground dune grasses and their colors.

Design Big Shapes

Focus on the background hills, making them larger to add depth and interest. Consider the angle of the ocean, keeping it straight and knife-like rather than overly curved.

Shape the Sand Dunes

Observe the angles of the sand dunes and vary them to create interesting shapes. Avoid duplicating shapes and lines to maintain visual interest.

Highlight the Foreground

Emphasize the sunlit dune grasses in the foreground. Ensure they stand out by contrasting them with shadows behind.

Add Light and Shadow

Indicate light spilling onto the beach from the dunes. Use shadows to break up shapes and highlight the sunlit areas.

Adjust Sky and Water

Darken the sky on the side opposite the sun, gradually lightening it across the painting. Apply the same gradient to the water and distant hills.

PRO TIP

Vary angles and shapes to create a more interesting composition and avoid repetition.

6 Mixing Cool Grey



Mix a Cool Grey

Combine ultramarine blue with a touch of burnt sienna and white to create a cool grey for the shadow areas of the sand dunes. Add a small amount of phthalo blue to enhance the mix, but use it sparingly as it is very strong. Optionally, introduce a hint of violet to deepen the color.

Adjust the Grey Tone

Move the dark grey mixture to another area on your palette and add more white to create a lighter version. This will give you flexibility with different tones for your painting.

PRO TIP

Use a large palette to have ample space for mixing and experimenting with colors.

7 Painting the Sky



Prepare the Horizon

Use a strip of masking tape to create a straight horizon line. This ensures accuracy while painting quickly and maintains a clean separation between sky and land.

Paint the Distant Hills

Mix a punchy gray-blue color for the distant mountains, intensifying the color slightly. Apply the paint with a large brush, keeping the strokes energetic to infuse the painting with vitality.

Adjust the Color Towards the Sun

Gradually lighten and gray the color as you move towards the sun. Add warmth to the paint near the sun to reflect its glow, extending the color slightly beyond the desired finish point for blending with the next layer.

Define the Sky

Mix white with a touch of phthalo blue and gray to paint the sky. Keep the sky slightly darker than reality to avoid drawing attention away from the painting's center of interest, allowing the foreground to stand out more.

PRO TIP

Use masking tape for a straight horizon line when painting quickly to maintain accuracy.

8 Painting the Hills



Define the Hill Contours

Invent the contours of the hills while keeping an eye on the mountain's shape to inform your design. Use thick paint to cover the canvas quickly, as the sun is setting. Apply horizontal and vertical strokes, varying the edges between sharp and soft to create interest.

Adjust Contrast and Color

Gradually lighten and warm the hills as they approach the sun by adding white, yellow ochre, and a touch of red. Use a lot of white paint for thickness, ensuring a rich texture. Blur some edges for a softer transition.

Add Gestural Details

Use a palette knife to introduce more gestural interest in the painting. Add darker shapes over lighter areas for variety. Create thin and thick lines with the edge of a flat brush to enhance the texture.

Create Light and Shadow

Add a touch of bright yellow to create greenish tones where the light hits the hill. As the hill recedes, blend in ultramarine and yellow ochre to mimic the hill's color. Consider the light direction, highlighting the sides of the hills.

Introduce Cliffs and Detail

Use a synthetic brush to paint cliffs with blue, burnt sienna, and yellow ochre. Apply thick paint and blend to create ambiguous detail. Add small points of light to suggest distant details like houses, enhancing the painting's depth.

PRO TIP

Use the edge of a flat brush to create varied brushwork, achieving both thin and thick lines for added texture.

9 Painting the Ocean



Reflect Sky Light on Wet Sand

Use the blue from the sky on your brush to paint reflected light on the wet sand. Apply the paint with downstrokes to mimic reflective water. Add a few lighter strokes to suggest light bits from the sky.

Prepare the Ocean Color

Wipe your brush clean before moving on to the ocean color. Mix a darker, punchier shade using yellow, white, and phthalo blue to balance the strong colors elsewhere in the painting.

Paint the Ocean

Create a straight, crisp line with your ocean color. Add white and more blue as you paint closer to the shore. Ensure the lines get thinner as they recede down the beach for a realistic effect.

PRO TIP

Strengthen the ocean color to your preference; it's your creation, so don't feel bound by nature.

10 Adding Wave Details



Add Wave Action

Use a palette knife to add a little wave action with brighter green. Apply a few thin lines to suggest movement in the water.

Create Crisp Edges

Mix white with a touch of green and flatten it out on the palette. Use the edge of the palette knife to create a crisp edge of paint for distant waves.

Add Sunlit Highlights

Mix in a little yellow to the white and green to capture sunlight on the wave tops. Apply with a thick edge to emphasize the sunlit foam.

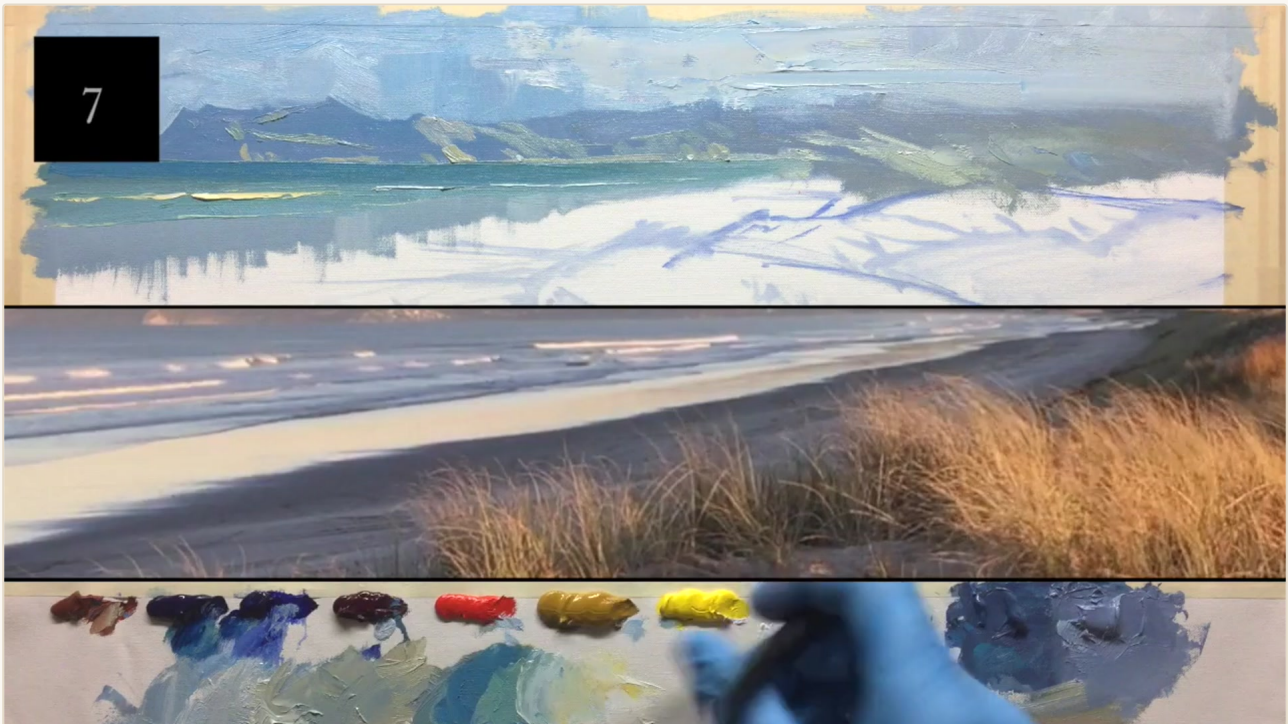
Define Foam Details

Use a fine edge of the palette knife to indicate the front lip of the foam surge. This adds contrast between sunlit and shadowed areas of the waves.

PRO TIP

Use the edge of the palette knife to create crisp, fine details in the wave foam.

11 Painting the Beach



Prepare the Beach Base

Use a clean brush to start painting the beach area. Add a bit more red than what you see in the reference to create color interest.

Adjust the Color

As you paint closer to the foreground, mix in more blue to the color. This will create a sense of depth and distance.

Add Light and Texture

Introduce some blue-grey tones in the background to suggest light and shadow. Apply the paint lightly so that it won't compete with the thicker paint of the dunes.

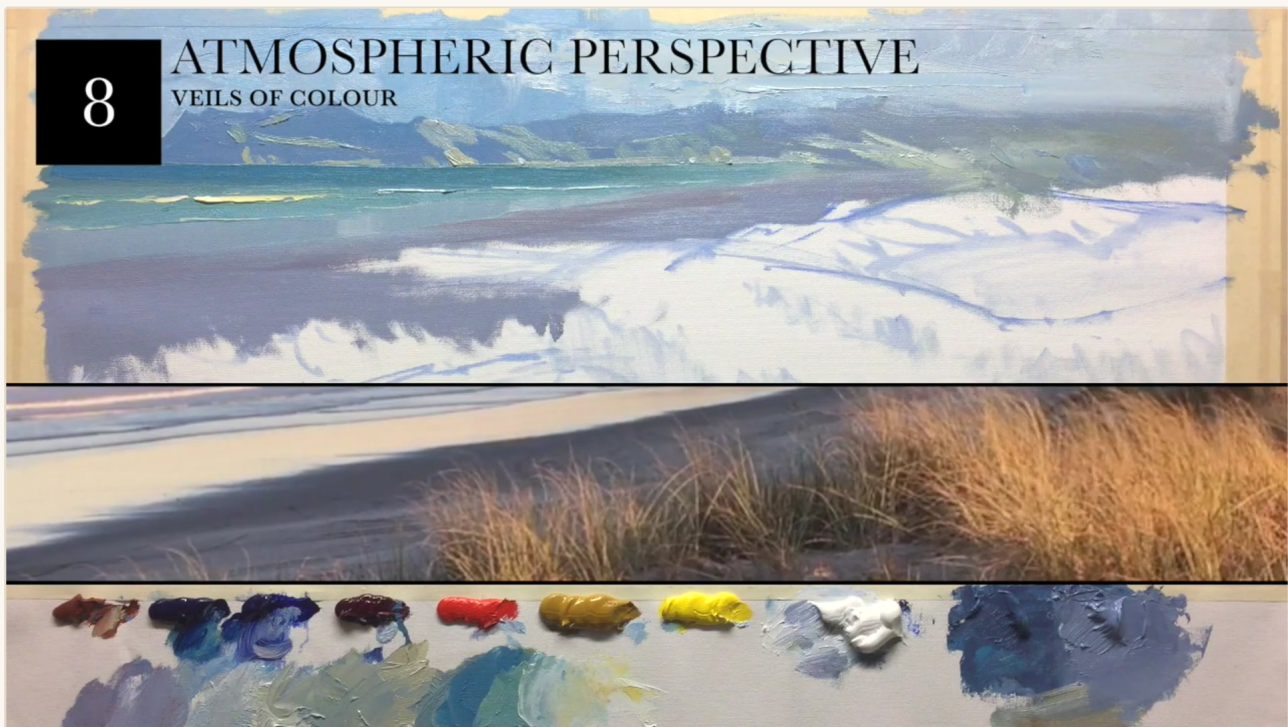
Brush for Dune Grass

Use downward brush strokes to remind yourself of the dune grass that will be added later. This technique also prepares the surface for future brushwork.

PRO TIP

Apply paint lightly on the beach to avoid conflict with thicker dune paint later.

12 Adding Dark Trees



Prepare the Canvas

Remove any thick paint from the horizon area to prevent the dark paint from mixing with lighter colors. This ensures that the dark trees will stand out clearly against the background.

Paint the Dark Trees

Use a dark mixture to paint the trees starting at the horizon and extending upwards. Adjust the height of the trees as desired; they can be any size you want.

Add Warmth to the Trees

Add a touch of red to the dark mixture to warm up the color. This adds depth and interest to the trees.

Enhance with Yellow

Introduce a small amount of yellow to the mixture for added color variation. This helps to define the mid-ground where more color is visible in the shadow areas.

Consider Atmospheric Perspective

Remember that as objects recede into the distance, they take on a more homogeneous color due to atmospheric perspective. In this scene, distant objects will appear more blue-gray.

PRO TIP

Adjust the height of the trees to your preference; they can be any size you want.

13 Painting Sand Dunes



Prepare for Dune Grasses

Brush down into the area where the dune grasses will be painted later. This will help create a natural transition when you add the grasses.

Adjust the Beach Line

Add a slight indication of light to straighten the beach line. Ensure it curves gently like the point of a knife to reflect the natural horizon.

Lighten and Warm the Dunes

Mix white with a little red and yellow ochre to lighten and warm the sand dunes. This subtle change will suggest the sun glowing through the scene.

Add Shadow Areas

Consider the shapes of the sand dunes and add shadow areas accordingly. Use long, straggly shapes to depict the dunes coming down onto the sand.

PRO TIP

Use a mix of white, red, and yellow ochre to create a subtle sunlit glow on the dunes.

14 Blocking in Dune Grasses



Mix Dark Blue-Grey

Use a big brush to mix blue and burnt sienna with a touch of Gamsol to create a thin, dark blue-grey. This color will help define the darkest areas of the dune grasses.

Apply Dark Tones

Dash in the dark tones, focusing on the darkest areas of the dune grasses. Keep the application blurry, as these areas will be painted over, with only bits showing through.

Avoid Light Areas

Be careful not to apply the dark blue-grey into the light areas, as this would muddy the colors. Preserve the punchy color of the lights by keeping them clean.

Add Warmth and Variety

Change the hue by adding some red to the mix while maintaining the same value. This technique adds variety and interest without altering the overall lightness or darkness of the area.

Incorporate Green

Introduce a greener hue in some sections, considering how to connect big shapes naturally. Aim for interesting, organic formations rather than man-made structures.

PRO TIP

Maintain the same value while changing hues to add variety and interest to your painting.

15 Painting Halftones and Shadows



Clean Your Brush

Thoroughly clean your brush with Gamsol to prevent dark colors from mixing into the halftones. If possible, use a fresh brush for this step.

Mix Halftone Colors

Prepare a mixture of yellow ochre, a little red, and some oil. Avoid adding too much white to prevent the halftones from becoming pasty. Adjust the mixture to achieve a slightly thicker consistency than the darks.

Apply Halftones

Use very soft brushwork to apply the halftones, ensuring there are no hard edges. Focus on the area where the light will be brightest, applying a stain of color as a base.

Add Dark Background

Carefully brush in darker bits in the background with soft strokes. This thin strip of dark will enhance the light area, making it shine more.

Introduce Light on the Beach

With a clean brush, mix white with a little yellow ochre, bright yellow, and a touch of red. Softly blend this into the background to create a light effect on the beach.

Paint Sand Shadows

Mix a shadow color with a little oil and apply it to the sand, working up into the darks and down into the dune grasses. Make the shadows more red and slightly darker in areas with reddish bushes to maintain a homogenous look.

PRO TIP

Use soft brushwork to maintain gentle transitions in halftones and shadows, saving sharp edges for later.

16 Adding Detail to Distant Hills



Add Halftones and Lights

Mix a little more blue and red to create halftones for the distant hills. Use this mixture to add depth and variation to the landscape. This will help create a sense of distance and atmosphere.

Enhance with Light Colors

Add a lot more white and a touch of yellow ochre to your palette. Use this lighter mix to highlight areas of the hills, giving them a sunlit appearance. This contrast will enhance the overall composition.

Create Texture with Brushwork

Use the side of your brush to apply the paint, creating a more textural feel. This technique adds interest and suggests more detail in the distant hills.

Add Depth with Blue

Introduce a little more blue as you paint further into the distance. This cool tone will help push the hills back, enhancing the sense of depth in your painting.

PRO TIP

Use the side of the brush to create texture and suggest detail in distant hills.

17 Adding Light to Dune Grasses



Apply Thick Yellow Ochre

Grab a generous amount of yellow ochre and apply it thickly to the canvas. Press it into the paint to create a rich texture. Use one or two brush strokes to maintain this texture, avoiding overworking the area.

Enhance with Warm Colors

Add touches of red and yellow to create a more orange hue. Apply these colors lightly to add variation and interest, allowing them to mix on the canvas for a natural blend.

PRO TIP

Allow colors to mix directly on the canvas to create interesting and beautiful streaks that can't be achieved by pre-mixing.

18 Adding Light to the Sand



Add Texture with Palette Knife

Use a palette knife to apply thick paint to the sand area. This technique creates an interesting texture that cannot be achieved with a brush. Experiment with carving into the paint and dragging it down to form lines.

Lighten the Sand

Mix a lot of white with some yellow ochre to create a light tone. Apply this mixture to the sand to add highlights and variation in the light areas.

Enhance with Rich Colors

Introduce a little more orange and dark tones to certain sections of the sand for depth. Clean your brush and use burnt sienna to add a rich, warm color to the lower areas, creating variation throughout the lights and darks.

PRO TIP

Use a palette knife to create unique textures and lines in the sand by carving and dragging the paint.

19 Adding Flowers and Details



Add Shadowed Bushes

Imagine the bush casting a shadow across the sand. Create a sharp edge for the shadow and blend it into the dune grasses. Use darker tones to enhance the shadow effect.

Apply Dark Accents

Mix blue, burnt sienna, and a touch of violet to create dark accents. Apply these with a calligraphic brushstroke, focusing on variety to avoid repetitive patterns. These accents are as crucial as the highlights that will follow.

Introduce Magenta Flowers

Clean your brush and add magenta for the flowers. Dab them into shadow areas first, using thick strokes. For flowers in the light, mix in some white to create a lighter version. Place these in the light areas, adjusting size for distance.

PRO TIP

Avoid repetitive brushwork by varying your strokes and joining some dabs to create more natural shapes.

20 Final Touches and Signing



Add Light-Colored Flowers

Introduce some light-colored flowers with a hint of yellow. Place them randomly to avoid a lined-up appearance, which can be tricky but adds a natural look.

Tidy Up Gaps

Fill in any small gaps on the canvas to ensure a cohesive look. Be careful not to get too caught up in tiny details.

Use Rigger Brush for Stalks

With a rigger brush, add a few stalks here and there. These fine details create the illusion of intricate work from a distance.

Enhance Foreground Texture

In the foreground, apply thicker chunks of paint to add texture. Ensure these are highlights and not overdone, to avoid a cluttered appearance.

Add Final Details

Include small shadows, tracks in the sand, and a few more intense reds to add life. Consider adding seagulls for interest and enhance contrast and light in certain areas.

Sign Your Painting

Once satisfied with the final touches, sign your painting to complete your unique artwork.

PRO TIP

Use thicker paint in the foreground to create texture and highlight areas without overdoing it.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by setting up your outdoor workspace with care. Begin by ensuring your canvas is protected from the elements with an umbrella, and manage your materials to prevent them from becoming a hazard in the wind. As you start painting, keep your canvas in the shade to maintain color accuracy and avoid glare. This preparation sets the stage for a successful painting session.

As you move into the creative process, focus on designing your composition with big shapes and varied angles to create a dynamic scene. Use a limited palette to simplify your color choices, and employ flat brushes for both broad strokes and precise lines. Pay attention to the play of light and shadow across your canvas, using cool greys and warm tones to bring depth and interest to your painting.

In the final stages, add details that bring your scene to life. Use a palette knife for crisp wave details and soft brushwork for gentle transitions in halftones and shadows. Remember to adjust your colors and shapes to reflect the natural beauty of your subject, and don't be afraid to make bold choices that reflect your personal vision. With these techniques, your painting will capture the essence of the sunset dunes, full of texture and vibrancy.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Always paint with your canvas in the shade to avoid unexpected darkening when viewed indoors.
- Use flat brushes for both broad strokes and precise lines by utilizing their chiseled edge.
- Vary angles and shapes to create a more interesting composition and avoid repetition.
- Use a large palette to have ample space for mixing and experimenting with colors.
- Use masking tape for a straight horizon line when painting quickly to maintain accuracy.
- Strengthen the ocean color to your preference; it's your creation, so don't feel bound by nature.
- Maintain the same value while changing hues to add variety and interest to your painting.
- Use soft brushwork to maintain gentle transitions in halftones and shadows, saving sharp edges for later.



"Sunset Dunes" 11.5 x 25" 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.

"Sand Dunes" by Lori Ippolito



"Sand Dunes" 11x14" Oil on Canvas by Lori Ippolito

Gorgeous painting Lori! Love the different format and what that's done to the foreground shapes. All good. Just take a look at the height of the midground dunes compared to the horizon. They should be higher. Check it in a mirror.

"Dunes Workshop65" by Fernando Vallejos



"Dunes Workshop65" 9x16 Acrylic on paper by Fernando Vallejos

Great work Fernando. Especially impressed with the background sky and hills - veeeery good. Some of the grasses in the foreground could be simplified a little with a few large strokes to combine small sections into single large clumps. That can help it read better from a distance.

"Beach Dune" by Kevin Kennedy



"Beach Dune" 9 x 12 Oil on Canvas by Kevin Kennedy

Some beautiful work here Kevin - great paint control. A shame you made that foreground clump a perfect quarter of the canvas really - just a little more added to the right side of it will break that rectangular shape and make it look more natural.

“June Grass Bay” by Ann Turner



"June Grass Bay" 9x12" Oil on Panel by Ann Turner

Wow pretty intense in those blues! Kind of fighting with the warms. Would suggest you gray the blues down so there's not such a battle. Perhaps its the photograph though - when taken in low light cameras tend to overcompensate and make the colours too vibrant. Exciting brushwork. Good shapes, if a little symmetrical like a pyramid - beware making straight paths.