



Point Lobos

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/140-Point-Lobos>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

Join me on a painting adventure to one of my favorite spots, Point Lobos in California, where the beauty of nature unfolds in a breathtaking coastal scene. In this chapter, we'll explore the art of capturing the stunning impressionistic view using big brushes and the powerful technique of contre-jour lighting, or 'against the light.' This method, favored by the French and renowned galleries, creates a dramatic effect by positioning the primary light source behind the subject, resulting in striking silhouettes, glowing highlights, and atmospheric depth. As we paint, you'll learn to control values to balance high contrast, ensuring subtle variations in dark areas and avoiding harshness in the brightest spots. This approach not only enhances mood and mystery but also brings a sense of depth and warmth to your landscape. Whether you're a beginner or an advanced painter, I'll guide you step by step through this process in oils, though it's perfectly adaptable for acrylics. In just two hours, you'll have a beautiful coastal painting, or you can choose to expand your vision into a larger masterpiece. Let's pay homage to Mother Nature's generosity and bring this scene to life with glowing light and vibrant colors.



"Point Lobos" 20 x 47" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson



REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 2

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 3

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 4

The scene as Richard found it.

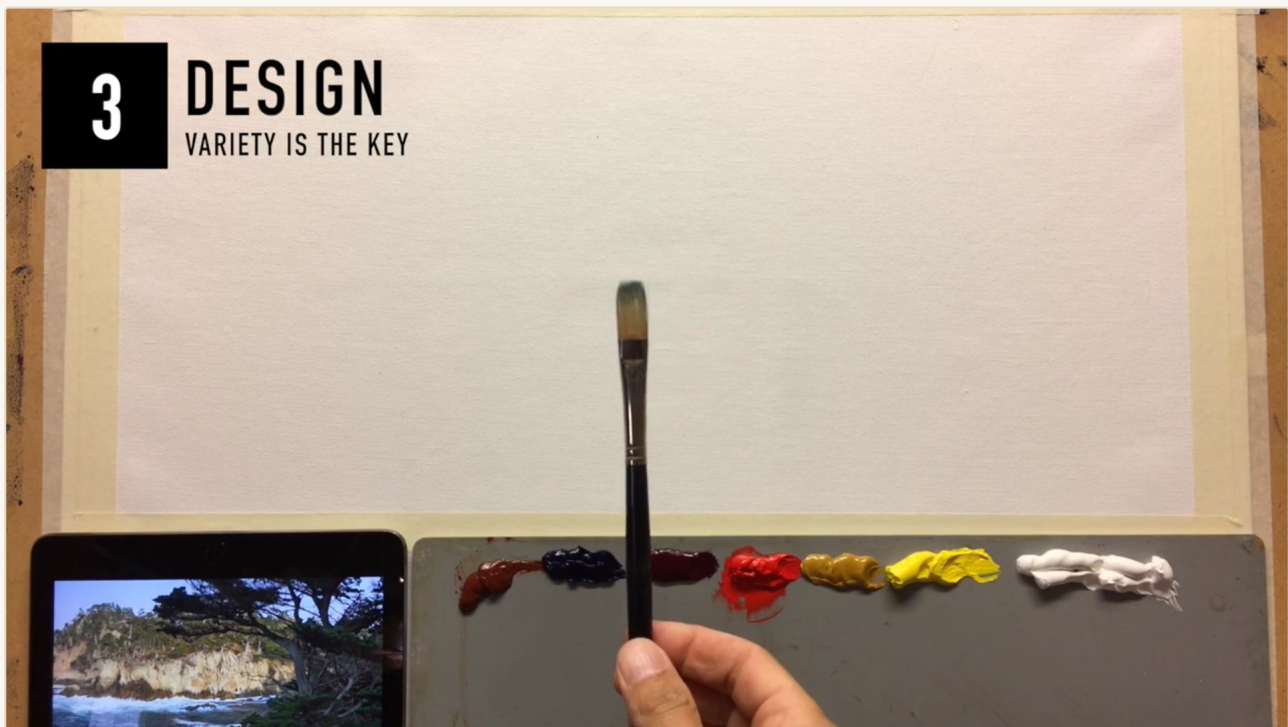
Materials

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

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- M. Graham & Co. Oil Paints
- 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 Design and Composition Planning



Choose Your Drawing Tool

Select a drawing tool such as a brush dipped in Gamsol with burnt sienna, a pencil, or charcoal. This will be used to sketch the initial design on your canvas.

Focus on the Main Element

Decide on the main element of your composition. If it's a tree, position it centrally and ensure it occupies a significant space to emphasize its importance in the scene.

Create a Sense of Motion

Incorporate diagonals and off-balance elements to convey motion. Use varied angles and slopes to avoid symmetry, which can make the composition static.

Enhance Light and Atmosphere

Plan for a beautiful sun glow to infuse the scene, highlighting the golden quality of light in the atmosphere. This will add depth and warmth to your painting.

Differentiate Foreground and Background

Ensure clear separation between foreground and background elements. Use the foreground to lead the viewer's eye into the scene and highlight the atmospheric qualities of the background.

Refine the Cliff's Base

Depict the base of the cliff with a subtle curve to reflect the viewpoint from above. This small adjustment can significantly enhance the realism of the scene.

Balance Headland Prominence

Decide which headland will be the focal point and push the other into the background. This will help in showcasing the atmospheric beauty without overcrowding the composition.

Iterate Your Design

Experiment with different design sketches and digital tools like Photoshop to refine your composition. Adjust elements like headland prominence and foreground details to achieve a balanced design.

PRO TIP

Use diagonals and off-balance elements to create a sense of motion in your composition.

2 Painting the Background



Paint the Background First

Dip a big brush into Gamsol and apply yellow ochre to the background area. This will establish where the sun glow effect will be, creating a warm, glowing atmosphere. Keep the application thin to allow for layering later.

Suggest Foreground Elements

Mix a little burnt sienna with the yellow ochre and lightly work it into the tree area. This begins to suggest the foreground elements and the color changes they will undergo due to the sun glow effect.

Enhance the Glow

Take yellow ochre mixed with a touch of white and smush it over the glowing area. This will enhance the golden light effect, especially at the bottom of the rocks where a color change occurs.

PRO TIP

Apply the initial layers thinly to allow for easy adjustments and layering later.

3 Establishing Foreground Elements



Suggest Trees with Phthalo Blue

Add a tiny touch of phthalo blue to your brush, being cautious as it's a very strong color. Use it to suggest some of the trees at the top of the painting.

Create Atmospheric Background

Switch to a clean brush and dip it into Gamsol solvent. Paint the second headland slightly darker than intended to create an atmospheric effect. This will be adjusted later with lighter colors for a shimmering look.

Work Forward with Ocean Colors

Use walnut oil instead of solvent as you move forward in the painting. Apply thicker paint to create a sunlit turquoise color in the turbulent water, capturing the light effect.

Allow Paint to Dry

Let the paint tack up or dry for half an hour to an hour before continuing. This ensures stability for the next layer without mixing too much with the underlying paint.

Tone Down Colors

Mix Burnt Sienna, yellow ochre, a little white, and a touch of blue to create a more greyed-down version of the color. Apply this to tone down the strong colors and prepare for the lighting effect.

Establish Lighting Effect

Add more burnt sienna to create a warm light effect, transitioning into reds and then blues. This base coat will support the lighting effect and will be refined in later layers.

PRO TIP

Use walnut oil instead of solvent for thicker paint application in the ocean section to capture the sunlit turquoise effect.

4 Creating Atmospheric Effects



Mix Shadow Color

Use a smaller brush to mix blue, red, and a little bit of white. Aim for a mid-value to ensure the section remains light compared to the darker areas.

Paint Shadow Shapes

Observe the shapes at the end and consider how light affects them. Paint longer shadows across the rock faces, ensuring the shapes are varied to avoid repetitive patterns.

Refine Edges

Redefine the edges by painting the background into them. Be aware that you will carve into these shapes, so precision is not crucial at this stage.

Adjust Background Color

With the current color on your brush, move into the background. Ensure it's lighter than the existing color by testing with a small flick. Use walnut oil to thin the paint, reducing texture.

Enhance Background

Adjust the edge by adding more white and a touch of yellow ochre to warm it up, locking in the desired effect.

PRO TIP

Avoid making repetitive patterns in shadow shapes by varying their forms.

5 Adding Color Transitions



Create a Soft Glowing Effect

Use yellow ochre to add light through the section as if light is pouring through and catching sea spray. Work outwards to naturally create a soft glowing effect.

Define Edges with Warm Colors

Mix white with a touch of red and blue, and a bit of walnut oil. Define the edges by cutting into the shapes, starting at a point and working outwards to create a soft transition.

Warm Up the Colors

Mix white with a little bright yellow. Start at a point and work across to create a warmer transition. Repeat, getting lighter and warmer each time.

Add Texture with Thick Paint

Clean the brush and use yellow ochre and white. Start at the darker end, adding a little violet for texture. Use thick paint with a bristled brush to create texture.

Intensify the Colors

Add more yellow ochre and bright yellow for a more intense color. Squeeze the brush to create a textured look, thinning out the paint where the tree will cover.

Enhance with Orangey Effects

At the top, add an orangey effect to represent lichens and plants. Down the bottom, use yellow ochre to throw more light onto the rocks.

Create a Color Banding

Achieve a color banding through the cliff face by transitioning from blues to mauves, reds, oranges, and yellows. Rough in these colors to create the desired effect.

PRO TIP

Use thick paint with a bristled brush to create texture that can't be achieved any other way.

6 Painting Wave Recession



Create Wave Shapes

Use a nylon filbert brush to paint subtle wave shapes. Mix a color slightly lighter than the surface, similar to the sky or atmosphere. Hold the brush at the top to create a crisp edge at the bottom and a softer edge at the top.

Blend Wave Reflections

Join the wave shapes together, allowing the paint to mix with the darker paint already on the canvas. This will create darker reflections as the angle changes closer to the horizon.

Adjust Wave Angles

Change the angle of the wave shapes as they approach the horizon. Make the angles steeper near the horizon and shallower and smaller in the foreground.

Understand Wave Recession

Use the horizon as a reference for wave size. A wave halfway to the horizon should be half the size of a similar wave closer to you. Repeat this halving process as you move towards the horizon to create a realistic wave recession.

PRO TIP

Hold the brush at the top to achieve a crisp edge at the bottom of the wave and a softer edge at the top.

7 Reflections and Water Effects



Add Orange Reflections

Take some orangey color to reflect the sky or background into the water. Make sure this color is a little lighter than the paint it's going on top of. In darker sections, darken the orangey color slightly to maintain subtlety.

Enhance with Light Turquoise

Use a really light turquoise to depict the foam being pushed under the water. This will lighten the area and add depth to the scene. Don't hesitate to brush into the foreground, as you'll paint back into the ocean later.

PRO TIP

Adjust the orangey color's intensity based on the surrounding darkness to keep reflections subtle.

8 Detailing Water and Foam



Mix and Apply Turquoise Off-White

Mix some white with a little yellow and a touch of phthalo. Wipe away some of the blue from the area first to prevent it from interfering with the white. Use a clean brush or switch to a new one, then apply straight white to create a turquoise off-white effect.

Create Foam Spray Effect

Use a big brush with a bit of sky color to determine where you want a big spray of foam. Brush it into that area to set it up for the foam effect. Wipe the brush and repeat to build up the desired effect.

Detail the Foam and Water

Observe the shapes in your reference photo, focusing on how the foam interacts with the rocks. Brush upwards to mimic foam cascading off rocks, using gentle curves rather than straight edges. Clean your brush frequently to avoid unwanted color mixing.

Add Whitewash and Foam Highlights

Lightly brush straight white across the surface to create a broken effect, resembling the foam on top of the water. Pay attention to how waves tuck into shadow areas to enhance the rock face. Add small swirls of foam to enrich the water's surface.

PRO TIP

Keep your brush clean while detailing foam to prevent unwanted color mixing.

9 Softening and Enhancing Foam Spray



Soften the Foam Spray

Use a really soft synthetic brush to gently soften the foam spray in the background. Aim for a misty look to create a sense of distance and atmosphere.

Add Shadow to the Foam

Identify areas where the foam would naturally be in shadow due to the rocks jutting out. Consider the direction of the light and how it affects the water ramping up to the rock.

Highlight the Foam

Mix white with bright yellow to create warm highlights. Apply these to the edges of the waves where they catch the light, enhancing the sense of movement and light.

Enhance Atmosphere with Sea Spray

Mix yellow with a little red to add more atmosphere and sea spray where the light pours through. Soften some edges to integrate the tree that will overlap this area.

PRO TIP

Use a soft synthetic brush to achieve a misty, atmospheric effect in the foam spray.

10 Enhancing the Glowing Area



Prepare Your Palette

Ensure your palette is clean and spacious. Use a larger palette if possible to give yourself more room to mix colors effectively.

Mix and Apply the Base Glow

Start by mixing white, yellow, a little bit of walnut oil, and a touch of yellow ochre. Apply this mixture to the center of the glowing area on your canvas.

Enhance the Glow

Add more yellow ochre, a little yellow, and a tiny touch of red to your mixture. Paint outward from the center, gradually darkening the color as you move away from the center.

Reintroduce Light

Take some white and a little bit of yellow, and reapply it to the center to enhance the effect of light skimming across the water.

PRO TIP

Gradually darken the color as you work outward from the center to create a glowing effect.

11 Painting Distant Trees



Switch to a Smaller Brush

Use a smaller brush to add trees in the distant glowing area. Mix a darker version of the orange used previously to paint these trees.

Add Tree Shapes

Decide on the placement of the trees, incorporating interestingly shaped trunks and branches. Vary the size and angle of your brushstrokes to create a natural look.

Create Brushstroke Families

Think of each clump of brushstrokes as a family, with one large stroke and a few smaller supporting strokes. This mimics the natural grouping of trees.

Mix Opaque Dark Colors

Instead of using burnt sienna, mix red, yellow ochre, a little violet, and blue for a more opaque color. This will cover the canvas better without leaving scrape marks.

Cool and Darken the Colors

As you move away from the glowing center, add blue to your mix to make the colors cooler and darker. This helps create depth and contrast in the painting.

PRO TIP

Vary the size and angle of your brushstrokes to create a natural look for distant trees.

12 Foreground Tree and Texture



Define the Tree's Shape

Intimate the shape of the tree with a gestural outline. Use a paper towel with a little solvent to clean off excess paint, making it easier to work with.

Mix and Apply Base Colors

Mix blue, red, and yellow ochre for the tree's base color. Apply with a big brush, creating bold, graphic strokes that are lighter and greener than the background.

Add Light and Texture

Switch to a smaller brush and apply thicker paint to areas catching the light. Make the color slightly greener. Use impasto technique to build texture, emphasizing the tree as the focal point.

Maintain Shadow Illusion

Be cautious not to go too light, preserving the shadow illusion in front of the strong light. You can add dark accents later to enhance depth.

Detail the Branches

Use a smaller brush to work in the branches, adding detail and definition to the tree structure.

PRO TIP

Use impasto technique to create texture, making the tree the focal point of the scene.

13 Adding Foreground Details



Create a Neutral Grey

Mix a neutral grey on your palette. Ensure it's pretty neutral by balancing your colors. This will help add depth and interest to your foreground.

Prepare the Brush

Flatten out the paint on your palette to avoid any globs. Use a big brush for small strokes by pushing it into the flattened paint to create a ridge.

Apply to Foreground Rocks

Lightly brush the neutral grey onto the foreground rocks. This will add more interest and texture to your painting with subtle details like sticks and rocks.

PRO TIP

Use a big brush for small strokes by flattening the paint and creating a ridge for precise application.

14 Golden Grasses and Highlights



Add Golden Grasses

Mix yellow ochre with a touch of brown to create a darker version. Use mainly vertical brush strokes to softly mark in the grasses, adding variation with the darker mix. Ensure the tree shape is different in size and shape from any existing ones to maintain interest.

Enhance with Dark Accents

Add more intense darks into the foreground to create depth. Avoid creating large dark areas that could overpower the painting and diminish its vibrancy.

Apply Light Highlights

Mix yellow ochre, yellow, and white to create highlights. Apply thicker highlights to the grasses, using less white and bright yellow as you move away from the light source. For rocks, add a little grey to the grass color and lighten them as they approach the glowing light effect.

PRO TIP

Use mainly vertical brush strokes to softly mark in the grasses, adding variation with darker tones.

15 Reestablishing Darks in the Tree



Reestablish Darks in the Tree

Use a fairly small brush to re-establish the darks in the tree. Mix burnt sienna with a little blue, but avoid making it too blue to maintain the warm color scheme. As you move to different areas, adjust the mixture with a little red and yellow ochre to maintain the glowing effect. Keep your brush clean to avoid muddying the mid values and lights.

Add Details

Add more branches and small details to the tree using the dark mixture. This step is crucial for adding depth and contrast to your painting.

PRO TIP

Keep your brush clean to prevent muddy areas between darks and lights.

16 Adding Final Highlights and Shimmer



Add Light and Depth

Introduce light to areas needing illumination. Add depth of color by incorporating another tree with branches, enhancing the overall composition.

Highlight and Detail

Switch to a small brush to add finishing details. Create crisp highlights in the grasses and rocks, and add small holes through the tree for texture.

Intensify Glow Area

Use a clean brush to mix pure white with a little yellow. Apply dabs of this mixture to intensify the light in the glow area, ensuring no impurities affect the color.

Create Tree Holes

With a touch of orange, poke holes in the trees to add depth. Ensure the color matches the surrounding area for a natural look.

Add Shimmer with Cool White

Mix a cool blue-white of the same value as the existing area. Apply it to create a shimmering effect, reminiscent of impressionist techniques.

Reflect Light on Trees

Use a blue-green color to reflect light from the sky onto the top of tree clumps. Consider the direction of light to enhance the impressionistic shimmer.

PRO TIP

Keep your brush clean when adding light into dark areas to maintain color purity.

17 Final Touches and Signing



Add Darker Accents

Identify areas that need more depth. Use a small brush to apply darker accents where necessary, enhancing the contrast and adding dimension.

Fix Branch Details

Examine any messy branches and refine them with careful brushwork. Introduce additional colors to create interest and realism.

Add Final Details

Use a small brush to add a few more details to the painting. Consider including elements like birds to bring life and movement to the scene.

Sign the Painting

Finish by signing your painting. Choose a subtle yet visible spot to add your signature, marking the completion of your artwork.

PRO TIP

Use a small brush for final details to maintain control and precision.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by thoughtfully planning your composition. Begin with a sketch using your preferred drawing tool, focusing on the main elements like a prominent tree or a striking headland. Incorporate dynamic diagonals and off-balance elements to infuse motion into your scene. Consider the play of light, especially the sun glow, to add warmth and depth, and ensure a clear distinction between foreground and background to guide the viewer's eye.

As you lay down the initial layers, use thin applications of paint to allow for adjustments and layering. Establish your background with warm tones, and gradually build up the foreground elements with careful color transitions. Use walnut oil for thicker applications, especially in areas capturing the sunlit turquoise of the ocean. Pay attention to atmospheric effects, varying shadow shapes to avoid repetition and enhance realism.

In the final stages, focus on detailing and enhancing textures. Use a combination of brushes to create realistic water effects and foam, maintaining a clean brush to prevent unwanted color mixing. Add depth with reflections and subtle color transitions, and utilize impasto techniques to emphasize focal points like the foreground tree. As you finish, ensure your glowing areas are vibrant and your distant trees add depth and contrast, completing a dynamic and atmospheric scene.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use diagonals and off-balance elements to create motion in your composition.
- Apply initial layers thinly for easy adjustments and layering.
- Use walnut oil instead of solvent for thicker paint applications.
- Avoid repetitive patterns in shadow shapes by varying their forms.
- Keep your brush clean while detailing foam to prevent unwanted color mixing.
- Gradually darken the color as you work outward from the center to create a glowing effect.
- Vary the size and angle of your brushstrokes to create a natural look for distant trees.
- Use impasto technique to create texture, making the tree the focal point of the scene.



"Point Lobos" 20 x 47" 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.

"Point Lobos" by Jim Haycock



"Point Lobos" 9x12" WB Oil on board by Jim Haycock

Great Impressionistic feel to this painting Jim. Very much reminds me of Monet's series at Etretat.

Very similar! The one thing Monet has done differently is to spend more time making clear shapes, which tends to make a painting easier to read. Creating more definite colour shapes also helps to keep colour areas separate and avoids muddiness which has occurred through much of your painting.

Take a step back from your painting and your foreground trees on the right are blending in with the background hill. Having foreground objects blending in with background objects is something I always try to avoid because it tends to flatten the painting and make it difficult to read. I would recommend either lightening the background there or darkening the tree in order to separate those two planes of depth.

Similarly the top of the trees on the second hill are blending in with the sky and muddying the colours there. I'd suggest repainting the sky there to solve that. Soft edges in the distance do help with creating depth but beware of overdoing it and muddying the sky. This softening effect has worked really well in the furthest hills, largely because the cooler colours there are more similar to the sky colour and so do not muddy the sky when blended with it.

You've given more space to the sky in your painting than in my design and to your credit have filled it with effective clouds full of motion and spirit. Nicely done. Conversely, the thin strip of land clinging to the bottom of the painting feels more like an afterthought - like you tried to squeeze it in at the end. Horizontals imply stability and calm. Diagonals imply motion and excitement. I always try to remember that when designing a scene with the intention that my design should speak about the feeling of the place.

Something to dwell on. Overall a very pleasing painting with a few things I'd encourage you to think about.
Good job!

"Point Lobos" by Elena Sokolova



"Point Lobos" Oil, canvas, 30cm x 60cm by Elena Sokolova

A very light filled and colourful painting Elena. Nicely done. I have only compliments to give you for this work but for a small note to be careful of making repeating patterns with your brushwork as is evident in the sky and water. Easy to say, hard to do! Great work Elena.

"Coastal Light" by **Laurena Beirns**



"Coastal Light" 8x16" Oil on Canvas by Laurena Beirns

Hi Laurena, good to see you working out that glowing light effect and paying good attention to the waves and cliff forms especially. If I can make a suggestion, looking over all your previous work it would simply be to pay more attention to the drawing of the scene and individual items. Thankfully drawing is an easy skill to learn well - it just takes practice and you can make it even easier on yourself in these painting projects by printing out my painting and using the grid transfer method to get the drawing accurately onto your canvas. It takes an extra chunk of time but it's well worth it in the end. See the Grid Transfer Method.

In terms of the colour in your painting, particularly in the glowing light area I can recommend using more yellow and orange before you start adding white to your mixtures because white tends to cool down mixtures rather than warming them like yellow and red. Hope that helps a little. Good work!

"Point Lobos" by Denis King



"Point Lobos" 18x8" Oil on Canvas by Denis King

Great work here Denis. Your own painterly style is shining through giving this a lot of motion and energy. Looks to me as if you've done everything pretty well spot on, at least in terms of doing everything that I taught in this lesson, so if anything's wrong now it's my fault. Looks good to me. Good job.