



Four Mile Beach

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/183-Four-Mile-Beach>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, I invite you to join me on a journey from location to studio, capturing the essence of Four Mile Beach alongside the talented California plein air artist, Scott Hamill. As we stand on the west coast, overlooking the majestic Pacific Ocean, you'll learn to embrace a more painterly and impressionistic style. My homemade easel, with its unique design, allows for fluid, expressive brush strokes, encouraging a loose and dynamic approach to painting. We'll explore the coastal bluffs and ocean, focusing on the big dark shapes, distant headlands, and the interplay of light and shadow. Using a 12 by 16 inch canvas with a toned surface, you'll learn to sketch with a thinned-down mixture of gold ochre and cad red medium, positioning your focal point thoughtfully with the rule of thirds in mind. This scene is a rewarding subject, offering a rich tapestry of lines, shapes, and perspectives that guide the viewer's eye. By the end of this lesson, you'll have a deeper understanding of composition, brushwork, and the joy of capturing the beauty of the natural world in a loose, expressive manner.



Four Mile Beach

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

- Download the lesson notes here:
- Scott Hamill Workshop Notes.pdf
- (78kb)
- Winsor Newton and Rembrandt paints:
- Cadmium Lemon, Cad Yellow Pale, Gold Ochre, Cad Red Medium, Permanent Rose, Ultramarine Blue (Rembrandt), Winsor Blue red shade.
- Titanium White (Winton large tube)
- Rosemary ivory synthetic, Robert Simmons Signet. Flats Size 8-12, Round size 4, Rigger
- Cotton or linen canvas mounted on birch ply or similar.
- Lightweight Easel – lightweight french easel or pochade box mounted on a tripod. There are many to choose from but I like Open Box M, EasyI, Art Box and Panel or Prolific Easel. An online search will give you lots of choices.

1 Composition and sketching



Assess the Scene

Observe the scene and identify the big dark shapes, distant headland, and cast shadows. Notice how the waves direct your eye back into the design. Consider the rocks on the back shelf as a potential focal point.

Prepare the Canvas

Use a 12 by 16 inch canvas with a toned surface to prevent the white from affecting your perception of values. This helps in seeing the light and dark shapes clearly.

Mix and Sketch

Create a thinned-down mixture of gold ochre and cad red medium, or any color of your choice, to sketch. Hold the brush at the end to maintain a loose grip and quickly sketch the shapes on the canvas.

Position the Focal Point

Ensure the focal point is not centered. Place it at one of the four intersections of the rule of thirds, such as the rocks in the background on the shelf under the big dark shape.

Create Variety and Balance

Massing in shapes, focus on a variety of lines and shapes. Avoid placing objects of the same size or shape next to each other. Ensure the foreground rock shelf doesn't end at the center of the canvas, and avoid lines going off the corners to keep the viewer's eye within the canvas.

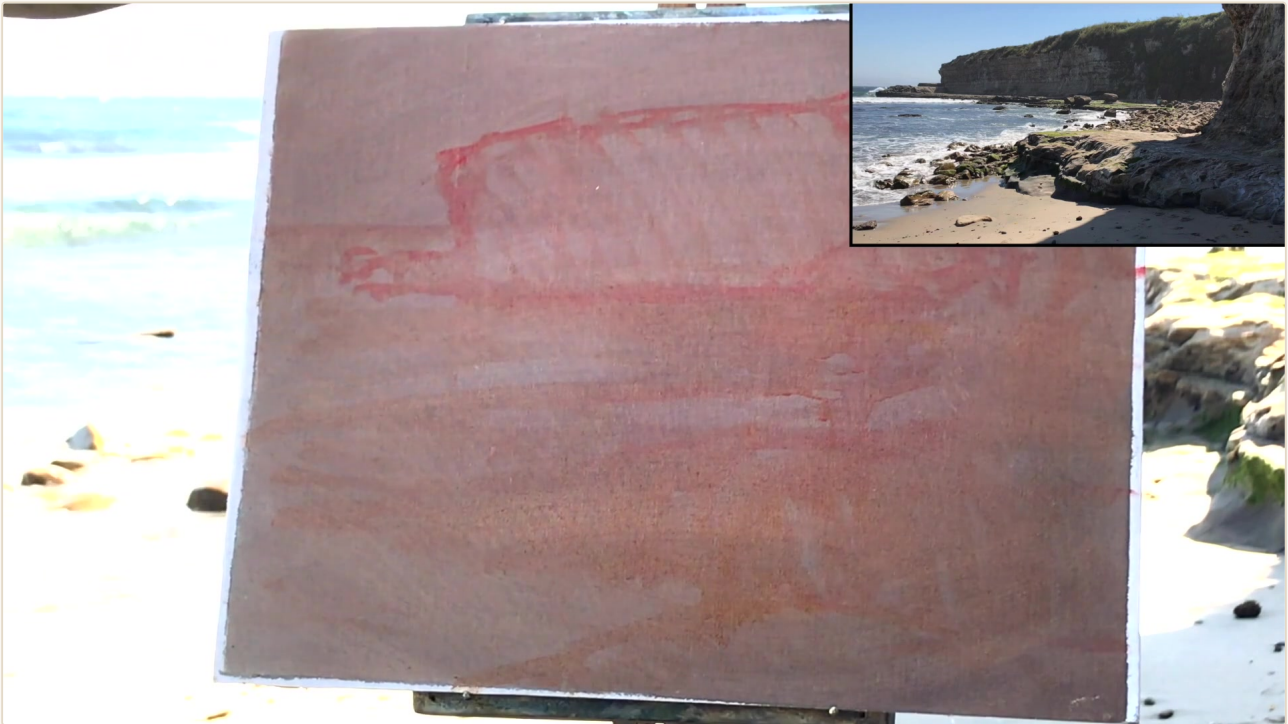
Establish Horizon and Lead-ins

Decide on a horizon line above the distant rock shelf. Look for lead-ins like waves that zigzag into the scene, providing linear perspective.

PRO TIP

Place the focal point at one of the intersections of the rule of thirds to avoid a boring composition.

2 Painting dark to light



Start with Darkest Darks

Begin by applying the darkest darks to the canvas, focusing on the shadow shapes. Use ultramarine blue and permanent rose, adding a touch of gold ochre to gray it down slightly. This will help establish the shadows before the sun changes the scene.

Loosely Cover the Canvas

Use a number 12 brush to loosely cover the canvas, starting with the foreground rock shelf shadow. Hold the brush in a pencil grip or from the end like a sword for varied movement and distance from the canvas. Experiment with both grips to find your preference.

Observe and Adjust Temperature

As you paint, squint at the scene to identify shifts in temperature. Alternate between cooler mixtures and warmer tones by adding reds and yellows. These subtle shifts will make the shadow shapes more interesting.

Create Interest with Brush Strokes

Focus on covering the canvas with interesting brush strokes and quickly shifting colors. Incorporate a bit of green for areas with moss and shadow to add variety. This approach will result in a painting with more life and interest.

Establish Dark Shapes and Shadows

Continue covering the canvas, identifying where the dark shapes and shadows are located. Keep it simple and loose, knowing that these areas will be modified later. Concentrate on capturing the value and temperature as best as you can.

PRO TIP

Squint at the scene to better see shifts in temperature and adjust your colors accordingly.

3 Mid-ground and atmospheric perspective



Mix Mid-ground Shadows

Mix a lighter, grayer, and bluer shadow color for the mid-ground. This adjustment reflects the atmospheric perspective, as distant objects appear lighter and cooler. Compare this mixture to your original dark paint to ensure it's appropriately adjusted.

Apply Shadow Shapes

Use a variety of loose brush strokes to apply the shadow shapes under the rock shelf and the dark headland. Employ squiggles and touches to create a dynamic and realistic shadowed effect.

Understand Atmospheric Perspective

Remember that atmospheric perspective helps create depth on a flat canvas. As objects recede into the distance, they should appear lighter, grayer, and cooler due to the absorption of light and color by water molecules in the air.

PRO TIP

Cool and lighten colors as they recede into the distance to create depth using atmospheric perspective.

4 Background headland and sky comparison



Observe and Compare

Observe the scene carefully, focusing on the background headland. Compare its value to the dark base and the sky. Take your time to mix the colors, warming and cooling them as needed.

Test and Mass In

Squint and apply a test brush stroke to check the color and value. Once satisfied, begin massing in the background headland with thin paint. This allows for thicker applications later.

Create Distance Effect

As the land moves away, cool and lighten the color slightly to create a subtle effect of distance. Work from right to left, indicating proximity and distance.

Add Foliage and Shadows

Work on the foliage and shadow areas, adjusting the temperature to be warmer and greener. Capture the plant life along the cliff face, focusing on big brush strokes.

Focus on Big Shapes

Concentrate on massing in flat shapes with the correct value, temperature, and color. Keep the brushwork loose and cover the canvas without worrying about form yet.

PRO TIP

Squint at the scene to better judge values and colors while painting.

5 Value comparison and canvas coverage



Identify and Cover Shapes

Focus on covering the headland area on your canvas. Ensure that the shapes at the base, such as rocks in the water, are identifiable. Use suggestive brushwork to indicate these features.

Compare Sky and Headland Values

Squint at the scene to assess the value difference between the sky and the headland in shadow. Notice how light the sky is compared to the darker headland.

Mix and Apply Sky Color

Use a clean brush to mix cad lemon, a tiny bit of phthalo blue, and a touch of ultramarine. Apply this mixture to the canvas, adjusting with more white if needed to match the sky's lightness.

Create Sky Gradation

As you paint the sky, remember that it gets darker and more violet as it rises. At the horizon, it appears lighter and more yellow or green. Use this gradation to create a realistic sky with loose brush strokes.

Cover Canvas for Value Judgement

Work towards covering the entire canvas to accurately judge the values of each shape. This allows you to compare the sky, headland, ocean, and foreground values effectively.

PRO TIP

Cover the canvas fully to make accurate value comparisons between different shapes.

6 Creating form with temperature shifts



Create Warm and Cool Relationships

Focus on creating variety by establishing warm and cool relationships in your painting. This will help to add depth and interest to your work.

Define Form with Temperature Shifts

At the top of the cliff face, where the sandstone turns horizontal, use cooler and lighter colors to suggest form. Mix lighter and bluer paint to mimic the influence of the sky, which is very blue and cool. Apply this mix lightly with a thin brush stroke to the top of the cliff face.

Apply Temperature Shifts Throughout

Use the technique of shifting temperature to cooler tones in other areas of your painting as well. This method is effective in creating the illusion of form in shadows, similar to how light affects snow, surf, and sand on a clear day.

PRO TIP

Use cooler and lighter colors to suggest form in shadowed areas influenced by the sky.

7 Ocean and sand color application



Apply Ocean Color

Mix a gray-green color for the ocean. Compare this value against the sky and headland shadows to ensure harmony. Mask this color onto the canvas, covering areas quickly while squinting to judge relationships between colors and values.

Adjust Ocean and Sand Colors

Lighten the ocean color as it approaches the shore. Don't worry about overlapping rock shapes; these can be reestablished later. Focus on covering the canvas efficiently.

Use a Viewing Aid

Use a small hole in your finger to isolate sections of the scene. This helps judge the value, temperature, and color more accurately, revealing surprising hues like unexpected blues.

Paint Sand and Shadows

Apply sand and shadow colors loosely with quick brush movements. Create a soft edge where the shadow meets light to avoid drawing the eye away from the painting. Adjust the mixture to achieve a clean violet for cast shadows on the sand.

PRO TIP

Use a small hole in your finger to isolate and better understand the colors in the scene.

8 Foreground rock and light definition



Define Shadow and Light on Sandstone

Mix warm and cool tones to create the shadow on the sandstone in the foreground. Use a variety of brush strokes, adjusting pressure to create texture and interest. Focus on the light areas, masking them in with light strokes to suggest the cliff face and shelf.

Add Definition to Foreground Cliff Face

Mix darks to define the foreground cliff face, creating dark areas by squinting to see shapes. Use a large brush to make fine lines, suggesting fissures and striations. Warm up the tones as you move down the rock to add depth and interest.

Separate Foreground from Headland

Mix warmer and lighter tones to distinguish the foreground cliff face from the headland behind it. Apply these tones to create form and angles, considering the erosion and crumbling of the cliffs. Add lighter areas influenced by the sky to enhance realism.

Create a Subtle Foreground Ledge

Use a light touch to create a ledge that flattens out, incorporating cool, flat, lighter areas. Allow some of this to blend into the shadow shape, ensuring the foreground remains understated. Avoid adding too much detail to keep the viewer's eye moving through the scene.

PRO TIP

Use a variety of brush strokes and pressure to create texture and interest in the rock face.

9 Foreground foam and wave details



Prepare the Brush and Mix Colors

Select a clean brush for the light areas of the sandstone. Mix gold ochre with white for a lit rock effect, adding a touch of cad red. If the color is too pure, introduce some blue to gray it down slightly.

Apply Light to Sandstone

Use a thin brush stroke to test the light and dark relationship on the sandstone. Pull the brush stroke across in the direction of the light, from right to left. Add a few light strokes to indicate moss and light, ensuring not to overdo it.

Create Light on the Sand

Apply a big, gooey brush stroke to the sand in the foreground. Experiment with your brush by letting it twirl and spin, creating various strokes. Capture the effect of wet sand reflecting the sky, noting that wet sand is darker than the sky.

Soften Edges and Shadows

Soften the edges between wet and dry sand, as well as the shadow edges. Create a more interesting shape by curving the shadow line. Ensure the shadow has a soft edge as it moves away from the object casting it.

Re-establish Darks and Define Shapes

Squeeze out fresh gold ochre if needed, avoiding polluted paint. Mix colors to work on the foreground rocks in shadow, incorporating warmer and cooler tones. Step back frequently to assess value and design issues.

Paint Foreground Foam and Light

Mix a warm white with cad yellow pale for the lightest light in the scene. Apply with a loose grip and a lot of paint, wiping the brush clean to avoid dark contamination. Use varied directions and pressure to suggest foam and water movement.

PRO TIP

Wipe your brush clean after each stroke to prevent dark colors from contaminating the light areas.

10 Sky and headland refinement



Soften Edges

Soften the edges of your painting. This will help create a more cohesive look and allow for future adjustments.

Paint the Wave

Mix a dark gray color and apply it to the canvas in the shape of the wave, following the direction it is breaking. Use brush strokes that mimic the cylindrical nature of the wave as it pulls up and curls over. Remember, waves come in sets, so observe and capture the movement.

Prepare the Sky

Clean your palette and prepare a fresh area for mixing. Squeeze out some titanium white, phthalo blue, and a touch of cad lemon. Mix these to create your sky color, ensuring it's lighter and warmer as it approaches the sun.

Apply and Blend Sky Color

Apply the mixed sky color to the canvas, blending it smoothly with existing colors. Create a soft edge to avoid harsh lines and enhance the illusion of light coming from the right.

Refine Light and Warmth

Adjust the sky color to be warmer and lighter where needed to enhance the light effect. Squint to check the illumination, ensuring it casts from right to left across the painting.

PRO TIP

Always clean your brush when touching different areas to maintain color purity and avoid muddying your work.

11 Final adjustments and highlights



Mix Colors for Moss and Light

Combine gold ochre, cadmium lemon, a touch of white, and some blue to create the color for the moss and light in the background. Shape your brush to have a fine point for precise application.

Apply Light Strokes

Hold the brush lightly and use the corner to make sharp lines from left to right. Turn the brush over to use a clean edge for a crisp finish.

Define Rock Faces

Identify the focal point and apply angular brush strokes to create a strong pop on the rock faces. Vary the sizes of the rocks to avoid uniformity.

Add Highlights and Warmth

Squint to assess the scene and add warmer tones to areas reflecting light, such as rocks catching sunlight. Use minimal brush strokes to maintain realism.

Enhance Atmospheric Perspective

Increase chroma in foreground greens and decrease it in background foliage to create depth. Adjust colors by adding complementary hues to achieve the desired gray tones.

Refine the Land's Edge

Decide whether to extend the land off the canvas or keep it within the frame to guide the viewer's eye. Adjust the shape to balance focus and distance.

PRO TIP

Use complementary colors to adjust the intensity and warmth of your grays, ensuring depth and realism in your painting.

12 Final review and packing up



Add Whitewater and Highlights

Use a clean brush to mix titanium white with a touch of cad lemon, gold ochre, or cad yellow pale to warm it up. Apply this mixture lightly along the shoreline to create waves and foam. Gradually increase the thickness of the highlights as the painting progresses.

Enhance Foreground Rocks

Switch to a smaller brush, like a number eight flat, to work on the facets of the foreground rocks. Focus on the main shapes by squinting to see them clearly. Use light touches to create the illusion of rock and light.

Refine Waves and Foam

Add thicker brush strokes of foam in a zig-zag pattern, referring to the scene for accuracy. Use a warm color mix with cad yellow pale to create a thick, warm foam. This will catch the light and create highlights when viewed indoors.

Adjust Background Rocks

Mix a cool color using permanent rose and ultramarine blue to tone down the background rocks. Apply this to reshape and reduce the dominance of the rocks, creating a subtle temperature shift between the shadowed rock warmth and the cooler cliff face.

Develop Shadow Cliff Face

Simplify and add interest to the shadow cliff face by incorporating warm and cool colors. Use subtle temperature and value shifts to depict shelves and rock shapes within the shadow.

Enhance Foreground Sand

Brighten the foreground sand by applying thicker, lighter paint. Use a push and pull technique to soften edges and create a more dynamic light effect.

Shape the Headland

Mix a clean sky color starting with cad lemon at the horizon, working up to a darker blue. Cut into the headland shape, softening edges to keep the viewer's eye focused on the painting's center.

Final Touches and Evaluation

Assess the painting by checking the darkest dark, lightest light, and edge work. Reestablish any lost contrasts and ensure the focal point is strong. Soften edges to imply movement and avoid a static feel.

Pack Up

With the tide coming in and the light changing, it's time to stop. Ensure the painting captures the day's feel with a strong focal point and good light contrast before packing up.

PRO TIP

Soften edges to imply movement, especially in water and clouds, using a clean, dry brush to blend or flick around the area.

13 Studio review and minor edits



Evaluate the Painting

Bring the painting back to the studio and give it some time away from your eyes. Turn it to the wall for a few days or weeks, then place it on the easel. Look at it in a mirror to see if there are any obvious changes that can improve the painting.

Limit Brushstrokes

When making adjustments, limit yourself to five to ten brushstrokes to maintain the plein air energy. Avoid overworking the painting, which can lead to repainting the entire canvas.

Adjust Composition

If needed, make minor compositional changes. For example, adjust any elements that create unwanted directional arrows or patterns. Use titanium white and cad lemon to modify areas like rocks and water, ensuring they don't point in the same direction.

Enhance Wave Details

Add a curl to the waves by using a blue-green color to create a cylinder feel in the breaking wave. Introduce cooler and lighter tones to suggest backlighting in the waves, enhancing their form and movement.

PRO TIP

Limit your adjustments to five to ten brushstrokes to preserve the original energy of the plein air piece.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by carefully observing the scene and identifying key elements such as the big dark shapes, distant headland, and cast shadows. Begin with a loose sketch on a toned canvas, ensuring your focal point aligns with the rule of thirds for a dynamic composition. As you block in shapes, focus on variety and avoid repetitive patterns to keep the viewer's eye engaged.

Progress through your painting by applying dark tones first, gradually moving to lighter ones. Use a mix of ultramarine blue and permanent rose to establish shadow shapes, and experiment with brush grips to find your preferred style. Introduce temperature shifts by alternating between cooler and warmer tones, adding depth and interest to your work. Incorporate atmospheric perspective by cooling and lightening colors as they recede into the distance.

As you refine your painting, focus on creating form with temperature shifts and apply color thoughtfully to capture the essence of the ocean, sand, and rocks. Use varied brush strokes and pressure to add texture and interest, especially in the foreground. Soften edges to create a cohesive look and adjust colors to enhance the light effect. In the final stages, add highlights and refine details to bring your painting to life, ensuring a balanced and harmonious composition.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Place the focal point at one of the intersections of the rule of thirds.
- Squint at the scene to better see shifts in temperature and adjust your colors accordingly.
- Cool and lighten colors as they recede into the distance to create depth using atmospheric perspective.
- Cover the canvas fully to make accurate value comparisons between different shapes.
- Use cooler and lighter colors to suggest form in shadowed areas influenced by the sky.
- Use a small hole in your finger to isolate and better understand the colors in the scene.
- Wipe your brush clean after each stroke to prevent dark colors from contaminating the light areas.
- Always clean your brush when touching different areas to maintain color purity and avoid muddying your work.



Four Mile Beach

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.

“FOUR MILE BY MICHEL BOULAY” by Michel Boulay



FOUR MILE BY MICHEL BOULAY

Great feeling of light and shadow here Michel. Well drawn and nice contrast makes for a very strong painting. Great loose brushwork creates an energetic piece. My only suggestion would be to make the curved line of the foreground cliff shadow a bit less regular. try cutting into it with the background or add a slash or two of shadowed color to create an implied edge or step in the cliff face. As I look at it again I might try softening the distance wave foam with a clean dry brush just touching and feathering the paint so that you create a feeling of movement which won't draw the eye so strongly. Great job!

“Four Mile Beach, Oil on Paper, 40x30 cm” by Genevieve Reinke



Four Mile Beach, Oil on Paper, 40x30 cm

Well done Genevieve. Lively and colorful feel to this piece. I like the energy in the ocean waves. Just a few suggestions...

To help with the feeling of distance in a painting remember that in general colors cool and gray as they recede. The distant headland and rock shelf below it are a bit warm (orange, red, yellow) which brings them forward. Try using that color mixture in the foreground and cool (blue, violet) the headland and I think you will see how atmospheric perspective can create the illusion of depth. The foreground shadow and light reads well but the distant headland is not as well defined as to whether it is in light or shadow. It is very important to keep everything in either the light family or shadow family. Value structure can be difficult to grasp when color is involved. Try drawing the original scene in just three values, light, mid tones and darks with a black sharpie on white paper. Lastly, be careful to create variety in your shapes. Those two small rocks back there look like twins. Overall you should be happy with this painting and I think you have an excellent feel of the day here.

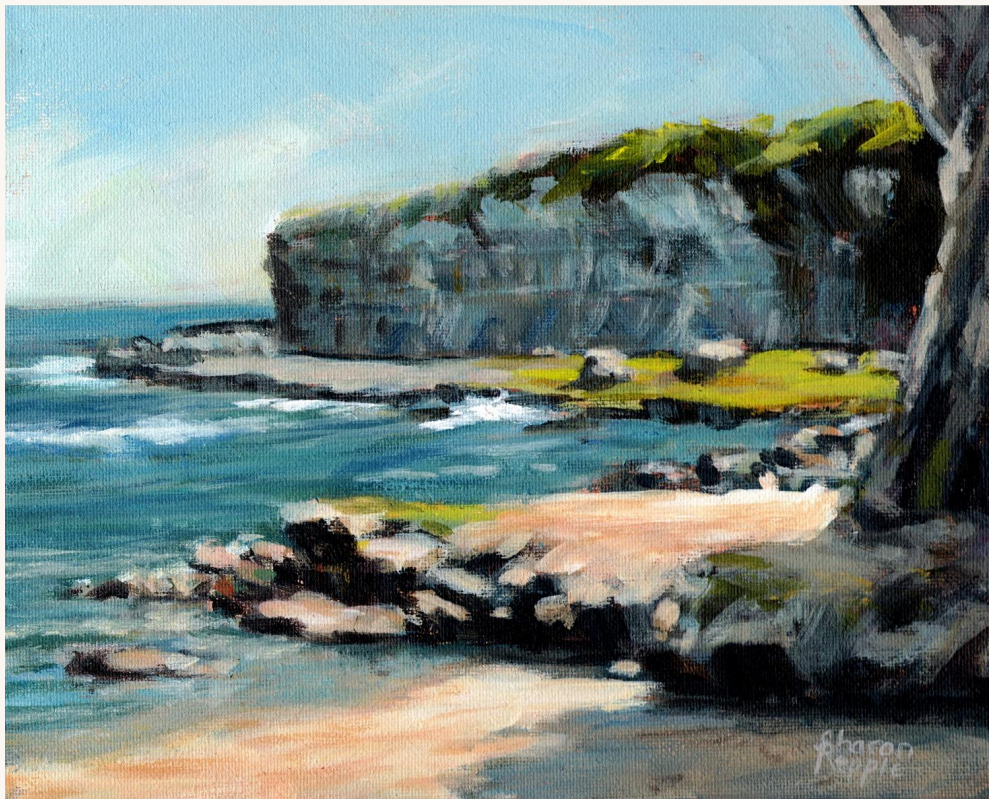
“Morning Mist Willow, 30x30cm, oil on panel by Silke Sauritz” by Silke Sauritz



Morning Mist Willow, 30x30cm, oil on panel by Silke Sauritz

Hi Silke! I've enjoyed seeing your recent work on facebook! It has been really beautiful. This is no exception! Love the directional brushstrokes and cool/warm color relationship in the sky. Nice tonal control as well. It may just be my interpretation but I feel like the amount of sunlight I see would be casting a shadow behind the tree. If the sky is cloudy or foggy than you've captured it just right. This is the kind of painting that is a treat to see in person because of the beautiful texture in those fluid brushstrokes. Lovely!

“Four Mile by Sharon Repple” by Sharon Repple



Four Mile by Sharon Repple

Hi Sharon. Excellent work! This painting really feels like the place. I appreciate the calm cove and warm light. Very calming piece. Well drawn and the design leads me through the canvas nicely. Shapes have become forms with excellent value structure. If I could be picky I'd like to see the foreground shape and background headland have a bit more variety. They feel pretty equal in how much canvas they occupy and both end at the same spot on the left vertical line. Try pushing the foreground rock shelf back a bit (shorten) and I think you'll have less of a feeling of two similar shapes. You'll notice in the reference photo the foreground shelf has some cuts and irregularities that could also be exaggerated to create some difference. Put a frame on it and get it under a nice light! Great piece.