



Expressive Brushwork 2

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/185-Expressive-Brushwork-2>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, we delve into the vibrant world of color mixing, a fundamental skill for any artist seeking to master expressive brushwork. As we explore the palette, I'll share insights into how I choose and mix colors, addressing common questions about achieving the perfect hue. We'll start by examining the importance of using a medium to adjust the consistency of your paints, ensuring they are neither too thick nor too firm, which can hinder your creative flow. You'll learn about the rich, pure colors I favor, like Cadmium Yellow Pale and Windsor Blue Red Shade, and how their generous application can transform a painting from ordinary to luxurious. We'll discuss the role of different whites, such as Titanium White and alkyd, which not only enhance the vibrancy of your colors but also speed up drying time. This lesson is about embracing the freedom of a loose, impressionistic style, where your brushwork and color choices speak volumes. By the end, you'll understand how to mix your darkest darks and brightest brights, creating a focal point that draws the viewer's eye and brings your composition to life.



Earnslaw Station



REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 2

The scene as Richard found it.

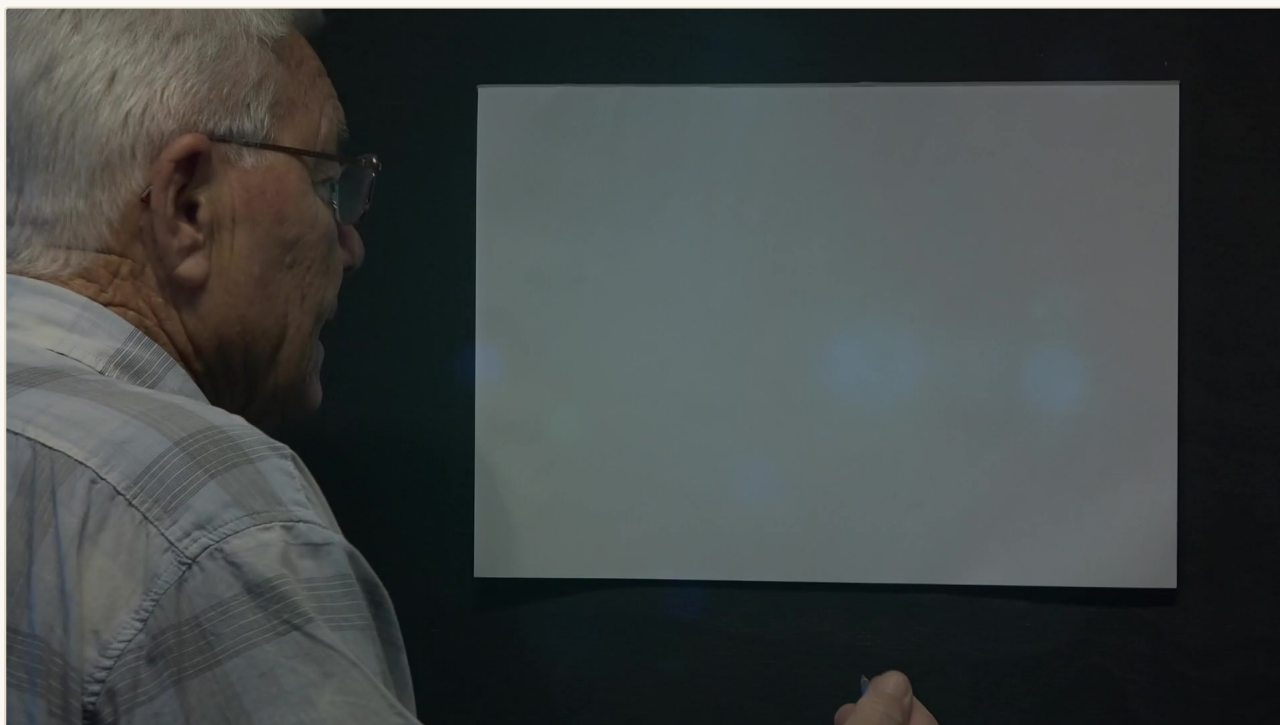
Materials

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

- Winsor and Newton, artist's quality oil paints.
- Winsor blue (red shade)
- Venetian red
- Winsor green
- Titanium white
- Cadmium lemon
- Cadmium yellow pale
- Cadmium orange
- Gold ochre
- Permanent rose
- Cadmium red
- Magenta
- Brushes
- Size 12 chisel tip long bristle.
- Only one small brush, usually an ox /sable rigger type brush – size 1 or 2.
- Medium
- Liquin Original
- for painting medium.
- Canvas
- Fredrix Ultrasmooth Canvas
- , a polyflax, triple primed, fairly smooth surfaced canvas.

1 Focal Points



Understanding Focal Points

Recognize that every painting needs a focal point to guide the viewer's eye. This is essential for creating a compelling composition.

Using the Rule of Thirds

Consider dividing your canvas into thirds both horizontally and vertically. Place your focal point near the intersections of these lines for a balanced and engaging composition.

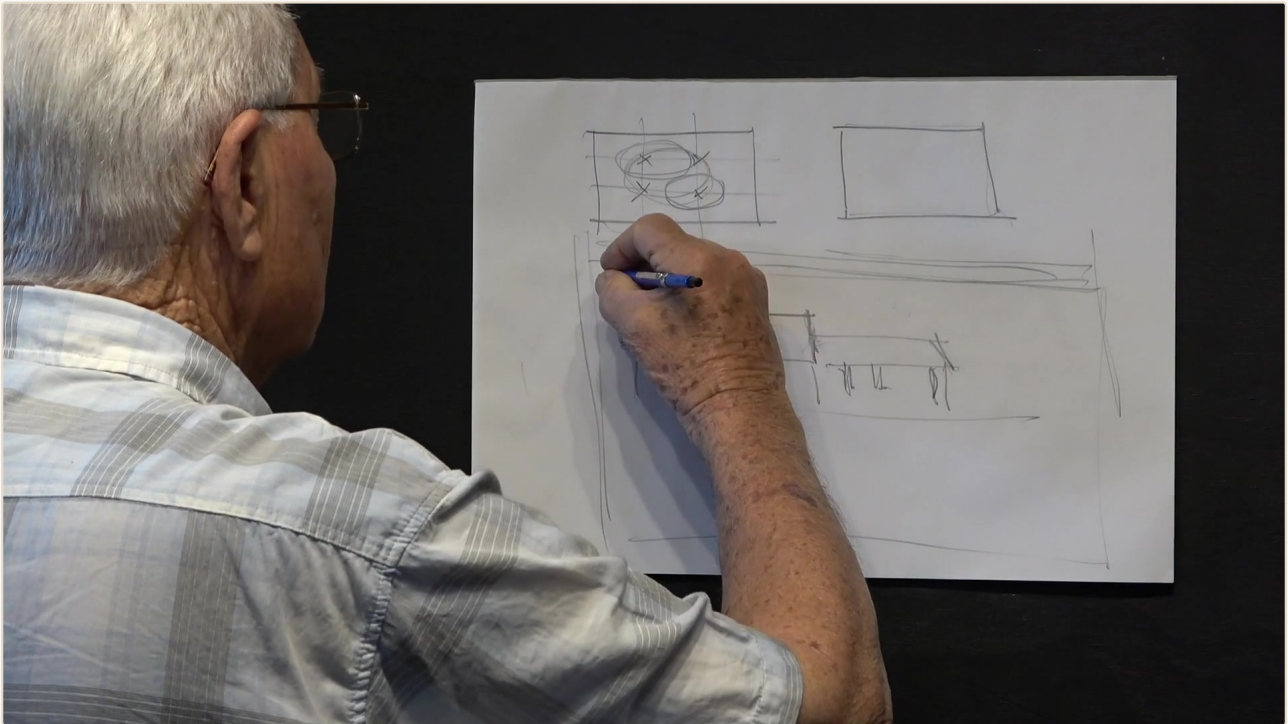
Allowing Flexibility

While the rule of thirds is a helpful guideline, feel free to let the focal point naturally emerge as you work. Trust your instincts and let the painting speak to you.

PRO TIP

Use the rule of thirds to help position your focal point effectively, but remain open to intuitive placement.

2 Avoiding Centered Horizons



Position the Subject

Place the subject closer to one end of the canvas rather than in the center. This helps create a more dynamic composition.

Add Background Elements

Paint the pines behind the subject using dark tones. This establishes the position of the building without needing detailed drawing.

Define the Building

Fill in the building details, such as shadows under the roof and windows. This will start to give shape to the building and the overall painting.

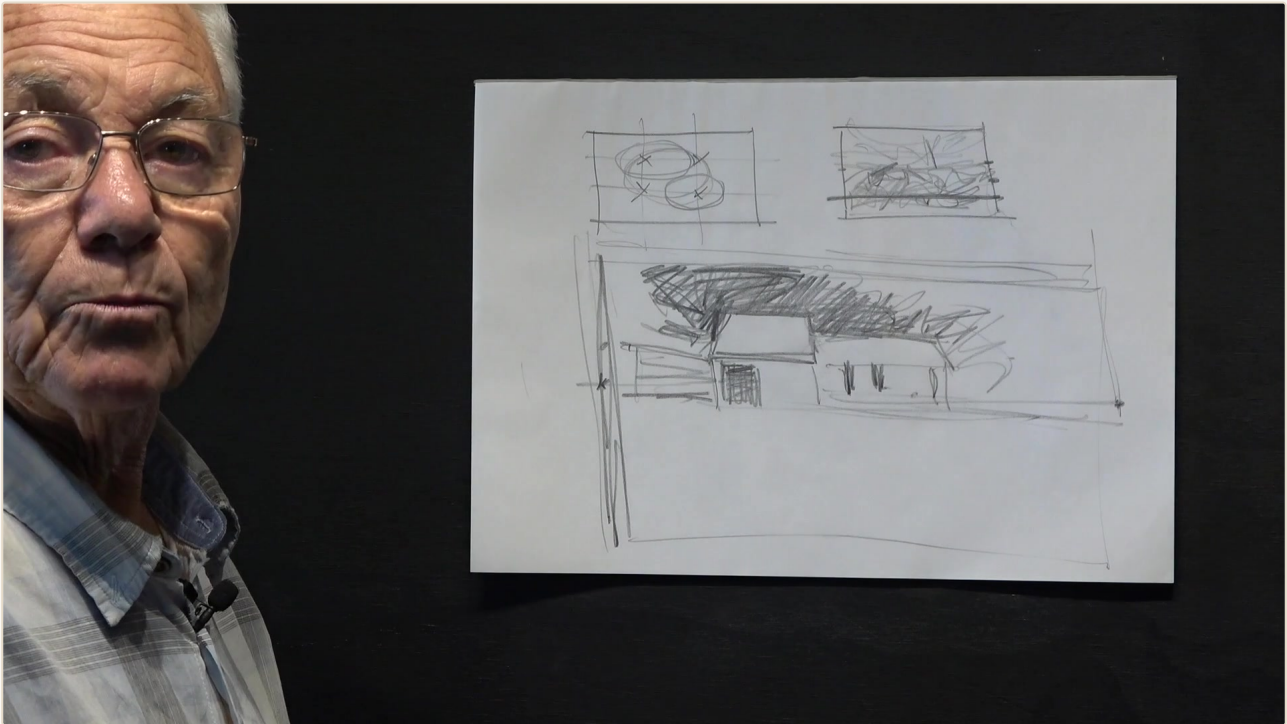
Adjust the Horizon

Avoid placing the horizon line in the center of the painting. Instead, position it slightly higher or lower to prevent the composition from being divided into two competing halves.

PRO TIP

Avoid centering the horizon to prevent the painting from feeling divided into two equal halves.

3 Single Focal Point



Position the Ground

Place the ground line lower in your composition to divide the painting into unequal parts. This can create a more dynamic and interesting visual effect.

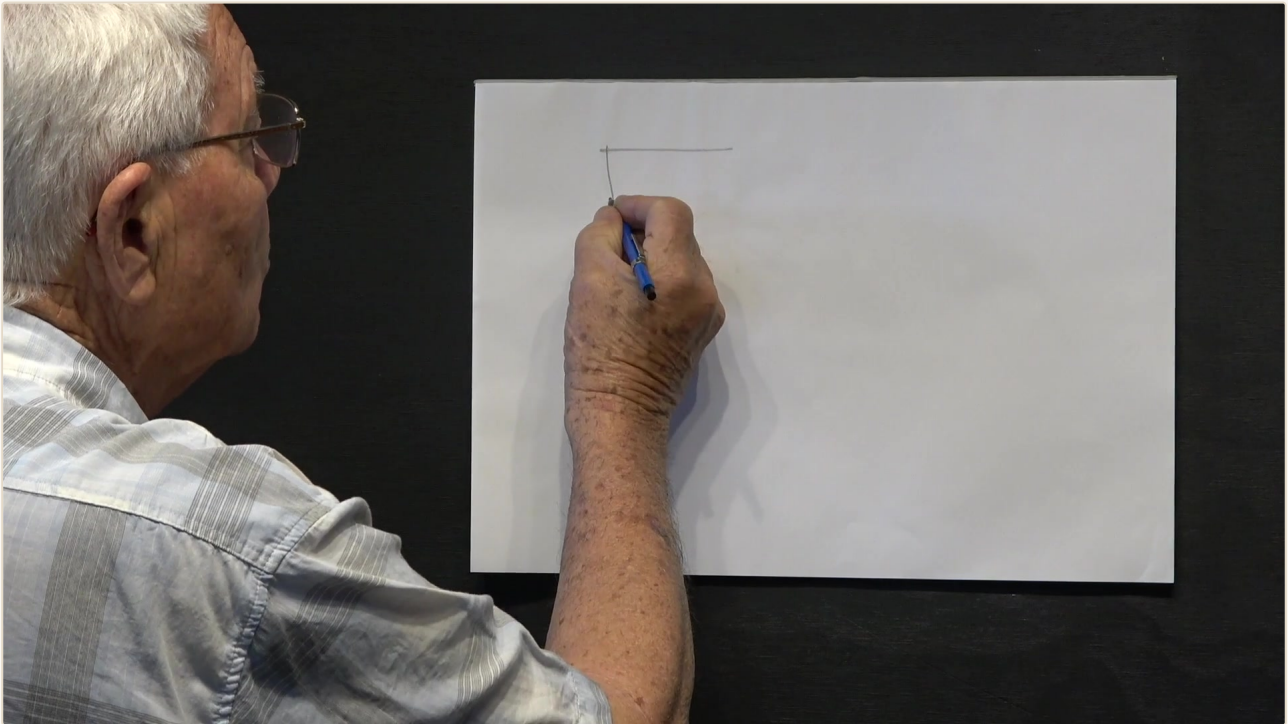
Establish a Single Focal Point

Ensure your painting has one primary focal point. Avoid having two focal points to maintain clarity and focus in your artwork.

PRO TIP

The focal point should be the main focus, like a queen bee, drawing the viewer's attention.

4 Leading the Viewer



Create a Focal Point

Decide on a focal point for your painting, such as mountains in the background. This will guide the viewer's eye and provide a sense of direction in your composition.

Add Foreground Elements

In the foreground, consider adding elements like shadows, a pool, or a stream to create interest and lead the viewer into the painting. These elements can form patterns that naturally guide the eye.

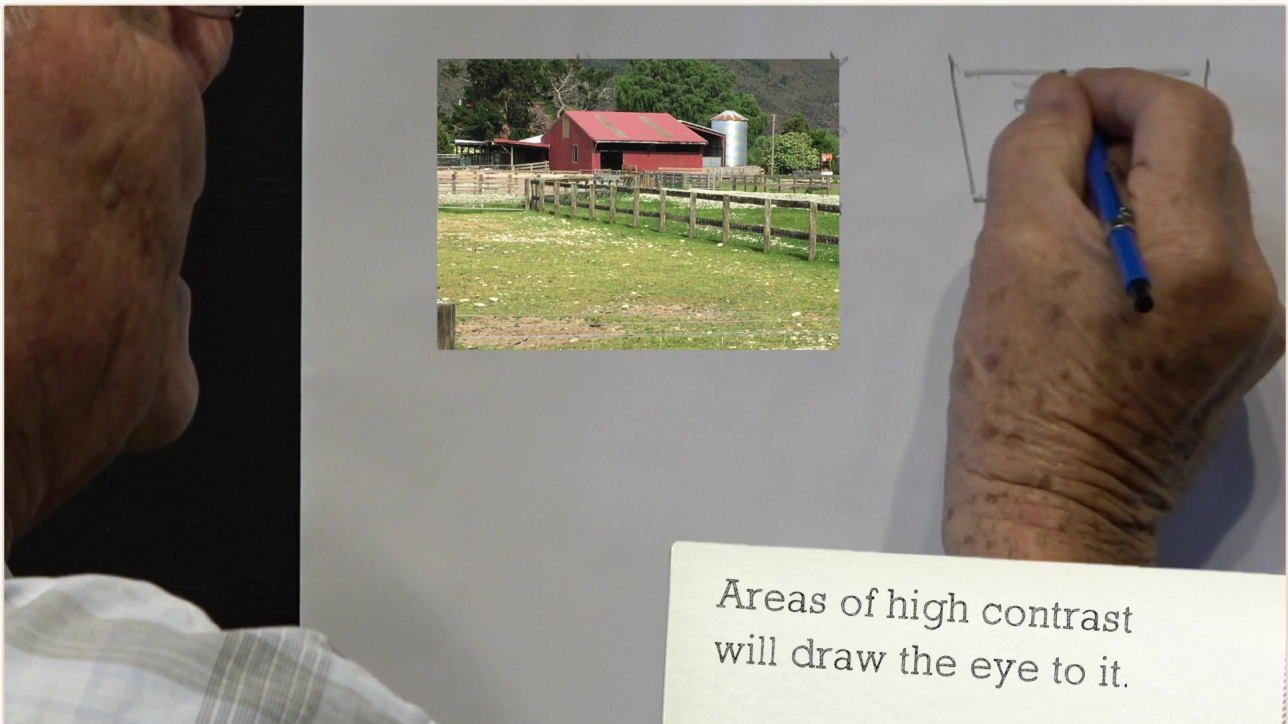
Vary Mountain and Hill Heights

If including mountains or hills, ensure they are distinctly different in height to avoid creating a 'gun sight' effect. This variation helps maintain visual interest and directs the viewer's gaze effectively.

PRO TIP

Use foreground elements like shadows or streams to guide the viewer's eye into the painting.

5 Highlighting with Background



Create Contrast with Dark Background

Use a dark color to paint the background behind lighter elements like the roof or walls of a building. This contrast will naturally draw the viewer's eye to the focal point.

Lead the Eye with Features

Incorporate features such as a farm track, puddles, or fence posts to guide the viewer's gaze towards the focal point. These elements can be strategically placed to enhance the composition.

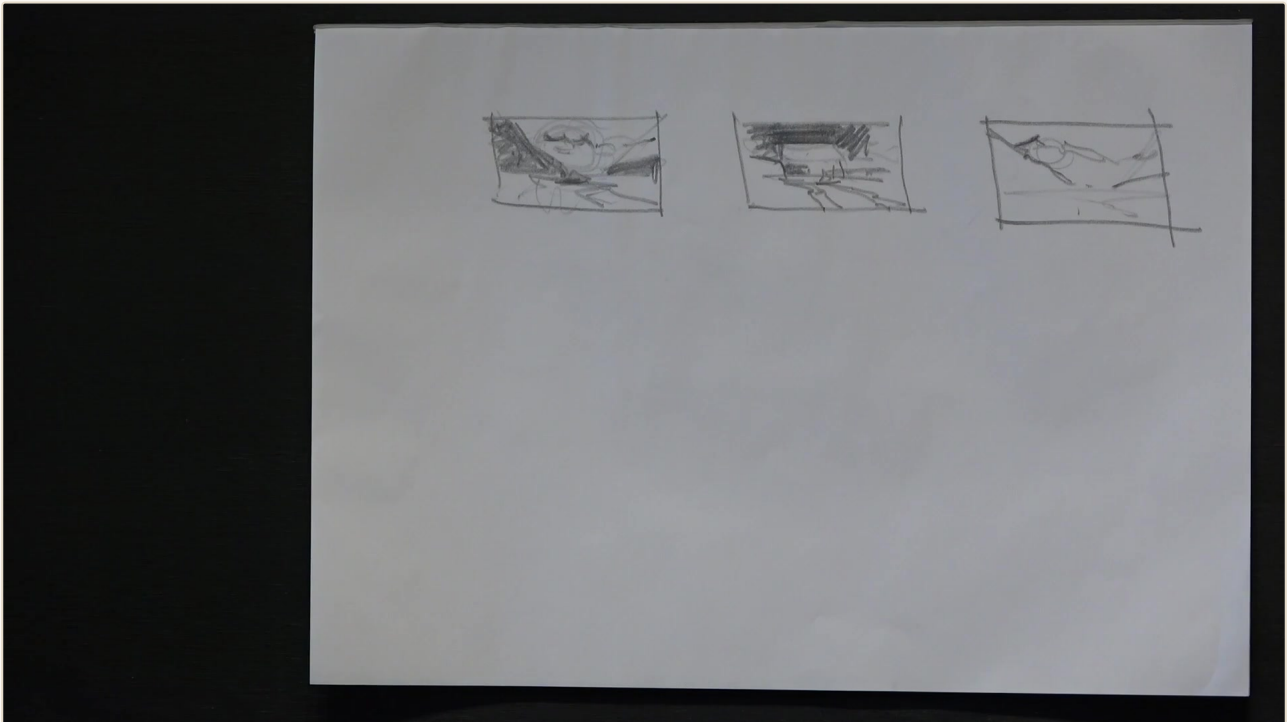
Highlight Mountains with Dark Sky

Consider using a very dark sky behind mountains to make them stand out. This technique helps to contain and emphasize the focal point within the landscape.

PRO TIP

Use contrasting tones, such as light against dark, to naturally draw attention to the focal point.

6 Using Diagonals



Highlight the Mountains

Consider using a very dark sky behind the mountains to make them stand out. A deep purplish sky can create a dramatic effect, especially on certain days.

Incorporate Clouds

Use cirrus clouds coming over the top of the mountains or puffs of cloud to lead the viewer's eye. Clouds can add depth and interest to your composition.

Utilize Diagonals

Create an interesting design by incorporating diagonal lines across your picture. Avoid flat shapes or lines, and instead, give the ground plenty of character with near-diagonal hills.

Break Up Flat Areas

Even in flat areas like riverbeds, find shadows or slight slopes to add interest. Use lines of force to guide the viewer's eye, even if the land is naturally flat.

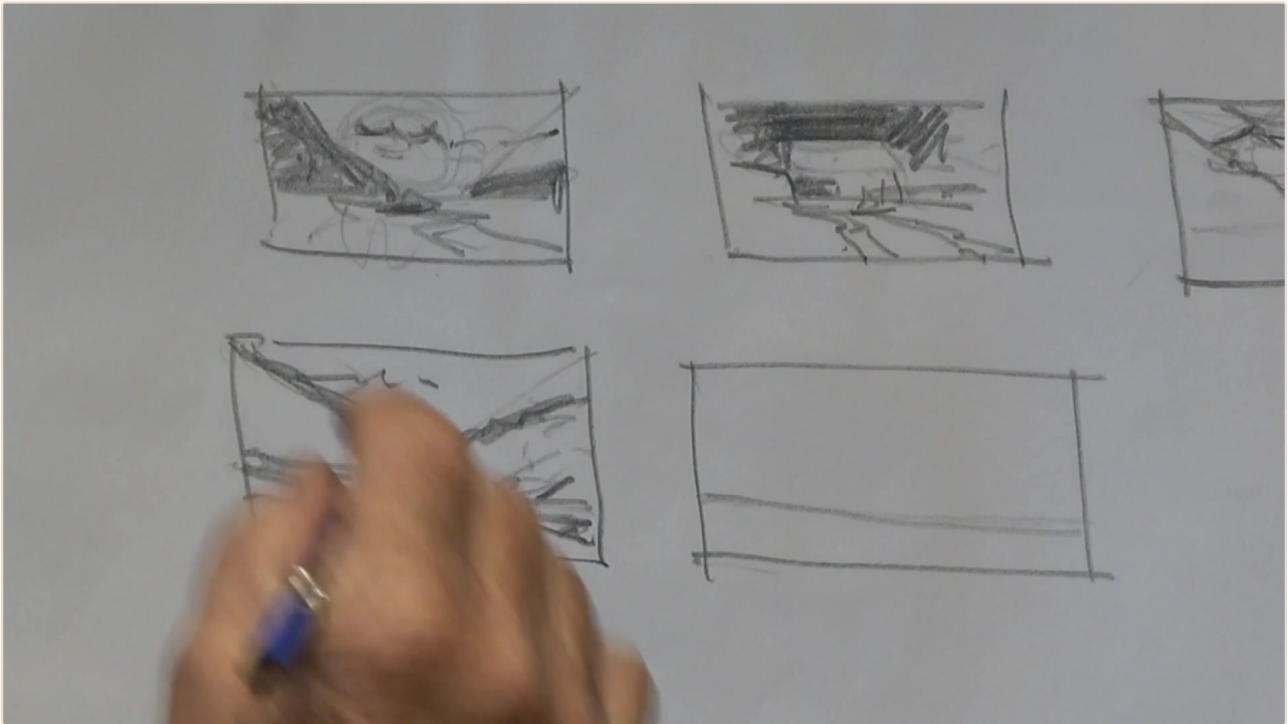
Avoid Centered Focal Points

Place focal points slightly off-center to maintain interest. A centered focal point can make the composition less engaging.

PRO TIP

Incorporate diagonal lines to create a more dynamic and interesting composition.

7 Avoiding Repetitive Patterns



Avoid Centered Elements

Avoid placing elements like rocks or clouds dead center in your composition. This can make the painting less interesting and dynamic. Instead, aim for asymmetry to create visual interest.

Introduce Rhythm in Clouds

When painting clouds, avoid repetitive patterns that mimic straight lines. Instead, introduce rhythm and movement by varying the shapes and sizes of the clouds. This adds a dynamic flow to your painting.

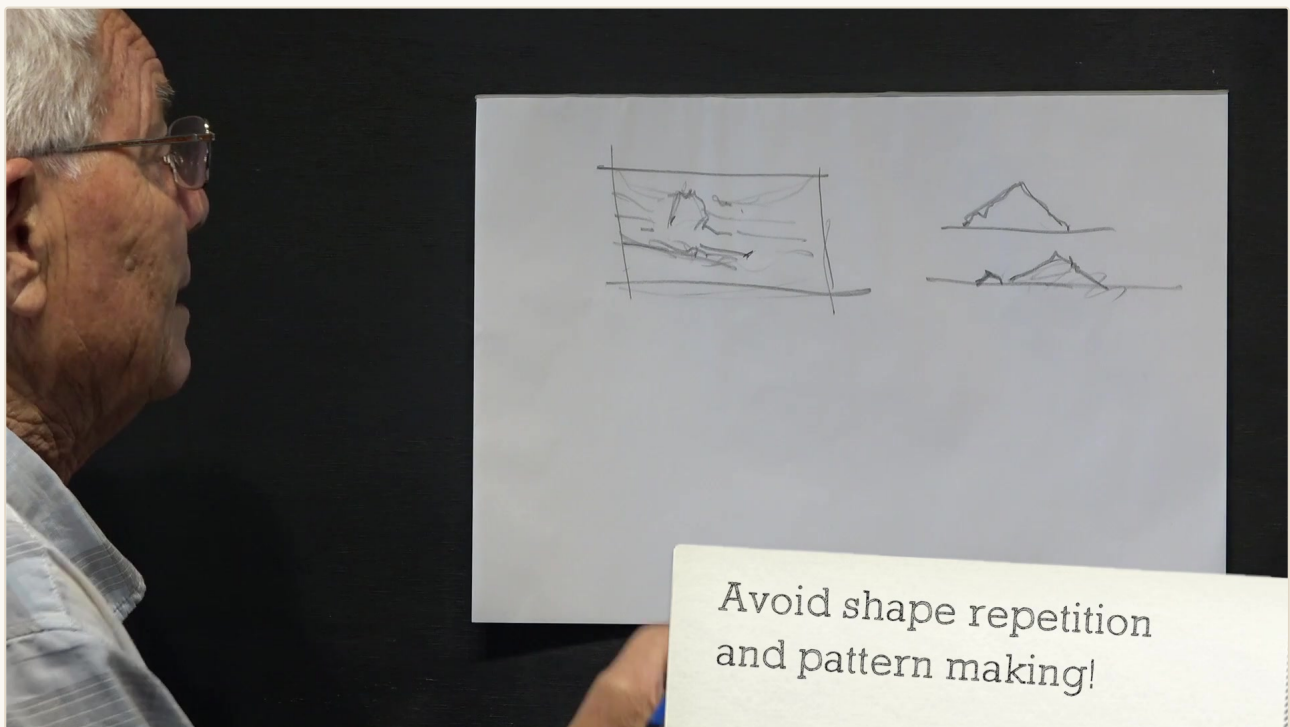
Vary Rock Shapes

When painting rocks, avoid repeating the same pyramid-like shape. Instead, vary the shapes and sizes of the rocks to prevent them from looking like a set of pyramids. This variation will make the scene more natural and engaging.

PRO TIP

Introduce rhythm and movement in your painting by varying the shapes and sizes of elements like clouds and rocks.

8 Variety and Balance in Composition



Break Edges for Interest

Avoid painting rocks and mountains as simple, repetitive shapes like cones. Instead, break the edges slightly to add interest and authenticity to your composition. This reflects the natural, varied shapes found in real landscapes.

Avoid Equal Spacing

Steer clear of creating patterns with equal spacing in your paintings, such as evenly spaced waves or rocks. This can make your work look artificial and less true to life. Focus on painting what you see, not what you think you know.

Create Uneven Compositions

When composing your painting, avoid dividing the picture into equal sections like sky, hills, and foreground. Instead, create an imbalance by making one side more exaggerated than the other. This adds interest and excitement to your work.

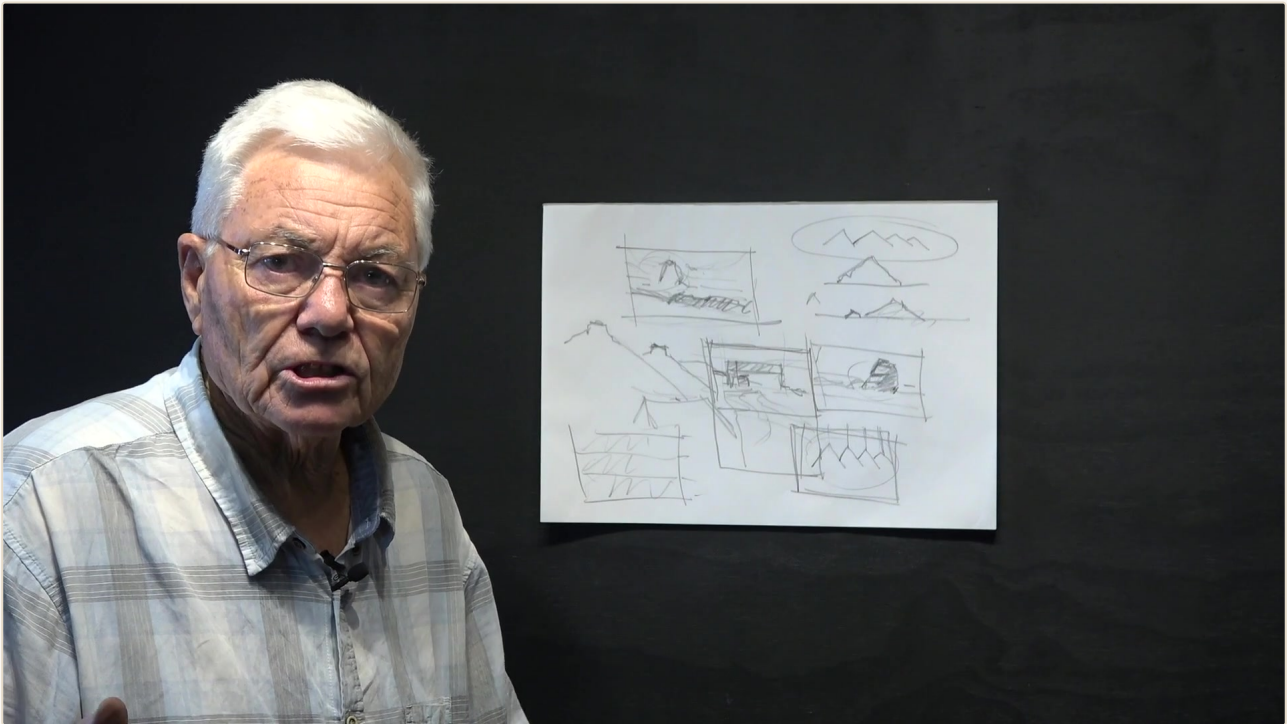
Embrace Asymmetry

Incorporate asymmetry by placing focal points off-center and varying the size and placement of elements. This approach prevents predictability and enhances the dynamic quality of your painting.

PRO TIP

Paint what you see, not what you know, to avoid creating artificial patterns.

9 Cropping for Interest



Create Natural Arrangements

Avoid arranging your subjects too neatly and tidily. Instead, aim for a more spontaneous and natural look, as found in nature.

Add Spontaneity to Still Life

When painting a vase of flowers, don't place them all neatly within the canvas. Let some flowers extend beyond the edges to create a more dynamic and interesting composition.

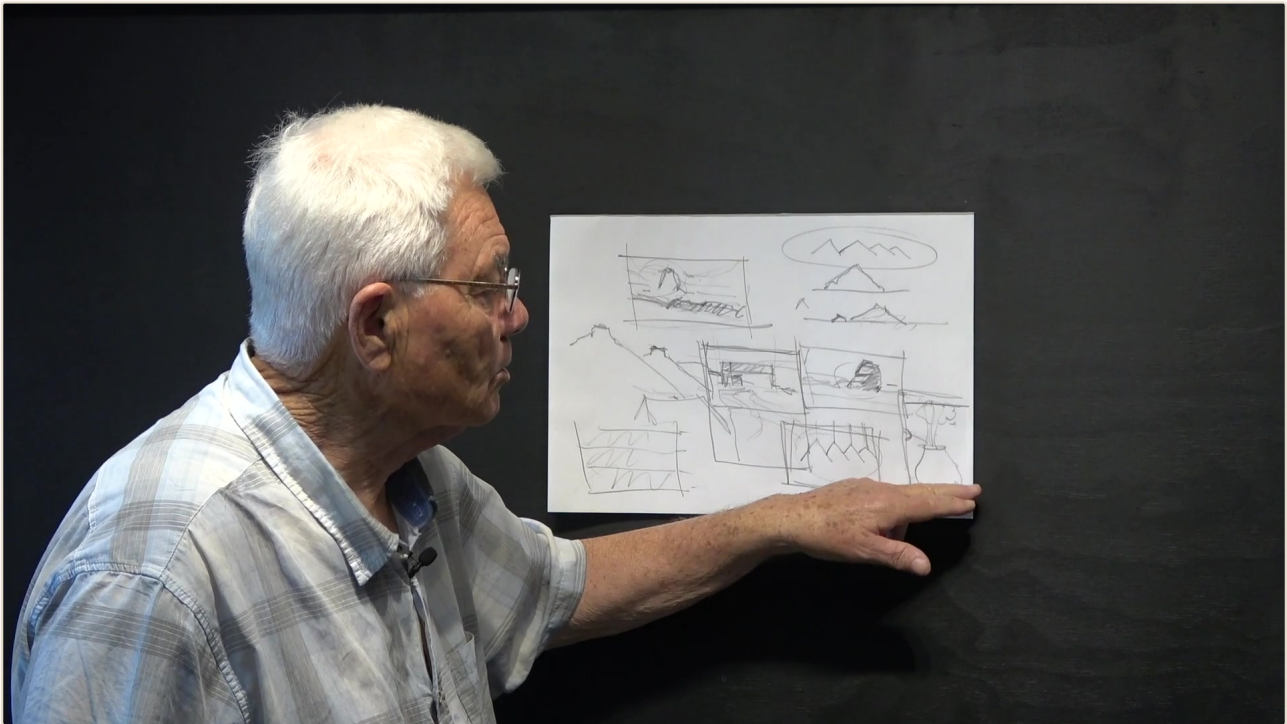
Capture a Passing View

Imagine walking past a beautiful bowl of flowers. Aim to capture that fleeting, unframed view rather than a perfectly placed arrangement.

PRO TIP

Let some elements extend beyond the canvas edges to add spontaneity and interest.

10 Softening Edges



Understand the Importance of Edges

Recognize that all paintings are composed of both soft and hard edges. Softening edges near the border of your painting can create a more engaging composition, giving the impression of a snapshot in time.

Choose the Right Tool

Opt for a brush over a palette knife for softening edges. A brush offers more flexibility and ease when softening edges, making it ideal for this task unless you prefer the challenge of using a palette knife.

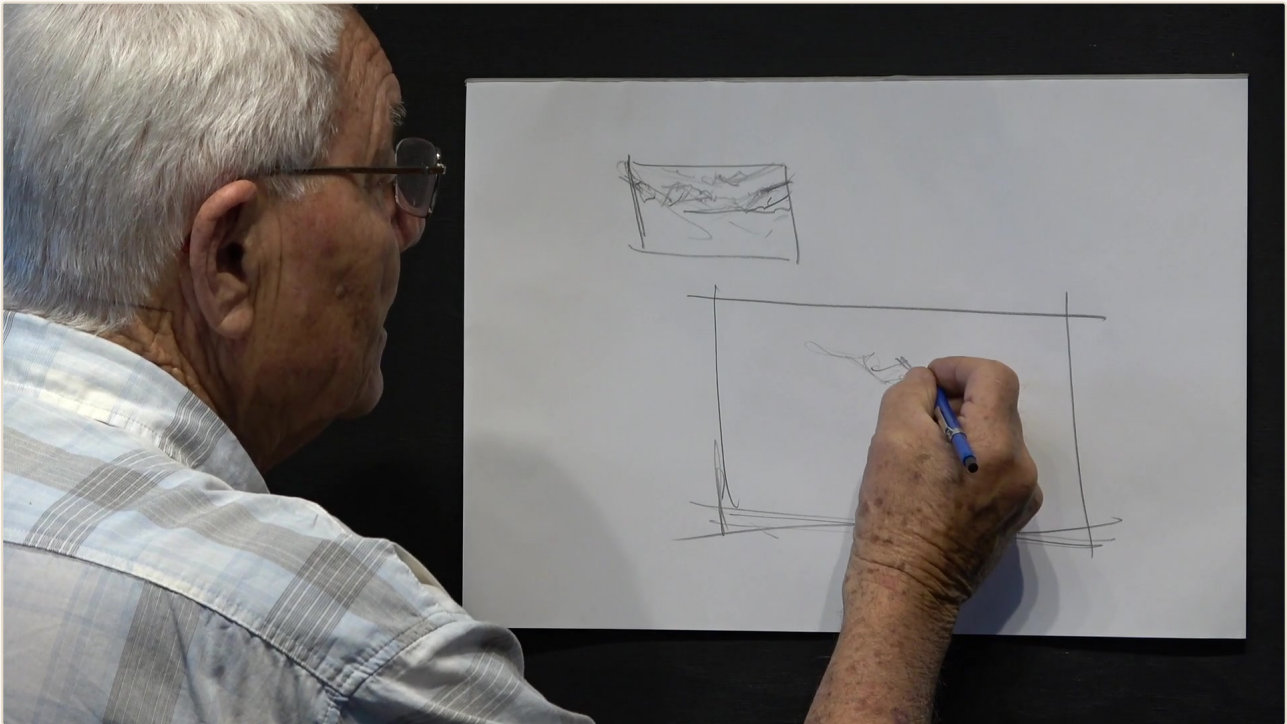
Soften the Edges

Use your brush to gently soften the edges of elements near the border of your painting. This technique helps keep the viewer's attention within the painting and enhances the overall design.

PRO TIP

Use a brush to easily soften edges, especially near the painting's borders, to maintain viewer focus.

11 Light and Shade



Plan Your Composition

Position the mountains slightly off-center to avoid predictability. This helps maintain focus on the main subject of your painting.

Manage Light and Shade

Identify areas of strong light and decide where to cast shadows. Use cloud shadows to mute certain areas, maintaining their interest without making them too eye-catching.

Create a Focal Point

Allow one area to glow by managing light and shade around it. This draws the viewer's eye to the main character of your painting.

Avoid Patterns

Be selective with light and dark areas to prevent creating distracting patterns. Simplify your composition to guide the viewer's interpretation.

Balance Light and Shade

Avoid a 50-50 balance of light and shade. Favor half tones and place highlights strategically to keep the painting clear and engaging.

PRO TIP

Use cloud shadows to mute bright areas, maintaining interest without distraction.

12 Colour Application



Apply Initial Color Fields

Quickly apply broad fields or layers of color to the large areas of your painting. This helps establish the overall color scheme and allows for adjustments later if necessary. Avoid applying paint too thickly at this stage.

Establish Darks Early

Introduce dark tones early in the process to guide your composition. These darks will help define elements like mountains or hills and provide a reference for the rest of your tonal values.

Lay in the Sky

Paint the sky simply and efficiently. Keep the application straightforward to maintain focus on the overall composition rather than getting caught up in details.

Avoid Top-Down Painting

Do not start painting from the top and work your way down. This can lead to issues with achieving the correct tonal range and depth as you progress.

PRO TIP

Introduce dark tones early to guide your composition and establish a reference for other tonal values.

13 Mixing Greys



Mix a Basic Grey

Start with plenty of white and a bit of blue to create a basic grey. Adjust the balance by adding more blue if needed. This will help you achieve a silvery grey tone.

Adjust the Tone

To shift the grey towards a warmer tone, add a touch of red. This will push the grey back towards a warmer side, creating a variety of grey tones.

Lighten the Grey

Add more white to lighten the grey. This technique is useful for creating lighter toned greys without altering the hue too much.

Explore Color Variations

Introduce a bit of permanent rose to see how the grey shifts. This can help you understand how small additions can change the overall tone and feel of your grey.

Balance and Recover Paint

Shift the balance of your grey by adding more red or blue as needed. This allows you to recover paint and avoid waste by rebalancing the colors instead of discarding them.

PRO TIP

Shift the balance of your grey by adding more red or blue to recover and adjust the paint without wasting it.

14 Painting the Shed



Sketch the Building

Use a blue or any preferred color to sketch the building on your canvas. Position the building high in the painting to create a sense of space. Avoid making gaps too similar in size to maintain visual interest.

Establish Dark Values

Begin with the darkest darks on the building to provide guidance for the rest of the painting. Mix a bit of blue with a warmer color for the foreground to create depth. These darks will help you balance the composition as you progress.

Block in Colors

Apply background colors thinly to allow for adjustments. Add variations in color, such as Windsor Blue and white, to create a lively roof. This approach adds life to the painting without distorting the overall color.

Add Structural Details

Use a small brush for structural elements like the roof and skylights. Keep brushstrokes loose to suggest age and character. Avoid making elements too perfect to maintain a natural, lively feel.

Create a Natural Background

Paint the background with gentle colors, avoiding hard edges to suggest distance. Add a bit of warmth without making it too dominant, ensuring the background complements the main subject.

Paint the Foreground

Use expressive brushstrokes to depict the foreground with rougher textures and stronger colors. Gradually transition from quieter colors in the background to more vibrant tones in the foreground.

Refine and Adjust

Make subtle changes to improve the overall composition. If necessary, scrape back areas that aren't working and repaint them. This process ensures the painting feels balanced and cohesive.

PRO TIP

Use expressive brushstrokes to convey movement and energy in your painting, especially in the foreground.

15 Quick Demos: Reflections and Clouds



Create the Rock and Wet Sand

Paint a rock on the edge of the beach with a shadowed side. Add a wet area of sand around it to set the scene. Ensure the reflection of the rock is slightly lighter than the actual rock to mimic natural reflections.

Add the Background Elements

Include a stormy sky with a softened horizon to suggest sea spray. This effect pushes back the dark tones, creating depth. Add a back rock to show the change in reflection and a wave with surf for context.

Paint the Reflections

Reflect the sky in the wet sand by adding a slightly darker tone to the reflected light colors. Ensure the light side of the rock is a touch darker in the reflection to convey realism.

Enhance the Sand and Sky

Introduce variety in the sand by using subtle color changes, reflecting the sky and water. Use vertical brush strokes in the sky to add height and interest, then soften with horizontal strokes for a blended effect.

Add Highlights and Final Touches

Soften the base of the rock with light strokes to simulate spray. Add highlights to the rock and darken the sky behind it to bring it forward. Use light strokes to blend and soften the horizon and surf for a natural look.

PRO TIP

Introduce subtle color variations in sand to reflect the sky and water, adding depth and interest to your beach scene.

16 Clouds and Sky Techniques



Start with the Mountains

Begin by painting the mountains first, even though it may seem counterintuitive. This approach helps establish the scene and provides a reference for the sky and clouds. Focus on areas where you want to draw attention, such as snow-capped peaks.

Add Clouds to Lead the Eye

Use clouds to guide the viewer's eye towards key areas in the painting. Consider the placement of shadows and highlights on the clouds to enhance the scene. Leave gaps for light to create variation and interest.

Paint the Sky

For a blue sky, use a mix of Windsor Blue. Work the sky color around the mountains, ensuring it is not uniform in tone or color. Add variation to the blue to create a more dynamic and natural look.

Create Cloud Edges

Decide whether you want hard or soft edges on the clouds. Use a light touch with the brush to soften edges or break up the clouds. This technique adds life and movement to the sky.

Adjust and Refine

If needed, use a clean brush to soften areas without muddying the colors. Adjust the cloud shapes and edges to achieve the desired texture and effect. Remember, it's about the touch and the subtle variations you create.

PRO TIP

Start with the mountains to establish the scene, then add clouds and sky for context and depth.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by establishing a strong focal point to guide the viewer's eye. Use the rule of thirds as a guideline, but trust your instincts to let the focal point naturally emerge. As you build your composition, avoid centering the horizon or elements to create a dynamic and engaging scene. Incorporate asymmetry and variety to maintain interest and prevent predictability.

As you progress, use contrasting tones and expressive brushwork to highlight your focal point and add depth to your painting. Employ diagonal lines and varied shapes to lead the viewer's eye and enhance the composition's energy. Softening edges near the painting's borders can help maintain focus within the artwork, while strategic use of light and shade will guide the viewer's interpretation.

Finish your piece by applying color thoughtfully, starting with dark tones to define your composition. Mix greys with care, adjusting tones to suit your needs. Use expressive brushstrokes to convey movement and energy, particularly in the foreground, and don't hesitate to make subtle changes for balance. Let spontaneity and natural elements extend beyond the canvas to capture the essence of your subject.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use the rule of thirds to position your focal point effectively.
- Avoid centering the horizon to create a dynamic composition.
- Ensure your painting has one primary focal point for clarity.
- Use foreground elements to guide the viewer's eye into the painting.
- Incorporate diagonal lines to add interest and movement.
- Vary shapes and sizes of elements to introduce rhythm and avoid repetition.
- Let some elements extend beyond the canvas edges for spontaneity.
- Use expressive brushstrokes to convey movement and energy.



Earnslaw Station

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.

Earnslaw



Earnslaw

Artist: Afke van Mansum

The old Barn. Thanks John I enjoyed that.



The old Barn. Thanks John I enjoyed that.

Artist: Nancy Murray

Shed hard by the Stream



Shed hard by the Stream

Artist: tony o sullivan

"The Old Shed." 11 x 14, Oil on hardboard panel.



"The Old Shed." 11 x 14, Oil on hardboard panel.

Artist: Antonia Clark