



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 aspect of expressive brushwork. As we explore the palette, I'll guide you through the nuances of mixing colors, a topic many of you have inquired about. We'll start by discussing the importance of using a medium to adjust the consistency of your paints, ensuring they remain pliable and easy to work with. This is particularly crucial when working with thick whites, as a touch of medium can transform them into a more workable, slushy state. You'll learn about the specific colors I favor, such as the versatile Windsor Blue Red shade, which serves as a beautiful neutral for creating darks. We'll also explore the richness of Venetian Red and the vibrancy of Cadmium Lemon and Cadmium Yellow Pale, each offering unique qualities to your palette. As we mix these colors, you'll discover how to achieve the perfect greens and blues that often captivate viewers. This lesson is designed to enhance your understanding of color dynamics, empowering you to create paintings that are generous and luxurious in their expression. By the end of this chapter, you'll have a deeper appreciation for the purity and strength of your colors, setting the stage for your own expressive brushwork journey.



Earnslaw Station



REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 2

The scene as Richard found it.

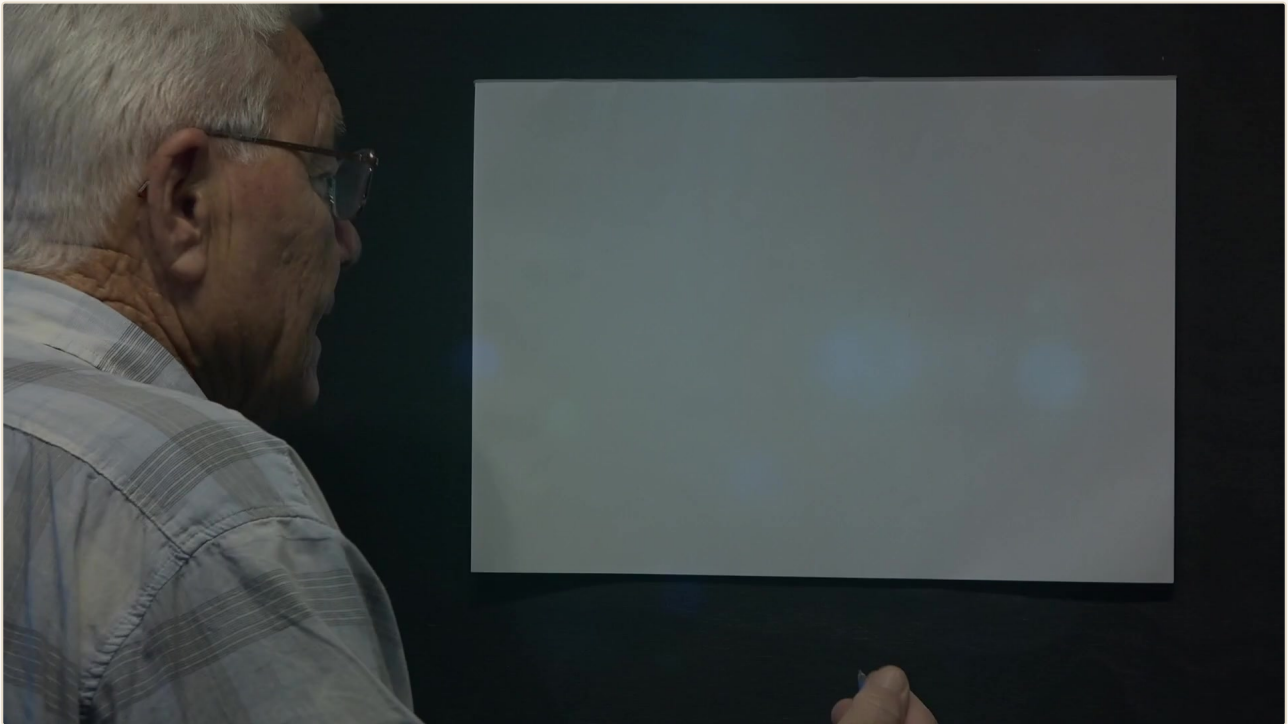
Materials

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



Understand the Importance of Focal Points

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

Use the Rule of Thirds

Divide your canvas into thirds both horizontally and vertically. Place your focal point where these lines intersect to create a balanced and engaging composition.

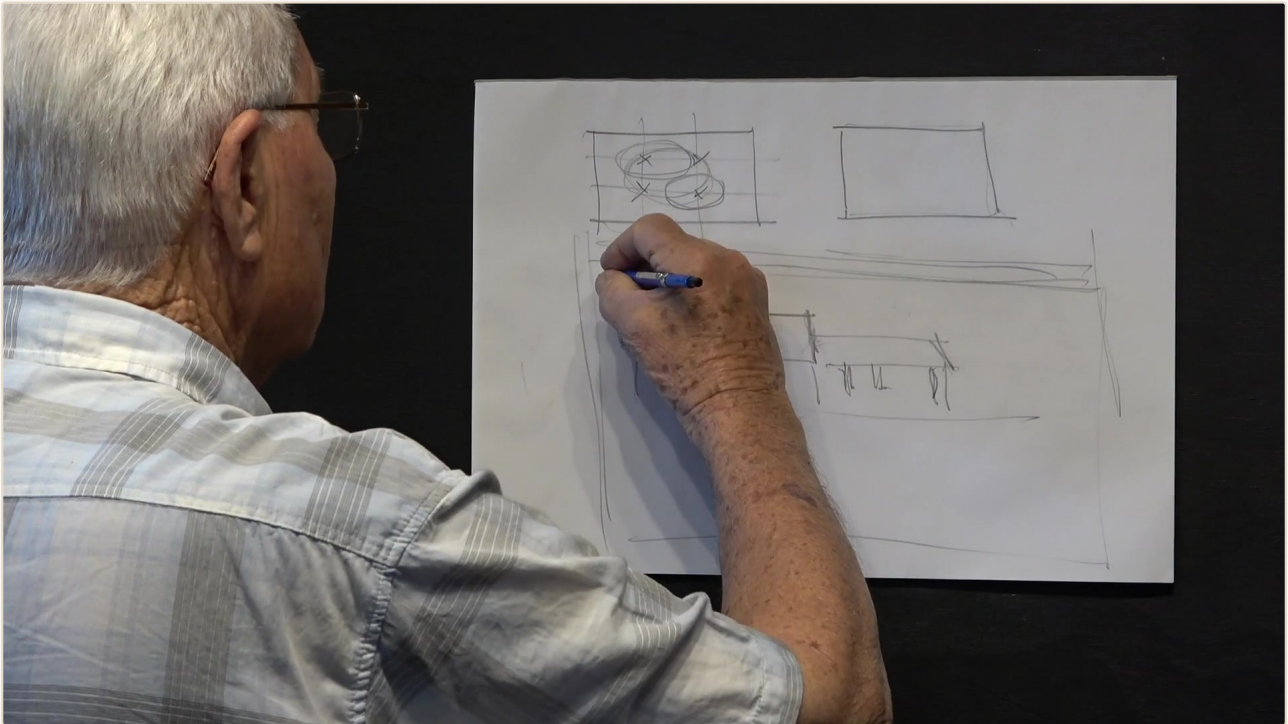
Allow Flexibility in Focal Point Placement

While rules like the rule of thirds are helpful, don't feel constrained by them. Let the focal point naturally emerge and speak to you as you develop your painting.

PRO TIP

Place your focal point at the intersection of the thirds for a balanced composition.

2 Avoiding Centered Horizons



Position the Subject

Place the subject slightly off-center to avoid dividing the painting into equal halves. This creates a more dynamic composition.

Add Background Elements

Paint the background elements, such as pines, in a dark tone to establish the setting. This helps define the placement of the main subject without detailed drawing.

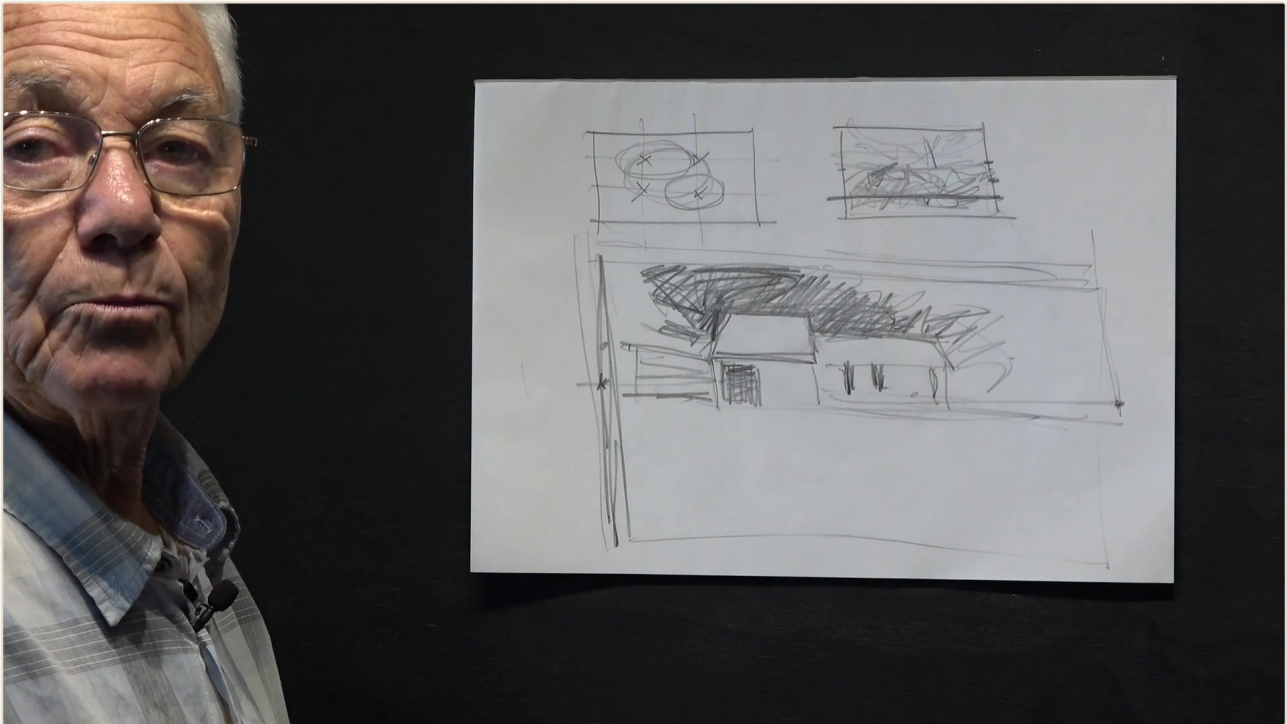
Avoid Centered Horizons

Position the horizon line slightly above or below the center of the canvas. This prevents the painting from feeling like two competing halves and enhances the overall balance.

PRO TIP

Avoid placing the horizon line in the center to prevent the painting from being divided into two equal halves.

3 Single Focal Point



Position the Ground

Place the ground low in your composition to divide the painting into unequal parts. This can create a dynamic and pleasing effect.

Determine the Focal Point

Decide on a single focal point for your painting. This focal point should be the main focus, like the queen bee of your composition.

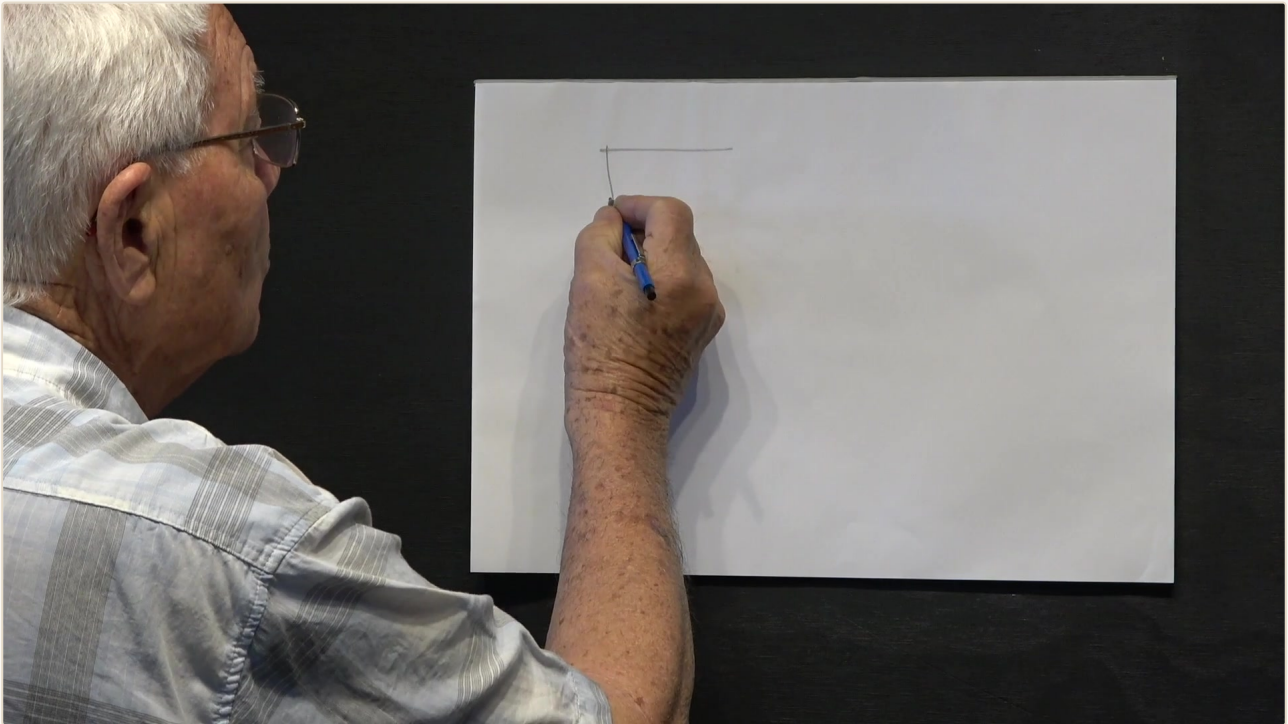
Avoid Multiple Focal Points

Ensure that you do not have two focal points. While you can include more than one point of interest, maintain a single dominant focal point to guide the viewer's eye.

PRO TIP

Place the ground low to create a dynamic composition with unequal parts.

4 Leading the Viewer



Consider Leading Elements

Think about how to lead the viewer into your painting. Use elements like mountains, clouds, or shadows to create a path for the eye to follow.

Create Foreground Interest

Look for opportunities to add interest in the foreground. Consider patterns formed by shadows, a pool of water, or a stream to guide the viewer's gaze.

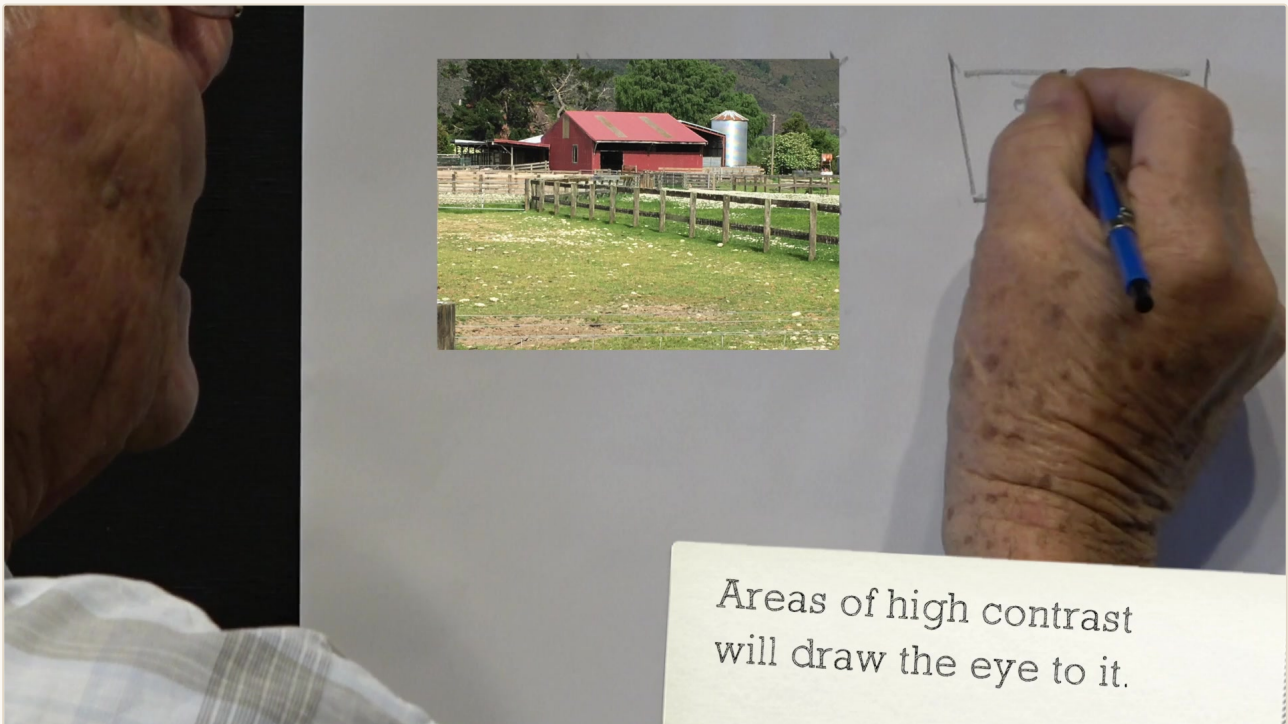
Vary Mountain and Hill Heights

Ensure mountains and hills in your composition are distinctly different in height. Avoid making them the same to prevent a 'gun sight' effect, which can be distracting.

PRO TIP

Use varied heights for mountains and hills to naturally guide the viewer's eye through the painting.

5 Highlighting with Background



Utilize Contrast for Focal Points

Identify areas in your painting where a dark background can contrast with a lighter subject, such as a light roof against dark trees. This contrast naturally draws the viewer's eye to the focal point.

Incorporate Leading Elements

Consider adding elements like a farm track, puddles, or fence posts that guide the viewer's eye towards the focal point. These elements can enhance the composition by creating a visual path.

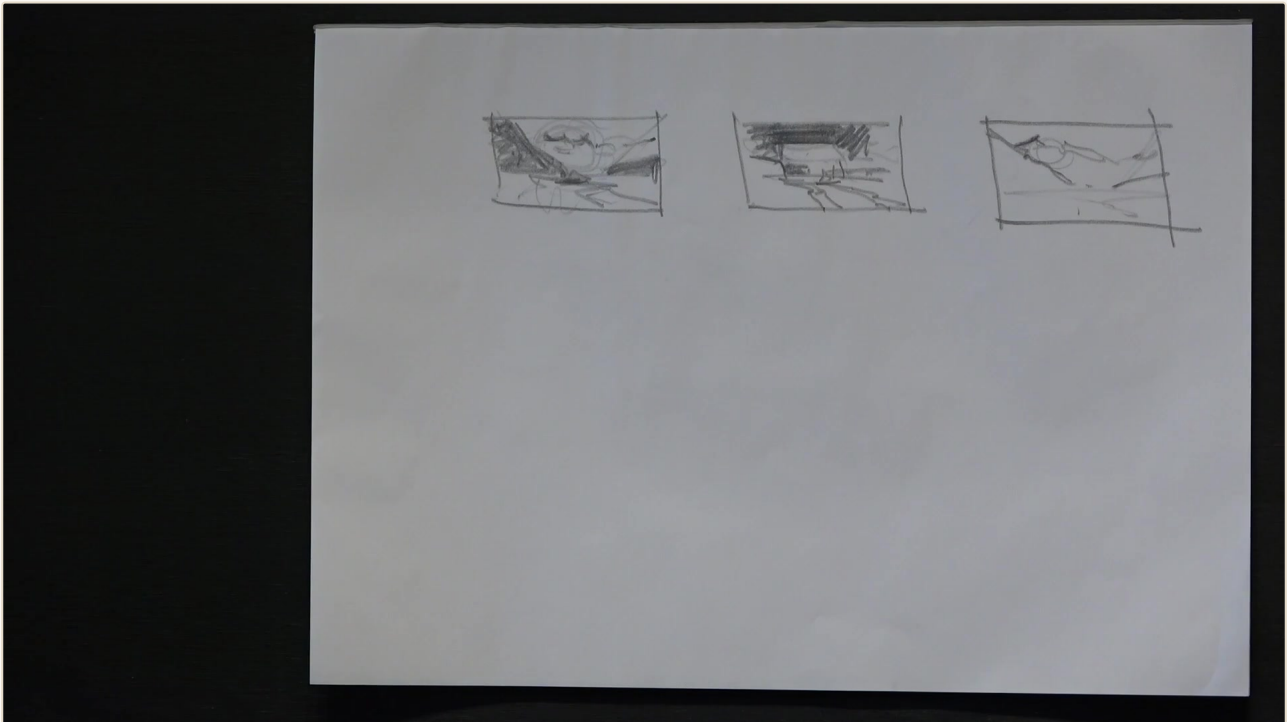
Frame with Natural Features

Use natural features like hills or mountains to frame and contain the focal point. This technique helps to keep the viewer's attention centered on the main subject of your painting.

PRO TIP

A strong contrast between light and dark areas can effectively highlight your painting's focal point.

6 Using Diagonals



Create a Dynamic Sky

Consider using a very dark sky or a deep purplish sky to add drama. Incorporate cirrus clouds over the mountains or puffs of cloud to lead the viewer's eye. This adds depth and interest to your painting.

Incorporate Diagonals

Use diagonal lines across your painting to create an interesting design. Avoid flat shapes or lines; instead, give the ground plenty of character with near-diagonal hills.

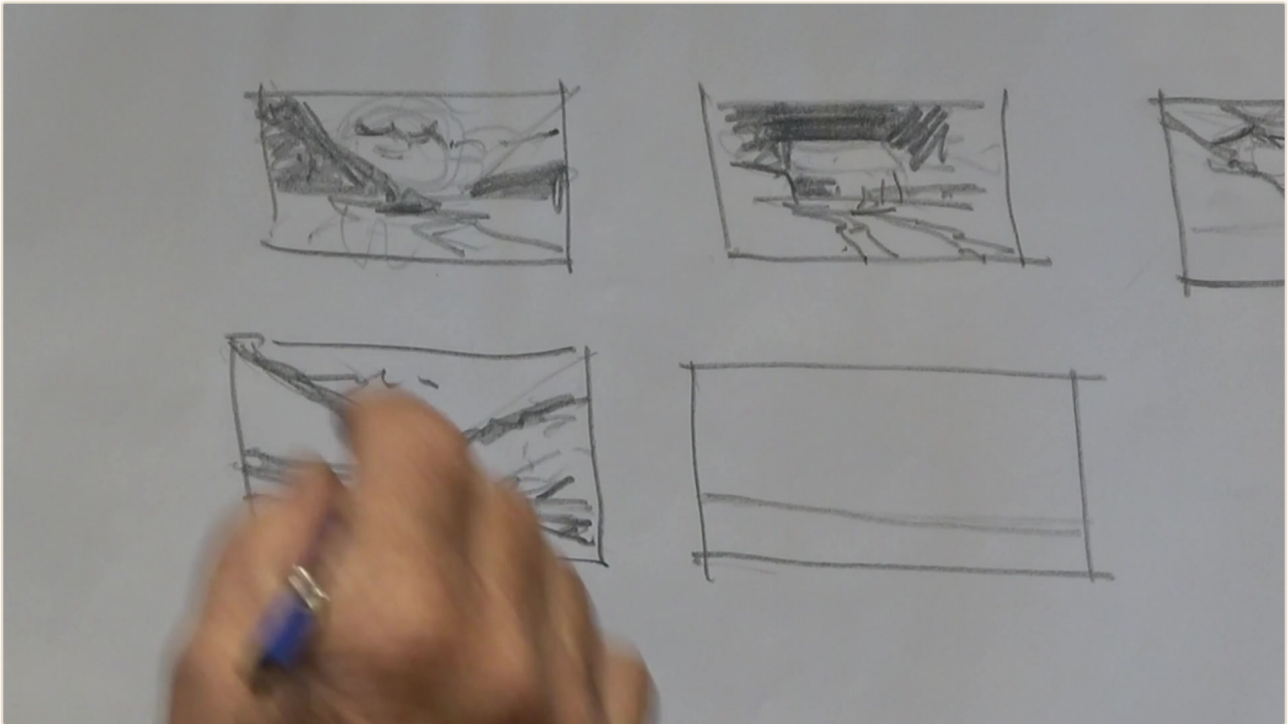
Add Character to Flat Areas

Even if the valley floor is flat, incorporate slight slopes or shadows to break up the monotony. This adds visual interest and guides the viewer's eye through the painting.

PRO TIP

Use diagonal lines to make your painting more dynamic and engaging.

7 Avoiding Repetitive Patterns



Create Dynamic Cloud Patterns

Avoid placing clouds in repetitive, straight lines across your painting. Instead, introduce rhythm by varying their shapes and positions. This adds interest and movement to your sky.

Incorporate Rhythm in Elements

When arranging elements like rocks in a seascape, avoid uniform shapes. Instead of repeating pyramid-like forms, vary the size and shape of each rock to prevent a monotonous pattern.

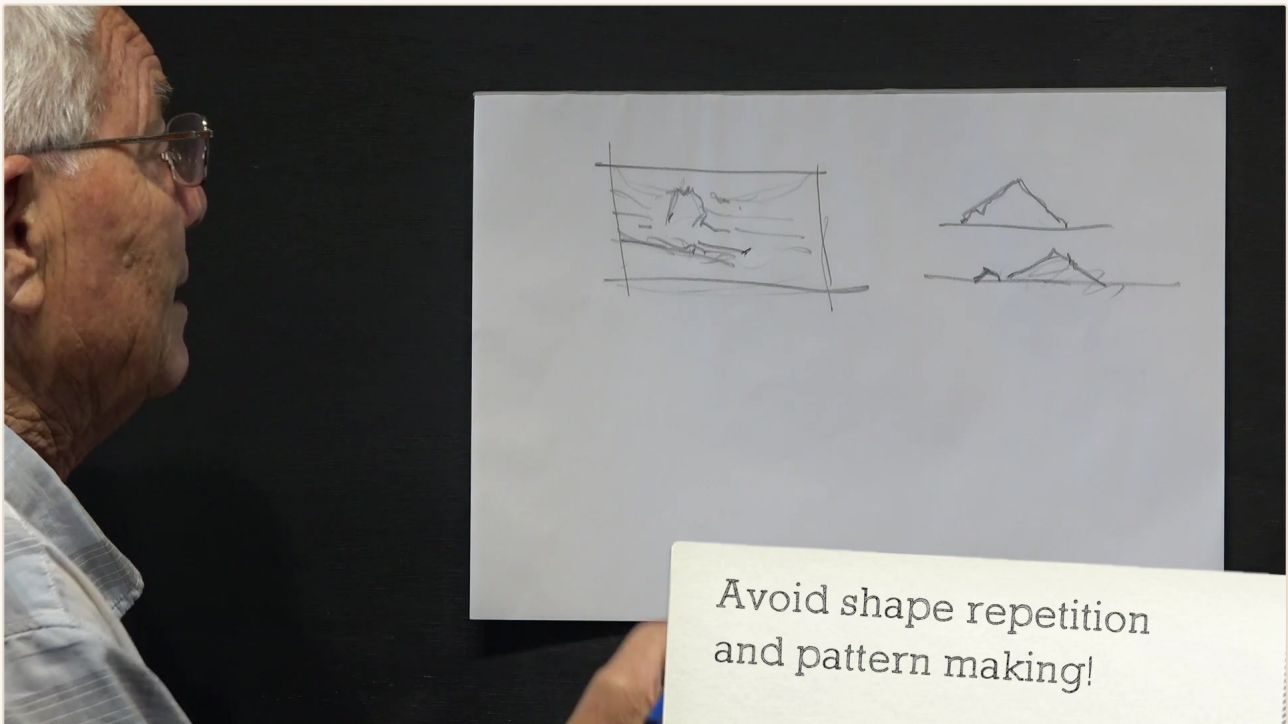
Lead the Eye with Composition

Arrange elements to guide the viewer's eye towards the focal point. Use sweeping lines and varied shapes to create a sense of movement and rhythm throughout the painting.

PRO TIP

Avoid repetitive patterns by varying the size and shape of elements like rocks and clouds to maintain interest and rhythm.

8 Variety and Balance in Composition



Avoid Uniform Patterns

When painting natural elements like rocks, mountains, or waves, avoid creating uniform patterns. Nature is haphazard and does not arrange itself in equal spaces. Ensure your composition reflects this randomness to maintain authenticity.

Break Edges for Interest

Incorporate variety by breaking the edges of elements like rocks to add interest. This prevents them from appearing as uniform shapes, such as cones, which can make the painting look predictable.

Create Uneven Compositions

Design your composition with uneven elements. For example, place the focal point off-center and vary the size and placement of objects to avoid symmetry. This creates a more dynamic and engaging painting.

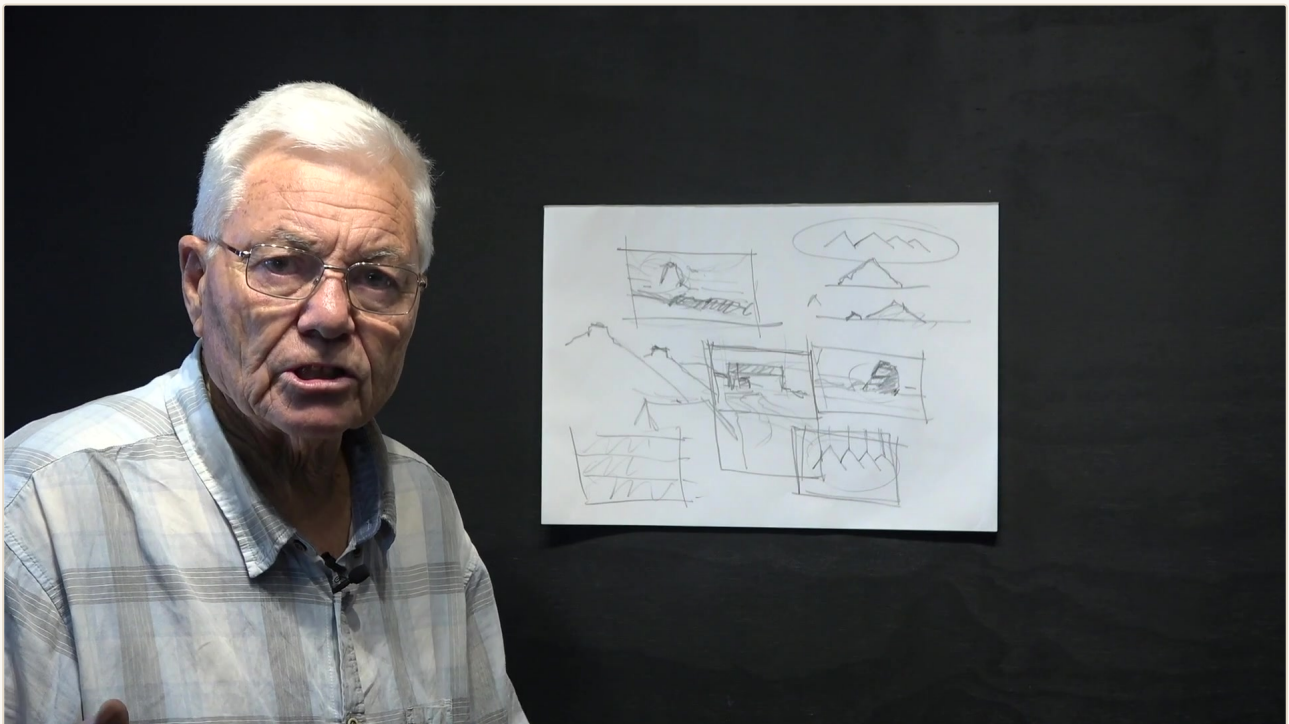
Embrace Imbalance

Allow for a slight sense of imbalance in your painting by having unequal spaces, like a large foreground with minimal background. This approach adds excitement and unpredictability to your work.

PRO TIP

Avoid making patterns by ensuring elements in your painting are not evenly spaced or symmetrical.

9 Cropping for Interest



Create a Natural Arrangement

Avoid arranging your still life subjects too neatly. Instead, aim for a slightly haphazard look that mimics nature.

Add Interest with Cropping

When painting a vase of flowers, allow some flowers to extend beyond the canvas edges. This creates a dynamic composition and suggests a natural, spontaneous view.

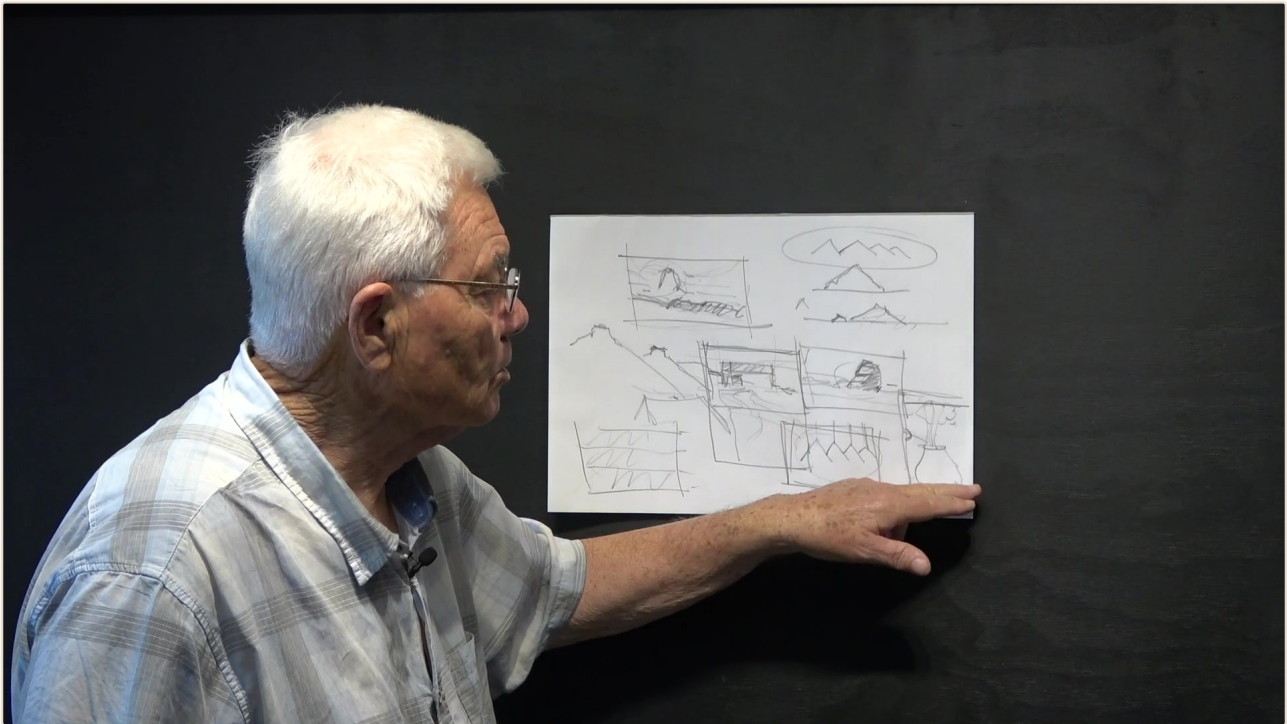
Enhance Spontaneity

Imagine walking past a beautiful bowl of flowers in a hallway. Capture that fleeting impression rather than a perfectly framed scene.

PRO TIP

Allow elements to extend beyond the canvas edges to create a more dynamic and spontaneous composition.

10 Softening Edges



Soften Edges Near the Picture's Edge

When approaching the edge of your painting, use a brush to soften the edges. This technique helps create a more cohesive and engaging composition, drawing the viewer's eye inward.

Understand the Importance of Edge Variation

Recognize that all paintings are composed of both soft and hard edges. Softening edges can add a sense of depth and interest, making your painting feel more dynamic.

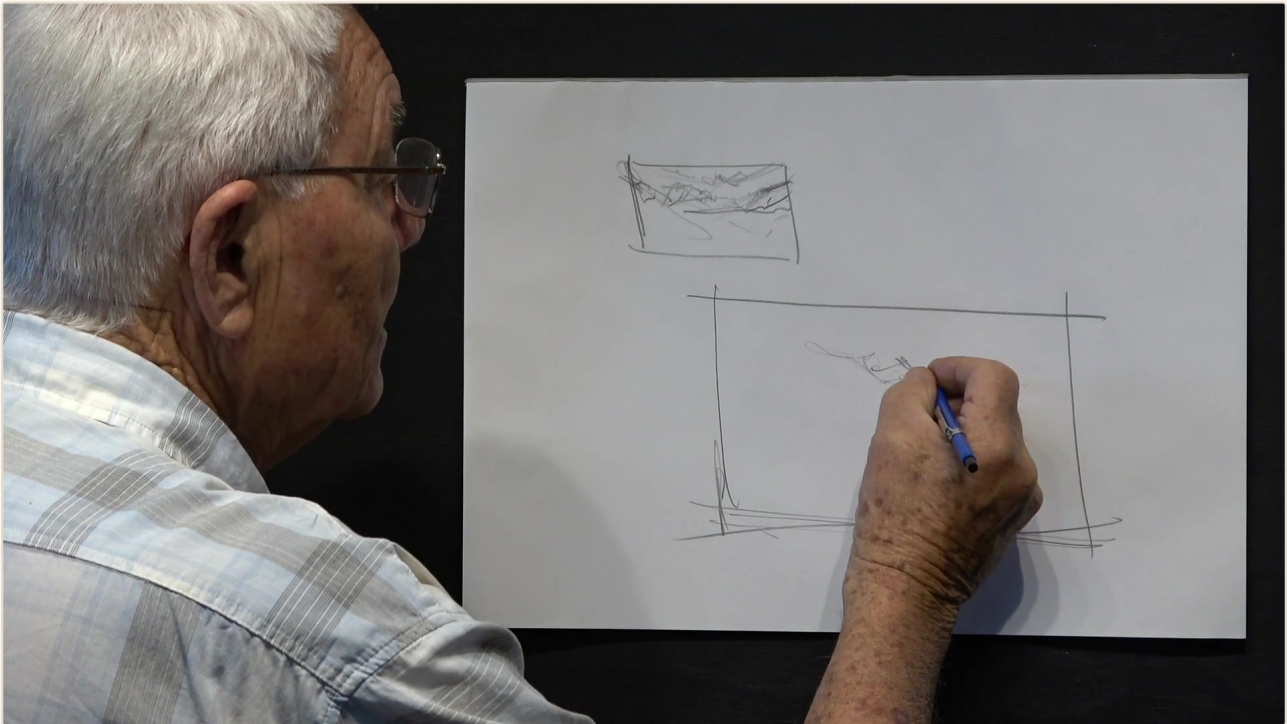
Choose the Right Tool for Softening

Opt for a brush over a palette knife for softening edges. A brush offers greater flexibility and ease in achieving the desired softness, while a palette knife may present more of a challenge.

PRO TIP

Use a brush to soften edges near the painting's edge for a more engaging composition.

11 Light and Shade



Plan Your Composition

Position the mountains slightly off-center to avoid predictability and maintain viewer interest. Ensure the main focal point is not dead center to keep the composition dynamic.

Control Light and Shade

Identify areas of light that might distract from the main focus. Use cloud shadows to cast parts of the snow into shade, maintaining their color but reducing their brightness to avoid scattering attention.

Create a Focal Point

Allow one area to glow by muting surrounding areas with cloud shadows. This directs the viewer's eye to the main character of your painting, while other elements play supporting roles.

Be Selective with Highlights

Avoid a 50/50 balance of light and shade, as it can scatter attention. Use half tones and place highlights selectively to simplify the composition and facilitate viewer interpretation.

PRO TIP

Use cloud shadows to mute areas and prevent them from distracting from the main focal point.

12 Colour Application



Apply Initial Colour Layers

Get as much colour on your painting as soon as you can. Focus on filling big areas with colour fields or layers quickly. Don't worry about slight adjustments needed later; the goal is to establish a foundation.

Lay in Darks and Sky

Add darks in areas like mountains or hills to guide your composition. Lay in the sky simply and quickly, keeping it straightforward. This helps in setting the stage for further tuning.

Avoid Sequential Painting

Don't start at the top and paint your way down laboriously. This can limit your ability to adjust tones effectively, especially for creating depth and distance.

Establish Tone Range Early

By placing darks first, you can better judge the tones needed to create a sense of distance. Use the white of the canvas and the dark shadows to visualize the tonal range.

PRO TIP

Get as much colour on your painting as soon as you can to establish a strong foundation.

13 Mixing Greys



Mixing a Basic Grey

Start by adding plenty of white to your palette. Mix in a bit of blue to create a base grey. Adjust the balance by adding more blue if needed to achieve a cooler tone.

Adjusting Grey Tones

To shift the grey towards a warmer tone, incorporate some red into the mix. Lighten the grey by adding more white, creating a lighter tone while maintaining the balance.

Creating a Range of Greys

Experiment by adding different amounts of red, blue, or yellow to push the grey in various directions. This will help you achieve a wide range of greys, from silvery to warm tones.

Recovering Paint

If your mix isn't right, don't discard it. Simply adjust the balance by adding more of the needed color, such as red or blue, to bring it back to the desired grey.

PRO TIP

Shift the balance of your grey by adding small amounts of red or blue to achieve the desired tone.

14 Painting the Shed



Sketch the Building

Sketch the building on your canvas using a blue or any color of your choice. Position the building slightly back in the composition to create a larger setting. Keep the structure high in the painting to emphasize its presence.

Establish Dark Values

Start by painting the darkest darks on the building to set a strong foundation. Use a mix of dark colors, adding a bit of warmth for the foreground. This will guide your eyes and help structure the rest of the painting.

Block in the Building Colors

Apply the main colors to the building, keeping the paint thin to allow for adjustments. Introduce variations by mixing in colors like Windsor Blue and white to add life to the roof and walls.

Add Details and Texture

Use a small brush to add details like skylights and roof variations. Create texture by suggesting rust and weathering on the roof. Avoid making everything too perfect; imperfections add character.

Paint the Background and Trees

Use gentle colors for the background, avoiding strong greens. Create a sense of distance with soft edges and subtle color variations. Add tree trunks with a light touch to integrate them into the landscape.

Develop the Foreground

Paint the foreground with expressive brushstrokes, suggesting movement and texture. Gradually increase the color strength as you move closer to the viewer. Consider adding elements like a dirt track or animals for interest.

Refine and Adjust

Make any necessary adjustments to balance the composition. Remove or alter elements that disrupt the flow, such as overly repetitive patterns. Use expressive strokes to suggest details without overworking them.

PRO TIP

When painting tree trunks or branches, lightly whisk across them to embed them into the paint, making them feel like part of the tree rather than separate elements.

15 Quick Demos: Reflections and Clouds



Create the Rock and Wet Sand

Paint a rock with a shadowed side, imagining it on the edge of a beach. Add a wet area of sand around it to set the scene. This helps establish the setting for the reflection exercise.

Understand Reflections

Remember that reflections alter tones: dark tones appear lighter and light tones appear darker in reflections. Adjust the tones of your rock and sand to reflect this principle.

Add Sky and Sea Elements

Paint a stormy sky above the scene, softening the horizon to suggest sea spray. Introduce a wave and some surf, using white paint to define these elements even on a white canvas.

Enhance the Scene with Details

Add a dark line where foam meets the beach to define the edge. Soften the base of the rock to suggest spray. Use subtle color variations in the sand to add interest and lead the viewer's eye.

Create Depth with Sky and Rock

Darken the sky behind the rock to bring it forward. Use vertical brush strokes to add height and interest to the sky, then soften them with horizontal strokes for a blended look.

PRO TIP

Use subtle color variations in sand to create interest and guide the viewer's eye.

16 Clouds and Sky Techniques



Start with the Mountains

Begin by painting the mountains first, even though it might seem counterintuitive. This approach helps you establish the main focus and allows you to work the sky around them. Leave gaps for light and add variations in the snow to create interest.

Add Cloud Highlights

Paint the highlights of the clouds using light edges. Avoid using pure white, as clouds are rarely as white as snow. Instead, aim for a slightly muted white to create a natural look.

Paint the Blue Sky

Use Windsor Blue to paint the sky around the mountains, varying the color and tone for a more dynamic effect. Decide where you want hard and soft edges in the clouds, and adjust accordingly.

Create Cloud Variations

Introduce variations in the clouds by adding different shapes and textures. Use a light touch with the brush to break up the clouds and create a more lively sky.

Soften Edges

If needed, soften the edges of the clouds by whisking a clean brush across the paint. This technique helps blend colors without muddying them, maintaining the vibrancy of your painting.

PRO TIP

Start with the mountains to establish focus and work the sky around them for better tonal balance.

Summary & Key Takeaways

In this lesson, you explored the art of creating expressive brushwork by focusing on composition, focal points, and dynamic elements. Begin your painting journey by identifying a focal point that naturally draws the viewer's eye. Use the rule of thirds as a guide, but allow your intuition to lead you as your painting develops. Avoid centered horizons and symmetrical patterns to maintain a dynamic and engaging composition.

As you build your painting, consider how elements like mountains, clouds, and shadows can guide the viewer's eye through the scene. Use contrast between light and dark areas to highlight your focal point and create a visual path. Incorporate diagonal lines and varied heights to add depth and interest, while avoiding repetitive patterns that can make your painting feel static.

Finally, focus on the details that bring your painting to life. Use expressive brushstrokes to suggest movement and texture, and soften edges to create a cohesive composition. Experiment with color application and mixing greys to achieve the desired tones. Remember, the goal is to create a painting that feels natural, spontaneous, and full of life.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Place your focal point at the intersection of the thirds for a balanced composition.
- Avoid placing the horizon line in the center to prevent the painting from being divided into two equal halves.
- Use varied heights for mountains and hills to naturally guide the viewer's eye through the painting.
- A strong contrast between light and dark areas can effectively highlight your painting's focal point.
- Use diagonal lines to make your painting more dynamic and engaging.
- Avoid repetitive patterns by varying the size and shape of elements like rocks and clouds to maintain interest and rhythm.
- Get as much colour on your painting as soon as you can to establish a strong foundation.
- Use a brush to soften edges near the painting's edge for a more engaging composition.



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.

Farm Road by Sharon Repple 16 x 16



Farm Road by Sharon Repple 16 x 16

This is a nice, bright and competent painting Sharon with a good feeling of sunshine and shadows. You demonstrate good drawing and brush skills and a nice sense of lighting. However, there is a design problem. The two buildings are too separated so that they are two focal points. Even if they were separate, I would have placed one slightly behind the other so that they connected and became one focal point.

One other thing I feel to mention. The red area in the immediate foreground feels out of place. It is too chromatic against the bright greens in your grasses. It needed to be a darkish khaki like colour – perhaps like the sedge grasses that often grow in damp areas. It would then relate better to the colours throughout the rest of the painting.

Incidentally, several of your trees come to the top edge of the canvas. Much better if they go right past the top, or stop well clear of the edge. Otherwise, a very nice painting.

Days End by Darla Calhoon



Days End by Darla Calhoon

Your painting has a wonderful feeling of highlights and shadows Darla which, along with bold brushstrokes give a nice lively feeling. Try not to be too careful when painting fences and posts (have a look at mine – they are quite rough really) and avoid putting

highlight effects (behind the trees on the right side of the painting) as any highlight near the edge of a painting will drag the eye away from the focal point. Well done!

Shed down south by Deborah Crowley



Shed down south by Deborah Crowley

This is a great effort Deborah. Nice colour, tones and good drawing. However, there are two things that need your attention. Try to loosen up! Let the brushstrokes show – don't smooth them out. It takes the feeling of vitality out of your work. Secondly, you don't need to be so careful with your edges. Notice your painting of the stock fences and the edges of the building – very careful and painstaking.

Painters often talk about being 'painterly.' Something that most of us strive for. It means relaxing and enjoying what you're doing without worrying too much about being exact. So... you've got colour and tones sorted, now go for the more painterly.

Old red barn, Michel BOULAY



Old red barn, Michel BOULAY

This is a very nice slightly flamboyant painting that speaks to me about rhythm, the curve in the drive, the loose rendition of the stock fences, and the same approach to the old barn. There is almost a 'devil may care' approach to the drawing and brushwork that makes me think that you enjoy your painting Michel. The colours and tones are good but two things need to be considered. You have placed the barn perilously close to the side and top of the painting – it feels slightly squashed in. I like the idea of pushing the boundaries

when it comes to designing a painting, but in this case, I think the building could have had a little more breathing space around it.

The poultry in the middle of the paddock, because of their central position and size, are almost trying to compete with the barn. They would have been better placed over against the stock fence where they would then become a part of the focal point rather than competing with it. I wonder Michel if you felt that the centre of the paddock was an empty space that needed something to fill it and so the poultry got involved? Paintings need rest areas, quiet areas that we should try to preserve. Try not to feel compelled to fill them!

Incidentally, some paintings need a frame to contain them. Because of the vigorous brushstrokes, I think this painting will feel more complete if it is framed.