



Mount Manaia

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/119-Mount-Manaia>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, I invite you to join me in the studio as we explore the captivating beauty of Mount Manaia, a dormant volcano that stands majestically over Whangarei Harbour in Northland, New Zealand, where I call home. This iconic landmark has been a source of inspiration for me, and despite having painted it numerous times, I am continually drawn to its allure, striving to capture its essence more fully with each attempt. Together, we'll delve into the process of transforming a photograph into a vibrant painting, using our knowledge and artistic license to bring the scene to life. You'll learn how to harness the benefits of studio painting, such as consistent lighting, which allows us to maintain control over the light on our canvas and avoid the exaggerated contrasts often found in photographs. We'll also discuss how to compensate for these contrasts by understanding outdoor lighting conditions. While studio painting may lack the spontaneity of plein air work, it offers the opportunity to plan and refine our compositions, ultimately leading to a polished final piece that conveys the spirit of this remarkable location. Let's embark on this artistic journey and capture the timeless beauty of Mount Manaia together.



"Mount Manaia" by Richard Robinson.



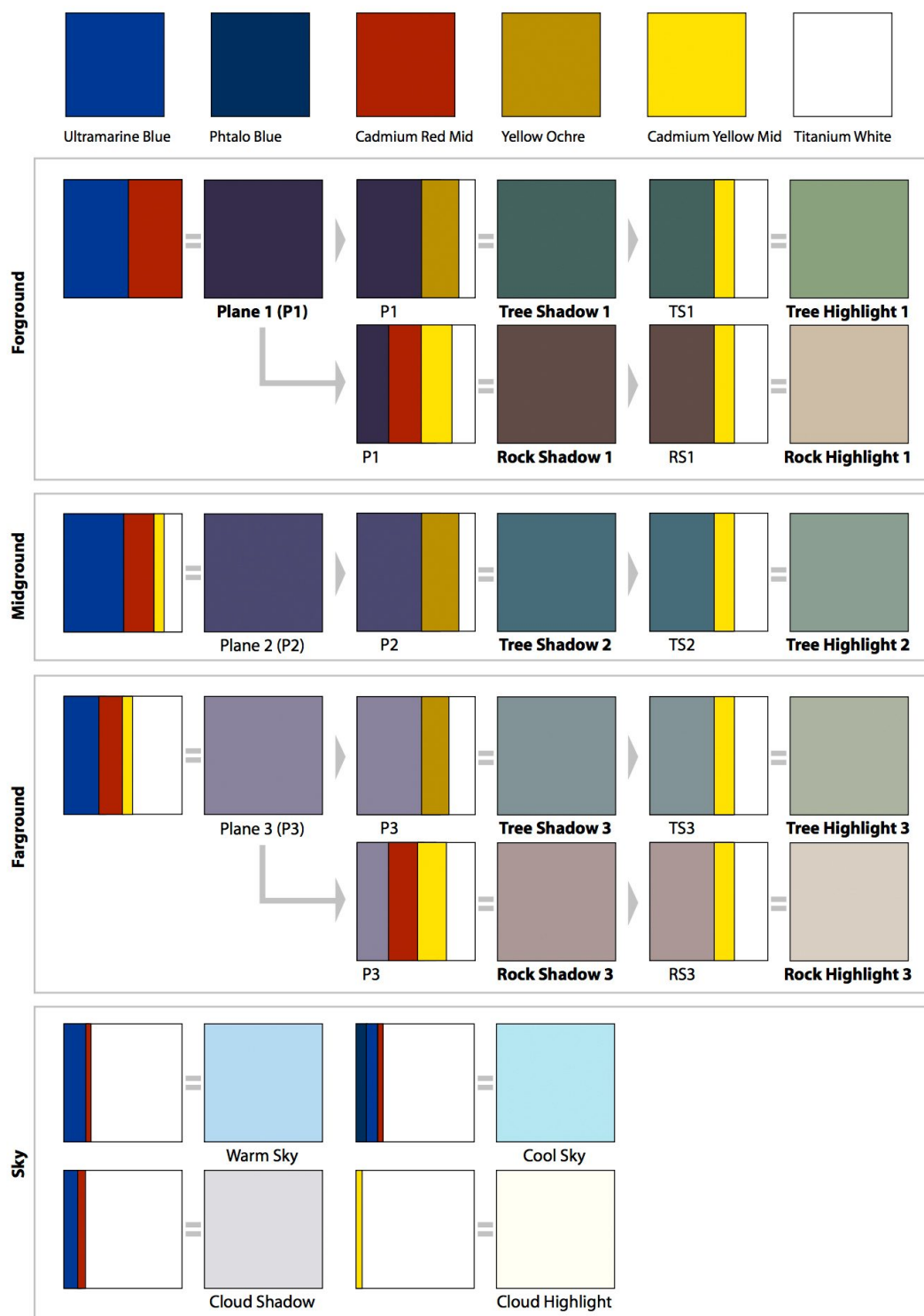
REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 2

The scene as Richard found it.



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REFERENCE PHOTO 3

The scene as Richard found it.

Materials

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

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

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

1 Studio vs Outdoor Painting



Understand Studio Advantages

Recognize the benefits of painting in the studio, such as constant lighting. In the studio, you can control the light on your painting, avoiding glare and ensuring the subject's lighting remains unchanged.

Acknowledge Photography Limitations

Be aware that photographs often exaggerate contrasts, making darks too dark and lights too light. Compensating for this requires experience and understanding of outdoor lighting conditions.

Consider Weather Impact

Appreciate that outdoor painting offers dynamic lighting changes, like sun breaks through clouds, which can highlight unique aspects of a scene. These fleeting moments can add drama and interest to your work.

Plan for Studio Painting

Use studio time to plan and refine your work with sketches and small studies. This preparation can lead to a more polished final piece, though it may lack the spontaneity of outdoor painting.

Capture the Spirit of a Place

Aim to convey the essence of a location in your painting, even when working indoors. A skilled painter can evoke the spirit of a place, despite not being physically present.

PRO TIP

Control studio lighting to avoid glare and maintain consistent lighting on your subject.

2 Compositional Sketches



Create a Compositional Sketch

Begin by sketching the basic shape of your canvas. Quickly add the basic tonal shapes of the image in front of you. Use artistic license to add elements like a waterfall or tree to enhance interest and depth.

Divide the Composition into Planes

Separate the composition into planes divided by tone. Start with the darkest tone in the foreground, lightening as they recede into the distance. Aim for about five planes of depth, including foreground elements, midground features, and background landmarks.

Simplify the Values

Limit the number of values to create a strong tonal base. Use as few values as possible—consider using 5, 4, 3, or even just 2 values, like black and white, to strengthen the composition.

Focus on Abstract Patterns

Turn your sketch on its side or upside down to view it as an abstract pattern. This helps you see the masses and shapes as interesting forms rather than recognizable symbols.

PRO TIP

Limit the number of values in your sketch to create a strong tonal base and enhance the composition.

3 Simplifying Values



Choose Your Medium

Select either paint or felt tip markers to define your values. Using these tools helps maintain consistent tones without unintended blending.

Prepare Your Values

If using paint, mix four distinct values. Ensure these values are clearly separated and do not blend them on the canvas to avoid creating additional tones.

Use Marker Pens

For an easier approach, use a range of about seven marker pens. Select pens from black to almost white for a comprehensive value range.

PRO TIP

Avoid mixing values on the canvas to maintain clarity in your tonal range.

4 Color Mixing Basics



Select Your Palette

Use a reduced palette consisting of ultramarine blue, cadmium red mid, yellow ochre, cadmium yellow mid, and titanium white. This will simplify your color mixing process.

Mix Color Families

Create color families for each object in your painting. Start with the darkest color for each family, which will be the parent color, and base subsequent colors on this parent.

Mix the Darkest Color First

Begin by mixing the base shadow color for the foreground plane. This will be the darkest color in your painting and serve as a foundation for other colors.

Create Midground and Background Colors

Using the same mixture as the foreground, recreate the color for the midground, adjusting it by adding white and blue to lighten and push it towards the atmospheric sky color. Repeat this process for the background color of Mount Manaia.

Prepare Larger Color Piles

Mix larger piles of your base colors than needed. These will be the parent colors, from which you can take portions to adjust and create the necessary variations for your painting.

PRO TIP

Mix larger piles of base colors to serve as parent colors, allowing easy adjustments for variations.

5 Sky Color Mixing



Mix the Base Sky Color

Combine blue and white on your palette to create the base sky color. This will serve as the foundation for your sky.

Adjust the Blue Tone

Observe the sky's blue tone to determine if it is warmer or cooler. If the blue appears cooler, add a tiny touch of phthalo blue to your mixture to achieve the desired coolness.

PRO TIP

Use phthalo blue to cool down your sky color when needed.

6 Foreground Color Mixing



Mix Foreground Colors

Start with the darkest color for the foreground. Take a small amount of this dark pile and mix two or three colors to layer on top. This will help indicate grasses and rocks.

Create Grass Tones

Add yellow ochre to the blue mixture to shift it towards green. This combination will represent the grassy areas effectively.

Mix Rock Colors

For the rocks, mix yellow and red to create an orange hue. Lighten this mixture slightly to achieve a basic rock color.

Adjust Tree Top Colors

For the top of a green tree, use the blue background color and add yellow to create green. Ensure this color is lighter in value than the background by adding yellow and, if needed, a touch of white to avoid an unnatural green.

PRO TIP

Add white to lighten colors without making them appear unnatural.

7 Checking Values



Adjust Light Colors

If a color becomes too light, add back its dark constituent colors or a bit of the base color to balance it.

Mix Greens for Shadows and Light

Mix two greens for the hills. The first green should be slightly lighter than the base color for the shadow side where light doesn't strike. The second green should be brighter and lighter for the tops of the trees where the light hits.

Prepare Mount Manaia Colors

Take a bit of Mount Manaia's base color, add yellow to create green, and then add white to lighten it. Ensure the color relationships are correct by checking them constantly.

Check Color Values

Smooth the color mixture on a palette knife, hold it at the same angle above the base color pile, and compare the values. Squint through your eyelashes to reduce color intensity and focus on value.

PRO TIP

Squint through your eyelashes to reduce color intensity and focus on checking values accurately.

8 Cloud Shadow Color Mixing



Check Color Values

Compare the values of your colors by placing them side by side. If they blend together, they are the same value. If one stands out, they have different values.

Use Tools for Value Checking

Utilize a black mirror to remove color and focus on value, or use a digital camera to convert the image to black and white for a clearer value comparison.

Mix Cloud Shadow Color

Begin by mixing the shadow color for the clouds in the sky. Adjust the mix as needed to achieve a light color for the clouds later in the process.

PRO TIP

Use a digital camera to convert your image to black and white for easy value comparison.

9 Transferring Sketch to Canvas



Transfer Sketch to Canvas

Use a ruler to draw a straight line for the horizon on your canvas. This line represents the bottom of a hill, not the actual horizon. Ensure it's level and correctly placed, as it sets the foundation for your composition.

Sketch with Pencil

Lightly sketch your initial design onto the canvas with a pencil. Keep the pencil marks faint to prevent them from showing through light layers of paint later.

Position Reflections

Carefully place and angle the reflections in the water. These reflections should be slightly shorter than the hills they mirror, due to your eye level being about ten feet above the water.

PRO TIP

Keep pencil marks light to avoid them showing through paint layers.

10 Painting the Sky



Sketch the Major Rock Formations

Lightly sketch the major rock formations on the front of Mount Manaia. Keep the lines simple as they will serve as a guide and be painted over later.

Mix a Warm Sky Color

Mix a warm sky color by using ultramarine blue, which tends towards red, avoiding phthalo blue as it tends towards green. This will add variation and interest to the sky.

Apply the Sky Color

Use a one-inch pastry brush to apply the warm sky color quickly. Ensure the paint layer is thin by adding a lot of painting medium, such as chroma archival classic medium, which has a drying time of about 24 hours.

Leave Space for Clouds

Leave a space between the blue of the sky and the shadow color of the clouds. This space will be for the light color of the clouds, ensuring they remain bright and light-filled.

PRO TIP

Use ultramarine blue for a warm sky color to add variation and interest.

11 Cloud and Mist Effects



Create Textural Effects

Use your brush in various ways to create interesting textural effects. Apply it straight on and then flip it over to use the edges. Avoid over-blending the colors to keep the brushstrokes visible without making them too chunky.

Paint Cloud and Mist

Paint the cloud color around Mount Manaia to separate it from the mid-ground hill. This will give the effect of the mountain emerging from the mist or cloud. Ensure the cloud color is ready to blend nicely with the background color you will add next.

PRO TIP

Your brushstroke is your signature; keep them visible to showcase your unique style.

12 Adjusting Mountain Colors



Refine Mountain Details

Switch to a smaller brush to work on the details and profile of Mount Manaia. This allows for more precision in capturing the mountain's unique shape.

Adjust Green Color

Evaluate the green color you've mixed. If it's too dark and vibrant, it may blend too much with the base layer. Adjust by adding blue and white to lighten and tone it down.

Assess the New Color

Apply the adjusted color to the mountain and observe the improvement. The lighter, toned-down green should create a better distinction from the base layer.

PRO TIP

Use a smaller brush for detailed work to achieve precision in your painting.

13 Rock and Highlight Techniques



Load the Brush with Paint

Push the brush into the paint pile to get a wad of paint on the end. Use this to lay off paint onto the canvas.

Mix Highlight Color for Green

Mix a highlight color for the green areas. Be cautious not to overdo it; aim for one large highlight in a specific area.

Create Sky Shine Color

Mix the sky shine color for the side of the mountain. As the mountain turns away, the planes become flatter and reflect what's behind them.

Mix Rock Colors

Mix the color for the rocks, pushing it towards brown or orange. Ensure the shadow color of the rocks has a bit more blue to be duller, matching the value of tree shadows.

Apply Rock Highlights

Decide on the light source direction, applying lighter blue to the shadow side for sky reflection. Use a palette knife for the major highlight, with a couple of supporting highlights.

PRO TIP

Avoid overdoing highlights; focus on one major highlight with a few supporting ones.

14 Midground and Waterfall Details



Lay Down Midground Dark Color

Apply the dark parent color to the midground, leaving a white space for the waterfall's light color. This sets the foundation for the midground, ensuring the waterfall stands out.

Match Hill and Reflection Colors

Use the same color for the hill and its reflection in the water. This simplifies the painting process and maintains consistency, though note that reflections can vary in value.

Apply Dark Background for Headland

Use a small amount of dark value from the foreground to paint the background of the headland. This approach works well for small paintings where colors are similar.

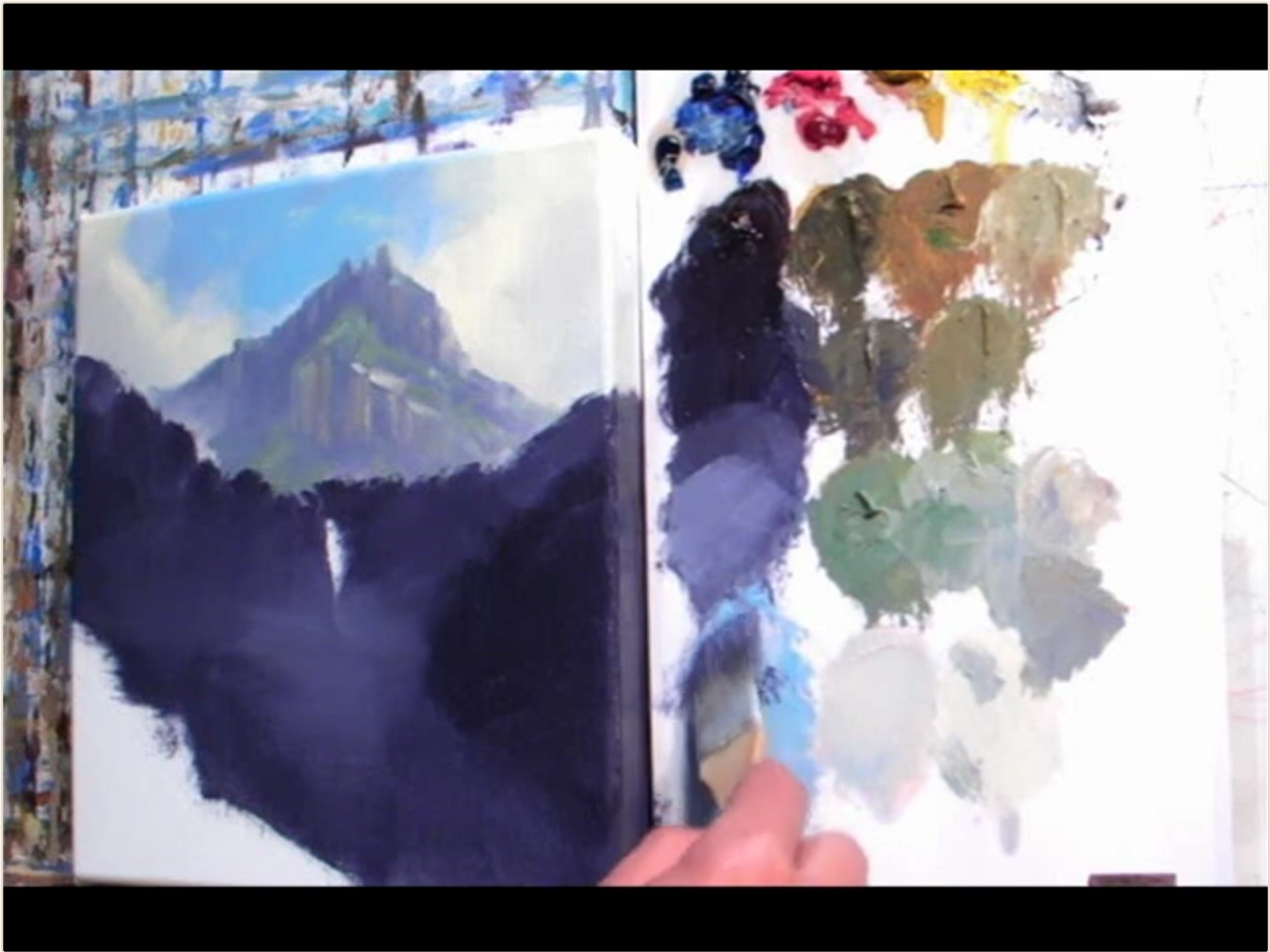
Create Waterfall Mist Glow

Apply a lighter value for the mist around the waterfall in stages. Gradually increase the light value as you approach the waterfall to create a glowing effect, which will also be reflected in the water.

PRO TIP

Leave a white space for the waterfall's light color to ensure it stands out against the midground.

15 Light Effects on Hills



Create Light on Mist

Mix a light orange by combining your warm light color with your waterfall color. Apply this mixture to the mist area to simulate the effect of light falling on it. This will create a warm glow, enhancing the sense of light in the painting.

Blend Waterfall into Mist

Reload your brush with the light color to keep it pure. Paint into the mist area, allowing the light value to naturally blend with the background colors. This will create a smooth gradation as the light disappears into the mist.

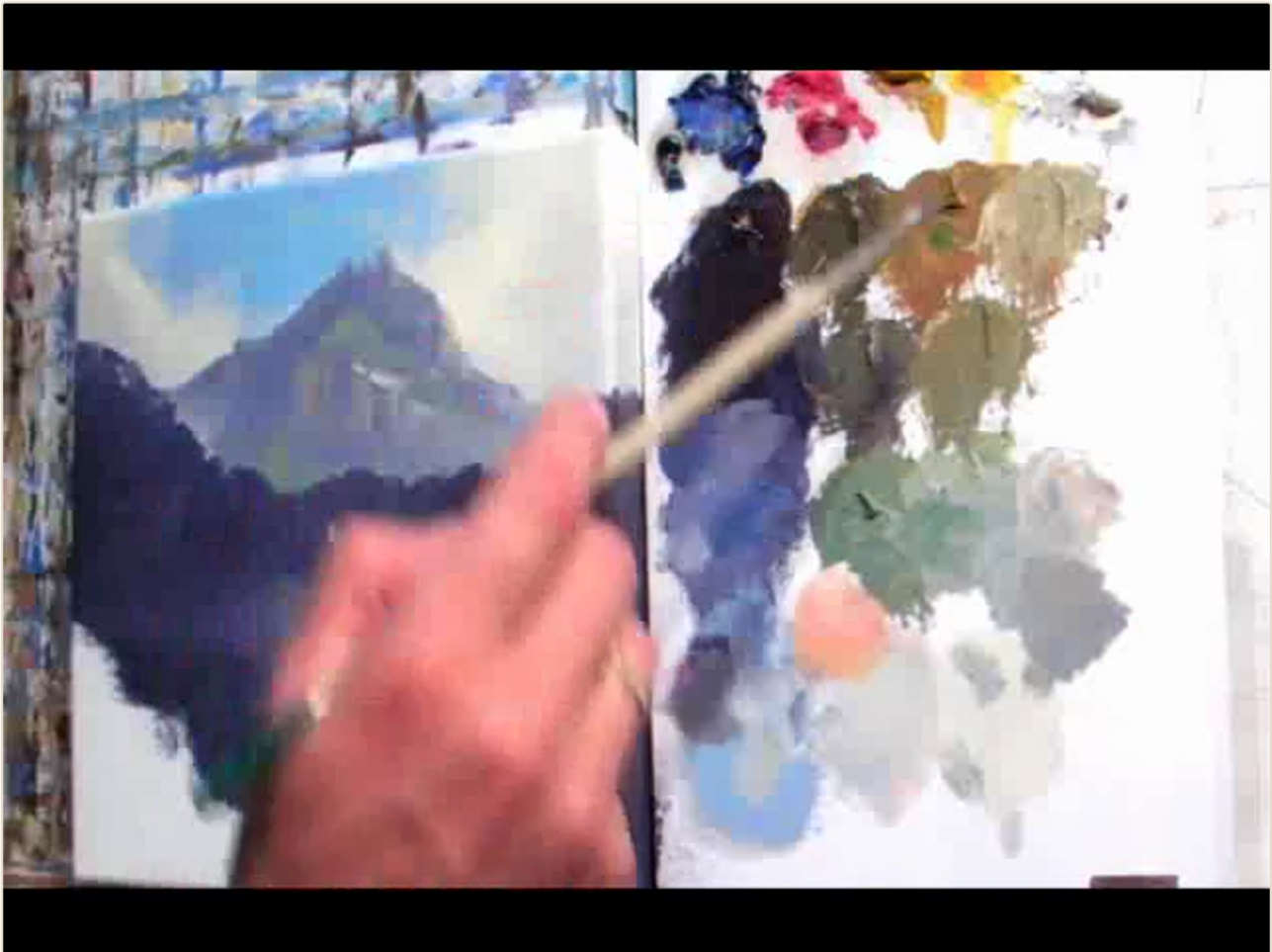
Establish Tree Tops on Mid-ground Hill

Begin with the mid-ground hill on the left by painting the tops of the trees. Use a slightly lighter and bluer color to suggest light coming over the hill. This will give the impression of light pushing past the edge of the hill, infusing the edge with a lighter tone.

PRO TIP

Use a big brush creatively to achieve versatile effects without needing smaller brushes too early.

16 Foreground Tree Planning



Plan Foreground Tree Placement

Consider the placement of a tree in the foreground on the left side of the painting. Ensure this area remains subdued to allow the tree to stand out effectively.

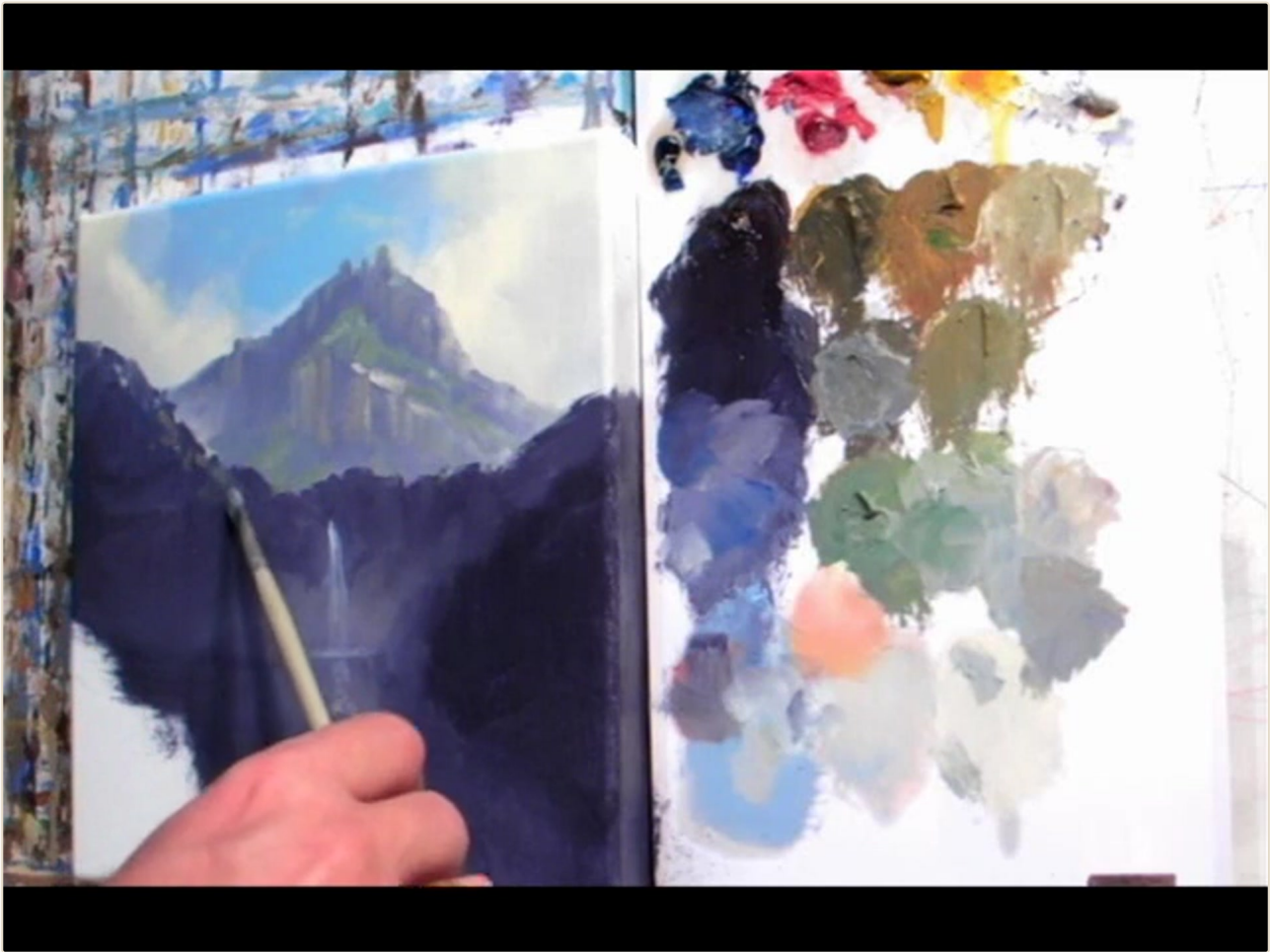
Subdue Mid-ground Hills

Apply light to the top of the hills in the mid-ground, but avoid creating strong contrasts in value or color. This will help maintain focus on the tree that will be added later.

PRO TIP

Keep the area for the foreground tree subdued to enhance its prominence.

17 Headland and Reflection Techniques



Add Greenery to the Headland

Use a color value similar to the hill behind it, but increase the saturation slightly. Add a tiny bit more yellow to the mix to suggest the headland is less shrouded by mist. Roll the brush to create the round tops of the trees.

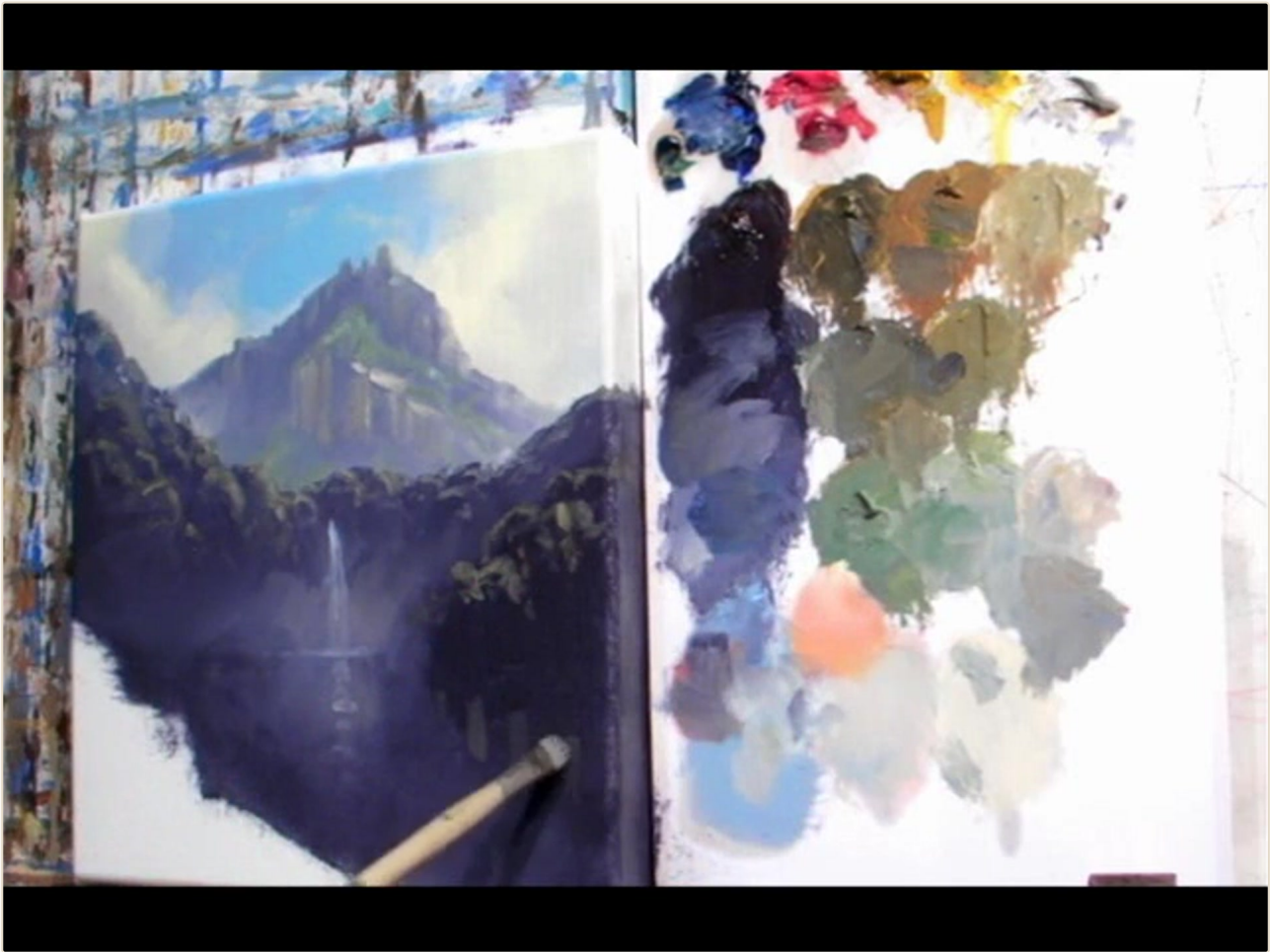
Paint Reflections

Use the same color as the headland but make it slightly darker for the reflections. Ensure that vertical strokes are directly beneath the objects being reflected to maintain accuracy.

PRO TIP

Roll the brush to create the round tops of the trees, adding a natural look to the headland.

18 Foreground Rocks and Grass



Lay in Warm Rock Base

Apply a very warm mixture to the foreground to establish the base for the rocks. Use a palette knife to add texture, indicating the presence of rocks on the headland.

Draw the Tree

Mix a very dark color and use it to draw in the tree. Use a big brush to minimize strokes, avoiding blending with the wet background and maintaining the dark value's power.

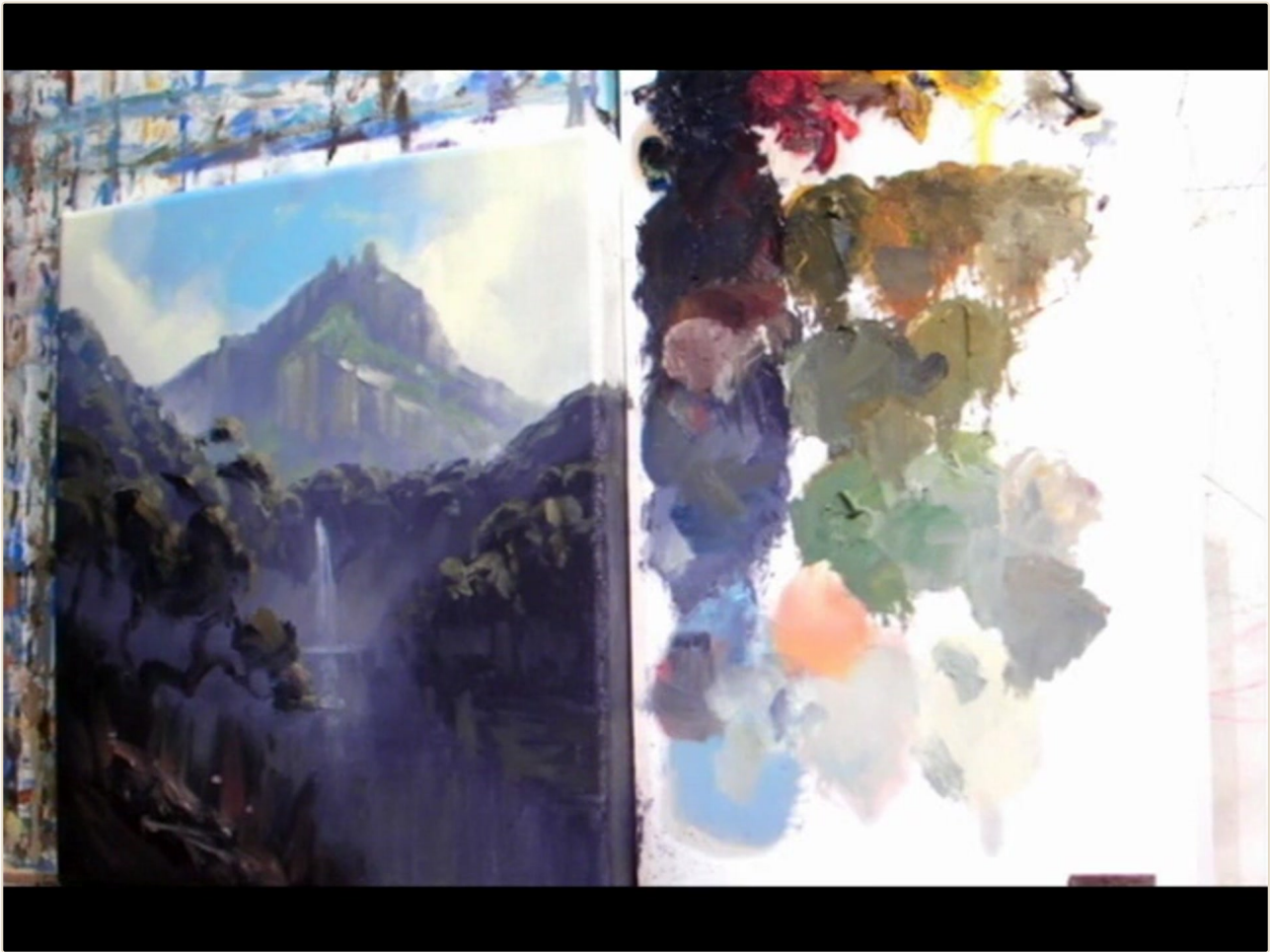
Add Warmth to Foreground Grass

Return to the foreground with a warm mixture to apply to the grasses. Reload your brush often and use upward strokes to suggest the grass, adding warmth and interest.

PRO TIP

Use a large brush to minimize strokes and prevent blending with the wet background.

19 Tree and Reflection Details



Add Shadowed Foliage

Begin with the dark tone of the shadowed foliage. Use a fine brush to paint the thinner branches, ensuring depth and detail in the greenery.

Reflect Light on Tree

Mix a fairly dark orange or orangey-green color. Apply this color to the underside of the branches to reflect the light from the warm rocks in the foreground.

Enhance Foreground Drama

Create a spotlight effect by adding more drama to the foreground. Use sharp accents of grass to bring interest, scratching them out with the back of a brush for texture.

Simplify Background

Mix colors for the mid-ground hill to simplify the area behind the tree. This will help the tree stand out and read better.

Add Waterfall Mist

Introduce more waterfall mist into the background. This will help push out the headland and define it from its background.

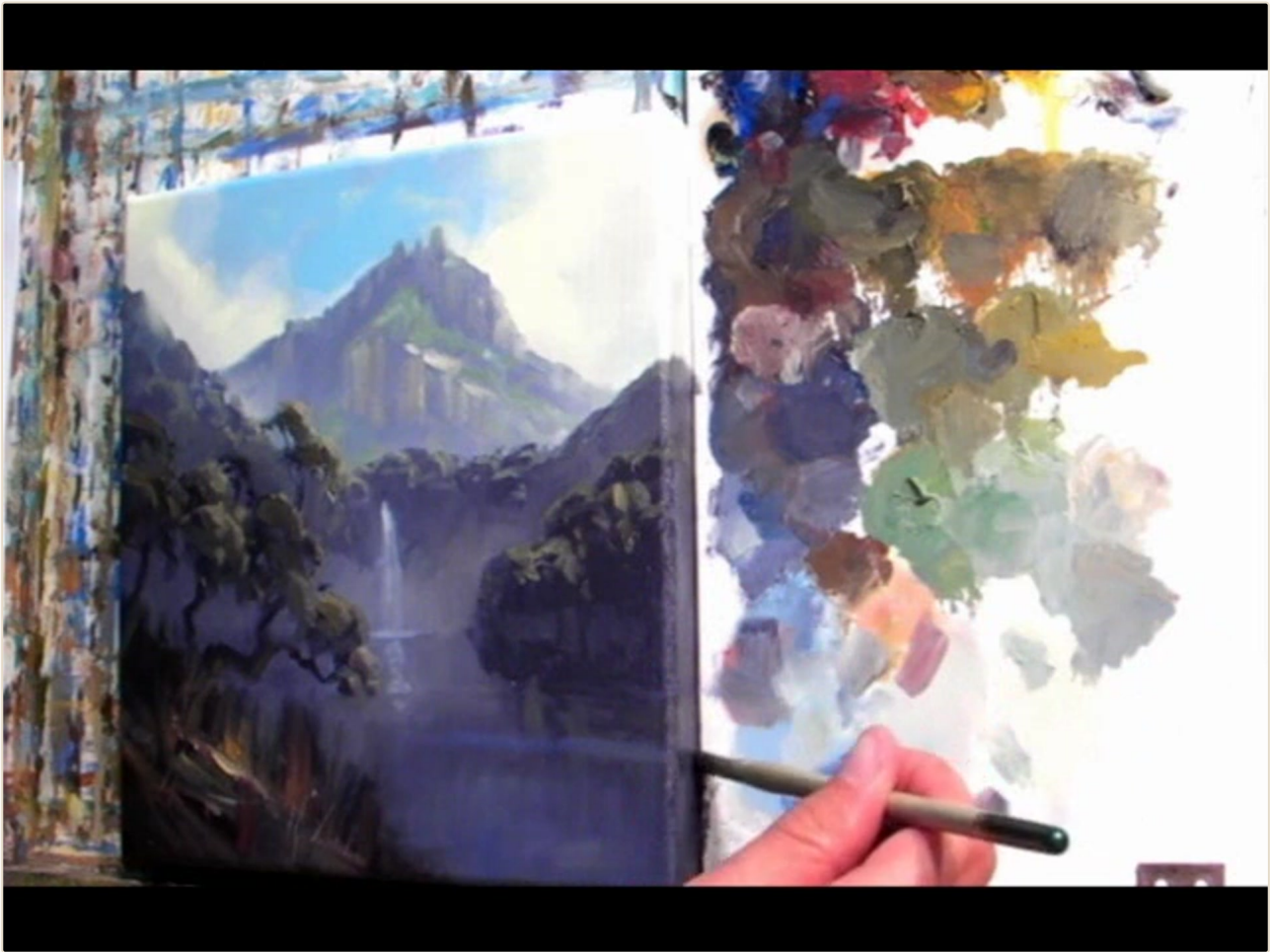
Finish Water Details

Complete the water in the foreground by adding interest with either vertical or horizontal strokes. This will enhance the overall composition.

PRO TIP

Use the back of a brush to scratch out sharp accents of grass in the foreground for added texture.

20 Final Touches and Highlights



Apply Highlights to Branches

Use a warm gray mixture that is a couple of steps lighter than the dark background. Apply this with a small brush to the top of the branches to create highlights.

Adjust Foreground Elements

Add small rocks in the water in the foreground along with their reflections. Include a touch of light play on top of the water to enhance realism.

PRO TIP

Use a small palette knife to collect a fine ridge of paint for precise application with a brush.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by understanding the unique advantages of both studio and outdoor settings. While the studio offers controlled lighting, allowing for consistent work, outdoor painting captures the dynamic essence of natural light. Use your studio time to refine your compositions and sketches, ensuring that your final piece conveys the spirit of the location, even if painted indoors.

Begin your painting with strong compositional sketches, focusing on tonal values to create depth and interest. Simplify your values to maintain clarity and use a limited palette to streamline your color mixing process. As you progress, pay attention to the subtle shifts in color and value, ensuring that each element of your painting contributes to a cohesive whole.

As you add the final touches, focus on the details that bring your painting to life. Use your brushstrokes to express texture and movement, and carefully adjust colors to capture the light and shadow play across your scene. Remember, your brushstroke is your signature, so let it reflect your unique style and vision.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Control studio lighting to avoid glare and maintain consistent lighting on your subject.
- Limit the number of values in your sketch to create a strong tonal base and enhance the composition.
- Avoid mixing values on the canvas to maintain clarity in your tonal range.
- Mix larger piles of base colors to serve as parent colors, allowing easy adjustments for variations.
- Use phthalo blue to cool down your sky color when needed.
- Squint through your eyelashes to reduce color intensity and focus on checking values accurately.
- Use ultramarine blue for a warm sky color to add variation and interest.
- Avoid overdoing highlights; focus on one major highlight with a few supporting ones.



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