



Chinaman's Bluff

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/67-Chinaman-s-Bluff>

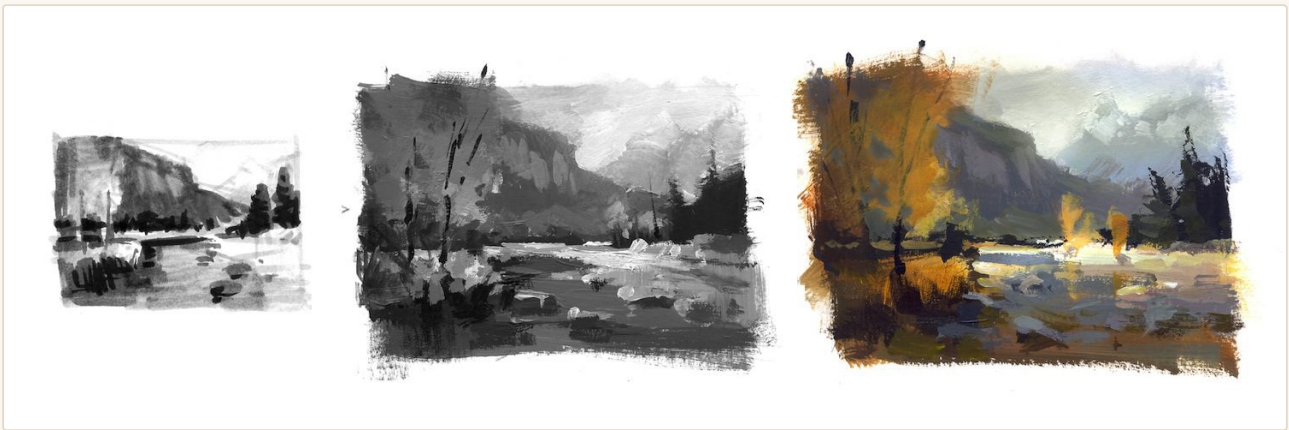
MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

This chapter invites you to join me at Chinaman's Bluff, nestled at the end of the majestic Dart Valley in New Zealand's South Island. It's a place that holds fond memories of painting alongside talented artists like John Crump and Kevin Macpherson. The scene is a painter's dream, offering a perfect backdrop to explore atmospheric perspective and the spotlight effect. Although I began a painting here during that memorable trip, I never quite finished it in the studio, leaving me eager to revisit and capture the essence of this stunning location. Now, I encourage you to take up the challenge of creating your own masterpiece from the resource photos provided. This is your opportunity to unleash your creativity, using your artistic license to transform the scene into something uniquely yours. Start by crafting tiny no tan sketches to experiment with composition and design, allowing you to explore various possibilities and refine your vision. This approach will guide you to unexpected creative solutions, making the journey as rewarding as the destination itself.



"Chinamans Bluff" by Richard Robinson 14 x 8" Oil on Canvas



REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 2

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 3

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 4

The scene as Richard found it.

Materials

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

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

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

1 Designing with No Tan Sketches



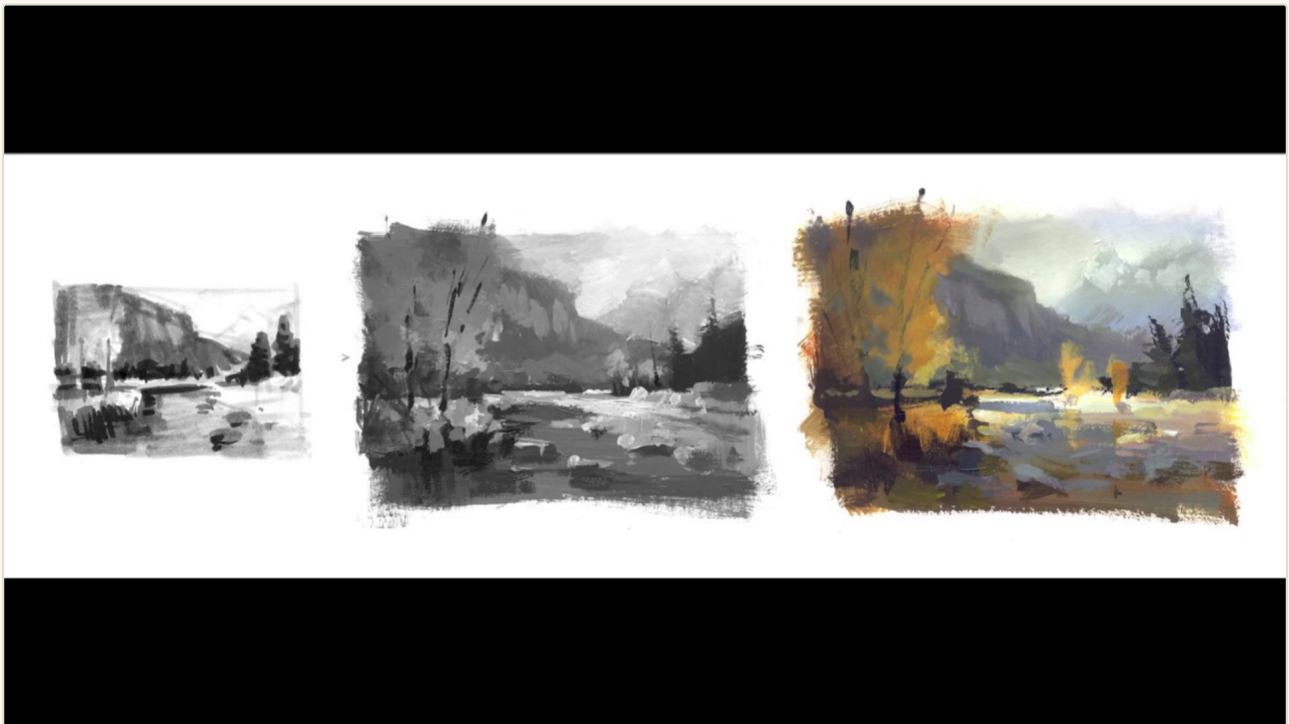
Design with No Tan Sketches

Begin by spending time designing your painting with tiny no tan sketches. These sketches allow you to explore multiple options quickly, helping to stimulate your creativity. Experiment with different elements, introduce new ones, and rearrange them to discover new ideas. This process will refine your concepts and lead you to unexpected creative solutions.

PRO TIP

Use no tan sketches to explore and refine your painting ideas before starting on the canvas.

2 Thumbnail to Final Painting Process



Transition from Thumbnail to Value Study

Begin with a thumbnail sketch and transition to a limited value study in black and white. This helps establish the composition and values before adding color.

Create a Simple Color Study

Develop a simple color study based on your value study. Keep it similar to the thumbnail, focusing on key elements like the spotlight area and gradients in the trees.

Refine in Photoshop

Use Photoshop to clean up your color study and experiment with compositional ideas. This digital refinement allows you to explore different possibilities before finalizing your painting.

Finalize the Painting

Return to your initial idea if it resonates most with you. Compare your final painting with the color study to ensure consistency and coherence. This preparatory work will guide you confidently through the final painting process.

PRO TIP

Stick closely to your thumbnail sketch to maintain the essence of your initial vision throughout the painting process.

3 Spotlight Effect Advice



Prepare Yourself

Ensure you are well-prepared before beginning your painting. Gather all necessary materials and set up your workspace for optimal creativity and efficiency.

Explore the Spotlight Effect

Experiment with the spotlight effect to enhance your painting. This technique can add drama and focus to your work. Refer to the spotlight effect video on the online resource page for detailed guidance.

PRO TIP

Experimenting with the spotlight effect can add dramatic focus to your painting.

4 Warm Cool Relationships



Warm/Cool color relationships

Every warm note is an opportunity to place a cool note next to it and vice versa

Evaluate Warm and Cool Relationships

Examine your painting for the balance between warm and cool colors. Consider how adding more variation can enhance the overall effect. Look for areas where warm tones can complement the cool ones.

Enhance with Warm Variations

Identify cool areas in your painting, such as greens, that could benefit from added warmth. Introduce warm variations to these areas to create a more dynamic and visually appealing composition.

PRO TIP

Balance warm and cool colors to create more interest and depth in your painting.

5 Atmospheric Perspective Explanation



Understand Atmospheric Perspective

Recognize that atmospheric perspective affects all colors in your scene. As objects move away, more atmosphere comes between your eyes and the object, causing the object to take on more of the atmosphere's color.

Observe Changes in Values and Contrast

Notice that as objects recede, their values come closer together, reducing contrast. Details become smaller and less defined, and edges soften. Colors gray out, reducing saturation.

Identify the Atmosphere Color

Look at the sky just above the horizon to find the atmosphere color influencing the background. This color affects distant mountains, Chinaman's Bluff, and their reflections in the water.

Mix and Apply Atmosphere Color

Mix a large amount of the atmosphere color on your palette. Gradually mix more of this color into the colors of objects as they recede into the distance to simulate atmospheric perspective.

PRO TIP

Mix a large amount of the atmosphere color and use it to adjust colors of distant objects, enhancing the sense of depth.

6 Sky and Darkest Dark



Sketch Big Shapes

Begin with a very light mixture of purple to sketch the big shapes in your composition. Focus on capturing the overall structure before moving on to smaller details.

Paint the Sky

Apply a very light cool grey to the sky area. This sets the atmospheric perspective and influences the other colors in the scene. It also establishes the value range, as this will be one of the lightest lights in the painting.

Add the Darkest Dark

Mix burnt sienna with one or both of the blues to create the darkest dark. Apply this to the areas of your painting that require the deepest shadows, helping to define the lower end of your value scale.

PRO TIP

Start with the sky to set the value range and atmospheric perspective for the entire painting.

7 Blocking in Trees and Riverbed



Add Variation with Blue

In the left-hand corner, add more blue to the dark areas to introduce variation. Consider the warm and cool relationships from the start.

Block in Distant Trees

Use a slightly lighter, cooler dark to block in the trees on the opposite riverbank. Add a touch of yellow to push the color towards green, maintaining a loose approach.

Emulate Freshness

Apply thin paint to capture the freshness seen in the brush strokes and color study. Focus on the lean of the trees from the study and incorporate it into your painting.

PRO TIP

Keep the paint thin and loose to capture the freshness and movement of the trees.

8 Painting the River



Establish the Riverbed Base

Lay some greeny browns into the darks in the foreground. This will establish the base for the riverbed, creating a foundation for the rest of the river.

Add Blue for Depth

As you move up the river, gradually add more blue to your mix. This will create a lighter and more blue-gray tone, reflecting the bluff and sky above.

Create Subtle Reflections

Near the foreground, use very dark gray tones to mimic the slight reflections of the sky. These should closely match the color of the riverbed, emphasizing subtle variations in warm, cool, and value.

Add Dark Blue Shadows

Introduce dark blue shadows cast onto the water. These shadows add depth and realism to the reflective surface of the river.

PRO TIP

Avoid painting the river entirely blue; instead, use subtle variations to capture the reflective and transparent qualities of water.

9 Brush Stroke Technique



Plan Your Brush Stroke

Think carefully about how to make a single brush stroke convey the effect of multiple strokes. This requires planning and confidence in your technique.

Add Cool Variation

Introduce cool variation into warm areas by adding a green tone. Apply it thoughtfully to create contrast and interest.

PRO TIP

Resist the temptation to adjust a brush stroke after applying it; trust your initial decision.

10 Initial Block Ins and Painting Medium



Focus on Big Blocks of Color

Begin by blocking in large areas of color. Avoid getting caught up in details at this stage to simplify your process.

Use Painting Medium

Incorporate a fair amount of painting medium to keep the paint thin. This allows for easy adjustments and ensures that subsequent layers will settle nicely.

PRO TIP

Avoid using a small brush too early; focus on large color areas first.

11 Chinaman's Bluff and Atmospheric Perspective



Apply Atmospheric Perspective to Chinaman's Bluff

Lighten and cool the colors of Chinaman's Bluff as it recedes into the distance. Focus on the edges of the bluff to create the effect of light infusing the dark mass. This will enhance the sense of depth in your painting.

Enhance Depth with Mount Pluto

As you move further back in space to Mount Pluto, apply even lighter and greyer tones. Match these tones more closely with the color of the sky to emphasize atmospheric perspective. This will help create a seamless transition into the background.

Add Warm Grey to the Right Hand Bank

Dash in a warm grey on the right hand bank to add variation and interest. This touch of warmth will contrast with the cooler tones and enhance the overall composition.

PRO TIP

Lighten and cool colors as they recede to enhance atmospheric perspective.

12 Color Study Influence



Leverage Your Color Study

Use your color study as a guide to reduce uncertainty in your color choices. This preparation allows you to focus on painting without second-guessing your palette.

PRO TIP

Rely on your color study to make confident color decisions during your painting process.

13 Color Differences in Video and Photo



Understand Color Differences

Be aware that color variations can occur due to differences in camera settings. The still camera image is often closer in color to the final painting than video footage.

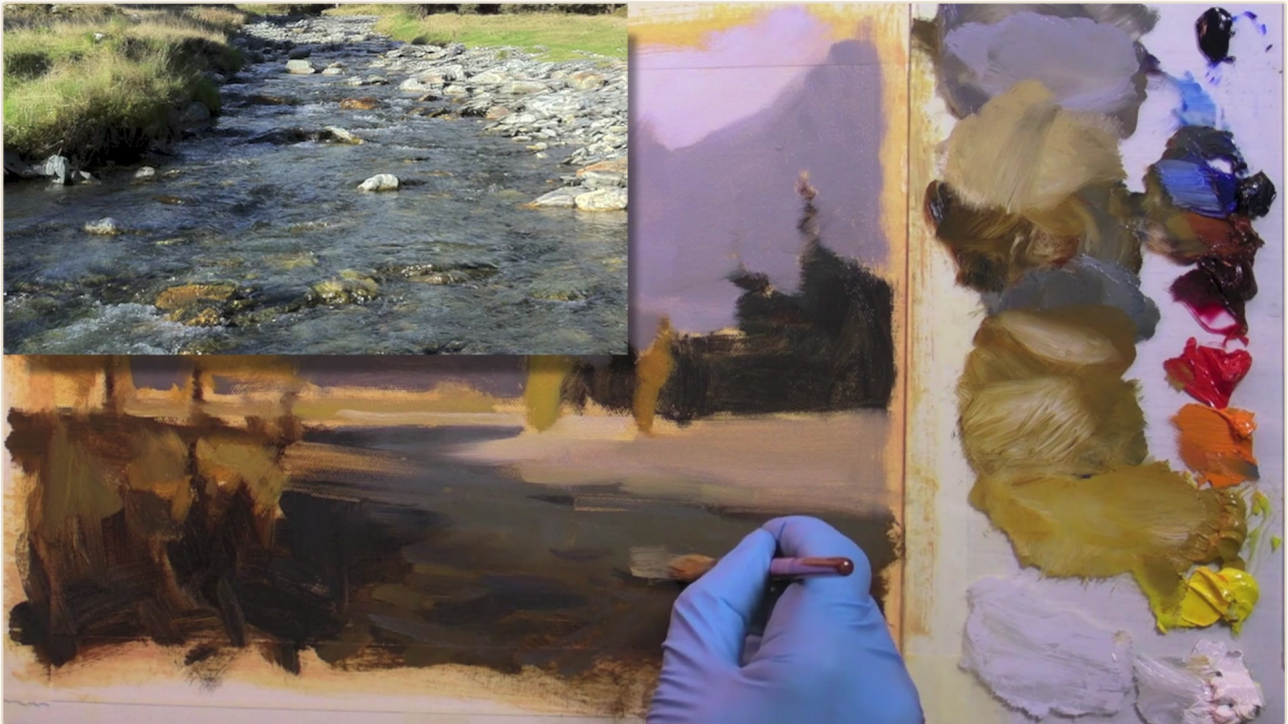
Consider Screen Variations

Remember that your screen may not be color calibrated the same as others, which can affect how you perceive the colors in the painting.

PRO TIP

Always consider that screen calibration and camera settings can alter the perceived colors of a painting.

14 Painting Rocks with Linear Perspective



Use Warm Gray for Rocks

Apply the same warm gray used on the bank to paint the rocks. Use the photograph as inspiration rather than copying it exactly.

Apply Linear Perspective

Ensure the bottom edges of the rocks become rounder as they come closer to the viewer. As the rocks recede into the distance, make their bottom edges flatter. This technique helps the rocks appear naturally placed on the water.

PRO TIP

Make the bottom edges of rocks rounder as they come closer to you and flatter as they recede.

15 Adjusting Chinaman's Bluff Value



Adjust Chinaman's Bluff Value

Compare the value of Chinaman's Bluff in your painting to your color study. If it appears too light, apply a slightly darker tone to the area. Since the initial layers are thin, adjusting the value at this stage is manageable.

PRO TIP

Ensure your initial layers are thin to allow for easy adjustments later.

16 Sunlit Trees and Atmosphere



Paint the Dark Line of Trees

Add a dark line of trees to the painting. This will serve as a base for the sunlit trees on Chinaman's Bluff.

Suggest Sunlit Trees

Use a mixture slightly lighter than the background grey to suggest the sunlit trees on Chinaman's Bluff. This contrast will help them stand out against the darker line of trees.

Create Atmospheric Perspective

As the hill rolls away into the background, adjust the sunlit tree color to incorporate more of the atmosphere color. This adjustment will create a convincing illusion of depth and distance.

PRO TIP

Use a lighter mixture than the background grey to make the sunlit trees stand out.

17 Exposed Rock and Value Relationships



Use Warmer Gray for Exposed Rock

Apply a slightly warmer gray to the exposed rock of the cliff face. This helps to accurately depict the rock's appearance in shadow.

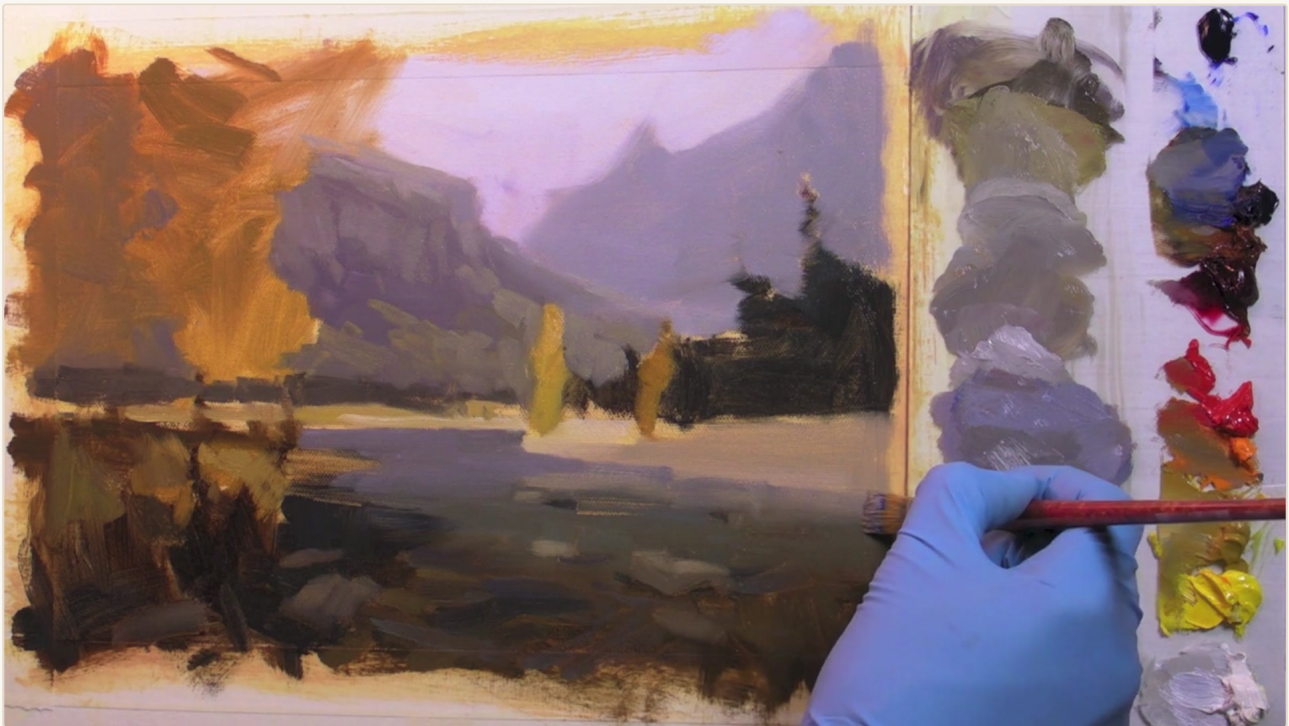
Compare Values Carefully

Be vigilant when comparing the values in shadowed areas. Ensure that the light-colored objects in shadow are not painted lighter than they actually are.

PRO TIP

Always compare the values in shadowed areas to maintain correct value relationships.

18 Tree Form and Interest



Assess Tree Form

Evaluate the tree on the left side of your painting. Consider how its form can be enhanced to add interest and depth to the composition.

Add Form to the Tree

Use your understanding of tree structure to introduce more detail and shape. Focus on creating a realistic silhouette that complements the surrounding landscape.

PRO TIP

Enhancing tree form can add depth and interest to your painting, even if it wasn't fully designed in your initial study.

19 Distant Mountain and Simplification



Plan Shadow Gaps

Leave intentional gaps in your brushwork to suggest shadows on the distant mountain. This requires some planning ahead to create a believable structure.

Mix Sunlit Tree Color

Mix a color for the sunlit trees that is slightly lighter than the existing gray and has a hint of green. This subtle adjustment helps differentiate the tree line from the mountain.

Adjust Color Above Tree Line

Slightly lighten the color above the tree line to indicate less dense vegetation. Gradually lighten the color as you move up towards the snow line.

Simplify with Major Shapes

Squint at your subject to eliminate detail and focus on major shapes of light and dark. Use a few brush strokes to suggest these simplified forms.

PRO TIP

Squint at your subject to simplify it into major shapes of light and dark, making it easier to paint.

20 Final Details and Adjustments



Add Sky Reflections

Apply a soft reflection of the sky on the top of the rock. Use a lighter tone to capture the subtle light bouncing off the surface.

Enhance Vertical Reflections

Introduce darker and warmer vertical reflections on the water. These should be slightly deeper in tone than the actual rock to create contrast.

Detail the Tree

Add small sparkles and leaves to the tree for a touch of realism. Use quick, light strokes to suggest movement and texture.

Highlight the Spotlight Area

In the center, apply thick, warm paint using yellow ochre and white. This will create a focal point with a glowing effect.

Adjust Rocks and Remove Unwanted Details

Refine the shapes of the rocks in the corner by adjusting odd shapes. Remove any unnecessary details and re-establish some darks to enhance depth.

PRO TIP

Use thick, warm paint in the spotlight area to create a vibrant focal point.

21 Finishing Touches and Textural Interest



Sign Your Painting

Add your signature to the painting to mark it as complete. This is an important step to finalize your work.

Adjust Hill Shape

Examine the shape of the hill for any regularities that might look unnatural. Use your brush to adjust the shape, ensuring it appears more organic and varied.

Re-establish Cliff Light

Revisit the cliffs and enhance the light areas. This will help to bring out the contrast and add depth to your painting.

Remove the Tape

Carefully peel off the tape from the edges of your painting. This reveals clean edges and gives your work a polished look.

Add Textural Interest

Focus on the centers of interest in your painting. Use a palette knife with thicker paint to add texture, enhancing the visual appeal and depth in those areas.

PRO TIP

Use a palette knife with thicker paint to add texture to focal areas, enhancing their visual interest.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by designing with no tan sketches, allowing your creativity to flow and refine your ideas before committing to the canvas. Transition from thumbnail sketches to a limited value study, setting a strong foundation for your composition and values. As you progress, maintain the essence of your initial vision by sticking closely to your thumbnail sketch, ensuring consistency and coherence throughout your painting process.

Prepare your workspace and materials to enhance your creativity and efficiency. Experiment with techniques like the spotlight effect to add drama and focus, and balance warm and cool colors to create depth and interest. Use atmospheric perspective to simulate depth by adjusting colors as they recede into the distance, and start with the sky to establish the value range and atmospheric perspective for your entire painting.

As you approach the final stages, focus on blocking in large areas of color and using painting mediums to keep the paint thin for easy adjustments. Pay attention to value relationships, especially in shadowed areas, and enhance the form of elements like trees to add depth and interest. Trust your initial brush strokes, and use your color study as a guide to make confident color decisions. Finish with final details and adjustments, adding textural interest and your signature to complete your masterpiece.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use no tan sketches to explore and refine your painting ideas before starting on the canvas.
- Stick closely to your thumbnail sketch to maintain the essence of your initial vision throughout the painting process.
- Experimenting with the spotlight effect can add dramatic focus to your painting.
- Balance warm and cool colors to create more interest and depth in your painting.
- Mix a large amount of the atmosphere color and use it to adjust colors of distant objects, enhancing the sense of depth.
- Avoid painting the river entirely blue; instead, use subtle variations to capture the reflective and transparent qualities of water.
- Ensure your initial layers are thin to allow for easy adjustments later.
- Squint at your subject to simplify it into major shapes of light and dark, making it easier to paint.



"Chinamans Bluff" by Richard Robinson 14 x 8" Oil on Canvas

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.

“Chinamans Bluff Plein Air” by Susie Gregory 11x14 oil on stretched canvas



"Chinamans Bluff Plein Air" by Susie Gregory 11x14 oil on stretched canvas

The background mountains seem to be creeping forward. Here's what it looks like lightening the values there just a little...

... immediately gives a better sensation of light and distance in the background.

I really like your idea for the painting and actually one of my notan studies was very similar to this. Something else you could look at here is the treatment of your trees - they look a bit formless to me like jelly or molten rocks. I know it's tricky giving them obvious form because they're in the shadow so you need to rely more on the outline shape of the tree, the deeper shadows underneath and sky colour reflecting off the upper foliage edges to give us some more subtle visual clues. Also the mirrored shapes of the trees either side of John look a little too manmade - one or both could do with changing. The clouds could do with some softer edges too. Other than those few things I really like this one - nice composition, colours and brushwork.

"Chinaman's Bluff" by Susie Gregory 16x20" oil on stretched canvas



"Chinaman's Bluff" by Susie Gregory 16x20" oil on stretched canvas

Design

You've stuck very close to photo which is fairly decently cropped already, though there are two things I would personally like to see changed. The first is that I always try to avoid running strong lines off at the corners of the canvas - I don't particularly know why I'm afraid, but it always seems a little too eye catching too me, but to be fair the top left corner is the best corner to do this in for Western readers if you have to do it. Personally I would raise or lower the line of that mountain on order to miss that corner.

The second thing is the light on the scene. This beautiful curving river leads your eye into the trees and mountains beyond, but I find in your painting the light does not reach a crescendo in that crucial focal area. Instead you've darkened the main copse of trees there and left the ones on the far right lighter which splits the attention between the left and right sides instead of coalescing in the middle. I understand you were delineating one set of trees from another using light and dark which is great, but in this case I personally would have painted that light the other way around. You've also seemingly placed a shadow over the foreground water which is a great way to lead in, but you haven't carried that shadow over onto the rocks which in turn creates a fairly high contrast area which draws the eye instead of pushing the eye onwards which is the usual purpose of a shadowed foreground. That could be changed pretty quickly with a dark glaze if you wanted to.

Color

The color overall is pretty good with nice warm/cool variations. I personally would have liked to see a clear distinction between midground and background, which is an element of composition as much as color. To do that you would lighten and cool the mountains. I often find graying the blue sky a little helps to add depth too.

The river seems to have gone a little too dark, creating a bit of a hole in the painting. Have a closer look at the multitude of colors present in the river in the photo. (There are even more on site!)

It's getting there, but I don't quite get a convincing sense of the color of the light on the scene, which means some lights are too cool and some too warm. The grasses on the left for instance could be warmer. I always find it harder getting that right when working from photos.

Brushwork

I love the energy in your brushwork - the overall feel is lively and interesting. I also very much like that soft glowing edge you've made in the cradle of the mountains which I think would be even more appealing if the mountains were lightened and subdued some more.

You have a nice balance of hard and soft edges, although some of those are not in the right place - like the halftone edge of the grasses on the left for instance which could be softer as could the sharp shadows under the far right trees and I would like to see a few sharper edges further up river to draw the eye.

Realism

From a distance it all looks pretty convincing. On closer inspection some of the drawing seems to have been compromised in the flurry of brushstrokes. The grassy bank on the right has dropped a little which raises the perceived viewpoint a little and may be contributing the slight confusion over the size of objects on that side of the river. (picky eh!?)

Some of the key river rocks could have been drawn better and you've missed out most of their reflections which all do help to assert the reality of the water.

You've done a valiant job of reestablishing some value structure in the overexposed clouds, but they could possibly be mistaken for snowy mountains due to their crisp shapes.

I would have liked to have seen a few key elements treated with a little finer rendering which often makes more sense of all the other loose brushwork - the light and shadow upstream, a few crisp rocks in the midground and the grasses on the left.

Overall I think it's a pleasing painting which could benefit from some refinements. Nice work.

"Chinamans Bluff" by Emmanuelle Mertian de Muller 12x10" - oil on canvas



"Chinamans Bluff" by Emmanuelle Mertian de Muller 12x10" - oil on canvas

Design

notan

I really like the design. When it's simplified to it's basic dark/light design I can more easily see why - large dynamic shapes leading me into the painting. You've taken the concept of the curving river and turned it into what could be a grassy plain or a dirt track and the color design of warm against cool works very well and is immediately attractive to my eye even when viewed at a very small size which is always my test of a good design - if it looks good on a postage stamp, it'll look great on a wall.

Color

As I said the warm/cool thing is great and you've also varied the hues within those major groups enough to keep them interesting. The light blue in the mountains suggest smoke or mist to me and possibly could stand with some warming up just a little, as could the snow in sunlight to keep it in the same light as those warm clouds. I could imagine a slightly stronger spotlight effect further down the valley too. There are just a few odd flicks of dark green which seem to float out of place at the base of the mountains.

Brushwork

Lovely brushwork - very confident. I'm enjoying those strokes leading into the painting - they're a really beautiful feature of this painting in my opinion.

Realism

Overall it's really pretty good in terms of giving a convincing illusion of space. There is one major thing that pokes in my eye and that's the size of the trees on the right. Although I do like the size of them compositionally, there doesn't seem any way to reconcile their size with the size of the trees on the left and that puts the entire foreground into question - is it a broad plain of tussock or a dirt track? If you look at the image in a mirror for a second you'll get a new perspective on this because you're used to it now. To my eye those trees need some pruning and the track could do with some other elements to give it better scale, like some fence posts and some mustering sheep for instance.

I've picked on the things I personally would change which are pretty minor because overall I think its a really nice painting and I wouldn't mind it on my wall at all.

"Chinaman's Bluff" by Stuart J. Gourlay Oil on linen panel 12 x 16"



"Chinaman's Bluff" by Stuart J. Gourlay Oil on linen panel 12 x 16"

VERY nice Stuart, love the impressionistic brushwork - gives it a shimmering sense of light when combined with all your subtle grays. Also really enjoying your use of soft and hard edges - gives a very subtle call to the center of interest upstream. Can't really fault this one except the mountain pushing against the top edge, which you've subdued well with cloud, but my eye still wants a bit more space there! :- (but, that's a pretty minor thing and easily fixed if you were so inclined. Nice Job!

One thing I might say is that I tend to look for opportunities to push color a little (or a lot) in one area of the painting, while subduing it in others, I guess in an attempt to capture that special moment in nature when everything coalesces into the 'perfect' lighting conditions for a certain scene. It looks like you've put a very subtle shadow across the foreground which is nice and something I would do but then I would tend to push the colors a little in the rest of the foreground. By pushing I mean raising their chroma/saturation a little and often the value. Right now, to my eyes, you have a very nice scene, capably painted and captured, and the location is very special but the lighting is just your everyday lighting. More and more I'm looking for lighting conditions that are very brief and special and make people stop in their tracks and say 'Oh!, that's NICE!' That's the goal anyway. You're at that point where you can reach for that sort of thing too. Playing with chroma is one small aspect of playing with the lighting and of course there is more to learn about that than we've got time on earth for, but it's an exciting goal to aim for.