



The White Jug

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/111-The-White-Jug>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, we delve into the art of setting up a still life, a crucial step that sets the stage for your painting's success. I've arranged a warm-colored panel on the right and back, with a simple lamp casting light from above and slightly in front. A black panel on the side and a top panel casting a shadow onto the background leave our still life in full light. Though it appears simple, this setup took me two hours to perfect, and I challenge you to do the same. The key lies in arranging your chosen elements—each with distinct shapes, colors, textures, and sizes—into a composition that captivates. Variety is essential, not just in your selection but also in the spacing and positioning of each item. For instance, maintaining the pear's unique shape rather than aligning it with the grapes' roundness adds interest. This process is an art form in itself, so take your time, experiment, and learn. Whether it takes hours or days, capturing the perfect setup is invaluable. As we progress, you'll also learn to harness the quick-drying nature of acrylics, which demands swift decision-making and brushwork, ultimately elevating your skills to match those of oil painting.



"The White Jug" - Acrylic on Canvas by Richard Robinson



REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



Original design



I might have cropped it like this.

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

- Golden Open Acrylics
- Burnt Sienna
- Ultramarine Blue
- Alizarine Crimson
- Cadmium Red Light
- Cadmium Orange
- Yellow Ochre
- Cadmium Yellow Light
- Titanium White
- Canvas
- 14×14" Fredrix Ultrasmooth canvas. Giving it a light sand before painting helps the paint stick better.
- Brushes
- [Rosemary & Co. Richard Robinson Brush Set](#)
- Palette Knife
- Paper Towels

1 Acrylic vs Oil Painting



Understand Medium Differences

Recognize that acrylics dry faster than oils, which can be both a challenge and an advantage. This requires quicker decision-making and brushwork.

Aim for Mastery

Set a goal to bring your acrylic painting skills to the same level as your oil painting skills. Practice consistently to improve your technique and comfort with acrylics.

PRO TIP

Acrylics dry quickly, so work efficiently to make the most of their fast-drying properties.

2 Abstract Pattern Arrangement



Squint to Simplify

Squint your eyes to simplify the scene into an abstract pattern of colored shapes. This helps you focus on the arrangement rather than the details.

Embrace Freedom

Enjoy the freedom of arranging your still life. Unlike landscape painting, you have the liberty to experiment with the composition of colors and shapes.

Train Your Eye

Use this exercise to train your eye to recognize what looks good and interesting as an abstract pattern on the canvas.

PRO TIP

Squinting helps simplify the scene into abstract shapes, making it easier to arrange visually pleasing patterns.

3 Practice Importance



Embrace Practice

Understand that setting up a still life can be challenging. Accept that it becomes easier with consistent practice. Dedicate time regularly to improve your skills and gain confidence.

PRO TIP

Consistent practice is key to making still life setups easier and more intuitive.

4 Canvas Preparation and Materials



Prepare the Canvas

Eliminate the white of the canvas by applying a wash of burnt sienna and yellow ochre. This creates an interesting base and helps set the tone for your painting.

Gather Materials

Use acrylic colors for this painting. Have a selection of simple brushes and a palette knife ready for later use.

Use Retarded Medium

Add retarded medium to your spray bottle and cleaning bottle for brushes. Spray this mixture on the paints and canvas throughout the painting process to keep the paint wet and achieve wet-in-wet effects similar to oil paints.

PRO TIP

Use a retarded medium in your spray bottle to maintain wet paint and achieve smooth blending effects.

5 Drawing and Value Range



Draw the Baseline

Start with the baseline of your composition. Use your brush to measure and transfer the baseline to the canvas, ensuring it aligns with key elements like the back of the pear, the top of the handle, and the grapes.

Sketch Major Lines and Shapes

Continue drawing by sketching the major lines and shapes. Focus on capturing the overall structure of the composition accurately.

Apply the Darkest Darks

Mix ultramarine and alizarin crimson to create your darkest darks. Apply this mixture to the canvas, ensuring it is thick enough to prevent the canvas from showing through. You may need to apply a second layer for depth.

Block in the Lightest Lights

Block in the lightest lights using a very warm white. Mix in some yellow and orange to reflect the yellow dull light from the lamp. This should be just a tone away from pure white.

PRO TIP

Ensure your darkest darks are thick enough to cover the canvas completely, preventing any show-through.

6 Jug Painting Technique



Establish the Dark Side of the Jug

Mix a warm green for the dark side of the jug, reflecting the warm light from the tabletop. Ensure this area remains wet and juicy for easy blending.

Add Warmer Reflected Light

Introduce even warmer colors under the jug to represent the reflected light. This adds depth and realism to the painting.

Apply Warm Light Colors

Use warm colors for the light areas of the jug, as the light source is a yellow bulb. Focus on placing the right colored shapes in the correct positions with appropriate edges.

Segment and Blend Value Planes

Mix about five different value planes for the jug as it transitions from dark to light. Soften the edges between these planes to create the appearance of a smoothly rounded object.

PRO TIP

Segment your shapes to avoid mixing an infinite variety of colors, focusing on softening edges for a rounded appearance.

7 Reflected Light and Color



Warm and Light Transition

Make the jug warmer and lighter as it curves towards the light. This will help convey the light source and create a sense of volume.

Add Green Reflections

Observe the area near the pear where green light reflects onto the jug. Incorporate a hint of green here to capture this subtle interaction.

Smooth Value Transitions

Smooth the edges between different value planes on the jug. Focus on transitioning smoothly rather than blending completely to maintain distinct areas.

Capture Warm Reflected Light

Under the spout, add warm reflected light. This area contains subtle color variations that enhance the realism of the jug.

PRO TIP

Incorporate subtle color variations to capture the complexity of reflected light.

8 Background and Texture



Block in the Background

Use a painted backdrop instead of a smooth surface for the background. This approach enhances the painterly quality of your work, allowing for freer brushwork.

Add Texture

Apply a second layer of acrylic paint to build interesting texture. If the first layer is too thin, use this opportunity to create depth. Scrape back some areas with a tissue to add varied texture.

PRO TIP

Use a painted backdrop to enhance the painterly quality and allow for freer brushwork.

9 Surface Reflection and Playfulness



Observe Surface Reflections

Examine the surface the objects are sitting on. Notice how the varnished wooden box reflects the colors and shapes of the objects above it.

Paint Reflections

Paint the reflections by matching the colors to the objects. For instance, make the reflection under the cherries slightly redder and the area under the white jug slightly lighter.

Adjust Shadows

Extend the shadow of the pear further up the back. If you lose the shadow, reintroduce some light to save the effect.

Embrace Playfulness

Allow yourself to be less concerned with precision. Splash the paint around to lose tightness and embrace a more playful approach.

PRO TIP

Match the reflection colors to the objects for a realistic effect.

10 Painting Grapes



Establish the Base Color

Use a very dark red for the base of the grapes. This semi-transparent color allows the shadow side to appear stronger, adding depth to the grapes.

Add Light and Highlights

Apply a lighter color to the areas where the light hits the grapes. For shiny grapes, use the exact color of the light for the highlights to create a realistic shine.

Incorporate Reflected Light

Add subtle touches of reflected light to enhance realism. Introduce a hint of the white jug's reflection on the top surface of the grape and a light brown reflection from the wood on the shadow side.

Consider the Grape's Surface

Remember that grapes often have a greyish coating when fresh. Consider this texture in your painting to add authenticity.

Adjust Highlight Intensity

Vary the intensity of highlights to create depth. Dull the highlights on grapes that are further back in space and carefully place highlights to indicate the light's position relative to each grape.

PRO TIP

Use a palette knife for precise highlights to enhance the grape's shine and realism.

11 Soft and Sharp Edges



Strengthen the Background

Reinforce the background by adding more paint to ensure it stands out. This will help create a contrast with the objects in the foreground.

Create a Soft Edge on the Pear

Blend the back edge of the pear into the background to achieve a soft edge. This technique adds variation by transitioning from soft to sharp edges and helps the pear appear to recede into space.

PRO TIP

Blend edges into the background to create depth and variation in your painting.

12 Detailing with Small Brush



Use a Small Pointy Brush for Details

Select a small pointy brush to draw fine lines in specific areas that require precision. These lines will stand out, especially when placed against darker areas, so handle them with care.

Steady Your Hand with a Mall Stick

Use a mall stick to steady your hand while painting important lines. This will help maintain control and precision, especially for lines that need to be very light against dark backgrounds.

Limit the Use of the Small Brush

Avoid the temptation to use the small brush across the entire painting. Overuse can lead to a tight, overly detailed finish. Reserve it for necessary touch-ups and fine details only.

PRO TIP

Use a mall stick to steady your hand for precise lines with the small brush.

13 Final Touches and Wet on Wet Technique



Add a Dark Base to the Stem

Apply a dark base color to the little stem area. This will create depth and contrast for the lighter details to come.

Finish with Light Details

Add some light touches to the stem to complete the detail work. This will enhance the realism and make the stem stand out.

Wet the Canvas

Moisten the entire canvas again, especially the background and left-hand side. Keeping the surface wet helps avoid a hard-edged, grainy effect.

Achieve a Wet on Wet Look

Work over the shadowed edges while the canvas is wet. This technique helps push the shadows back into space, mimicking the wet on wet oil painting effect with acrylics.

PRO TIP

Keep the canvas wet to avoid hard-edged, grainy effects and achieve a smooth, blended look.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by embracing the unique qualities of acrylics. Their fast-drying nature demands swift decision-making and confident brushwork, offering both a challenge and an opportunity to refine your skills. Begin by simplifying your scene into abstract patterns, focusing on the arrangement of shapes and colors rather than intricate details. This approach will help you develop an eye for composition and enhance your creative freedom.

As you progress, practice consistently to build confidence in setting up still life compositions. Prepare your canvas with a warm base to set the tone of your painting, and use a retarded medium to maintain a wet surface, allowing for smooth blending and a painterly quality. Pay attention to the value range, ensuring your darkest darks and lightest lights are well-defined to create depth and contrast.

Focus on capturing the nuances of light and reflection, particularly on the jug and surrounding objects. Use warm and varied colors to depict the interplay of light, and incorporate subtle color variations to enhance realism. As you add texture to the background and reflections on surfaces, embrace a playful approach, allowing for expressive brushwork. Finally, refine your painting with careful detailing and ensure your canvas remains moist to achieve a smooth, blended finish.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Work efficiently with acrylics to leverage their fast-drying properties.
- Simplify scenes into abstract patterns by squinting.
- Consistent practice makes still life setups more intuitive.
- Use a retarded medium to keep paint wet for blending.
- Ensure darkest darks are thick enough to prevent show-through.
- Segment shapes and soften edges for a rounded appearance.
- Match reflection colors to objects for realism.
- Use a mall stick for precise lines with a small brush.



"The White Jug" - Acrylic on Canvas by Richard Robinson

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.

"The Corner Table" by Sharon Casavant



"The Corner Table" 16 x 20" Oil on Canvas by Sharon Casavant

Design

Nice painting Sharon. The design is very eye catching, as much for it's dark/light contrast as for it's colour and shape placements. I can see you've spent some considerable time playing with ideas and it has paid off. It feels to me that there's a tad to much space around your subjects (this is totally subjective of course), and I might have gone so far as to crop it as in the image below right. To me, the cropped image looks stronger and more dynamic - there is more light space on show and your main subject fills more of the canvas. It also makes the crimson less overpowering. However, maybe I like it more like that because I'm a guy. Your design has more femininity about it - with the plush crimson setting and flowing fabric it reminds me of a jewel on a large velvet cushion. Something to think about anyway.

Colour

It is a nice arrangement of colour shapes as I said and you have some good strong colour in your fruit but what it's lacking is a coherent colour for the light on the scene. The light on the jug and bowl and fabric looks very cool whilst the light on the fruit and table looks very warm. You need to start looking at the overall colour of the light on your subject. I know how difficult it is to paint whitish objects - to get those grays on the right side of warm or cool is extremely challenging. It just looks to me like you chose the wrong side this time. Inventing the crimson setting colour is a hugely tricky thing to do and get right simply because it changes nearly every colour in your painting, or should do, so my advice would be that if you want to paint a crimson fabric backdrop, go get a crimson fabric backdrop. You and I are not yet at the point where we can go making these things up willy-nilly without paying a heavy price in terms of realism.

Yes you've used your artistic licence which is great, but how much you risk inventing should depend on the goals you have for your painting.

Brushwork

I do like the movement in your brushwork - again it seems to be very feminine, full of long languid swishiness - beautiful. You nearly have that resonating through the whole piece. It's in the bowl, the jug and fabric, but sadly you tightened up a bit on the fruit, which is understandable because they are smaller forms, but I would really like to see that lyrical brushwork throughout the whole painting. Maybe on the next one?

Realism

Again, nice to see you using your artistic licence in changing the colour of the setting and the inclusion of a table and glass bowl, however you lose a lot of realism when you try to paint imagined things like that. Also, you've broken the unity of some of your shadows by making the reflected lights to light in value compared to the shadow. Keep in mind throughout the whole painting, 'what am I painting? Is it light, or is it shadow?' Be clear about that and your subjects will be much more solidly real.

"Grape Time" by Sandra Kelly



"Grape Time" 12 x 12" Oil in Canvas by Sandra Kelly

Design

The placement of the objects and colour shapes seems to me to be very pleasing and harmonious. The pear leads back to the grapes which leads back to the jug and the whiteness of the jug is mostly in shadow and slightly out of focus so it doesn't seem to want to jump in front of the pear. You haven't quite captured the same depth with your painting - the viewing angle is a bit higher so the three grapes have shuffled forwards to compete with the pear and the pear seems to be edging a bit to close to the bottom of the canvas to me too. Those are pretty minor points to me though. I like how you've softened the background to help push all those warm colours back into space.

Colour

The colour in your painting is what really caught my attention. It's warm and light-filled and with all the scumbled additions of reflected light has produced an interestingly varied colour space in the style of the impressionists. You are very close to a really stunning colour treatment there - I think that if you had worked over the painting with thicker paint, adding hue variations everywhere without changing value it would have jumped up another level. You always do that at the risk of what you have there already though, so it's a gamble.

What I mean about 'hue variations with a change in value' is this: take the brown colour of the base everything's sitting on, as a flat colour it's ok, but a bit boring, so we add variations of value into it - getting light towards the light source and darker away, or where it's cast into shadow. We can also look for

reflected light in it, like a green tinge from the pear, or red from the grapes, or something from the background. So now it's more interesting. Now we can throw some more colour in there like a cooler gray, or a mauve (provided they're kept the same value as the base colour - the same degree of light or dark), and if that's made it too cool we can add some strokes or scumbles of hotter orange to balance it out. That's leading to really impressionistic colour usage, and I only mention it because your painting seems to be headed in that direction. It may be better for you at the moment to keep trying to paint what you're seeing, because that's challenge enough, but impressionistic colour is something you can explore anytime.

Brushwork

Your loose brushwork and scumbles are all adding to that impressionistic feel which is lovely. I like how you've played with lost edges - keep working on that. It looks to me on close inspection that you may have a slight issue with your canvas being too absorbent. Or perhaps you're using turps in place of a painting medium? Hard to tell from a photo. I don't use scumbling or dry brushing much at all in my work because I prefer the juicier look of wet in wet, but each to his own. If you do want a juicier look to the painting you'll need to use more paint, don't use turps or thinners for anything but the sketch, and make sure your canvas is well sealed with gesso or primer beforehand.

Realism

The painting doesn't score very high on realism because the drawing is a bit loose in some areas and the values wobble in and out of place in the darks but that doesn't stop it being a charming and colourful piece. Well done.

"Red Grapes, Green Pear" by Denise Maxwell



"Red Grapes, Green Pear" Oil on Canvas by Denise Maxwell

Design

Great painting Denise. The design is appealing with enough variety of sizes, shapes and spacing to keep the eye interested and the ploy of the grapes breaking forward of the setting is interesting too. The old slab of wood is a nice textural addition and suits the other elements. Your background in the photo has a little more light in it which I thought was a bit of a shame to have lost that in the final painting, and I have the same regret for my own demo painting.

Colour

The colour in the pear and grapes and wood are great. You've managed to capture the translucency of the grapes and even the gray coating on their surface. The form of the pear is modeled nicely but the colour does seem to get a little chalky in the half tones which is often a sign of blending your light into your shadow rather than mixing a separate halftone where the colour is often more vibrant than anywhere else. The shadow colours in the jug seem to me to be a little too cool although I don't expect they were as warm as what we're seeing in the photo. You also have some sharp edges between value planes there which are not helping with the roundness of the form. In the photo there is a green stalk in the grapes which I thought nicely related the grapes to the pear and you might have included that although you did well to improvise the detail of the stalk at the back of the grapes.

Brushwork

Your brushwork in the grapes and the front of the wood is fresh and bold and joyful, but in the pear and more so in the jug as often happens with overworking problem areas you've lost some of that magic.

Realism

I can see you struggled with the ellipses in the jug which you certainly improved on in your second attempt. They're still not quite there, and they're always tricky things to draw accurately with a brush. (You'll notice I got the grooves in my jug drawn at an odd angle too!) When I'm trying to get these right I imagine a central horizontal line running through the apexes and even hold a ruler up to it which helps to construct your curves symmetrically on the left and right. These ellipses are not symmetrical top to bottom though. Any text on perspective drawing will teach you more on that. Getting the hand to do what the brain knows is another story though. The tops of cylinders often pose a problem because our brain knows the shape is actually circular and wants to draw that shape rather than what the eye is seeing. Also, notice in the photo how the middle angled section of the jug is so much brighter than the vertical sides because it is turned up towards the light? You've missed that in your painting and it is flattening the form. Other than that the realism is quite convincing, especially the grapes and the textured wood and you've even managed some little dents in the pear. Getting there, getting there!

"Grapes, Pear and a White Teapot" by Annie Cullen



"Grapes, Pear and a White Teapot" Oil on Canvas, 12x16" by Annie Cullen

Design

It's an interesting choice putting the white teapot on a white base and the way the deep red from the grapes is echoed in the background makes me think of the Yin & Yang symbol - dark on light, light on dark. I would have been tempted to place the background grapes behind the left side of the teapot to help balance it out in that direction. It seems a little like a ship with all its cargo balance on the bow at the moment. Just a thought.

Colour

It's so tricky to mix those grays in the white jug isn't it!? I really struggled with that too. You haven't quite captured the subtlety of the colour/value gradation around the jug so it's ended up a little flat, but you really made this hard on yourself with the white base being reflected into the shadow side of the jug which makes the difference between dark and light very subtle indeed and you've painted the core shadow a little too dark here - you're close though! The grapes are great, so no worries there, but the pear needs a little deeper shadow side and not so much white in the lights which have gone a bit pasty and lost the powerful green that was available to you there. If you try painting a pear without using any white (except for using white in the mixture for the highlight), you can avoid getting pasty colour there. The same goes for a lot of things actually - we often reach for the white far too soon in our mixtures at the expense of truly rich colour. Your base looks to be suffering from the same problem, besides it being slightly too light - especially on the left side where it's furthest from the light.

Brushwork

A little to much fiddling and glazing with thin layers here for my liking, but hey that's just where you are at the moment. As I suggested to Stephen and anyone wanting to paint 'looser' more expressive paintings, try bigger brushes, more paint, stepping back from the canvas every few strokes and squinting or defocusing your eyes every time you look at your subject - remember it's the big shapes of colour we are after. If you get those right with the right soft or hard edges the jigsaw comes together from a few feet away. To me it's the difference between writing a poem or a song about a subject, or a long-winded clinical essay about its visual properties. Easier said than done though.

Realism

I've picked your painting apart but it's actually a pretty darn good rendition of the subject and I know you haven't done many still life paintings so I think you've done very well. One thing I noticed you working on here was the lost and found edges which is fantastic - keep going with that! I'd caution you to look again at the cast shadow edges under the front edge of the grapes however - the softness in your painting goes against the properties of the other shadows you so carefully built. Remember soft edges on cast shadows speak of a diffused light source or a longer distance from the object casting the shadow. Again, picking. Overall, pretty good I thought.