



# Oranges

---

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/110-Oranges>

MY PAINTING CLUB

# Introduction

---

In this chapter, we dive into the vibrant world of still life painting with a focus on the humble yet striking orange. We've moved on from the pear and grapes, though you're welcome to include them if you wish. The white vessel remains, offering another opportunity to master those subtle greys that challenged us in the last workshop. This time, I've added leaves, stems, and a white tablecloth to enrich the composition and elevate the complexity of the scene. You'll learn to capture the luminous quality of the cut oranges, with the light source strategically placed above and slightly behind them. This positioning creates a stunning stained glass effect as light passes through the orange flesh, resulting in a powerful, high-chroma color. This lesson is designed to refine your skills, offering a rewarding challenge that enhances your understanding of light, color, and composition in still life painting. Let's embrace the beauty of these oranges and explore the depth they bring to our canvas.



*"Oranges" - Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson*



**REFERENCE PHOTO**

*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
- 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 Orange Color and Lighting



### Enhance Orange Color

Focus on capturing the vibrant orange color of the cut oranges. The light source should be positioned above and slightly behind the oranges to create a stained glass effect. This setup allows the light to pass through the orange flesh, producing a powerful, high-chroma color.

#### PRO TIP

*Position the light source to come through the orange flesh for a stained glass effect.*

## 2 Light Effects and Composition



### Capture the Central Light

Focus on the powerful light in the center of the still life. Use the white tablecloth to reflect light onto the objects, creating a dynamic interplay of light and color. This will make the center of the still life vibrant and full of energy.

### Create Light Effects

Allow the light to bounce from the tablecloth to the objects and back. This interaction will make each object a colored light source, enhancing the overall luminosity of the scene. This technique will make the center of the still life almost explode with color and light.

### Shift Composition to Enhance Light

Shift the composition slightly to the left. This adjustment will let the right side of the painting capture the unfolding explosion of light, creating a gradient from light to dark. This not only adds drama but also guides the viewer's eye to the central area of the painting.

#### PRO TIP

*Use the white tablecloth to reflect light and create dynamic interactions between objects.*

### 3 Color Progression and Unity



#### Incorporate Color Progression

Add a red nectarine to your still life to create a progression of color. This technique involves transitioning colors in a spectrum, such as from red to orange to yellow. It helps achieve color unity in your composition.

#### PRO TIP

*Experiment with color progression to enhance unity in your still life paintings.*

## 4 Palette and Initial Canvas Preparation



### Prepare Your Palette

Mix a mid-grey using burnt sienna, ultramarine blue, and white. This grey will assist in mixing the greys for the white vessel. Arrange your primary colors: blue, cad red light, and cad yellow light, along with alizarin and cadmium orange as secondary colors.

### Select Your Brushes

Choose a combination of bristle and synthetic brushes to suit different textures and effects in your painting.

### Set Up a Value Scale

Place a value scale under your canvas to help judge values accurately, especially under harsh lighting conditions.

### Prepare the Canvas

Use walnut oil as your painting medium. Mix it with warm colors to create a thin wash and tone the canvas. This thin layer will enhance wet-on-wet effects in your painting.

#### PRO TIP

*Use a value scale to accurately judge values, especially when working under harsh lighting.*

## 5 Setting Limits with Drawing and Color



### Set the Limits with Drawing

Draw the top and bottom limits of the vessel. Begin by placing a center line to guide the symmetry of the object. Use this center line to judge the angles and proportions accurately.

### Indicate Shadow Placement

Lightly sketch where the shadows will fall on the object. This will help in planning the values and contrasts in your painting.

### Establish Color Limits

Identify and apply the darkest dark and the lightest light in your composition. Use these extremes to set the range of values, ensuring no darks will be darker and no lights will be lighter than these established limits.

#### PRO TIP

*Always start with a center line for symmetrically shaped objects to maintain balance and accuracy.*

## 6 Painting the Orange and Reflected Light



### Paint the Base of the Nectarine

Start with a dark red at the base of the nectarine. Use large brush strokes and soften the edges as you move up through orange and yellow towards the light.

### Apply Translucent Orange

Use a pure cadmium orange with a touch of yellow to capture the powerful translucent color of the orange. Apply it where the light hits the fruit.

### Utilize Existing Colors

Look for other areas in the painting where you can use the color already on your brush. Adjust the hue slightly if needed, considering whether it should be warmer or cooler.

### Shade the Shadow Area

For the shadow area of the orange, use a brownish color to represent dark orange. Pay attention to the reflected light bouncing off the tablecloth and the nearby slice of orange.

#### PRO TIP

*Always consider where else you can use the color on your brush to speed up the painting process.*

## 7 Painting Dark Leaves



### Mix Dark Green

Combine ultramarine blue with cadmium orange to create a warm dark green. This mixture will help accentuate the brightness of the orange by providing a contrasting background.

### Add Light to Leaves

Introduce some yellow to the dark green mixture as the leaf moves into the light. This will create a natural transition and add depth to the leaves.

#### PRO TIP

*Use ultramarine blue with cadmium orange to mix a warm dark green for contrasting backgrounds.*

## 8 Background and Light Contrast



### Create a Dark Background

Mix burnt sienna and ultramarine blue to achieve a deep, dark tone for the background. Apply this dark color to the area behind the central part of the still life to enhance the contrast and make the central colors appear more vibrant.

### Add a Gradient

Avoid a flat black background by incorporating a gradient. Transition from dark to light as you move from left to right in the background. This technique adds depth and interest to your painting.

#### PRO TIP

*A darker background enhances the perceived brightness of the light areas in front of it.*

## 9 Shadow Colors and Ambient Light



### Identify Occlusion Shadows

Observe the occlusion shadow in your painting. Notice if it has a slightly cooler tinge, which can indicate the ambient light in the room.

### Consider Ambient Light

Determine the source of ambient light, such as a window, that may be casting cooler light into the room. This can affect the color of your shadows.

### Block in Shadow Areas

Use a pre-mixed mid-gray to block in large areas of shadow. Allow a little warmth to remain in the brush from painting warmer shadows beneath the orange to add depth.

#### PRO TIP

*Use ambient light sources to inform the color temperature of your shadows.*

## 10 Table Corner Shadows



### Add Dark Corner Shadow

Paint the darker corner of the table to create a subtle accent. Soften the edge as much as possible to prevent it from drawing too much attention.

### Create Sharp Shadow

On the opposite side, add a sharper shadow. This will help balance the visual interest on the left side of the painting.

#### PRO TIP

*Soften edges of shadows to keep them from becoming focal points.*

## 11 Painting the White Vessel



### Paint the Shadow on the White Vessel

Focus on the shadow of the white vessel and how it relates to the dark background. Use a dark grey to capture the shadow, ensuring the value is correct. Squint to better perceive the difference between the background and the shadow side of the vessel.

### Add Reflected Oranges

Introduce the oranges reflecting onto the shiny surface of the vessel. Be cautious not to raise the value too much with these reflected colors. Keeping the reflected colors too light can disrupt the unity and solidity of the shadows.

#### PRO TIP

*Squint to better perceive value differences between the background and the shadow side of the vessel.*

## 12 Color Comparison Questions



### Ask Key Color Questions

When painting subtle colors, consistently ask yourself two questions to maintain accuracy. First, determine if the color you are applying is lighter or darker than the adjacent color. Then, assess if it is warmer or cooler than the color it is next to. This practice helps maintain balance and harmony in your painting.

#### PRO TIP

*Always compare new colors to adjacent ones by asking if they are lighter or darker, warmer or cooler.*

## 13 Drawing Handles and Gradients



### Draw the Handles

Carefully draw the two handles, ensuring they are symmetrical and aligned. This precision is crucial as they need to be nearly identical.

### Add the Cast Shadow

Use a dark tone on your brush to paint the cast shadow on the top of the handles. This shadow adds depth and realism to the handles.

### Create a Subtle Gradient

Introduce a subtle gradient across the top, making it slightly darker on the left. This gradient enhances the dimensionality of the surface.

#### PRO TIP

*Ensure the handles are symmetrical to maintain balance and realism in your painting.*

## 14 Half Tone and Gradation



### Apply the Half Tone

Add the half tone or mid tone where the light transitions into the shadow. This area is tricky, so take care to blend it smoothly.

### Soften the Edges

Soften the edges of the half tone to achieve a smooth gradation from left to right. Use the color on your brush efficiently to speed up the painting process.

#### PRO TIP

*Use the color on your brush while it's there to maintain a smooth workflow.*

## 15 Lighting and Warmth in Painting



### Observe the Light Source

Notice the yellow hue from the incandescent 100 watt light bulb illuminating the scene. This warm light affects the colors in your painting, especially in the lighter areas.

### Identify Warm Shadows

Examine the shadow in the middle of the scene. Recognize that it is not a typical gray but a warm, light tone. This contributes to the glowing effect in the painting.

### Incorporate Light Colors

Ensure that all elements in the very light areas of your painting reflect the color of the light source. This will enhance the overall warmth and cohesion of the scene.

#### PRO TIP

*Use warm tones in shadows to create a glowing effect.*

## 16 Brush Stroke Considerations



### Consider Each Brush Stroke

Before applying a brush stroke, think about the color and shape it needs to be. Decide exactly where the shape should be placed on the canvas.

### Determine Edge Qualities

Consider what edges the brush stroke will require. Decide if the stroke needs to trail off, be soft, or have a sharp edge on one side.

### Achieve Desired Effects

Think about what you want to achieve with each brush stroke. This approach helps in achieving pure, bright colors more easily.

#### PRO TIP

*Consider each brush stroke carefully to achieve the desired effect and maintain color purity.*

## 17 Adding Warmth and Avoiding Ad-libbing



### Add Warmth to Highlights

Introduce more yellow into the highlights of the cloth. This will create a warm glow, giving the impression that the oranges are casting their light onto the white tablecloth.

### Balance the Painting

Add a bit more color to certain areas to balance the composition. Use this opportunity to create slightly sharper edges where necessary.

### Avoid Thick Over Thick

If you have thick paint in an area, consider wiping it out and redoing it rather than applying more thick paint over it. This approach maintains clarity and prevents muddiness.

### Focus on Observation

Concentrate on painting what you see rather than improvising. Straying too far from observation can reduce the realism of your still life.

#### PRO TIP

*Introduce more yellow into highlights to create a warm glow and enhance the sensation of light.*

## 18 Reflections and Juiciness



### Add Reflected Light

Observe the edge of the orange where light reflects off the sugar pot. Apply a subtle highlight to this area to help the orange appear more rounded and dimensional.

### Enhance Juiciness with Shadows

Notice the slight shadow on the inside edge of the orange. Deepen this shadow to enhance the juicy appearance of the fruit.

#### PRO TIP

*Use reflected light to create a sense of dimension and realism in your painting.*

## 19 Fine Details and Realism



### Add Fine Details to Leaves

Use the very edge of your brush loaded with a thin line of paint to define the edges of the leaves. Add a few darker accents to enhance depth and realism.

### Create Warm Shadows

Prepare a warm shadow for the stick to sit on by mixing a suitable color. This will help ground the stick and add dimension to the composition.

### Use a Sable Brush for Fine Details

Employ a sable brush, typically used for watercolor, to paint fine details. Ensure the brush is well-cleaned to maintain its effectiveness with oil paint.

### Add Metallic Details

Utilize a fine synthetic brush, similar to a short rigor brush, to paint thin strips of metallic detail. This brush is ideal for creating delicate strokes.

### Paint Reflections

Add two tiny reflections: the first long one for the large orange and a smaller one for the sliced piece on the tablecloth. Adjust the lines to suit your viewing angle, even if they differ slightly from the reference photograph.

#### PRO TIP

*Use a sable brush for fine details, ensuring it's well-cleaned to maintain its effectiveness with oil paint.*

## 20 Finishing Touches



### Add Highlights

Apply a few small spots of light to the oranges. This will give them a wet and juicy appearance, enhancing their realism.

### Add Signature

Use a touch of red from the nectarine to create your signature. Place it subtly in the background to tie the composition together.

#### PRO TIP

*Use highlights sparingly to enhance the juiciness of the fruit without overpowering the composition.*

## 21 Vibrant Color and Neutral Surroundings



### Use Pure Cadmium Orange

Apply pure cadmium orange for the bright sections of the oranges. Add a tiny bit of cadmium yellow light to enhance the vibrancy. Avoid adding white to maintain the intensity of the color.

### Surround with Neutral Colors

Ensure the surrounding areas are painted with more neutral colors. This contrast will make the vibrant orange stand out. Avoid using bright colors around the orange to prevent it from getting lost.

### Subdue Other Elements

Subdue the colors of other elements in the painting by mixing them to lower chroma, making them greyer. This will naturally occur when mixing colors, especially with oil paints.

#### PRO TIP

*Apply vibrant colors first, then adjust surrounding elements to be more neutral to enhance contrast.*

# Summary & Key Takeaways

---

In this lesson, you embarked on a vibrant journey to capture the essence of oranges in a still life painting. By positioning your light source strategically, you created a stained glass effect, allowing the rich, high-chroma colors of the oranges to shine through. You learned to use the white tablecloth to reflect light, creating dynamic interactions that enhance the luminosity and energy of your composition.

As you progressed, you explored color progression and unity by introducing a red nectarine, transitioning smoothly from red to orange to yellow. You mastered the art of setting limits with drawing and color, ensuring balance and accuracy in your composition. The interplay of dark leaves and a contrasting background further accentuated the brightness of the oranges, while careful attention to ambient light and shadow colors added depth and realism.

Finally, you focused on the finer details, using precise brush strokes and subtle highlights to bring out the juiciness and dimensionality of the fruit. By maintaining the purity of vibrant colors and incorporating warm tones, you achieved a cohesive and glowing effect. Your painting journey concluded with the addition of finishing touches, enhancing the realism and vibrancy of your still life masterpiece.

## LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Position the light source to create a stained glass effect through the orange flesh.
- Use the white tablecloth to reflect light and enhance luminosity.
- Experiment with color progression for unity in your composition.
- Start with a center line for symmetrical objects to maintain balance.
- Use ultramarine blue with cadmium orange for warm dark green backgrounds.
- Squint to better perceive value differences between shadows and backgrounds.
- Compare new colors to adjacent ones by asking if they are lighter or darker, warmer or cooler.
- Introduce more yellow into highlights to create a warm glow and enhance light sensation.



*"Oranges" - Oil 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.

**'Orange with White Jug' Oil on Canvas, 30.5 x 40.5 cm (12 x 16") by Annie Cullen**



*'Orange with White Jug' Oil on Canvas, 30.5 x 40.5 cm (12 x 16") by Annie Cullen*

**Design**

Looks like a good strong design to me Annie - you've tied everything together in a circular fashion and the overall dark/light construction is very strong. I might have tried adding a leaf or two behind the jug on the right, but that's all.

**Colour**

Good bold colour nicely arranged. The strong red in the background might be stealing a little of the orange's thunder, but on the other hand it helps bring the greens to life. You have noted some subtle colour variations like the cloth getting cooler on the left (although it could have gone a bit darker too) but have missed a few key ones like the difference in value between the light and dark sides of the oranges. For instance look at the two on the right. It is not very obvious that the piece behind is in light and the other in shadow. The colours are too similar. Also, look at the rind in shadow in the full orange. Squint at it and it does not blend in with the other shadow colour there. It should. The value is too light. Also your reflection of that orange in the jug is mostly darker in value than the jug's shadow which it is actually supposed to be lightening, so the value of the orange there is too dark or the shadow is too light, or both. The gradation of colour across the jug could have been smoother to give the effect of glazed pottery, but that's more about brushwork. Hope that helps. The more you look the more you see.

**Brushwork**

Some of your brushwork is fluid and bold and beautiful, while other parts are overworked - you know where, because you felt it when you did it. I see beautiful brushwork as an art in itself, but when you can describe something with a few luscious strokes it's a double-whammy - a perfect harmony of form and function. Something to aspire to. I'm always asking myself, 'how many brush strokes does this really need?' How can I use the brush in a clever way to paint a Haiku rather than an Encyclopaedia? But that's me. Depends on your goals. One note that might be useful to you is to be careful that your quest for exciting brushwork does not ruin your value structure. At the moment I'm seeing that happen in most of your surfaces, most noticeably in the jug where slight changes in value because of left over paint in the brush or moving from one area to another are causing streaks of different values and confusing the form.

## Realism

There are the few things I've mentioned detracting from the realism, but also the drawing in some places which is very easy to see when you place the finished painting next to the photo. Just compare individual shapes and it's easy to spot small errors to watch out for next time. It's much harder to do while you're actually painting of course but hey it wouldn't be exciting if it wasn't challenging right!? Reading this again it seems I've really picked this painting to death but that's because I want to encourage you to do even better next time. Overall I think it's a very pleasing painting which leaves a lasting impression because for the most part it's been boldly and elegantly done. Good work!

## 'Light on Oranges' Acrylic on canvas, 16 x 12", by Karen Sheppard



*'Light on Oranges' Acrylic on canvas, 16 x 12", by Karen Sheppard*

### Design

I love your design Karen, it's lovely to have the grapes flowing over the plate and leading the eye to the glowing orange segment. Good use of dramatic lighting - it's almost ethereal and perhaps you could have brought a little more light into the shadowed area on the left by rotating the orange segment there clockwise so that its right side was catching the light. As it is at the moment your two segments are very much the same shape where you had an opportunity to add a little more variety. That's being pretty picky but same shapes are something I try to avoid in my own arrangements.

### Colour

You're getting somewhere now. Nice contrast between warm and cool overall, and you've noted some subtle difference within those too. A few things you could look at are the value of the pith in both the orange segments - it's too light which is destroying the illusion of shadow there. Squint squint! In the teapot you have a nice subtle cool to warm transition but perhaps the light is not quite light enough? It's great to see you casting reflected light from the orange segment on the right and that's something I encourage you to keep playing with. In the teapot you may have missed the opportunity to reflect the red grapes into the shadow side which would have made a nice counterpoint to the grey blue there.

The orange light in the background fabric is striking from a distance but you've lost a little realism there by excluding some cooler grays in there, and the orange colour is so strong there it really takes the eye away

from the subject of the painting. Similarly it looks to be a little too cool in the shadowed backdrop on the left and might have been more balanced including some slightly warmer notes in there.

### Brushwork

Your brushwork has a nice feminine fluidity about it in some parts, however a lot of it is overworked - many brush strokes where one would suffice, flattening the paint and muddying the colour. That's only going to improve with brush miles and you're already doing so well so keep it up! Consider using a larger brush, more paint and be aware of painting value planes as described in the first still life workshop.

### Realism

Well you can see yourself you're getting there. The grapes look pretty convincing as do several other portions of the painting, and your drawing is not too shabby. One thing you might try next time is losing some edges. For instance you could lose all that detail under the plate where it joins the table - just blur it together. Similarly in the photo the left side of the big orange is nearly the same value as the background so there's another opportunity to lose an edge. Same story in the big shadow area of the grapes - you've delineated every single grape which is not strictly necessary. Some things to think about. Hope that helps.

## 'Oranges & Tea Cup with Blue Leaves' Oil on Canvas, by Justine Wardle



*'Oranges & Tea Cup with Blue Leaves' Oil on Canvas, by Justine Wardle*

### Design

Justine I like your design and arrangement of colours - quite similar to my own setup so I guess I'm biased there. It's got plenty to interest the eye and keep it moving around the canvas. I would perhaps have given a tad more room on the left of the big orange and maybe a teaspoon in the cup leaning to the left would help with that empty area there.

### Colour

Your colour is very rich and vibrant - a joy to look at, made more so by the contrast with the gray background. You have lightened the reflected light in many of the shadow areas more than what is natural which does add to the vibrant colour as a whole but tends to flatten the form as it confuses the distinction between shadow and light areas. If you want to avoid that just be sure to squint down on those shadows and compare the areas of strong reflected light with the surrounding shadow areas. Areas of reflected light still belong to the shadow family and should not be as light as the same object in the light.

Nice to see the warm/cool variations in the cloth although there too the form is a little confused due to incorrect value relationships. The orange in the teacup is a little overstated and detracts from the form, as do the sharp edges within the face of the cup. You've really just got to look at the major colours and shapes that are happening, get those right and then add subtler variations.

### Brushwork

A lot of your brushwork is bold and beautifully done - laid down once and left there. I can see you're battling like I am to paint the big shapes in a simple fashion but then add some fine detail to hold the whole painting together. I can only encourage you to keep going because you're well on your way there. The next thing to consider might be the possible relationship between thin washes and thick impasto brushwork. I think there's real beauty to be found there. You could also afford to loose some edges here and there in the shadows and glowing parts.

## Realism

You're very close to some crisp realism here, especially in that orange on the left - beautiful! It's mainly just the incorrect values that are letting you down and the drawing could be a bit better too. Getting there, getting there! I haven't mentioned the light blue marks in the background as you said you have now painted over those, which is good. You've got a bit of glare happening on the left of this photo so just be aware of that when you're taking your next shot. Try to get a large dark background behind you (like an open garage). Great work Justine - keep it up!

## 'Heaven's Scents' Acrylic on Canvas by Stephanie Burgess



*'Heaven's Scents' Acrylic on Canvas by Stephanie Burgess*

### Design

This is one of the most interesting designs we've had I believe, using the candle is a really nice idea. Makes me think of a little village. So yes you've got good elements in there but I do feel the design itself is not quite working. It's such a subjective thing though. If it was me I would have taken one of the big oranges out or have one behind the candle, or add another one. It's so hard to balance two of the same objects in a still life and you did try to hide one a bit but they're both similarly placed on each side of the canvas so it creates a division.

### Colour

Good strong colour throughout and with a few subtle variations noted here and there. You handled the glowing candle light particularly well. Here are a few things you could look at: you might have grayed the purple in the background to avoid it jumping forward, the cloth appears to be too light, as does the ceramic holder which lessens the effect of the candle light. The fold in shadow on the right of the big orange on the left is much too cool as it should be picking up that reflected orange light and getting darker closer to the orange.

### Brushwork

Looks like you have a tendency to try and smooth everything out which is easily overcome by cutting one finger off every time you do this. Jokes! No, it's hard to stop yourself doing this. One good exercise is to do a small simple painting of a pear for instance and limit your painting to say, 30 brush strokes. That's 30

times the brush can touch the canvas. You'd be surprised what a bold dynamic pear you can paint with 30 brush strokes. You've tentatively started softening some edges there and I encourage you to continue pushing forward with that.

## Realism

Some of this rates very high for realism, which is really just a measure of how well you have seen your subject, so it encompasses everything. I love the way you have handled the candle and think that's the crowning achievement of this painting because it's a very tricky thing to do well. Your oranges are beautifully round and edible (and I don't say that to everyone I meet) but your drawing is a bit wonky in places like the tilted ellipse of the half orange and the symmetry of the candle holder. Some good work here though. Keep it up!