



Paradise Chickens

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/105-Paradise-Chickens>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

I recently discovered a breathtaking spot in Paradise Valley, near Glenorchy in New Zealand's South Island, while painting with my friend John Crump. The scene was perfect—a shed bathed in the last rays of sunlight, a tractor, and, as if on cue, a flock of chickens emerged, scratching around in the foreground. It was a magical moment, and although the light was fleeting, we captured it with photos and video, which I later used to create the demo painting you'll see in this chapter. Here, we'll delve into the often-overlooked art of edges in painting. Edges are crucial for adding variety, describing form, and guiding the viewer's eye. By observing nature, we can learn how to manipulate edges to make certain elements pop or recede, creating depth and interest. This lesson will guide you in using edges to highlight focal points and enhance your composition, transforming a simple scene into a captivating work of art. Enjoy the journey of discovery as you explore the possibilities of edges in your own paintings.



"Chickens in Paradise" 11 x 11" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson



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
- 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 Importance of Edges in Painting



Understand the Role of Edges

Recognize that edges in a painting add variety, help describe form, and guide the viewer's eye. Notice that sharper edges naturally attract more attention in a scene.

Observe Nature's Cues

Take cues from nature to determine how sharp or soft an edge should be. Use this natural guidance to decide which elements in your painting should stand out.

Emphasize Edges for Interest

Overemphasize certain edges to create more variation and interest in your painting. This technique helps to highlight focal points and add depth.

Experiment with Soft Edges

Allow some edges, like the back of a shed, to blend into the background. This softening creates mystery and depth, enhancing the overall composition.

PRO TIP

Use softer edges to create depth and mystery by letting them blend into the background.

2 Skipping Design Stages



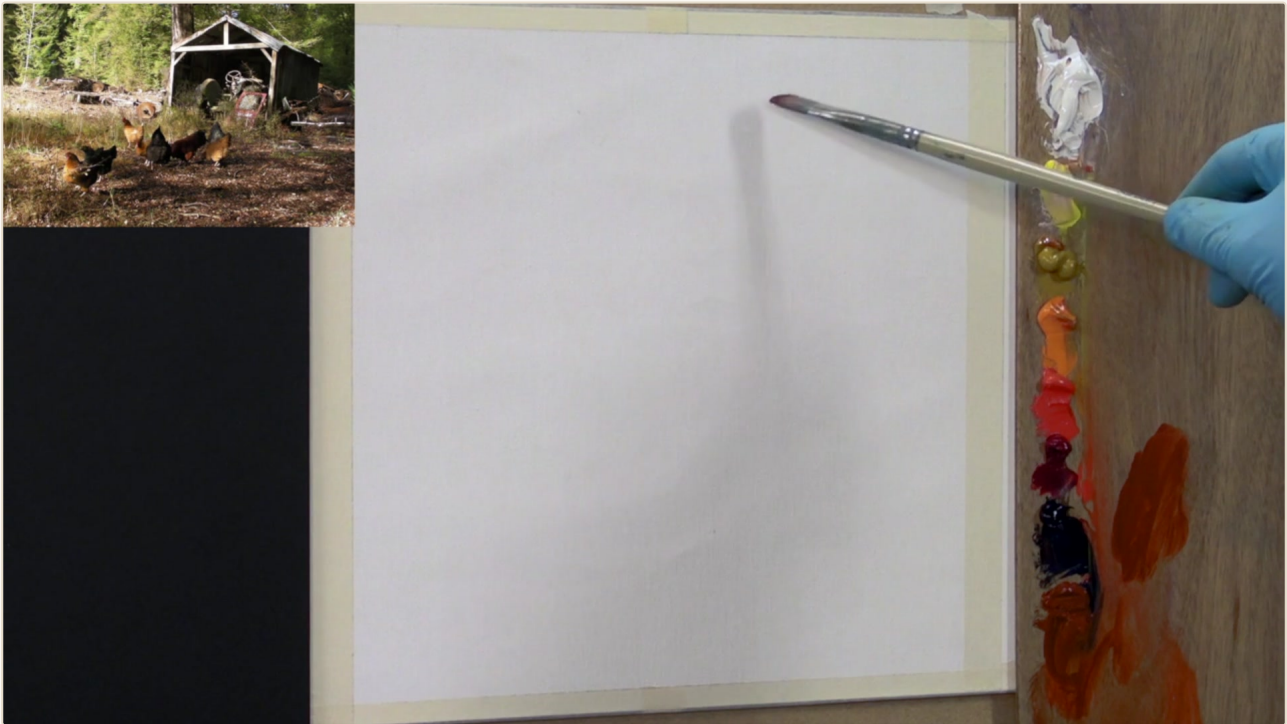
Follow Design Stages

Refer to the design stages outlined on the resource page. These stages are crucial for planning your composition and ensuring a successful painting.

PRO TIP

Always complete the design stages to improve your painting's composition and structure.

3 Initial Drawing and Blocking Darks



Start the Drawing

Use a very thin mix of Zest It thinners and Venetian Red to begin your drawing. Establish the top and bottom boundaries of your main subject to set the limits. Sketch in roughly and mark out where you want your darks and lights to go.

Block in Darkest Darks

Block in your darkest darks first, keeping the paint quite thin. Use thinners instead of walnut oil to maintain a lighter consistency at this stage.

PRO TIP

Use a thin mix of thinners and Venetian Red to sketch and set boundaries before blocking in darks.

4 Working with Edges and Shadows



Define Sharp Edges

Create a very sharp edge on the leading edge of the shed. This will help it stand out and give a sense of structure and solidity to the building.

Soften Shadow Edges

On the shadow side of the shed, soften the edges as you work into the shadowed underside. Add more color to this area than what might be seen in a reference photo, incorporating greens to reflect the forest light.

Paint the Background Forest

Apply broad strokes to paint the dark forest behind the shed. Modulate the greens slightly to create a blurred and out-of-focus effect, ensuring the background remains dull to push the foreground forward.

Add Reflected Light

Introduce some reflected light on the inside of the shed, maintaining soft edges. This subtle lighting will add depth and interest to the interior space.

PRO TIP

Consider whether you are creating sharp or soft edges with each brushstroke to enhance depth and focus in your painting.

5 Foreground and Background Contrast



Blur the Background Edge

Use a very soft bristle brush to blur the edge in the background. Ensure the brush is clean and dry for effective blending. This technique helps the background recede, enhancing depth.

Block in Chicken Colors

Block in large areas of color for the chickens without focusing on details. Use big blocks of color to establish the base. Avoid getting carried away with detail at this stage.

Lay Down Foreground Shadow

Apply a very thin base of brown shadow with thinners in the foreground. Extend this shadow into the rest of the painting, leaving gaps for light areas. This creates depth and contrast.

Add Form and Light to Chickens

Carefully add form to the chickens, considering your strokes and drawing. Introduce a light mixture of white and yellow ochre, possibly with other modifiers, to highlight areas.

Play with Edges and Light

Experiment with the edges of the foreground chicken and grass. Aim for a glowing effect on the left side of the painting with similar, light values and soft edges.

PRO TIP

Use a clean, dry brush to blur edges effectively, helping elements recede into the background.

6 Using Oils vs Acrylics for Edges



Apply Mid-Tones and Lights

Start by applying mid-tones and lights using pure yellow ochre. Carefully paint around the chickens, deciding on the type of edge you want for them.

Create Soft Edges with Oils

Use oils to flick up and create a soft edge where the top of the grass dissolves into the dark background of the shed. The advantage of oils is their ability to stay wet, allowing you to play with edges.

Manage Edges with Acrylics

If using acrylics, choose a slower-drying paint and use more paint to achieve a wet-on-wet look. Keep a spray bottle handy to maintain moisture on the palette and canvas, and modify edges immediately as acrylics dry faster.

PRO TIP

Keep your spray bottle handy to maintain moisture when working with acrylics.

7 Reworking Acrylic Edges



Rework Acrylic Edges

Use acrylics that are re-wettable or have an unlocking medium to rework dried areas. These paints do not build up a skin, allowing you to adjust them even after drying.

Blend Edges

Rub the edge with a brush or your finger to dissolve and blend it. This technique can help soften the transition, though blending while the paint is wet often yields better results.

PRO TIP

For best results, blend edges while the paint is still wet.

8 Sharpening and Softening Edges



Sharpen Edges with Precision

Use a round, pointy watercolor brush to create sharp edges, especially on highlights. Focus on getting the drawing correct by analyzing the shapes and connections carefully. Ensure the brush is clean if using oils, as they can stick to fine bristles.

Use a Support for Steady Lines

Rest your hand on a stick or a similar support to maintain control over fine lines. This technique helps achieve precision in your work.

Subdue the Background

Gray down and simplify the background if it appears too colorful or distracting. This will prevent it from competing with the foreground elements.

Adjust Background Lighting

After subduing the background, add some lights back in to balance the composition. Ensure the background complements rather than overwhelms the scene.

Soften Edges as Needed

Soften any edges that appear too harsh to create a harmonious transition between elements.

PRO TIP

Use a support like a stick to steady your hand for precise line work.

9 Balancing Warm and Cool Colors



Introduce Greys to the Foreground

Add some greys into the foreground to start balancing the warm tones. This helps prevent the painting from becoming overly warm and 'chocolate boxy'.

Balance Warm and Cool Colors

Incorporate cooler colors alongside the greys to further balance the warmth in the foreground. This creates a more harmonious and visually appealing composition.

PRO TIP

Use greys and cooler colors to balance overly warm areas in your painting.

10 Reflected Light in Shadows



Add Reflected Light

Introduce a bit of reflected light to the back of the chicken. This will enhance the subtlety in the shadows that photos often miss, preventing the darks from appearing too dark.

PRO TIP

Reflected light can reveal subtle details in shadows that photos often fail to capture.

11 Softening Edges for Movement



Soften Light Branches

Use a soft bristle brush to gently brush over the light branches. Apply a couple of light strokes to subtly soften their edges. This helps the branches blend back into the tree, reducing their prominence.

Darken the Chicken in Shadow

Focus on the chicken in the shadow of the rooster. Darken the top third of it to reflect the shadow, adding depth and contrast.

Add Cooler Grays to Foreground

Introduce cooler grays into the foreground to lighten it and reduce warmth. Pay attention to the clumps of grass and dirt, and how the light falls across the scene.

Create Depth with Brushstrokes

Use large, chunky brushstrokes in the foreground to enhance depth. Gradually decrease the size of the brushstrokes as you move back to create perspective.

Soften Edges for Movement

Soften the tail edges slightly to suggest movement. Soft edges can convey form and mimic the blur of motion, adding dynamism to your painting.

PRO TIP

Use soft edges to suggest movement and form, enhancing the dynamism in your painting.

12 Adjusting Background Elements



Enhance Shed Depth

Add a cool dark tone to the recesses of the shed. This will push the back of the shed further away and bring the front forward, creating depth. Include small shadows in the woodwork to enhance the effect.

Blend Shed into Forest

Darken the forest area behind the shed. Blend the back edge of the shed into the forest so it nearly disappears, integrating the elements smoothly.

Adjust Tree Spacing

Observe the spacing of the trees and ensure it isn't too regular. If needed, blot out any overly uniform trees and replace them with more subtle variations to create a natural look.

PRO TIP

Blend the back edge of the shed into the forest to create a seamless transition.

13 Final Touches and Color Highlights



Add Tractor Tire

Include a small tractor tire in the composition to add interest and detail to the scene.

Enhance Shed Color

Introduce more color interest at the end of the shed. Use shades that echo the blue sky color, creating harmony with the background.

Highlight Chicken Details

For the crops of the chickens, apply pure cadmium red light. Using pure tube colors in select areas can add a vibrant sparkle to your painting.

Finish with Foreground Strokes

Apply a couple of larger strokes in the foreground to complete the painting, ensuring a balanced and finished look.

PRO TIP

Use pure tube colors in small areas to create vibrant highlights and add sparkle to your painting.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by understanding the importance of edges. They are not just lines; they guide the viewer's eye and add depth to your work. Begin by blocking in your darkest darks with a thin mix of thinners and Venetian Red, setting the stage for the rest of your composition. As you progress, pay attention to the edges you create, deciding which should be sharp to draw attention and which should be soft to blend into the background, adding mystery and depth.

As you move from the initial drawing to adding details, remember to balance your colors and edges. Use oils to manipulate edges, creating soft transitions in the grass and shadows, or work with acrylics, keeping them moist for blending. Introduce cooler tones to balance warmth, and use reflected light to reveal subtle details in shadows. These techniques will enhance the depth and realism of your painting.

In the final stages, refine your composition by adjusting background elements and adding vibrant highlights. Use pure tube colors sparingly to create focal points and add sparkle. With careful attention to edges and color balance, your painting will come to life, capturing the dynamic beauty of your subject.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use softer edges to create depth and mystery by letting them blend into the background.
- Always complete the design stages to improve your painting's composition and structure.
- Use a thin mix of thinners and Venetian Red to sketch and set boundaries before blocking in darks.
- Consider whether you are creating sharp or soft edges with each brushstroke to enhance depth and focus in your painting.
- Use a clean, dry brush to blur edges effectively, helping elements recede into the background.
- Keep your spray bottle handy to maintain moisture when working with acrylics.
- Use greys and cooler colors to balance overly warm areas in your painting.
- Use pure tube colors in small areas to create vibrant highlights and add sparkle to your painting.



"Chickens in Paradise" 11 x 11" 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.

“Scratching Out a Living” by Elfrida Schragen



"Scratching Out a Living", Oil on Canvas by Elfrida Schragen

Design

Elfrida the overall design looks good to me - you've balanced it well with plenty of interesting chickens and the tree and the foreground shadow. Personally I would have moved the chickens up away from the bottom of the painting just a little more. Getting close to the edge of the canvas with key objects always makes me feel edgy if you'll excuse the pun. It's all a little heavy on the right too, especially considering the tilt of the land too so I think you could actually crop an inch or two off the left hand side and not lose anything important while balancing the composition a little.

Colour

The colour is attractive and punchy with some subtler grays threaded throughout. I would like to see the green in the background muted just a little and some larger dark spaces added there because to my eye it's jumping forward a little.

Brushwork

I find your brushwork really appealing in its fresh boldness and there are a few areas like some chickens and those leaning tractor tyres where you've really nailed it - fresh direct painting combined with accurate drawing, so, nicely done there. The details on the tractor could have done with a smaller brush and I noticed that your handling of the grass is the same in the foreground and background, that is, the brushstrokes are the same size which hinders the illusion of depth a bit. Squinting at your subject will help with that - paint what you see while you're squinting.

Realism

I'm pretty impressed with the realism of much of this painting. My favorite piece is the small white hen closest to us - beautiful! The least realistic portion is the ground plane which understandably is the trickiest part of the scene with its complex surface mottled by shadows. If you give the viewer some more clues as to the specific elements present there it will help a lot. For instance make the dirt slightly cooler than the grass, and make the grasses get smaller with less detail as they recede and have them cast small shadows onto the dirt. Be clear about the slope of each area of ground and how the grass sits on it. Overall it's a nice painting though and my comments are just picking out small things I would personally change. Great work!

“Light on Shed (with Chickens)” by Casey Toussaint



"Light on Shed (with Chickens)", Oil on Canvas by Casey Toussaint

Design

Casey there's something about this design that catches my eye. I don't know if it's because it's breaking a number of my own compositional 'rules' or because it actually works well. To me it looks very modern in that it ignores traditional conventions. Cutting off the side of the barn and placing the white chicken in the bottom corner drags the eye over to the edge but it's then pulled back by the starkly lit pillar of a tree on the right, so in that way it is really nicely balanced. It rubs me the wrong way and then smooths out my fur, reminding me of how the impressionists would sometimes abruptly crop their scenes to give the feeling of a quickly observed slice of life, or a snap shot, not contrived.

Colour

Such a stark contrast! You said your goal was to paint the light and you've certainly done that rather than getting stuck trying to carefully render bunch of chickens and I applaud you for that because it's an illusive goal that I'm aiming for myself.

Brushwork

There's a lot of variation and experimentation in there which I love to see. Only the tractor stands out to me as being a bit fumbled and the drawing has been a little lost there, but overall you've achieved painterly effects which seem to have been joyfully dashed on rather than laboured over, so well done.

Realism

From a distance this piece really comes together and considering the bravura brushwork that's quite some accomplishment. Great work!

"Retired" by Bonnie-Leigh Jones



"Retired", Acrylic on Canvas Panel, 9x12" by Bonnie-Leigh Jones

Design

I think you're right Bonnie, this angle is so interesting it doesn't need chickens or anything else for a complete painting. I think what it does need though is a little more space around the subject as shown in the photoshopped image.

Colour

I've made a few adjustments in the colour too because you lost a lot of saturation in overpainting with too much white in your mixtures.

Brushwork

Because of the scumbling technique you've used there's not a lot of visible brushwork to speak off although it's good to see you subduing the detail in the background and the technique you used for the grass seems to have worked really well to indicate grass without overdoing the detail. Although the brushwork is mostly hidden there's a unity in that which I find quite pleasing to my eye.

Realism

Realism is usually won or lost in the drawing and in this case your drawing is a bit wonky and you've lost form by scumbling too much light over your mid values. Could be worse, could be better, as always. I can see you've put in a lot of effort and have just ended up overworking the painting which is so easy to do. It's

the effort which is the key those because that's the path to making your next painting even better, so, well done.

"Scratching Out a Living" by Jim Delk



"Scratching Out a Living", Oil on Canvas, 20x24" by Jim Delk

Design

Hi Jim, you picked the most interesting angle of the shed to paint - one that I'm sure I'll paint later on too. I just love those tractor wheels leaning on the side of the shed and the raking light across the old tin. There's nothing wrong with your design as far as I can see except for the path leading out the bottom right corner which I would raise up to run off the side or obscure with grasses. You could do with one or two other chickens as well to fill out the foreground.

Colour

The colour is a little bit haphazard but there are sections like the side and roof of the shed and the tractor wheels where you have done a really good job getting the colour relationships right. The biggest problem seems to me to be the similarity of all the values. I can't be sure whether or not this is due to the photography of your painting though because it does seem to be a fairly uniform loss of contrast overall which makes me think you've photographed surface shine. I took the liberty of adjusting the contrast and making a few other changes in photoshop to illustrate a few points.

Brushwork

I can see you're still learning (as am I) to put a brushstroke down and leave it alone. A lot of that comes from good drawing skills, which is built purely with practice. Most of your brushstrokes have been overworked. When I find myself doing this I try to make myself stop painting, look very hard at the shape of colour I want to paint with my brush, taking in its characteristics including where its edges are sharp or

soft, consider how I can achieve it with one brushstroke, looking back and forth to measure the placement, hold my breath and place the stroke on the canvas.

Realism

With the exception of the side of the shed and the tractor tyres the few colour problems and unsure drawing detracts from the realism here, especially the confusion evident in the ground and grasses. I can see the problem you faced of mowing the grass and putting in the chickens was a big one so it was always going to be a stretch, but I think you could resolve it better given more time. The shadows from the chickens for instance are not making sense at the moment - they are too vertical which puts the ground plane in doubt. Personally I feel the shed is so interesting from this angle it barely needs anything in the foreground to flesh out the painting - perhaps just the hint of a path through the grass would do. I hope you enjoyed painting this one as much as I did Jim and I look forward to seeing how you deal with the next one.