



Clouds

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/100-Clouds>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

In this chapter, we delve into the captivating world of painting clouds, a subject that has intrigued many of you and is one of the most requested topics in my workshops. Hawaii, with its breathtaking skies, serves as the perfect backdrop for this exploration. Painting clouds is both thrilling and a bit daunting, as they embody a unique blend of structure and unpredictability. As artists, we must balance the analytical construction of their forms with the freedom to capture their abstract essence. My approach is to simplify the scene, which not only helps manage the complexity but also makes the painting more accessible to viewers. I often find myself challenged to add more detail, while some of you might face the opposite struggle of needing to simplify. In this lesson, I will guide you through my process of painting various cloud forms, encouraging you to observe and translate these 'wee beasties' onto your canvas. Together, we'll learn to visualize clouds as solid geometric shapes, understand their light and shadow dynamics, and simplify color mixing to achieve a realistic effect. Let's embrace the challenge and joy of painting clouds in all their glory.



"Cloud Studies" 11x12" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson



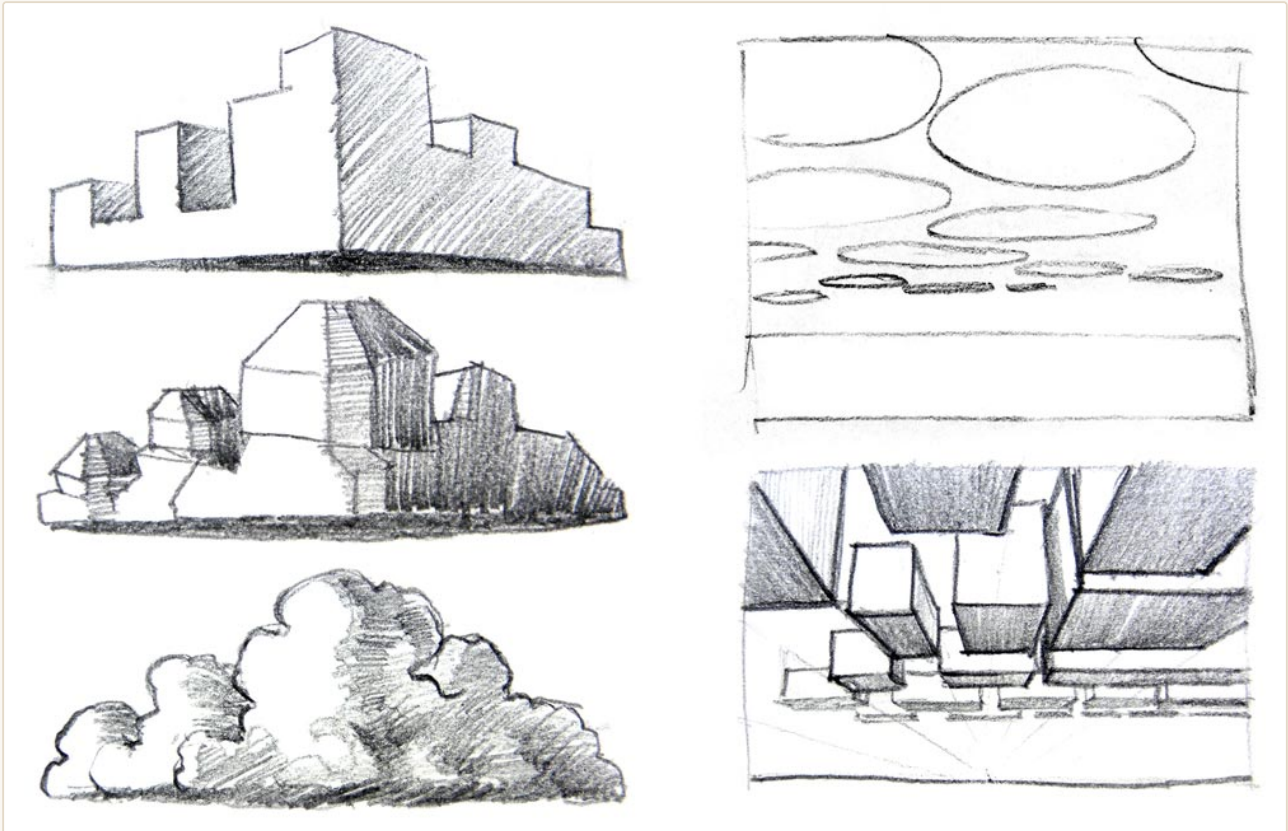
REFERENCE PHOTO 1

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.

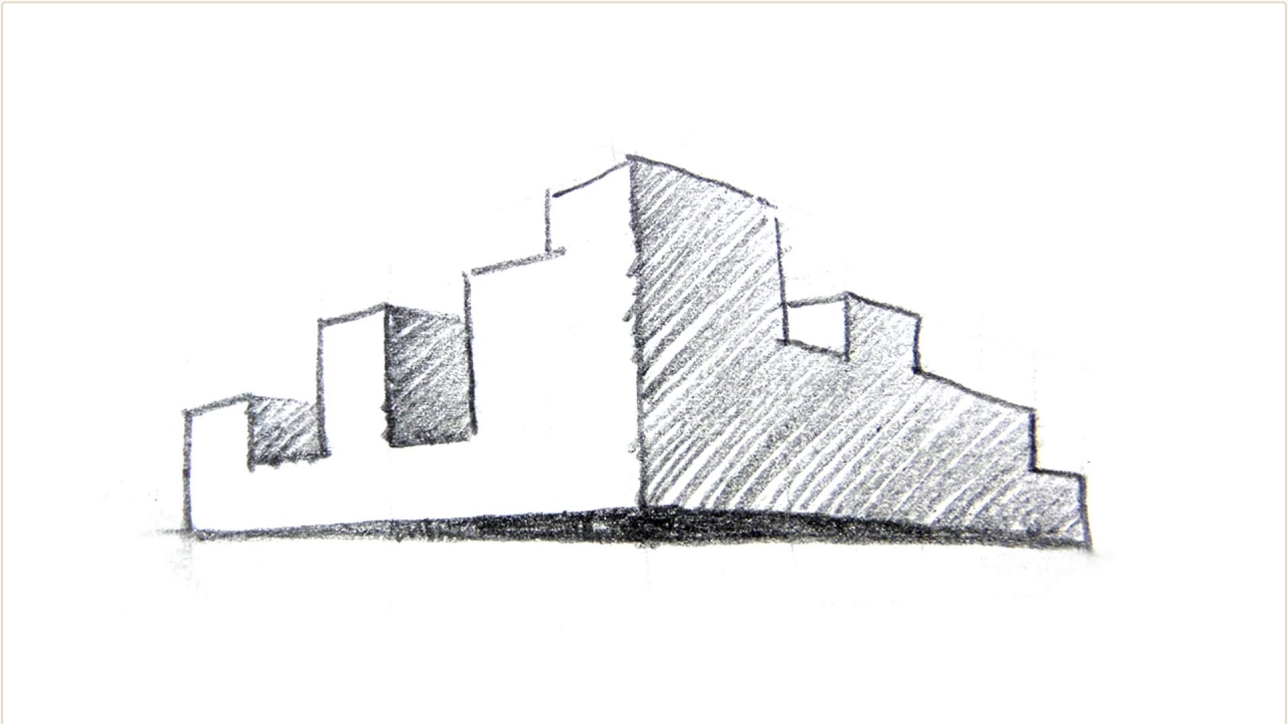
Materials

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 Visualizing a Cumulus Cloud



Visualize the Cloud

Visualize a cumulus cloud as a solid geometric shape seen in perspective, rather than a flat cutout or fluffy cotton ball. Imagine how a sculptor might start with big blocky forms to establish the cloud's structure.

Determine Light Source

Decide where the light is coming from to establish a light side and a dark side of the cloud. This will help you create a more realistic depiction.

Round Off the Form

In your imagination, round off the blocky form of the cloud to make it appear more natural. This will give you a light side, a dark side, and an important half tone in between.

Mix Cloud Colors

Break down your color mixing into three groups: shadows, half tones, and lights. This simplification will help you achieve a realistic cloud effect.

PRO TIP

Visualize clouds as solid geometric shapes to better understand their form and lighting.

2 Creating Unique Cloud Shapes



Start with Blocky Shapes

Begin by painting large, blocky shapes to establish the basic form of the cloud. This is similar to a sculptor starting with a rough block of material.

Refine the Cloud Shape

Gradually refine these blocky shapes, adding detail bit by bit. Aim for a shape that clearly resembles a cloud and feels complete.

Introduce Variation

Ensure there is enough variation in the cloud's shape so that no part of it is duplicated. This will make the cloud look more natural and realistic.

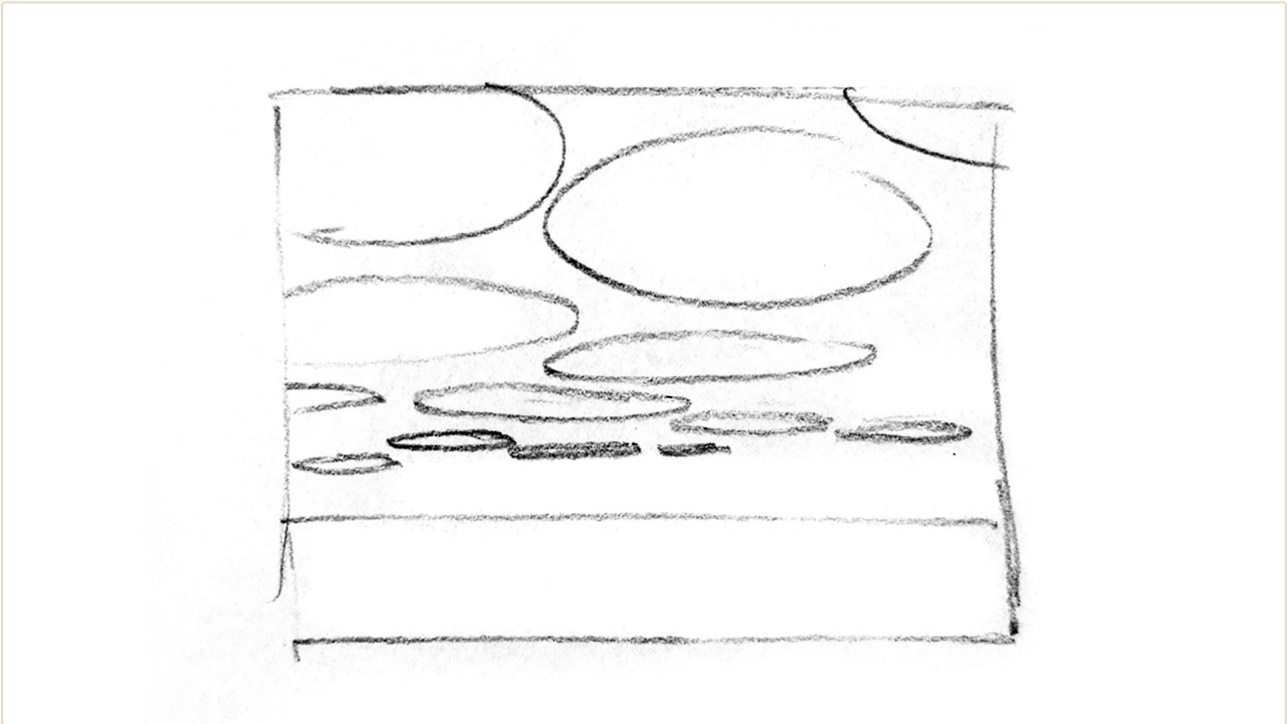
Create Unique Clouds

When painting a sky full of clouds, make sure each cloud is unique. Avoid repeating shapes to maintain a dynamic and interesting composition.

PRO TIP

Ensure every cloud and part of the cloud is unique to avoid repetition.

3 Perspective in Cloud Painting



Understand Cloud Perspective

Visualize clouds as they appear in the sky. Closer clouds are larger and viewed more from underneath, while distant clouds have flatter bases and are smaller.

Create Depth with Cloud Shapes

Use the shapes, overlapping, and receding sizes of clouds to convey depth. This technique enhances the linear perspective in your painting.

PRO TIP

Think of the sky as a city of clouds with streets running between them to guide your composition.

4 Painting Cloud Shadows and Halftones



Sketch the Horizon and Cloud Shapes

Use an oily mixture of ultramarine blue and walnut oil to sketch the horizon line. Outline the basic shapes of the main clouds, ensuring the bottoms of the clouds flatten as they recede into the distance.

Paint the Cloud Shadows

Mix ultramarine blue, a little red, and a fair amount of white to create a middle value color for the shadow side of the clouds. Apply this mixture thinly with plenty of oil to cover the canvas without leaving gaps. This fluid application helps establish the dark areas of the clouds.

Adjust Shadow Colors for Distance

As you move to the next set of clouds, lighten and cool the shadow color by adding more white and a touch of blue. This adjustment creates atmospheric perspective, allowing the clouds to recede naturally into the background.

Mix Halftone Colors

Create a lighter, warmer gray for the halftones, which are the cloud faces not fully in light or shadow. Use the warm light, cool shadow principle: as you move into the light, make colors lighter and warmer by adding more red to halftones and more yellow to lights.

Adjust Halftones for Depth

Lighten and cool the halftones as they recede into the distance, similar to the shadow colors. This prevents them from standing out too much and maintains the depth in the sky.

PRO TIP

Use atmospheric perspective by lightening and cooling colors as they recede to create depth in your sky.

5 Managing Edges in Cloud Painting



Observe Cloud Edges

Examine your reference photo closely to identify where the sharp and soft edges are in the clouds. Notice that most cloud edges are soft, with only a few sharp ones.

Decide on Edge Placement

Determine where you want to place soft and sharp edges in your painting. Consider the overall composition and the effect you want to achieve.

Apply Brushwork Thoughtfully

Use your brush to create soft edges by blending gently, and apply more pressure or a firmer stroke for sharp edges. This will help convey depth and realism in your cloud painting.

PRO TIP

Most cloud edges should be soft, with only a few sharp edges to create contrast and interest.

6 Atmospheric Perspective in Clouds



Understand Atmospheric Perspective

Recognize that as clouds recede into the distance, they lose contrast. The dark areas become lighter, and the light areas become darker, blending more with the sky color.

Apply Atmospheric Perspective

Apply this understanding to your painting to create a sense of depth. This technique helps convey a magical sense of distance and realism in your artwork.

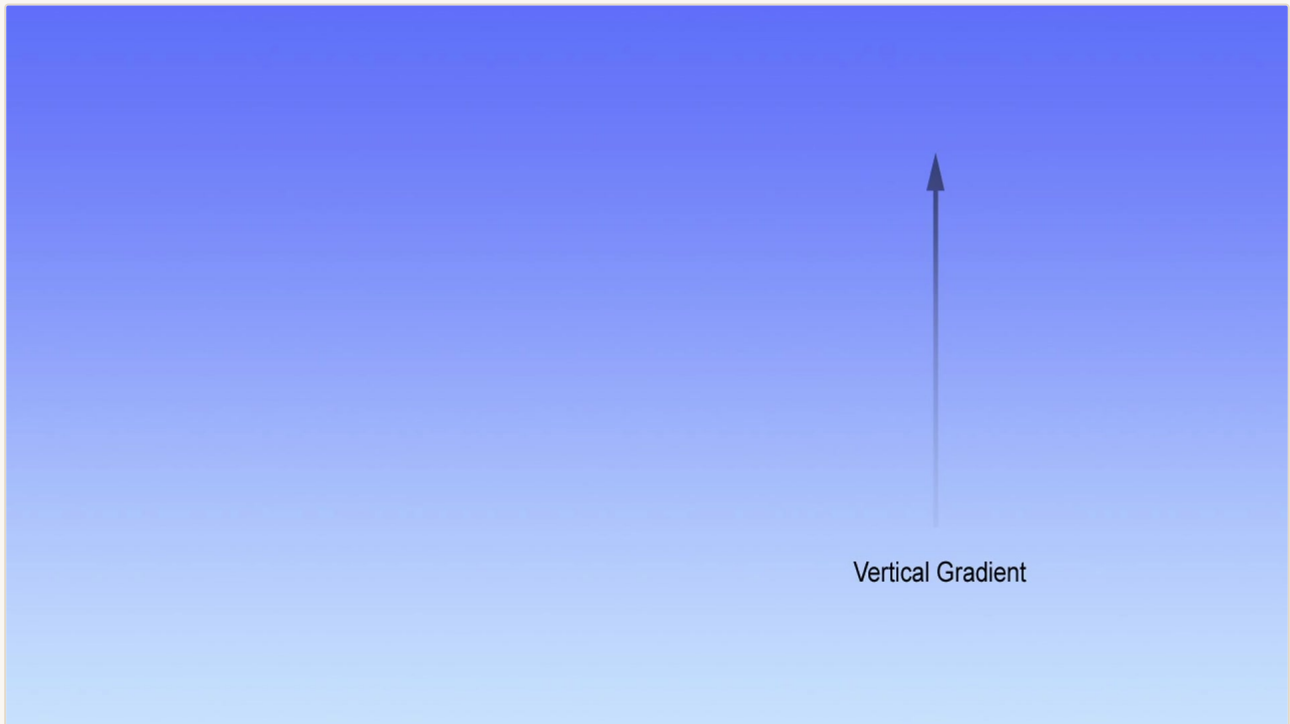
Mix Sky Colors

Use a mixture of ultramarine blue and white for the top of the sky. This combination creates a pure sky color that can serve as a base for your atmospheric perspective.

PRO TIP

As clouds recede, adjust their contrast to blend more with the sky color, enhancing depth.

7 Sky and Sea Color Gradients



Mix Sky Colors

Combine ultramarine blue and white for the top of the sky. This creates a strong vertical gradient that lightens towards the horizon.

Adjust Sky Hue

Add a tiny touch of yellow to a mixture of phthalo blue and white. Phthalo blue is cooler and leans towards green, creating a radial gradient from the sun.

Create Sea Color

Mix ultramarine blue, yellow ochre, and white to form a dark blue-green for the sea. This combination captures the sea's depth and color variation.

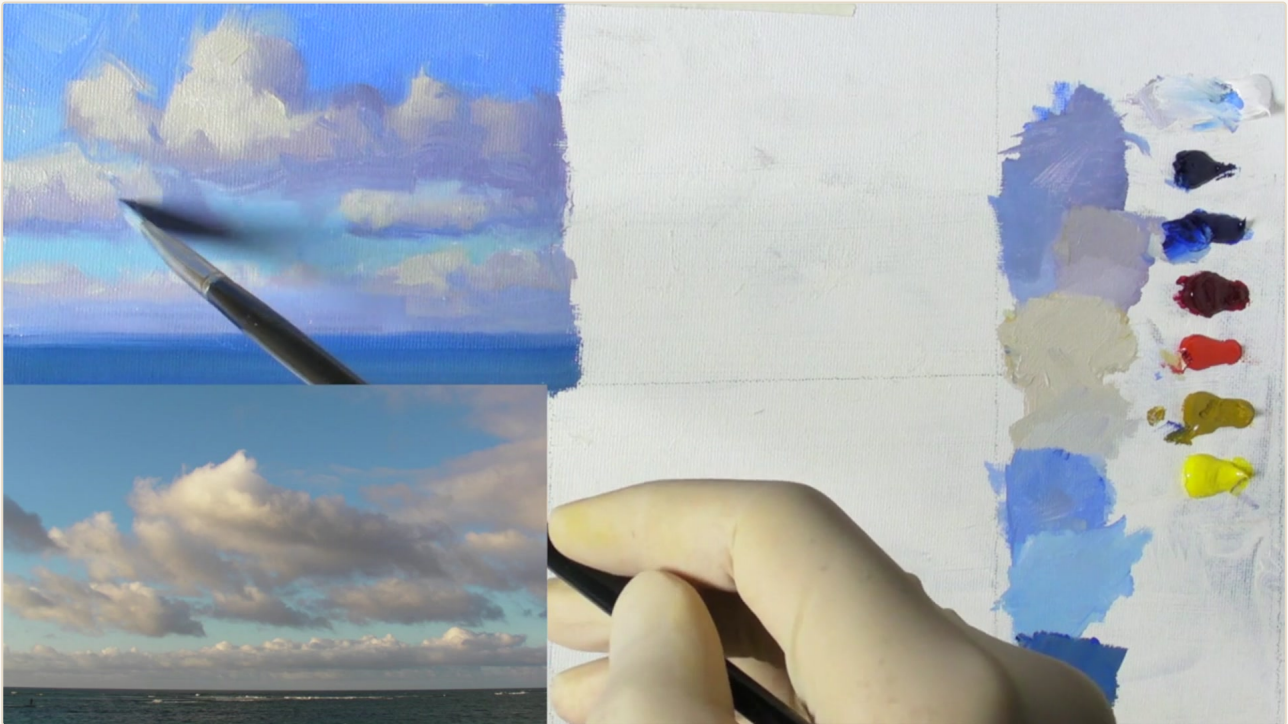
Add Sky Color to Horizon

Apply a bit of sky color to the distant horizon area of the sea. This technique enhances atmospheric perspective, making the horizon recede into the distance.

PRO TIP

Use phthalo blue for cooler sky tones that lean towards green.

8 Painting Cloud Shadows and Light



Add Dark Accents

Apply a few dark accents to create shadows in the clouds. This will add depth and contrast to your painting.

Introduce Light Accents

Touch up the clouds with light accents that are slightly lighter and warmer than the existing colors. This enhances the effect of sunlight on the clouds.

Mix Shadow Colors

Combine ultramarine blue with a touch of crimson and a fair amount of white. Add a hint of orange to this mix for the shadow colors in the clouds.

Create Color Banding

Observe the color banding from blue-grey at the bottom, moving up to reds and then yellows. Capture this transition by adjusting your paint mixtures accordingly.

Adjust for Light and Warmth

As you paint upwards on the cloud, make the colors lighter and warmer. This reflects the natural changes in light as the day progresses.

PRO TIP

Focus on the relationships between colors in terms of temperature and value to achieve a harmonious result.

9 Adding Accents and Details



Add Crisp Shadow Edges

Paint the shadows on the cloud with crisp and dark edges where the cloud rolls away. This creates a sense of depth and contrast, emphasizing the light source behind you.

Lighten and Cool Shadow Areas

Apply a lighter and bluer tone to the shadow areas of the clouds. This reflects the cool light from the sky above, adding realism to the scene.

Add Sky Accents

Include a small accent of sky color squeezing through between the hill and the cloud. This adds interest and breaks up the cloud mass.

Enhance with Dark Accents

Introduce a few dark accents in the cloud to enhance the depth and dimension. These accents provide contrast and highlight the cloud's form.

PRO TIP

Use crisp, dark edges on cloud shadows to emphasize depth and light direction.

10 Creating Sky Gradients and Cloud Highlights



Create the Sky Gradient

Apply a very thin mixture of light paint at the bottom of the sky area. Gradually fade this mixture upwards to the top. This creates a natural gradient effect as you paint down into it without refreshing your brush, allowing the paint to naturally wear out and blend smoothly.

Paint the Clouds

Use a mixture of ultramarine blue, cadmium orange, and white for the cloud shadows. Apply this color to form the clouds, ensuring to include long, low, swishy shapes with some cumulus elements for variety.

Enhance Cloud Highlights

Push the tip of your brush into a pile of light warm color. Use this to lay a fine edge onto the tops of the clouds, creating a sparkling effect that mimics light pushing through the cloud edges.

PRO TIP

Allow the paint to naturally wear out of the brush to create a smooth gradient.

11 Painting Ocean and Adding Drama



Add Sun Hint

Introduce a subtle hint of the sun in the sky to create a focal point and enhance the atmosphere.

Mix Ocean Color

Mix a color for the ocean, incorporating some of the cloud color for the distant water at the horizon to maintain harmony in the painting.

Ensure Horizon Line

Ensure the horizon line is straight and horizontal. Use a ruler if necessary to achieve this effect.

Create Glowing Cloud Area

Add a glowing area in the cloud near the sun. This should be slightly lighter than the cloud's shadow color to suggest sunlight filtering through.

Add Swishy and Speckly Clouds

Paint a few swishy clouds and small speckly clouds to give the scene scale and interest.

Enhance Drama with Wispy Clouds

Introduce thin, wispy clouds that are backlit by the sun to add drama and depth to the sky.

PRO TIP

Use a ruler to ensure the horizon line is straight and horizontal.

12 Approaching Dramatic Sunsets



Start with Bright Yellow

Lay down a very thin mixture of bright yellow to begin your sunset. This color represents the warm sun and will be the base for the clouds closest to the sun.

Work from Light to Dark

Unlike usual, start with the lighter colors and work towards the darker ones. This helps in capturing the dramatic effect of a sunset without creating mud.

Transition from Warm to Cool

As you move away from the sun, transition your colors from yellows to oranges, then to pinks and blues. This gradient reflects the natural cooling and darkening of clouds further from the sun.

Avoid Muddy Colors

Mix a large batch of your sky color to maintain consistency. Keep the bright, clean colors separate from the darker areas until you are ready to blend them carefully.

PRO TIP

Work from light to dark when painting sunsets to avoid creating muddy colors.

13 Color Relationships and Painting Dynamics



Maintain a Clean Brush

Keep your brush clean and frequently reload it with fresh paint to ensure vibrant color application.

Add a Golden Glow

Apply a tiny sliver of golden glow on the horizon to enhance the luminous effect of your painting.

Enhance with Light

Introduce a small chink of light to contribute to the glowing effect, adding depth and interest to your scene.

Focus on Color Relationships

Ensure the relationships of temperature and value are correct in your painting. This will allow your colors to appear harmonious, regardless of their intensity.

Emphasize Cloud Form

Concentrate on the form of the clouds to create a dynamic composition. The handling of paint can make even gray colors appear lively.

PRO TIP

Keep your brush clean and reload it with fresh paint to maintain vibrant color application.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your cloud painting journey by visualizing clouds as solid geometric forms, focusing on their structure and lighting. Begin with blocky shapes, refining them gradually to create unique and dynamic cloud formations. Pay attention to the direction of light to establish realistic light and shadow sides, and use a simplified color palette to capture the essence of clouds.

As you progress, incorporate perspective to add depth, making sure closer clouds appear larger and more detailed, while distant clouds flatten and recede. Use atmospheric perspective by lightening and cooling colors as they move into the distance, enhancing the sense of space and realism. Manage edges carefully, blending most to softness while reserving a few sharp ones for contrast.

Finally, add drama and interest by incorporating accents and details, such as crisp shadows and highlights that reflect the natural light. When painting sunsets, work from light to dark to capture the vibrant transitions of color without muddiness. Throughout, maintain clean brushwork and vibrant color relationships to ensure a harmonious and dynamic composition.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Visualize clouds as solid geometric shapes to understand form and lighting.
- Ensure every cloud and part of the cloud is unique to avoid repetition.
- Think of the sky as a city of clouds with streets running between them.
- Use atmospheric perspective by lightening and cooling colors as they recede.
- Most cloud edges should be soft, with only a few sharp edges for contrast.
- As clouds recede, adjust their contrast to blend more with the sky color.
- Use phthalo blue for cooler sky tones that lean towards green.
- Keep your brush clean and reload it with fresh paint for vibrant colors.

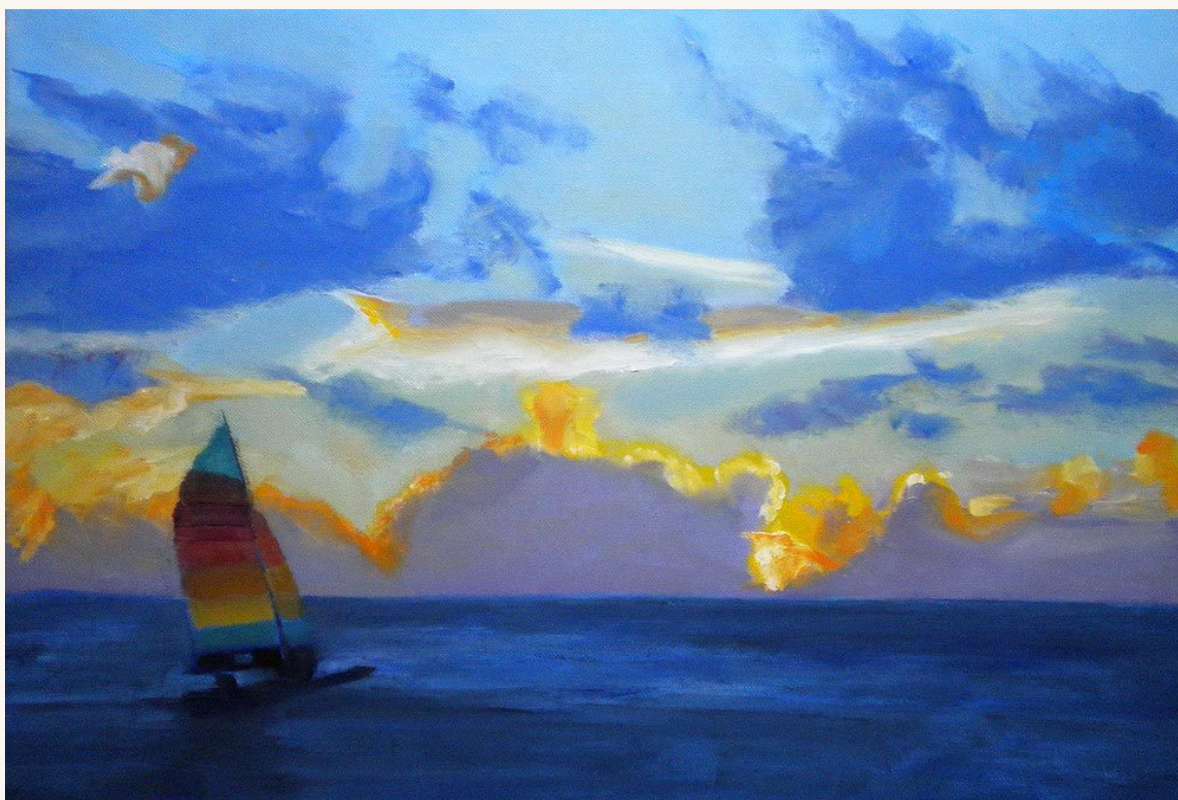


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Student Critiques

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.

'Remains of the Day' 55x39cm Oil on Canvas by John Main



'Remains of the Day' 55x39cm Oil on Canvas by John Main

Hi John, great painting! Love the composition and the totally organic cloud shapes. The only thing I want to bring to your attention is the value of the oranges in the 'silver lining' of your clouds. All that rim lighting should be lighter than the shadow side of the cloud. If you view it in grayscale (see my picture) you can see some of the orange lights are darker than the shadow. Other than that I love it.

“Sunset Reflections” by Michael J Severin



"Sunset Reflections" 16x20" Oil on Canvas by Michael J Severin

Michael I love the broken colour technique you've used here - adding different hues while keeping the value the same - it makes for a wonderful shimmering effect in the sky. Your cloud forms are great - smaller and flatter on the bottom as they recede which is creating all that wonderful depth in your painting. I'm also enjoying the painterly treatment of the foreground rocks.

What I'd like to see done better is the small transition between the orange sky and the sky above it because it seems a little abrupt at the moment but I think the bigger issue could be the strength of all that orange which to me is verging on gaudy rather than beautiful, but hey that's just my opinion and everyone's gaudy-meter is set to different tolerances. I hear this little voice (sounds a lot like Clyde Aspevig) saying 'Taste equals restraint'. Sort of like 'discretion is the best part of valor'. Take out of that what you will but I personally prefer to save those highest saturated colours for the small area right around the sun.

The blue in your water is too light (unless you wanted it to look like mist or ice). I would darken that a little and let the yellowy lights be the lightest part of the water. The distant blue land is too blue for it's proximity to all that powerful orange atmosphere - it should be closer to the colour of the atmosphere. Note that in my photoshopped version I just changed the colour of the atmosphere (mostly) and that made the land fit right in. The darkest values of your foreground and midground rocks are the same whereas if you'd made the midgrounds values very slightly lighter it would have added to the depth instead of subtracted. Overall my first impression was 'great!' so these are just some small points I would look at if I

were you. Good work! By the way I couldn't poke any holes at all in your 'Manhattan Beach Pier' painting so I chose this one to pick on.

'Cloud studies and reference photos' by Lyn Boyer



'Cloud studies and reference photos' by Lyn Boyer

Fantastic studies Lyn! Great shapes, colours and compositions. Very deftly done. Beautiful work.

'Different Cloud Studies' 16x20" Oil on canvas by Helen Tyralik



'Different Cloud Studies' 16x20" Oil on canvas by Helen Tyralik

Good work Helen. Mostly all good. Your best cloud forms are on the left whereas the ones of the top right got a bit confused in the darker values, as well as how the land connects to the sea and the clouds bottom left are a bit malformed. Notice there you reversed the idea of flattening the bases as they recede - you have the one closest to us with the flattest base. There's also the overpowering orange in that scene which stops abruptly behind the cloud rather than transitioning smoothly. Looking at these paintings in a mirror will give you a whole new feeling for what's going wrong (or right) with your cloud shapes. Great studying!