



# Better Days

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A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/216-Better-Days>

MY PAINTING CLUB

# Introduction

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In this chapter, I invite you to explore the captivating interplay of abstraction and realism in a painting I like to call 'Better Days.' This scene, with its ageing beauty, offers a rewarding challenge that combines expressive abstract backgrounds with detailed realism. You'll learn to use a greyed palette, punctuated by a single strong accent color, to bring out the drama of the subject. I'll guide you through the process, one brushstroke at a time, using a range of flat brushes and a palette knife to add texture and depth. We'll be working with Atelier Interactive acrylics, which are perfect for wet-into-wet techniques, allowing us to keep the canvas lively and dynamic. As we dive into the painting, we'll focus on creating a vibrant, abstract background with loose, energetic brushstrokes. This sets the stage for the more detailed elements, such as the boat, where gestural strokes will capture its essence and character. By the end of this lesson, you'll have a piece that beautifully contrasts crisp details with an expressive backdrop, showcasing your newfound skills in design, drawing, and passionate brushwork.



*Better Days 15x20" Acrylic on Canvas*



**REFERENCE PHOTO 1**

*The scene as Richard found it.*



**REFERENCE PHOTO 2**

*The scene as Richard found it.*

# Materials

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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

- Chroma Atelier Interactive Acrylics
- Ultramarine Blue
- Burnt Sienna
- Cadmium Red Mid
- Yellow Ochre
- Titanium White
- Canvas
- Fredrix ultrasmooth canvas.
- You could use a canvas panel or anything you prefer.
- Brushes
- [Rosemary & Co. Richard Robinson Brush Set](#)
- Palette knife
- Paper towels
- Bucket of water

## 1 Initial painting of Lady Isla



### Create an Abstract Background

Focus on creating a really abstract, expressive background. Use loose brushstrokes to convey movement and energy. This will set the stage for the more detailed elements of the painting.

### Paint the Boat Gesturally

Paint the boat with gestural strokes to capture its essence and character. Allow the brushwork to be loose and expressive, reflecting the boat's current state.

### Add Crisp Details

Include crisp details in specific areas like the front of the bow, parts of the cabin, and the supports at the front. These detailed elements will contrast nicely with the abstract background, adding interest and focus to the painting.

#### PRO TIP

*Balance abstract background with crisp details for a dynamic composition.*

## 2 Painting goals and color scheme



### Focus on Subdued Color Scheme

Maintain a subdued color scheme similar to previous works, but introduce a bit more red for contrast. This will create a harmonious yet dynamic visual effect.

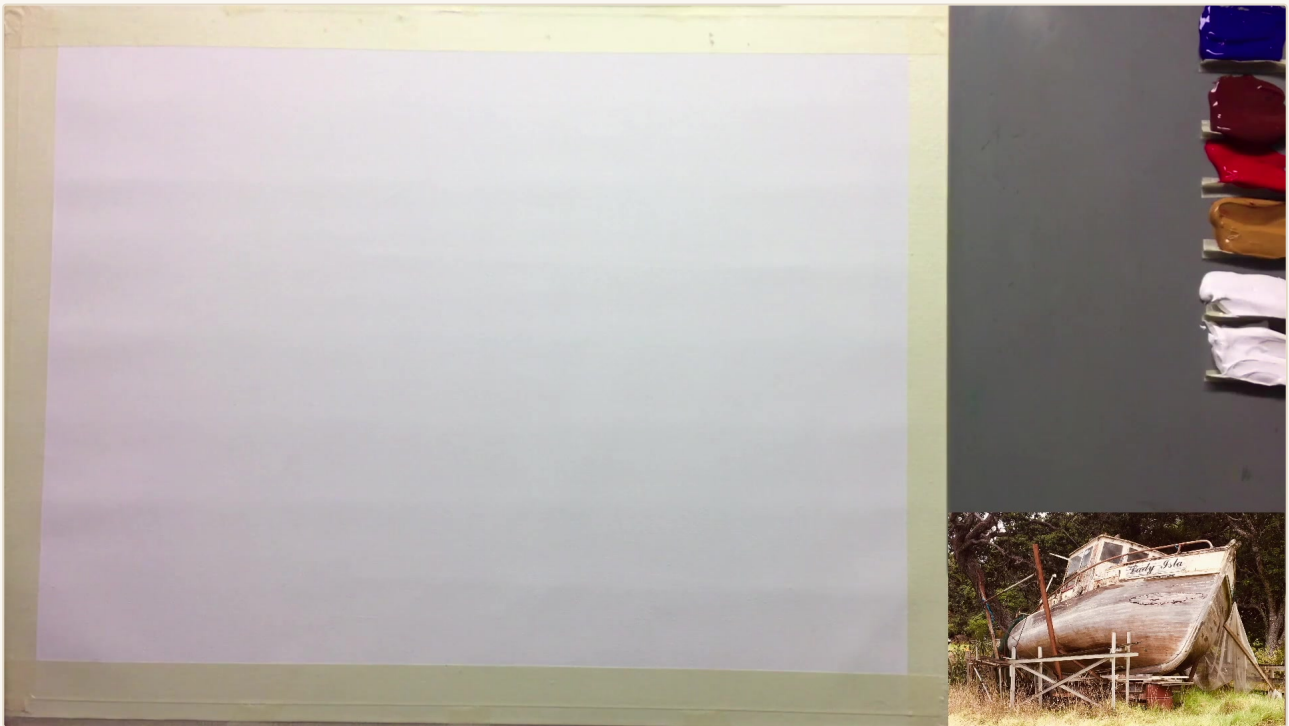
### Accentuate Reds and Oranges

Identify areas in the painting that are brown, such as the drum under the front of the bow and some metal beams. Enhance the redness or orangeness in these areas to achieve a striking contrast with the surrounding greys or non-colors.

#### PRO TIP

*Enhance the redness or orangeness in brown areas to create contrast with greys.*

### 3 Creating a vignette background



#### Prepare the Canvas

Apply water to the canvas, but only in certain areas. This will help create a splashy, gestural background.

#### Create the Light Vignette

Use white paint to brush around the edges of the canvas. Aim for a thin application to achieve a vignetted light look. This will soften the edges and create a gentle transition.

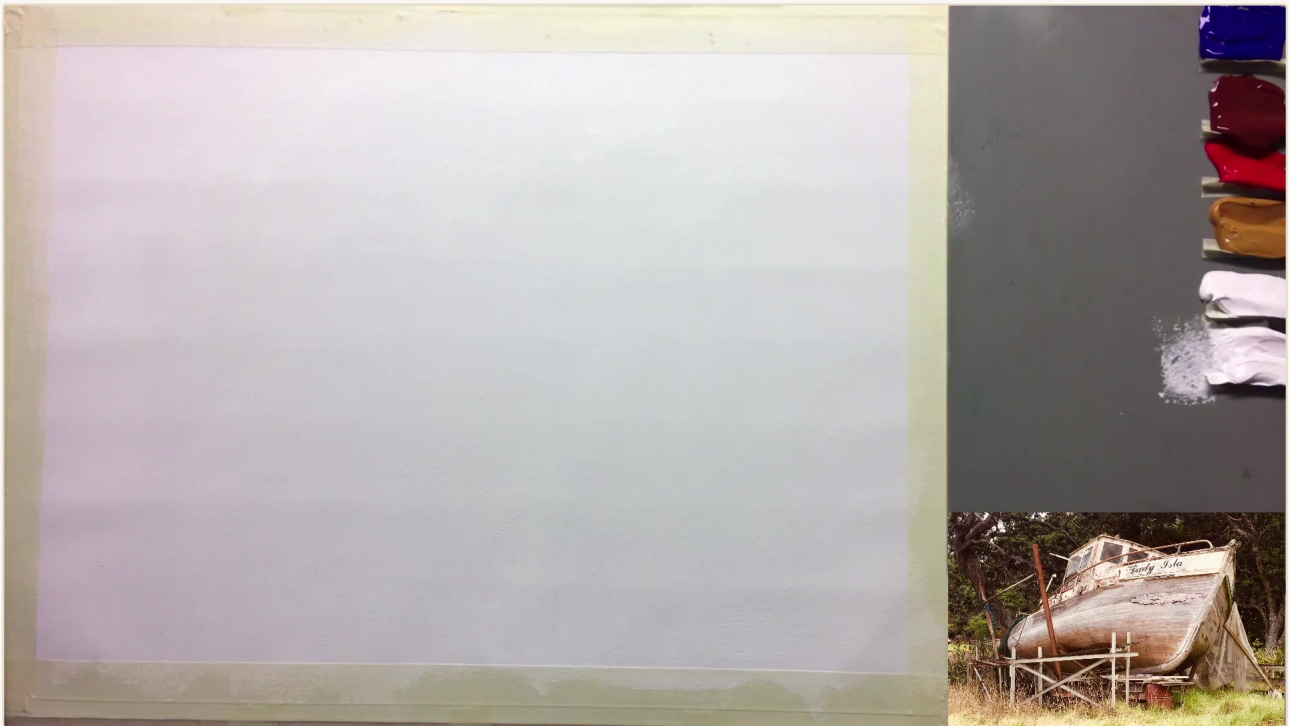
#### Blend the Vignette

Clean your brush or use a similar-sized clean brush. Blend the white paint into the canvas to enhance the vignette effect.

#### PRO TIP

*Use a thin layer of white paint around the edges to create a soft, light vignette.*

## 4 Gestural background painting



### Prepare Your Materials

Use a large, clean brush and have a rag ready. These will help you create a gestural background.

### Mix Your Base Color

Combine a little blue, a little Guernsey, and start with white. Add some yellow to create a grayed-down bluish mixture. This will serve as the base for your gestural background.

### Apply Gestural Strokes

Use the brush in various directions, changing pressure and loading more paint as needed. Be as gestural as possible and enjoy the process. There is no need for specific brushstrokes, just let loose.

### Darken the Sky

Add more darkness to the sky area for high contrast. Keep replenishing the dark as the white paint will lighten it. This will enhance the contrast and make the background dynamic.

#### PRO TIP

*Use the brush in all sorts of directions to create a loose, gestural background.*

## 5 Painting the shadow and grass



### Prepare the Shadow Colors

Mix yellow ochre, brown, and blue to create the shadow color for the grass. This mixture will help transition from the darker top to the lighter front, representing the shadow cast by the boat.

### Wet Your Brushes

Wet your brushes before use to prevent paint from drying on the ferrule, which can damage the brush. This ensures smooth application and longevity of your tools.

### Paint the Occlusion Shadow

Use your three darkest colors to paint the occlusion shadow beneath the boat. Brush downwards to create marks that resemble the tops of grass clumps, giving the appearance of soft grass.

### Work Quickly for Wet into Wet

Paint quickly to maintain the wet into wet effect, allowing for smooth blending and soft transitions. Add little details while the paint is still wet for a cohesive look.

#### PRO TIP

*Wet your brushes before painting to prevent paint from drying on the ferrule and damaging the brush.*

## 6 Adding texture with splattering



### Add Texture with Spraying

Spray the bottom area of your painting lightly to keep it wet. Consider spraying the top as well to add more texture and interest.

### Create Texture with Paper

After spraying, press a piece of paper or similar material onto the wet area. This will pull some paint off, creating an interesting texture effect.

### Enhance with Splattering

Use a brush to splatter paint onto the canvas. This adds dynamic texture and visual interest to your painting.

#### PRO TIP

*Spray water onto the painting and press paper onto it to create unique textures.*

## 7 Creating texture with splattering



### Prepare the Splattering Brush

Select a bristle brush suitable for splattering. Mix a blue-grey color with plenty of water to ensure it can be easily flicked off the brush.

### Load and Flick the Paint

Load the brush with the watery blue-grey mixture. Use a palette knife to flick the paint off the brush, creating splatters across the canvas for added texture.

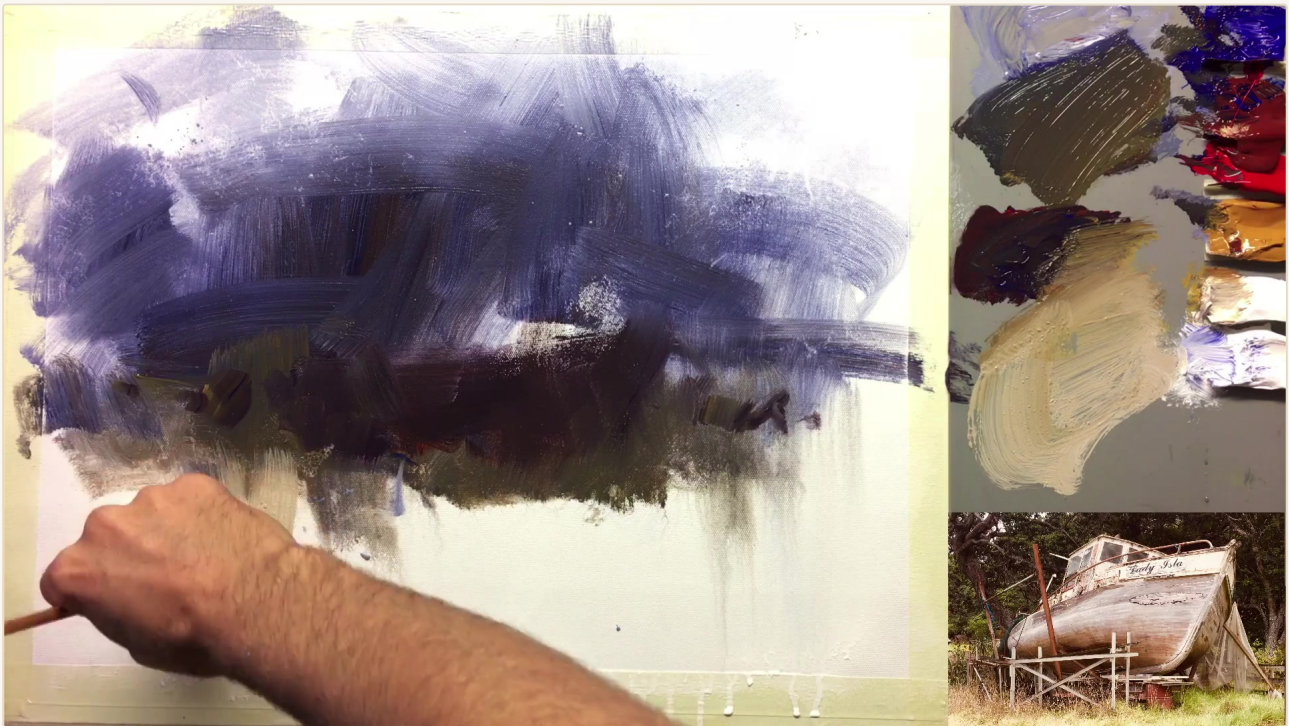
### Create Interesting Texture

Add splatters as desired to enhance the painting's texture. Feel free to vary the intensity and coverage of the splatters to suit your artistic vision.

#### PRO TIP

*Use a palette knife to flick paint off the brush for controlled splattering.*

## 8 Detailing the grass and flowers



### Add Depth to Grass

Brush up the grassy area using a mix of yellow ochre and grey to create depth. This combination will provide shadows under the clumps of grass, enhancing the overall texture.

### Decide on Finishing Touches

Consider whether to leave the paint as is or add more details. You can introduce lighter tones to direct the viewer's eye towards the center of the painting.

### Incorporate Flowers

Add small flowers, such as ragwort, to the scene. These details will add interest and mimic the natural elements seen in reference photos.

#### PRO TIP

*Use a mix of yellow ochre and grey to create shadows under grass clumps for added depth.*

## 9 Drying and preparing for the boat



### Create Random Effects

Use a spray bottle to add a dribbly look to the area of interest. Block off sections if desired, or use a rag to create more random effects for a splashy background.

### Decide on Drying Time

Consider whether to let the paint dry or to paint directly into it. Letting it dry can result in hard edges, while painting wet can cause mixing issues.

### Find a Balance

Allow the painting to dry for a few minutes to achieve a balance between hard and soft edges. Use this time to replenish your water supply and prepare for proper brush cleaning.

#### PRO TIP

*Use a rag to create random effects in your background for added interest.*

## 10 Sketching the boat



### Prepare Your Tools

Have two brushes ready and a pencil for sketching. Ensure your tools are easily accessible to maintain a smooth workflow.

### Sketch the Boat's Major Shape

Begin by sketching the major shape of the boat on your canvas. Focus on the placement and ensure it's positioned correctly within your composition.

### Carefully Draw the Angles

Pay close attention to the angles, especially the line of the bow. Use the clock idea to help: imagine the angle as a time on a clock face. Compare the angle in the reference photo to a clock, then transfer that angle to your canvas.

### Compare Relative Positions

Consider the relative positions of different parts of the boat. For example, note where the top of the cabin is in relation to other points. This will help you maintain accurate proportions.

#### PRO TIP

*Use the clock method to accurately transfer angles from your reference photo to your canvas.*

## 11 Adjusting boat proportions



### Adjust Cabin Height

Consider making the cabin taller to add more shape variation. This change can make the composition more interesting by breaking up similar shapes.

### Add Rail Detail

Use a fine brush to add the rail detail along the cabin. This small detail enhances the realism of the boat.

### Incorporate Barrels and Pallets

Include barrels beneath the cabin and stack pallets or wood on top. Ensure the size of the barrels is accurate to maintain the balance of the composition.

### Define Boat Limits

Set the limits of your object by determining where you want the boat to start and finish, both in width and height. This helps maintain the correct proportions as you work.

#### PRO TIP

*Set the limits of your object before detailing to ensure correct proportions.*

## 12 Painting the boat's base colors



### Prepare Your Brush

Select a nice synthetic brush, ideal for both large areas and fine details. Work from the bottom of the boat, moving from dark to light areas.

### Mix and Apply Base Colors

Start with a brown base color, using your flat brush to cover large areas. As you move into lighter areas, gradually add yellow ochre to create a smooth gradation from dark to light.

### Adjust the Color Tone

To avoid a brownish appearance, incorporate more blue into your mix. Aim for a transition from warm at the bottom to a cool grey at the top, creating a natural look.

### Create Texture

Use a light touch to brush over the surface, leaving small speckles for texture. Press harder if you want to smooth out the texture. Be mindful of the brush marks you create.

#### PRO TIP

*Use the fine edge of a flat brush for crisp details while covering large areas efficiently.*

## 13 Blending and softening edges



### Add Color to the Front Section

Apply a little more color to the front section of the boat. Focus on capturing how the light transitions from a thin shape to a wide shape, emphasizing the roundedness. Use a light touch to avoid overpowering the existing tones.

### Soften Edges with a Dry Brush

Use a very soft, dry brush to gently soften some of the edges. Clean the brush frequently to prevent muddiness. Work on small sections while the paint is still wet to maintain clarity.

#### PRO TIP

*Acrylics dry darker than when wet, so adjust your colors accordingly.*

## 14 Detailing the boat's shape



### Shape the Boat's Sides

Carefully work on the other side of the boat to maintain its shape. Use a palette knife to add a bit of wear and tear, especially at the front, to give it character.

### Add Broken Brushstrokes

Use an ivory long flat brush to create broken brushstrokes along the boat's sides. Let the strokes fade into a dark area for a nice effect, enhancing the boat's aged appearance.

### Clean Your Brushes

Clean your brushes thoroughly to prevent acrylics from drying on them and causing damage. Keep your brushes in good condition for future use.

#### PRO TIP

*Use broken brushstrokes to add character and avoid making the boat look too new.*

## 15 Painting the cabin and windows



### Start with Dark Tones

Begin by applying the dark tones for the cabin and window area. This will serve as the foundation for the lighter aspects to come.

### Add Bold Orangey Red

Mix a bold orangey red and apply it to the section you want to highlight. This contrast with the dark background will create a vibrant effect.

### Adjust Red Intensity

If you desire a brighter red, first paint a layer of white over the dark background, let it dry, and then apply the red on top. This will make the red appear more vivid.

### Paint the Cabin

Use a neutral lamp gray to paint the cabin. Be aware that the brush may pick up some of the dark background, which can be used to your advantage for blending.

#### PRO TIP

*For a brighter red, apply a white base layer first, let it dry, then add the red on top.*

## 16 Detailing the cabin and rail



### Paint the Windows

Paint the basic shape of the windows, ensuring the angles align with the top and side of the cabin. Avoid making the shapes too precise, as if drawn with a ruler. Use the surrounding light color to reshape and refine the window edges.

### Add the Light Preserver

Decide how much you want the red of the light preserver to stand out against the gray. For a subtle effect, gray down the red. For more pop, apply white first, then layer the red on top. Use a flat brush for sharp edges.

### Detail with Fine Lines

Create crisp lines using the edge of a palette knife or a rigor brush. Experiment with different tools to achieve the desired effect. Feel free to use a tiny brush for intricate details if that suits your style.

#### PRO TIP

*Use a flat brush for painting elements with hard, sharp edges to achieve clean lines.*

## 17 Adjusting boat's back shape



### Adjust the Boat's Back Shape

Ensure the back of the boat has a gentle curve rather than being too flat. Wash your brush thoroughly before transitioning from light to dark areas. Round out the back shape to achieve a more natural look.

### Soften the Edges

Soften the sharp edges of the boat to create edge variety. Use a pointy brush to blur the top edge slightly, avoiding overly sharp lines.

### Refine the Bow

Examine the front of the bow and make necessary adjustments for a cleaner look. Ensure the bow reads well and blends smoothly with the surrounding water.

### Consider Water Highlights

Remember that the water is painted in gray tones, not pure white. Consider adding subtle white highlights or a white trim at the end for emphasis, but avoid overdoing it.

#### PRO TIP

*Soften sharp edges to create a variety of textures and avoid overly harsh lines.*

## 18 Using a mahl stick for detail



### Use a Mahl Stick for Detail

Position yourself close to the canvas and use a mahl stick to steady your hand. This will help you add fine details with precision.

### Correct the Boat's Shape

Observe the shape of the boat and aim to correct any wonky lines. Try to make the lengths and angles more accurate, even though it's an old boat and doesn't need to be perfect.

### Soften and Define Edges

Balance your painting by adding both soft and crisp edges. Soften some areas to create a red glow and define others to add variety and interest.

### Use the Photo as a Guide

Refer to the photo of the boat as a guide. While you can paint the boat any way you like, the photo helps ensure accuracy and provides inspiration.

#### PRO TIP

*Use a mahl stick to steady your hand for precise detail work.*

## 19 Softening and sharpening edges



### Add Red Highlights

Introduce a subtle red light to the upper section of the boat. This adds interest and draws the eye to that area.

### Enhance Details with Crisp Light

Apply a crisper light to the protruding elements of the boat. This makes those parts stand out and appear closer to the viewer.

### Use Soft and Crisp Edges Strategically

Soften the edges towards the back of the boat to create depth. Use crisp edges at the front to bring the boat forward on the canvas.

#### PRO TIP

*Use soft edges at the back and crisp edges at the front to enhance depth and focus.*

## 20 Experimenting with paint removal



### Adjust the Shape

Examine the shape that seems a little too high. Use your brush to squish it down to correct the form.

### Remove Excess Red

If the red appears too intense, scrape off as much as you can. This will help balance the color and prepare the area for further adjustments.

### Apply White for Balance

Use white paint to cover the area where you removed the red. This will help pick up just enough red for the desired effect, especially for elements like barrels.

### Wipe Down the Front

Wet the front section and gently wipe it down. This prepares the surface for painting light over it without interference from the underlying colors.

### Experiment with Light and Shadow

Apply a light pink to see how it interacts with the existing colors. If it's too light, dry it a little darker and gray it down to create depth and contrast.

#### PRO TIP

*Scraping off excess paint can reveal underlying layers, creating a unique texture similar to weathered surfaces.*

## 21 Adding final touches and reflections



### Create a Glowing Effect

Add a mid grey to the area around the white to help it appear as if it's glowing with light. This contrast enhances the luminous effect of the white.

### Add Barrel Details

Paint a darker version of the grey for the barrel in the background, as it receives less light. Ensure the top of this barrel aligns with the top of the other one at the same angle.

### Introduce Variety in Bars

Paint the bars between the barrels with a neutral grey for variety. Avoid making them perfectly straight or uniform in width to add interest.

### Enhance with Blue-Grey

Mix a blue-grey using brown and blue to add depth to the front elements. Replenish your blue paint as needed to maintain consistency.

#### PRO TIP

*Don't rush the process; take your time to achieve the desired effect, especially where wet paint is crucial.*

## 22 Enhancing light and form



### Darken the Back of the Boat

Darken the areas towards the back of the boat to create depth and contrast. This will help define the boat's form and make it stand out against the background.

### Adjust the Orange Area

Balance the orange area at the back by knocking it back slightly. This adjustment will harmonize the colors and prevent the orange from overpowering the composition.

### Enhance Light on the Side

Add more strength of light to one side of the boat. This will enhance the 3D effect and create a more realistic form by emphasizing the light source.

#### PRO TIP

*Always consider where the light is coming from to create realistic form in your painting.*

## 23 Removing tape and framing



### Remove the Tape

Carefully peel the tape off the edges of your painting. Ensure you remove any excess paint first to prevent it from falling onto the floor. Enjoy the instant framing effect as you reveal clean edges.

#### PRO TIP

*Choose an accent color like red, green, or orange to add interest to a grey painting.*

# Summary & Key Takeaways

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Embark on your painting journey by setting a dynamic stage with an abstract, expressive background. Use loose brushstrokes to convey movement and energy, allowing the boat's character to emerge through gestural strokes. Balance this with crisp details in key areas to create contrast and focus, setting the tone for a captivating composition.

As you progress, maintain a subdued color scheme while introducing subtle reds for contrast. Enhance brown areas with hints of red or orange to create striking contrasts with surrounding greys. Utilize techniques like vignetting and gestural backgrounds to add depth and interest, and remember to keep your brushes clean and wet for smooth application.

In the final stages, focus on detailing and texture. Use splattering techniques to add dynamic texture, and carefully sketch and adjust the boat's proportions for accuracy. Pay attention to the interplay of light and shadow, and use a mahl stick for precision in fine details. Balance soft and crisp edges to create a harmonious and engaging painting.

## LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Balance abstract background with crisp details for a dynamic composition.
- Enhance the redness or orangeness in brown areas to create contrast with greys.
- Use a thin layer of white paint around the edges to create a soft, light vignette.
- Use the brush in all sorts of directions to create a loose, gestural background.
- Wet your brushes before painting to prevent paint from drying on the ferrule and damaging the brush.
- Spray water onto the painting and press paper onto it to create unique textures.
- Use the clock method to accurately transfer angles from your reference photo to your canvas.
- Soften sharp edges to create a variety of textures and avoid overly harsh lines.



*Better Days 15x20" Acrylic on Canvas*

# Student Critiques

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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.

## Better Days Lesson Acrylic 12x16 by Jill Frazier



*Better Days Lesson Acrylic 12x16 by Jill Frazier*

Nice one Jill! Love your energetic brushwork and strong value contrast. Dramatic! Couple of things to think about... look at the the colour in the long curving vertical stroke of the bow. In yours the colour and value is the same for the whole stroke. In mine the colour varies a little from cool to warm and gets darker at the bottom as it flows under the hull into the shadow. That small feature is an important one because without it, in yours, the hull is being flattened out because the colour isn't make it curve away into shadow. Easy to fix. Similarly the broad dark brown area on the hull next to this line could do with more light in the midsection before it curves into shade. Make those two small changes and the boat will look a lot more three dimensional.

Other than that, nice job!

## 'Forgotten' by Evelyn Tuhi-Herewini



*'Forgotten' by Evelyn Tuhi-Herewini*

Good job Evelyn. This is not a great photo of your painting but I can see how this would look in the flesh. A tip for photographing your painting, take it from a slight angle above your painting to avoid glare and then straighten the image using the perspective tools under the cropping function. If your phone camera doesn't have that function then you can download an app called JotNot which does the same thing. Also I've you're taking the photo in the shade indoors close to a big window (which is good), you'll likely need to increase the exposure a little and tint the photo a little warmer after taking the photo - all of which is available in the editing functions of any recent smartphone camera.

As for the painting the only thing I'd like to see is the drawing of the boat done a little better. Comparing it in the mirror with the original photo will help a lot with that. Currently the side of the hull needs a little more curve and the front line of the bow has developed a bit of a wobble. Small wobbles good, big wobbles not so good.

Good work!

“Old boat, acrylic with oil glazing, canvas, 40 cm x 50 cm” by **Elena Sokolova**



*Old boat, acrylic with oil glazing, canvas, 40 cm x 50 cm*

Great work, Elena! interesting approach you took in glazing over impasto acrylics with oils. The rich textures you've created by doing that really do suit this subject and that's a great achievement to have your technique speak about your subject. I do feel like some of the grass could have more structure to make it more real. Perhaps just a few highlights of ragweed or similar. Great job!

"Better Days" a watercolour & gouache painting, by Eric Hillmer, Toronto, ON, Canada.



*"Better Days" a watercolour & gouache painting, by Eric Hillmer, Toronto, ON, Canada.*

Hey Eric great painting! I love that you gave it a go in watercolour and gouache. Great attention to detail and you've done a great job of creating the rounded form of the hull as it moves into shadow - not easy! Nice job of the grasses transitioning from abstract to real too - not overworked which is great to see. Would have liked to see you use a much bigger brush for blocking in the dark background because it's not quite achieved the loose painterly feel that that can allow. You've spent some time making the scaffolding quite detailed and tightly drawn but if you're going to be that specific about it I'd want to see some colour variation (rust, paint, etc) on those white bars and also some strong cast shadows where they overlap. Other than that, all good - beautiful work!