



Mountain Path

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/97-Mountain-Path>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

Welcome to this chapter, where we explore the vibrant interplay of color in a stunning scene from the Crown Range overlooking Arrowtown in New Zealand's South Island. This breathtaking location offers a perfect canvas for experimenting with color contrasts. In this lesson, we'll delve into the art of balancing vibrant hues with more subdued, greyed tones to achieve a tasteful and harmonious composition. The simplicity of the scene allows us to focus on pushing the boundaries of color, particularly by contrasting the strong colors of the foreground with a muted background. As you follow along, you'll learn how to enhance your painting's mood by selectively emphasizing certain colors, such as bringing out the reds while softening the background. This approach not only adds depth but also guides the viewer's eye through the painting. Whether you choose to replicate my interpretation or create your own, the goal is to master the delicate balance between vibrancy and subtlety. Happy painting!



"Mountain Path" 11x11" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson



REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 2

The scene as Richard found it.

Materials

Gather these materials before you start. If you don't have the exact same supplies, use what you have and substitute freely.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- 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 Color Variations in Different Paintings



Observe Color Variations

Compare the plein air painting with the larger acrylic version. Notice how the colors are more vibrant in the acrylic painting, with enhanced blues and yellows.

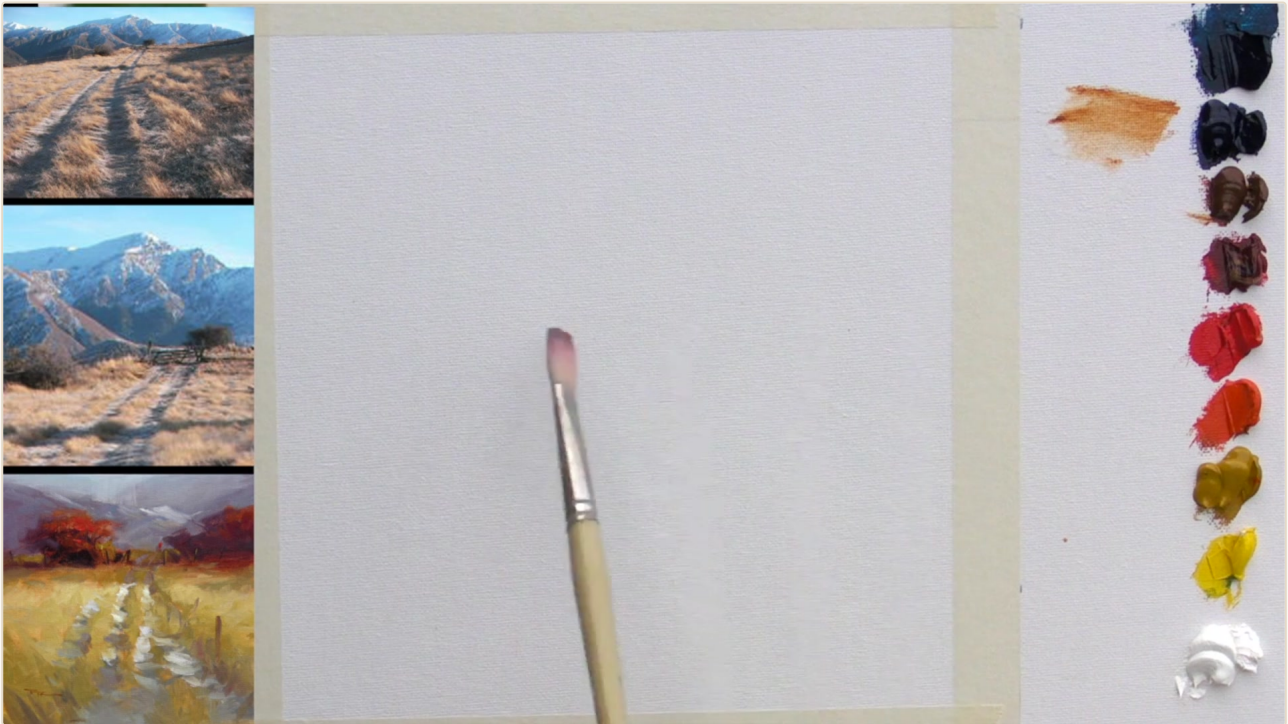
Experiment with Color

In your own painting, try pushing different colors to see how they affect the overall mood. For example, emphasize reds while graying down the background to create contrast.

PRO TIP

Feel free to play with colors to achieve the desired effect in your painting.

2 Sketching the Basic Design



Prepare the Sketching Mix

Mix a thin blend of linseed oil and burnt sienna. This will create a light, manageable color for sketching the basic design.

Sketch the Major Shapes

Roughly sketch in the major shapes on the canvas. Begin with the false horizon, which is the top of the hill.

Divide the Canvas

Divide the canvas into thirds to establish a balanced composition. Use these divisions as guides for placing the elements of your painting.

Outline the Tracks

Carefully outline the shapes of the tracks through the grass. Spend time ensuring these shapes are accurate, as they are a key part of the design.

PRO TIP

Divide the canvas into thirds to create a balanced composition.

3 Design Considerations for the Path



Create an Organic Path

Avoid painting a regular, highway-like track. Instead, aim for a broken, disused look with organic shapes to convey a natural feel.

Break Up Straight Lines

Although you may start with straight lines, plan to break them up with shadows, snow, and grass to enhance the natural, irregular appearance.

Avoid Lines Exiting at Corners

Ensure that none of the major lines exit at the very corners of the painting. This helps maintain a balanced composition and avoids dividing the canvas awkwardly.

PRO TIP

Avoid dividing the canvas in half vertically or horizontally to maintain a balanced composition.

4 Asymmetrical Balance with Bushes



Create Asymmetrical Balance

Extend the bush on the right further out to the right. Make it a larger mass and a different shape than the bush on the left. This will help achieve asymmetrical balance and add variation to the composition.

PRO TIP

Vary the size and shape of elements to create asymmetrical balance.

5 Avoiding Repeating Shapes in the Mountain Line



Avoid Repeating Shapes

Examine the line of the mountain and ensure there are no repeating shapes. This will create a more dynamic and interesting composition.

Adjust Mountain Line

Position the mountain line so it does not just touch the tops of any bushes. Ensure it is either above or below the bushes to avoid 'kissing' the tops.

Create Overlapping Forms

Aim for clearly overlapping forms in your painting. This enhances readability from a distance and adds depth to your work.

PRO TIP

Ensure the mountain line is either above or below the bushes to avoid 'kissing' the tops.

6 Shadow Planning



Plan Shadow Areas

Indicate the shadow areas on the land where the trees are located. Consider that the trees will have a shadow cast on them, with a touch of light on the top of the tree.

Define Light and Shadow Balance

Ensure there is a light area in the center of the painting as you move forward. Create a very soft cast shadow in the foreground to balance the composition.

PRO TIP

Add a touch of light on the top of the tree to enhance the contrast with the shadow.

7 Laying Down Darkest Darks



Mix Darkest Dark

Create a dark warm grey by mixing burnt sienna with a touch of blue, red, and a tiny bit of yellow ochre. Add linseed oil to thin the mixture.

Apply Darkest Dark

Brush the dark warm grey quickly at the base of the trees, extending the strokes past the intended area. This will allow for blending with the next layer of paint.

Add Lighter Warm Grey

Mix a slightly lighter warm grey and apply it to the shadow areas. This serves as a base to work with for further layers.

PRO TIP

Extend brush strokes past the intended area to allow for easier blending with subsequent layers.

8 Shadow Areas in the Grass



Prepare Your Brush

Use a Robert Simmons flat number 8 bristle brush for this task. This type of brush is ideal for creating texture in the grass.

Mix a Warm Grey

Combine a complementary blue with brown to create a warm grey. This mixture will provide a subtle, less vibrant tone for the shadow areas.

Apply Yellow Ochre

Mix pure yellow ochre with some linseed oil. Use this mixture to brush in the shadow areas of the grass, reinforcing the shapes established earlier.

PRO TIP

Use a warm grey to subtly define shadow areas without overpowering the scene.

9 Light and Shadow in the Grass



Identify Shadow Areas

Focus on the left-hand sides of the major clumps of grass for shadow placement. This will create a natural light effect.

Prepare the Spotlight Area

Consider the idea of a spotlight in the center of the grass area. Brush out the color to prepare for the soft shadow on the sides of the grass.

Mix Shadow Color for Snow

Mix a shadow color specifically for the snow. This will help define the contrast between light and shadow in the scene.

PRO TIP

Focus shadows on the left sides of grass clumps for a natural light effect.

10 Mixing and Applying Snow Shadow Colors



Mix Snow Shadow Color

Create a shadow color for the snow by mixing blue with a complement of orange, a touch of white, and a little crimson. Aim for a mid-value cool gray that appears cool next to the warm colors in the painting.

Apply Snow Shadow Color

Brush the mixed color thinly onto the canvas using a fair amount of linseed oil. Focus on blocking in the shadows on the snow in the foreground, keeping the shapes irregular to avoid duplication.

Add Warmer Gray Highlights

Mix a slightly warmer, lighter gray and add it to the foreground. This will enhance the sense of depth and variation in the snow.

PRO TIP

Keep shadow shapes irregular to maintain a natural appearance.

11 Blocking in the Sky and Background



Mix a Cool Grey for the Sky

Combine white with a small amount of phthalo blue on your palette. Mix this with the grey already present to create a fairly indistinct cool grey for the sky.

Block in the Sky

Apply the cool grey to the top of the canvas, brushing it in quickly. Aim for very soft edges to create a mysterious, atmospheric feel to the mountains.

Maintain a Simplified Composition

Avoid crisp edges in the sky to keep the focus on the mountain path, the main subject of the painting. This approach also simplifies the overall composition.

PRO TIP

Use soft edges in the sky to enhance the mysterious atmosphere and keep the focus on the main subject.

12 Composition and Light Balance



Simplify the Composition

Focus on simplifying your composition by dividing it into distinct sections. Keep the top third of the painting dark and the bottom two thirds light. This creates a clear and balanced contrast that guides the viewer's eye.

PRO TIP

Divide your painting into thirds to simplify and balance light and dark areas.

13 Building Texture and Light in the Grass



Create Shadow Texture

Mix yellow ochre, ultramarine blue, and a touch of burnt sienna to add warmth. Apply this mixture thicker by using more paint and less linseed oil. Use soft strokes to brush it onto the canvas, dragging slightly to create texture while keeping edges soft.

Lighten the Grass

Mix yellow ochre, lighter cadmium yellow, and titanium white to create a lighter, warmer mixture. Apply this thickly to build light in the central area of the grass. Adjust the mixture by adding yellow ochre and yellow to blend into the shadows, creating a half-tone between light and shadow.

Vary Brush Strokes

Ensure your brush strokes vary in direction to add interest and variety. This variation in strokes, along with the color and shape changes, enhances the painting's texture and depth.

PRO TIP

Use soft strokes to maintain soft edges in the grass, except where sharp edges are needed for cast shadows.

14 Adding Color Variation to the Grass



Add Light to the Hill Rim

Apply a touch of light color to the rim of the hill to create interest and guide the viewer's eye through the shadow area.

Introduce Color Variation in Grass

Mix some sky blue with your grass colors. Apply this mixture randomly over the grass with a very light touch to avoid disturbing the paint underneath.

Intensify the Darks

Use ultramarine blue and a couple of reds to deepen the darks at the base of the trees. This will enhance the contrast in your painting.

Push Trees into the Distance

Add a tiny touch of white to your dark mixture to push the other tree further into the distance over the hill.

Add Infused Light Effect

Use the lightened dark mixture to create an infused light effect on the edges of the bushes for added depth.

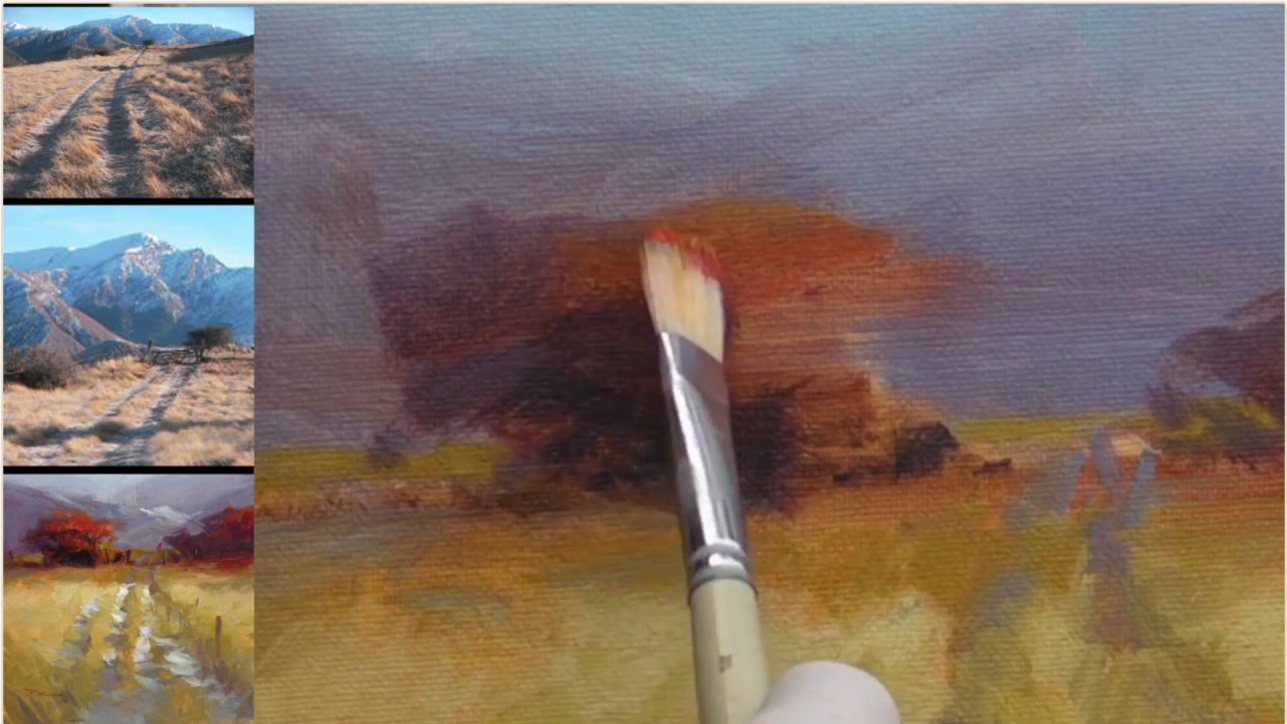
Apply Punchy Color

Mix a vibrant orange with a little yellow ochre. Apply this thickly to add a punch of color to your scene.

PRO TIP

Use a very light touch when adding color variation to avoid disturbing the underlying paint.

15 Enhancing Contrast and Color in Trees



Apply Thick Mixture for Tree Texture

Mix orange with a little bit of yellow ochre, ensuring the mixture is very thick without any linseed oil. Apply it quickly with a light stroke to create texture that simulates the airiness of leaves in the tree.

Enhance Mountain Background

Darken and strengthen the mountain on the left-hand side to convey a sense of light coming from the right. This will help establish the direction of light in your painting.

Reflect Cool Colors in Snow Shadows

Observe the cool color in the shadow side of the snow on the mountains, which reflects the phthalo color in the sky. Use this as inspiration to add a slightly cooler color to contrast with the warm tree colors.

Mix Neutral Light Grey for Snow

Prepare a neutral light grey for the light on the snow. Remember that the light is coming from the right as you apply each brush stroke.

PRO TIP

Apply thick paint with a light stroke to create texture and simulate the airiness of leaves.

16 Subduing the Background Mountain



Mix a Neutral Light Grey

Mix a neutral light grey to represent the light on the snow. Remember that the light source is from the right, so apply each brush stroke with this in mind.

Add Warmth to Sunlit Rocks

For areas where the sun catches the rocks, add a touch of orange to the grey. This mixture should be slightly darker and warmer than the snow to suggest sunlight.

Use a Crisp Square Brush

Switch to a square synthetic brush with a crisp edge. Use this brush to paint the light, maintaining a subdued background to highlight the foreground.

PRO TIP

Keep the background subdued to allow the foreground to stand out.

17 Painting Light on the Path



Select the Right Brush

Choose a square synthetic brush with a crisp edge to paint the light on the path. This brush will help you achieve clean, defined strokes.

Mix and Apply Light Gray

Mix a very light gray instead of pure white for the path's light areas. Apply this light gray to the path in the foreground, starting from the lightest area.

Create a Gradation

Work from the light area down into the shadow area with each new glob of paint. Allow the brush to run out of paint naturally, creating a smooth gradation from light into soft shadow.

PRO TIP

Use a square synthetic brush to achieve clean, defined strokes on the path.

18 Foreground Snow Shadows



Mix Cool Grey

Create a cool grey by mixing a combination of blue and a touch of black. This will serve as the base color for the shadowed snow in the foreground.

Apply Cool Grey to Snow

Use the cool grey to paint the shadowed areas of the snow in the foreground. Ensure the paint is applied smoothly to capture the soft, shadowed effect.

Reflect Sky on Snow

Highlight the tops of the snow clumps with a lighter shade of the cool grey. This will mimic the reflection of the sky on the snow, adding depth and realism.

PRO TIP

Use a lighter shade of cool grey to reflect the sky on the tops of snow clumps.

19 Intensifying Foreground Shadows



Intensify Foreground Shadows

Mix a slightly darker, warmer grey to enhance the shadows on the grass in the foreground. Be cautious not to make the shadows too dark, as they might compete with the dark tones in the trees.

PRO TIP

Balance shadow intensity to avoid competition with other dark areas in the painting.

20 Adding Details to Trees and Removing Gate



Add Detail to the Tree

Use the edge of a synthetic brush to add a little branch to the tree. This brush provides a crisp edge, perfect for fine details.

Paint Fence Posts and Gate

Switch to a thin rigger brush with only a few hairs to paint the fence posts and gate. Aim for a ramshackle look by making the posts uneven and not perfectly straight.

Highlight Fence Posts

Apply small spots of light to the fence posts using yellow ochre. This adds dimension and highlights to the structure.

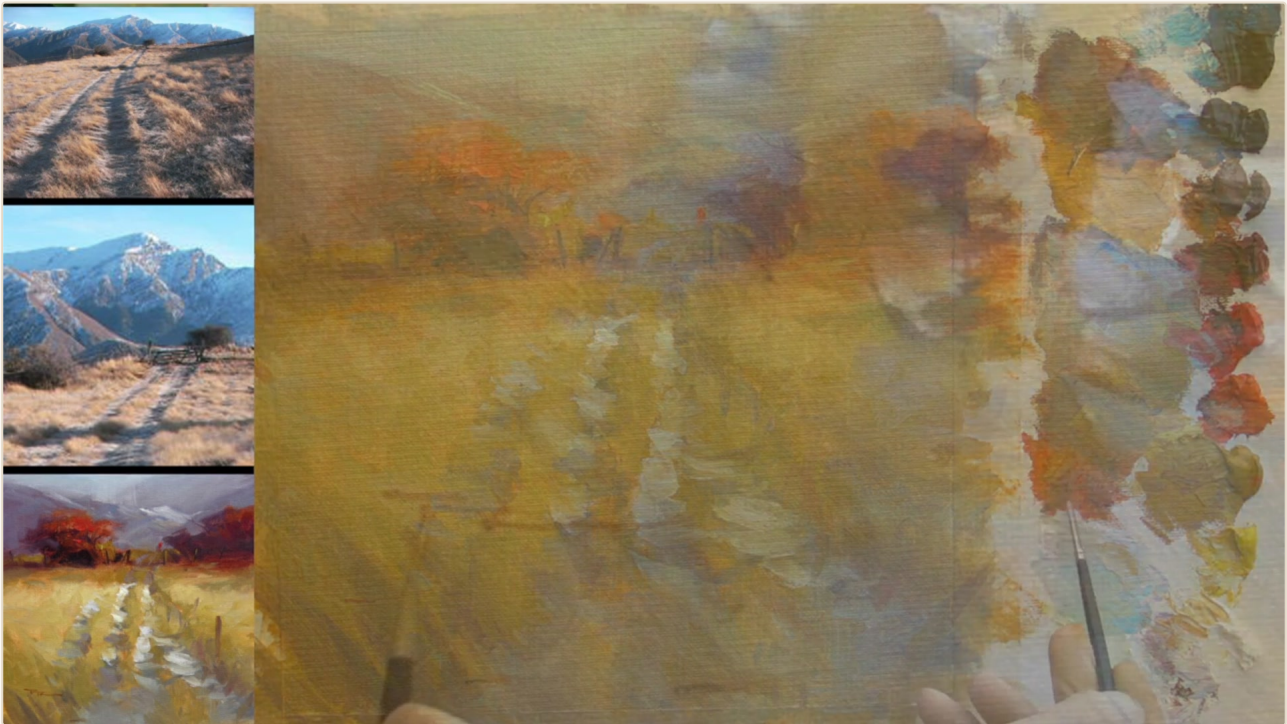
Remove the Gate

If the gate doesn't fit the composition, gently rub it out. Continue the path through the area without the obstruction for a cleaner look.

PRO TIP

Use a thin rigger brush to achieve a ramshackle look for fence posts by making them uneven.

21 Final Tweaks and Signature



Sign the Painting

Add your signature to the painting in a way that complements the composition. Consider how the signature can become an element within the artwork itself.

Add a Fence Post

Use a warm grey to paint a small fence post. This addition can help balance the composition, especially in relation to the signature.

Include a Red Hiker

Place a small red hiker on the path to add interest and a focal point. This touch of red can draw the viewer's eye along the path.

Enhance Mountain Light

Strengthen the light on the mountain slightly. This adjustment will help guide the viewer's eye into the painting, enhancing the overall depth and focus.

PRO TIP

Use your signature as a compositional element to balance the painting.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by experimenting with color variations to set the mood and tone of your piece. Begin with a basic sketch using a thin blend of linseed oil and burnt sienna, establishing major shapes and a balanced composition by dividing your canvas into thirds. As you progress, focus on creating a natural, organic feel by breaking up straight lines and ensuring asymmetrical balance with varied shapes and sizes.

Pay attention to the interplay of light and shadow, particularly in the grass and snow, to add depth and realism. Use a combination of warm and cool grays to subtly define these areas, and ensure your brush strokes vary in direction for added texture. As you block in the sky and background, maintain soft edges to enhance the mysterious atmosphere and keep the focus on the main subject.

In the final stages, refine details by adding texture and contrast to trees and enhancing the foreground with light and shadow. Use a light touch to introduce color variations without disturbing underlying layers, and consider the composition when adding your signature. With these techniques, your painting will capture the viewer's eye and convey a sense of depth and balance.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Feel free to play with colors to achieve the desired effect.
- Divide the canvas into thirds to create a balanced composition.
- Avoid dividing the canvas in half vertically or horizontally.
- Vary the size and shape of elements to create asymmetrical balance.
- Ensure the mountain line is either above or below the bushes.
- Use soft edges in the sky to enhance the mysterious atmosphere.
- Focus shadows on the left sides of grass clumps for a natural light effect.
- Use a thin rigger brush to achieve a ramshackle look for fence posts.



"Mountain Path" 11x11" 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.

"Morning Walk" by Paula Salmons



"Morning Walk" Oil on Canvas by Paula Salmons

Paula I love the design of this painting - not nearly so obvious as mine, sweeping us into the scene with your grassy track. You've approached the gray vs colour challenge rather differently by keeping the strong pthalo colour in the background and playing out the grays in the rest of the painting to offset the orange grasses and that works well but it's a shame the lighter grays on the right are slightly too light and flatly applied as they are spoiling the sense of depth there.

Some of the grays in the mountain are also not quite on the mark and could do with some more practice, so I think the highlight for me is your wonderful foreground where you've clearly put a lot of work into understanding the play of light and shadow over the forms there, the consequence being that you can nearly reach out and grab a handful of snow from the shadows of the sunlit grasses there. Beautiful work!

“Winter Walk” by Tony Quinn



"Winter Walk" 12x16" Oil on Canvas by Tony Quinn

Wow, what intense colour you've made in the piece Tony! You've achieved a real read glow coming off those trees. Did you use some red glazing there as well to help there? Whatever you've done it works very powerfully against the gray-blue background. You have missed a few opportunities for exciting impasto brushwork in achieving your rich colour throughout the painting, and I would love to see if you would like to work over this one a little to experiment with a looser style, or if that might happen if you painted it again. I've painted this scene several times now and each time it frees my hand to try something a bit more daring, which I highly recommend.

Your drawing of the path is very careful and you've unfortunately given in to our inclination to oversimplify and 'patternise' here - all too easy to do I know! Good that you avoid symmetry with your fence posts however they should be a fair bit thinner down the track. I do like the dash of snow you ran across the path to help loosen it up - that was a nice idea and it would work even better if you added a few subtle left side shadows to some of the grasses surrounding the snow because at the moment it's floating on top a little. Good job on keeping the values very similar and subdued in the background to which lets the foreground shine. Nice work.

"The Golden Trail" by June Stevens



"The Golden Trail" 12x16" Oil on Board by June Stevens

Great to see such a different take on this design June and you've created with it a lot of movement and a good sense of depth. The balance of the design is good but my only reservation is the regular spacing and size of your trees which appear to have been planted along the track evenly spaced. Perhaps a little more snow would have added some drama on the mountains too and in the large foreground shadow.

Your brushwork immediately stands out as being quite confident and expressive which is a pleasure to see and I'm looking forward to seeing more of your work.

"Crown Range" by Cheryl Lipham



"Crown Range" 11x14" Oil on Board by Cheryl Lipham

Fantastic foreground detail there Cheryl - I can almost hear the icy grasses crunching under my boots. It makes for a powerful lead in to the painting which unfortunately looks a little empty at the top of the rise after all that detail. Personally I think it would look better if you removed the tree altogether and focused on the path as in my photoshopped version of your painting.

Although I totally empathise with the logic of having a single tree as the focal point, and I know you've played with various arrangements, the orange tree you have there at the moment seems to me to be too small, powerful and pruned in the design which makes it more trite than poignant. Personally I'm always fighting against my tendency to create trite and hackneyed designs - a lifelong battle I'm afraid.

Saying all that, I commend you on your attention to detail and your dedication to keep pushing yourself to solve the design which was evident in your 3 posted versions of this painting - that's all it takes to make great paintings. Keep up the good work!