



Fisherman's Wharf

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/93-Fisherman-s-Wharf>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

Welcome to this chapter on capturing the enchanting atmosphere of Fisherman's Wharf in Monterey, California. This scene holds a special place in my heart as it was painted during my first visit to this beautiful location, amidst the bustling energy of a plein air painting convention. Surrounded by fellow artists, I found myself captivated by the vibrant colors and the remarkable atmospheric perspective that California offers. Unlike the subtler effects I encounter back home in New Zealand, the light and atmosphere here naturally create a stunning depth and mystery without the need for exaggeration. In this lesson, we will explore how to harness this atmospheric perspective to enhance the sense of distance in your painting. By learning to lighten and desaturate colors as they recede, you will be able to mimic the natural effects of the atmosphere, adding a layer of intrigue to your work. Whether you follow along step by step or infuse your own creativity, this scene promises to be a rewarding subject for any painter. Enjoy the journey!



"Fisherman's Wharf" 12x12" 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.

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 Focus on Atmospheric Perspective



Understand Atmospheric Perspective

Recognize that atmospheric perspective is key to creating depth in your painting. It involves using color and clarity to suggest distance, making objects appear lighter and less distinct as they recede.

Apply Atmospheric Perspective

To create a strong sense of atmospheric perspective, gradually lighten and desaturate colors as they move into the background. This mimics the natural effect of the atmosphere on distant objects, enhancing the depth of your scene.

PRO TIP

Use lighter and less saturated colors for distant objects to enhance atmospheric perspective.

2 Scene Composition and Perspective



Understand Scene Composition

Recognize the importance of having a foreground and background element in your scene. Notice how the building in the foreground is echoed by a similar structure in the background, creating depth.

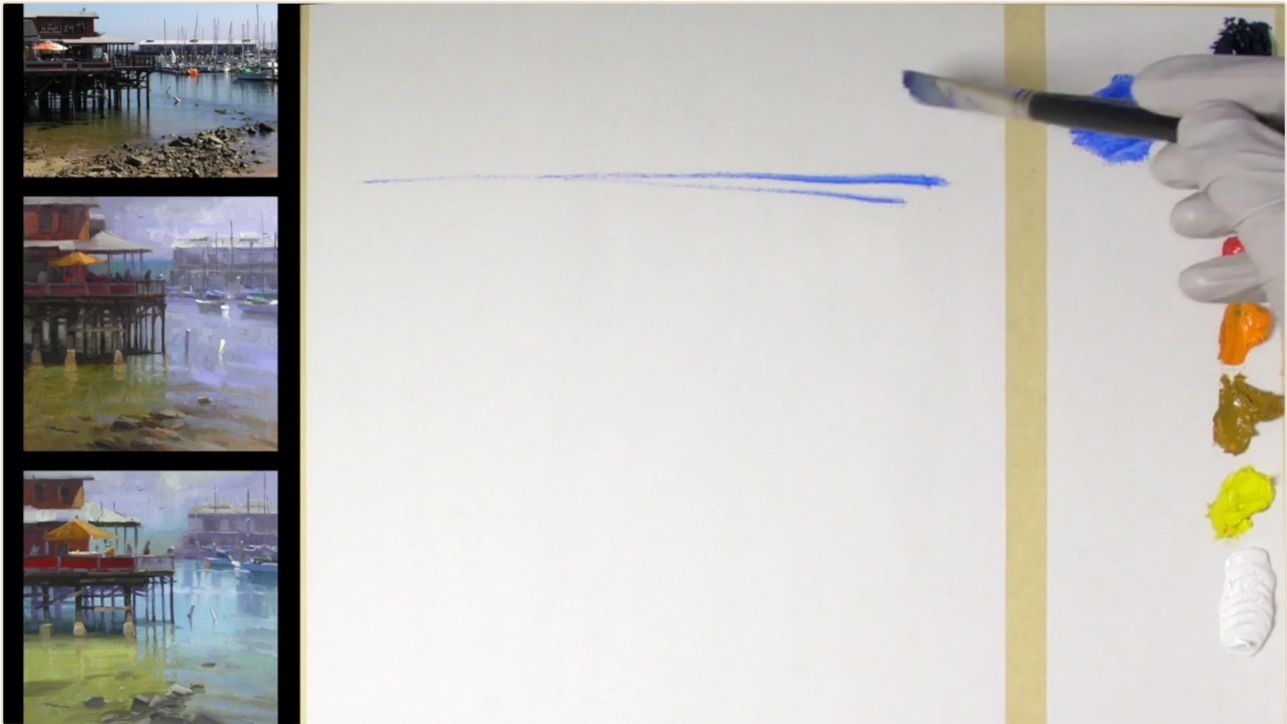
Apply Atmospheric Perspective

Use atmospheric perspective to push the background building into the distance. This technique involves adjusting the color and clarity to create a sense of depth and space.

PRO TIP

Utilize scale and atmospheric perspective to enhance depth in your painting.

3 Sketching the Composition



Establish the Horizon

Begin by sketching the horizon line. This is the easiest line to establish and will serve as the foundation for your composition's perspective.

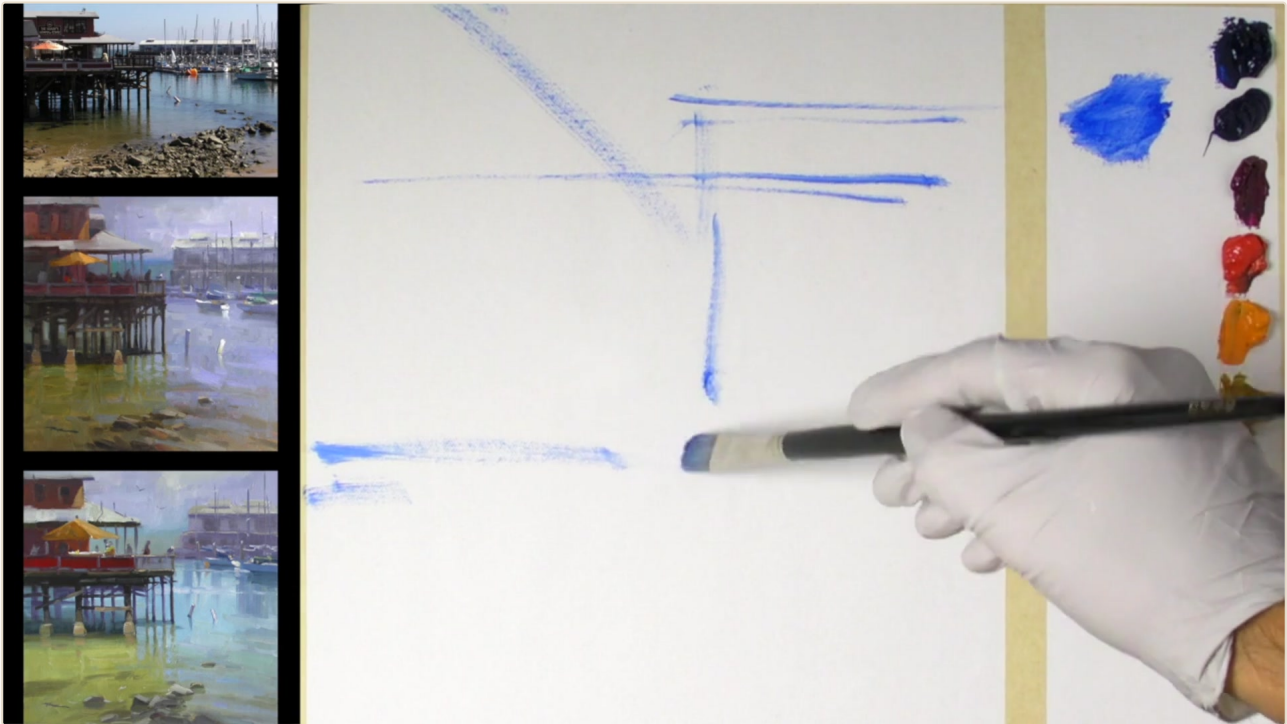
Sketch Main Object Lines

Identify the main objects in your scene and sketch their top, side, and bottom lines. Consider their positions relative to each other and to the horizon line to maintain accurate perspective.

PRO TIP

Use the horizon line to guide the perspective and placement of all other elements in your composition.

4 Blocking in Shapes and Composition Rules



Block in the Foreground Shape

Block in a large shape to represent the envelope of the building in the foreground. This will serve as the foundation, with other pieces fitting inside this larger shape.

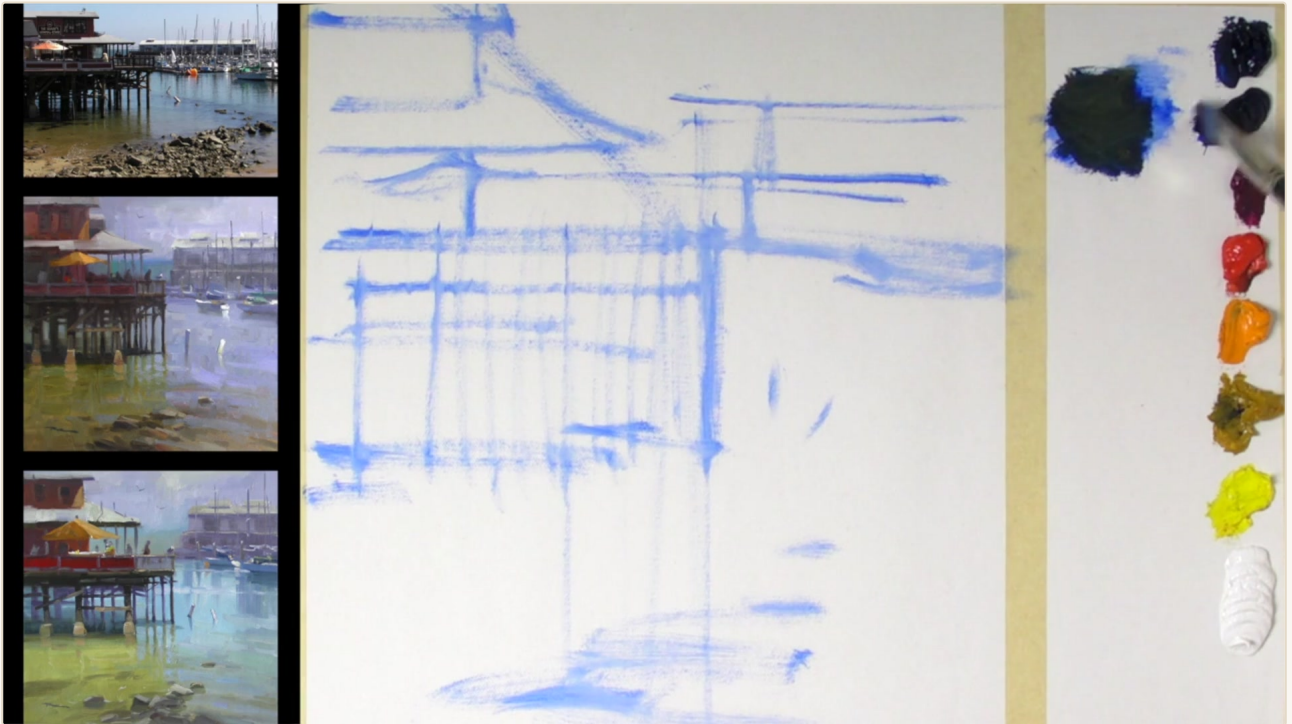
Apply Composition Rules

Avoid dividing the canvas in half with any major line to maintain balance. Ensure objects, like buildings, are either slightly separated or overlapping to prevent them from 'kissing'.

PRO TIP

Ensure buildings are either slightly separated or overlapping to avoid them 'kissing'.

5 Mixing and Applying Dark Values



Mix the Darkest Dark

Create a greeny-browny dark grey by mixing dark values with a hint of green. Ensure the mix doesn't lean strongly towards any specific color, maintaining a neutral tone close to black but slightly lightened.

Apply the Dark Layer

Incorporate walnut oil into the dark paint mixture to achieve a thin consistency. Apply this mixture to the piles underneath the foreground building, ensuring the canvas is fully covered without any gaps.

PRO TIP

Use walnut oil to thin the paint for smooth coverage without leaving canvas exposed.

6 Bending Colors and Midtones



Work from Darks to Midtones

Begin by painting the darkest areas of your composition. Gradually move towards the midtones, ensuring a methodical approach. This will help speed up your painting process.

Bend the Colors

Observe the color you just painted and identify any subtle differences in hue. Adjust the hue by adding a small amount of another color to shift it on the color wheel. For example, if the color is slightly greener, add a touch of yellow to enhance the green tone.

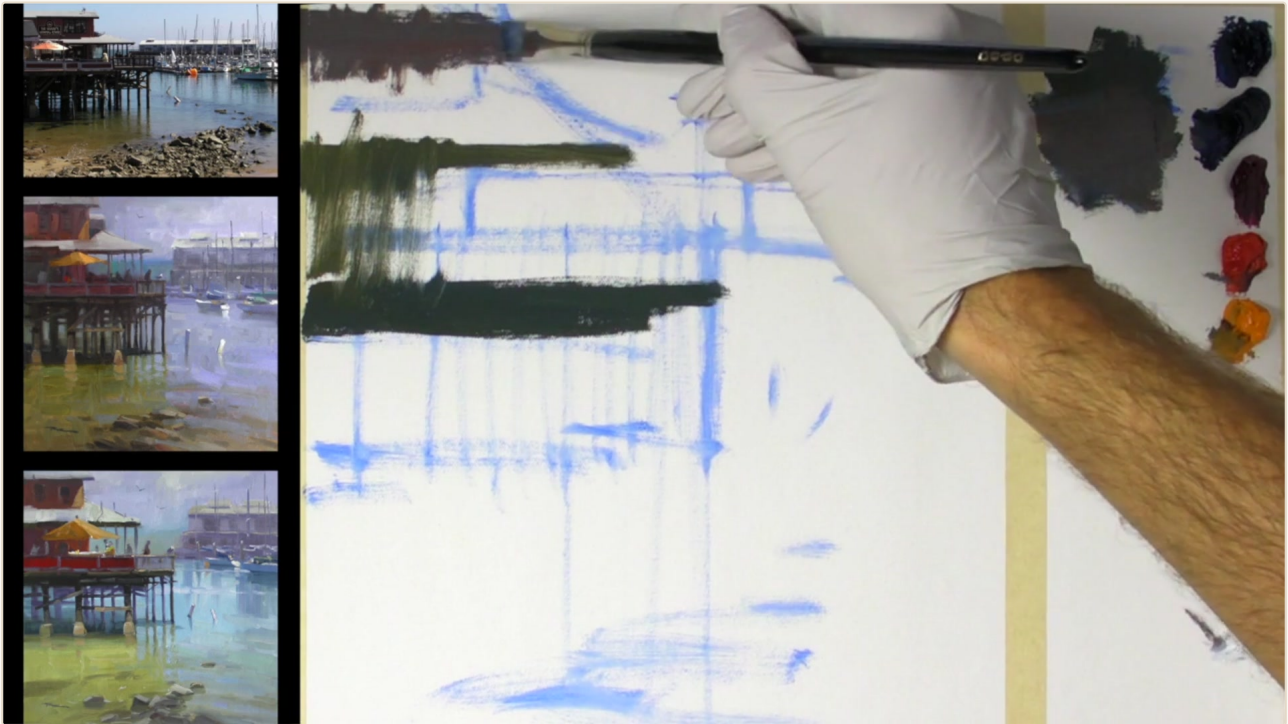
Lighten with White

To lighten the color slightly, incorporate a small amount of white into the mixture. This will help achieve the desired midtone while maintaining the correct hue.

PRO TIP

Analyze each color's hue and adjust it by adding complementary colors to shift it on the color wheel.

7 Adding Variations in Dark Grays



Mix and Adjust Dark Grays

Add a touch of red or orange to your gray mixture to introduce warmth. Lighten the mixture slightly by adding a bit of white. This will create subtle variations in the dark grays.

Apply Variations to Darks

Observe your subject closely to identify slight differences in the dark areas. Mix these variations and apply them to your painting to avoid flatness and enhance depth.

PRO TIP

Photographs often oversimplify dark areas, so rely on observation to capture subtle variations.

8 Benefits of Plein Air Painting



Understand the Limitations of Photographs

Recognize that photographs often simplify dark areas, clumping them together and losing detail. When painting outdoors, your eyes can perceive more color and detail in these darks than a camera can capture.

Embrace Plein Air Painting

If you haven't tried plein air painting, or if it intimidated you before, consider giving it another chance. Painting outdoors is a direct source of inspiration and beauty.

Overcome Initial Challenges

Expect some difficulties when transitioning from studio to plein air painting, such as setting up gear and painting quickly. With practice, these challenges become manageable, and you will find a rewarding rhythm.

PRO TIP

Your eyes can perceive more color in the darks when painting outdoors compared to a photograph.

9 Working with Darks and Value Relationships



Focus on Dark Values

Continue working with the dark values in your painting. Notice that these darks should have similar values, with little differentiation in terms of lightness or darkness. This helps maintain a strong shadow family and gives your forms structure.

Compare Like to Like

When adding mid values, compare them with other mid values. Similarly, compare light values with other light values. This method ensures your colors are in the correct relationship with each other, avoiding the difficulty of comparing darks with lights.

Mix a Cool Gray

For distant buildings or elements, mix a cool gray. This color will help create depth and maintain the value relationships in your painting.

PRO TIP

Compare values by grouping similar ones together, such as darks with darks, to maintain correct relationships.

10 Painting Distant Buildings



Mix Cool Gray

Mix a cool gray to represent the distant buildings. Focus on achieving a mid-value tone, which will serve as the base for subtle variations.

Analyze Subtle Differences

Compare the subtle differences in the grays of the distant buildings. Some areas should be slightly warmer, cooler, or lighter. Concentrate on getting these variations correct to create depth.

Adjust Values

Correct the values if the photo reference appears darker than reality. Consider overstating these values to push the buildings further into the distance, enhancing the illusion of depth.

Practice Value Relationships

Develop your skill in analyzing and mixing colors that are very close in value. Focus on the mid-value shadows of the buildings, ensuring the relationships between them are accurate.

PRO TIP

Push distant buildings back by overstating the lightness of their values, enhancing the sense of depth.

11 Improving Subtle Color Differences



Observe Subtle Color Differences

Train your eye to notice slight variations in color. This skill improves with practice and allows you to see differences that may initially be missed.

Practice Mixing Close Colors

Experiment with mixing colors that are very close together. This will enhance your ability to discern and replicate subtle color differences in your paintings.

Consider Sky Brightness

Decide how dark or light to make the sky in your painting. This choice can significantly affect the overall mood and balance of your work.

PRO TIP

Regular practice in mixing subtle color variations will improve your ability to see and paint these differences.

12 Sky and Water Color Relationships



Determine Sky Value

Decide on the value of the sky by considering its relationship with the building's shadows. Avoid making the sky darker than the building's shadows. Aim for a value between white and the shadow value of the distant building.

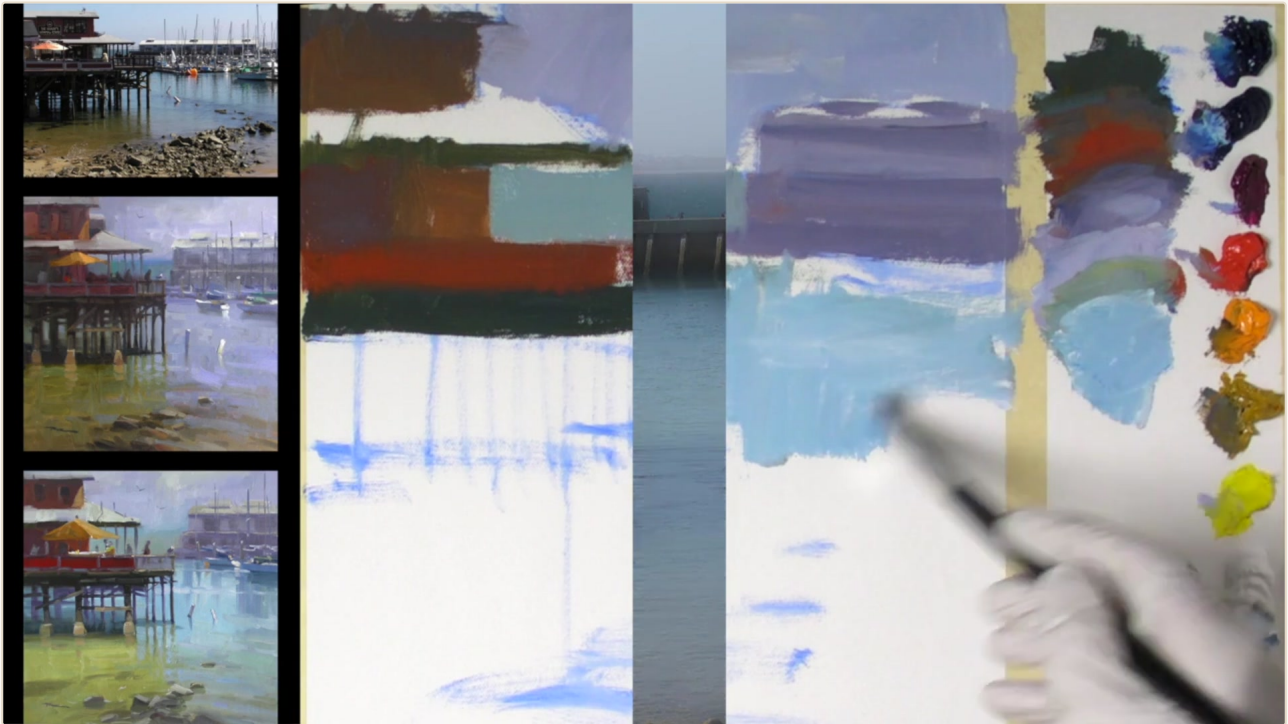
Maintain Color Harmony

Ensure that the colors and values used in the sky are reflected in the water. This creates a cohesive and harmonious scene, as the sky and water should share similar color relationships.

PRO TIP

Keep the sky's value between white and the shadow value of the distant building for balance.

13 Color Changes in Water



Understand Water Hue Changes

Observe how the hue of the water changes as it comes closer. Notice that the water transitions from green to blue and then to a slightly brown hue in the foreground.

Avoid Oversaturation

Be careful not to oversaturate the colors in the water. Keeping the colors slightly muted will prevent the painting from looking too vibrant or unrealistic.

Grey Down Colors

Focus on greying down the colors as you paint different sections of the water. This will help achieve a more natural and harmonious look.

PRO TIP

Grey down the colors in the water to avoid oversaturation and achieve a more natural look.

14 Thinning Paint for Future Layers



Thin the Paint

Use a paper towel to gently skim off excess paint from the area. This thins the paint, preparing the surface for future layers. Thinning ensures that the darks of the poles won't be muddled by thick light paint underneath.

PRO TIP

Use a paper towel to thin paint layers, preventing them from interfering with future dark layers.

15 Simplifying Complex Areas



Soften the Horizon

Create a soft, blurry horizon to enhance the atmospheric perspective. This technique is common in European landscapes and adds depth to your painting. Adjust the softness to your preference for a more subtle or pronounced effect.

Simplify the Dock Area

Focus on the shadowed area beneath the dock, which is complex with reflections and shadows. Decide how much detail you want to include, aiming for simplicity. Squint at your subject to help reduce details and capture the essence of the scene.

PRO TIP

Squint at your subject to simplify complex areas and focus on essential shapes and values.

16 Transition Zones and Water Color



Create Transition Zone

Apply an intense strip of green to serve as the transition zone between shadow and light. This will soften the edge and allow the color to flow smoothly from dark to light.

Adjust Color Intensity

Lighten the vibrant color slightly, if needed, to maintain balance. Ensure the color is not too light to preserve the intended effect.

Darken and Add Interest

Bend the color by slightly darkening it as it comes forward. Add yellow ochre to introduce more interest and depth to the area.

Use Loose Brushwork

Embrace loose brushwork in this area to enhance the interest of the large color shape. This approach adds dynamic texture and visual appeal.

Subtle Water Color Adjustment

In the foreground, adjust the water color to be slightly browner or warmer. This subtle change reflects the thin water revealing the sand underneath, without altering the value significantly.

PRO TIP

Use loose brushwork to add interest and texture to large color shapes.

17 Correcting Value Structure



Assess the Value Structure

Examine the relationship between the green and blue areas in the water foreground. Ensure the green is not too light compared to the blue to maintain the correct value structure.

Correct the Value with Glazing

If the green is too light, wait for the painting to dry completely. Apply a blue glaze over the green area to darken it slightly and correct the value structure.

PRO TIP

Use glazing to adjust the value of a color after the painting has dried.

18 Comparing Paintings



Compare Different Paintings

Observe the two paintings on the left. The one in the middle was created on location, capturing the immediate essence and atmosphere. The painting at the bottom represents the finished state of the current painting, showcasing refined details and adjustments made in the studio.

PRO TIP

Study both on-location and studio paintings to understand the evolution of your work.

19 Painting Poles with Perspective



Define Pole Lengths

Place small dots to mark the length of the poles beneath the building. This will guide you in maintaining consistent pole lengths.

Mix Distant Pole Color

Create a slightly lighter, slightly bluer grey to paint the most distant poles. This color choice helps convey atmospheric perspective.

Paint Distant Poles

Use the lighter grey mixture to paint the distant poles. Refresh your brush every stroke or two to keep the color consistent.

Mix Foreground Pole Color

Prepare a much darker grey for the foreground poles. This contrast will enhance the sense of depth in your painting.

Paint Foreground Poles

Apply the darker grey to the foreground poles using a larger brush. Use your whole arm for straight strokes, releasing your breath slowly to maintain control.

PRO TIP

Use your whole arm for straight strokes to avoid wobbling.

20 Painting Shadows and Avoiding Details



Paint the Poles

Use a larger brush with a darker grey mixture to paint the big poles. Keep them straight and simple, varying the spacing for an interesting rhythm. Avoid equal spacing for a more dynamic composition.

Adjust the Pole Values

Brush across the poles sideways to ensure the value appears darker. This helps counteract any sheen from lighting that might make them look lighter than they are.

Add Darkest Shadows

Apply the darkest shadow area right under the big poles. Focus on capturing the large shapes rather than small details.

Avoid Details

Squint at your subject to see the big shapes and avoid painting small details and ripples. Keep your focus on the overall composition.

PRO TIP

Squint at your subject to focus on big shapes and avoid unnecessary details.

21 Adding Rhythm and Variation



Add Rhythm to Concrete Blocks

Use a single stroke to paint each concrete block, but remember to incorporate rhythm in your colors. Even though the blocks are likely uniform in reality, vary their brightness, color, and shape to create visual interest.

PRO TIP

Introduce variation in color and brightness to make repetitive elements more engaging.

22 Painting Distant Boats



Add Light to the Table

Apply a small amount of light to the table area to make it more inviting and lively for the viewer.

Create Distant Boats

Paint the distant boats in an abstract manner, allowing for creative freedom. Ensure that one or two boats in the foreground are more clearly defined to help the viewer interpret the abstract shapes in the background as a collection of boats.

PRO TIP

Define one or two boats in the foreground to make the abstract shapes in the background read as a collection of boats.

23 Subtle Rock Details



Create Subtle Rock Details

Keep the contrast of the rocks low to ensure they don't draw too much attention. Use colors that are similar to each other to maintain harmony and avoid any jarring effects. This will help the rocks subtly lead the viewer into the painting without overpowering the scene.

PRO TIP

Maintain low contrast and similar colors for rocks to keep them subtle.

24 Balancing Colors in the Sky



Add Color Interest to the Sky

Introduce additional colors into the sky to create visual interest. This helps balance the bright green in the bottom left of the painting. Use your intuition to decide which colors to add, aiming for a harmonious effect.

Create Unity with Color

Ensure that colors are distributed throughout the painting to create unity and harmony. Allow colors to bounce around the canvas, linking different areas visually.

Observe Brush Stroke Rhythm

Examine the spacing and size of your brush strokes. Aim for an offbeat rhythm to add dynamic interest to the painting.

PRO TIP

Distribute colors throughout the painting to create unity and harmony.

25 Review of Atmospheric Perspective



Understand Atmospheric Perspective

Observe how atmospheric perspective is achieved by comparing the foreground and distant buildings. Notice the strong contrast in colors and values in the foreground, with distinct shadows and lights.

Analyze Distant Elements

Examine the distant building where there is minimal contrast between colors, shadows, and lights. Squint to see just enough contrast to identify major features.

Enhance Foreground Details

Darken the purplish poles under the front building to increase contrast. Enrich and darken the green area in the bottom left to add depth and interest.

PRO TIP

Squint at distant elements to ensure there's just enough contrast to identify major features without overpowering the atmospheric perspective.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by mastering atmospheric perspective, which is crucial for creating depth. Start by sketching your composition, establishing a strong foundation with the horizon line and main objects. As you block in shapes, remember to avoid dividing your canvas in half to maintain balance and harmony. Use atmospheric perspective to push elements into the distance, creating a sense of space and depth.

As you progress, pay attention to mixing and applying dark values, bending colors, and working with midtones. These steps will help you capture subtle variations and maintain the correct value relationships throughout your painting. Plein air painting can enhance your ability to perceive colors and details that photographs might miss, enriching your overall painting experience.

Finally, focus on refining your painting by simplifying complex areas and adjusting value structures. Use techniques like glazing and loose brushwork to add interest and texture. As you paint details like poles and shadows, maintain a dynamic composition by varying spacing and using your whole arm for straight strokes. With practice, these techniques will enhance your ability to create depth and realism in your paintings.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use lighter and less saturated colors for distant objects to enhance atmospheric perspective.
- Utilize scale and atmospheric perspective to enhance depth in your painting.
- Use the horizon line to guide the perspective and placement of all other elements in your composition.
- Ensure buildings are either slightly separated or overlapping to avoid them 'kissing'.
- Use walnut oil to thin the paint for smooth coverage without leaving canvas exposed.
- Analyze each color's hue and adjust it by adding complementary colors to shift it on the color wheel.
- Photographs often oversimplify dark areas, so rely on observation to capture subtle variations.
- Keep the sky's value between white and the shadow value of the distant building for balance.



"Fisherman's Wharf" 12x12" 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.

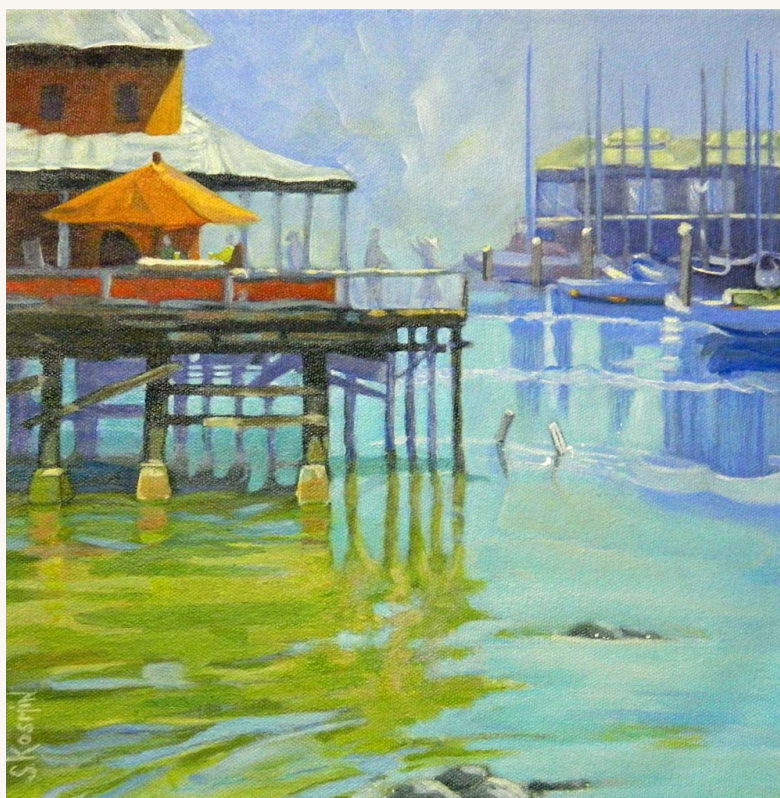
“Fisherman's Wharf” by **Stuart Gourlay**



"Fisherman's Wharf" 12x16" Oil on Canvas by Stuart Gourlay

Great attention to detail as usual Stuart. Great that you included that little sailing boat too which something I wanted to do on the day but he was moving too fast! I especially like all the intricate structure you've built in the poles beneath the wharf. While you're at it how about some folks enjoying a cuppa under the umbrellas? I can't see anything in this painting that needs mending particularly, so I'm really including it in the critiques to say 'Good Job!' and 'Hey everyone, look at this!'. Good work buddy.

"Fisherman's Wharf" by Sharon J Kosmin



"Fisherman's Wharf" 12x12" Oil on Canvas by Sharon J Kosmin

Another strong painting in your inimitable style Sharon. Like Stuart's I've included in the critiques this time because I simply can't find anything wrong with it. Great job!

"The Sea Shack" by Lori Ippolito



"The Sea Shack" 20x20" Oil on Canvas by Lori Ippolito

Hi Lori, looks like your water has got a little muddy but the overall colouring of this piece is really nice. I think all you need to do is stop yourself from smoothing everything out once you've put it down. The time honoured advice is 'put it on and LEAVE it!' It's so easy to go crazy with that beautiful soft blending brush that once you pick it up it's almost always fatal. What I would like to see in the water is some large horizontal and vertical strokes. If you threw those in there now they'd look awful though because everything else is smoothed out. There's always the next one.

Did you use black paint? Looks like it. It has a tendency to muddy whatever it comes into contact with, but that again could be your blending. On this scene I used Ultramarine Blue and Cad Red and a little Yellow Ochre to get my darkest dark. The recession of your far building is good and the light above it is great but there are a few little dark accents there that are popping out and spoiling the recession a bit.

The shadow cast on your second story wall is too light and your umbrella wants to be a pyramid. Other than that it's all good, but do go ahead and burn that blending brush.

"Monterey Wharf, CA" by Sharon Casavant



"Monterey Wharf, CA" 11x14" Oil on Canvas by Sharon Casavant

Great colours Sharon and a wonderful loose treatment although it's at the expense of the drawing in a few places like the umbrella and the roofline above it which seems to be angling up to get away from the umbrella. The horizon could do with some straightening too. You've got all your values looking good, especially in the distant building which sits back there nicely in space and your jumble of brushstrokes there really does give the impression of a bunch of boats nestled together which is great.

All that different colour you've put in the sky looks very exciting but it is lacking a little structure, or realism. Some of the poles under the wharf are a bit too light - looks like they've picked up a bit of the light blue in that area. Over all it's great and looks like it's been a fun painting for you. Some of that loose drawing makes the painting look a bit whimsical or naive which may be what you're after. If whimsy is not what you are trying for you just need to slow down and get more serious with the drawing.