



Painting a Dog Portrait

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/222-Painting-a-Dog-Portrait>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

Welcome to my studio in New Zealand, where today we embark on the delightful journey of painting a dog portrait. This isn't just any dog—it's my mum's adorable puppy, Bamsey. I thought, why not create a Christmas gift for her while also sharing a video lesson with you? In this chapter, we'll explore the art of painting a dog, focusing on essential techniques that bring the portrait to life. Although I'm working with oils, feel free to use acrylics, as I'll provide tips for both mediums. We'll start by laying in an intriguing background and then dive right into painting without preliminary drawing, though I'll also introduce three other methods to perfect your drawing. A key focus will be on mastering edges—soft versus hard—and understanding their impact. We'll delve into capturing the softness of fur, the glistening eyes and nose, and the sharp details that animate the portrait, especially the eyes, which are simpler to paint than you might think. Additionally, we'll discuss the importance of varied paint textures, from smooth to impasto, and how to achieve them. This lesson, while centered on a simple dog portrait, is rich with skills that will enhance your painting repertoire. Whether you choose to paint Bamsey or your own beloved pet, I hope you find joy and learning in this creative endeavor.



Bamsi 15x15" oil on board



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
- Ultramarine Blue
- Burnt Sienna
- Yellow Ochre
- Titanium White
- Painting medium
- M. Graham & Co. Walnut Oil
- Solvent
- Gamsol
- Board
- 15×15" MDF or Hardboard with 2 coats of acrylic gesso.
- Brushes
- [Rosemary & Co. Richard Robinson Brush Set](#)
- Palette Knife
- Paper Towels
- Container for painting medium

1 Preparing the Canvas



Prepare the Canvas

Use a 15-inch square MDF or hardboard. Coat it with two or three layers of gesso to create a smooth painting surface.

Apply an Acrylic Wash

Mix yellow ochre with a little alizarin crimson. Use a big brush to apply the wash in a broad transition across the board. Allow it to dry overnight to eliminate the starkness of a white canvas.

PRO TIP

Applying a colored wash helps reduce the intimidation of starting on a blank white canvas.

2 Materials and Tools



Prepare Your Palette

Set up your palette with ultramarine blue, burnt sienna, yellow ochre, and titanium white. Use two separate piles of titanium white: one for mixing and one for highlights to maintain cleanliness and organization.

Select Your Brushes

Choose Rosemary & Co long flat brushes for general painting and an Escoda brush for larger background areas. Use an eclipse angular brush at 3/8 inch for detailed work. Consider a rigor brush for fine lines, although the angular brush may suffice.

Gather Additional Tools

Have a trusty palette knife on hand for mixing and texture work. Use M Graham walnut oil as your painting medium to extend the working time and improve paint flow.

PRO TIP

Keep two separate piles of titanium white on your palette to avoid mixing mess and maintain clean highlights.

3 Laying in the Background



Prepare the Brush

Use a size 18 brush and dip it into walnut oil to soften the bristles before starting.

Mix a Dark Brown

Combine burnt sienna, a little blue, and yellow ochre with some walnut oil to create a dark brown color.

Outline the Head Shape

With the dark brown mixture, brush in the general shape of the dog's head and neck on the canvas. Focus on capturing the big shapes and angles without worrying about precision.

Clean the Brush

Clean the brush with walnut oil to prepare for the next color application.

Mix a Warm Neutral

Add white and a little more blue to the existing mixture to create a warm neutral tone for the background.

PRO TIP

Use walnut oil to soften the brush bristles before starting to paint.

4 Blocking in the Dog's Shape



Create a Warm Neutral Background

Mix a warm gray and brush it on the canvas in large, gestural strokes. This stage is about creating an abstract foundation for your painting.

Break Down the Big Shape

Identify the largest shape of the dog and begin breaking it down into smaller shapes. Consider the light source and add yellow ochre to areas where more light is hitting.

Embrace Expressive Painting

Focus on the fluidity and expressiveness of your brushwork. This method allows for a more artistic approach, though it may be challenging to perfect the final drawing.

PRO TIP

Use large, gestural strokes to create an abstract foundation for your painting.

5 Drawing Techniques and Alternatives



Choose Your Surface

Decide whether to use a canvas or a wood panel. A wood panel will show brush strokes more clearly, highlighting fine details like individual hairs. A canvas, with its texture, will give a softer feel by hiding some of these details.

Mix and Apply Dark Paint

Create the darkest mixture possible using blue and brown paint. Add a little more brown to slightly raise the value and keep it warm. Use this mixture to place the dark areas, focusing on the placement of features like the eyes.

Consider Drawing Techniques

When drawing, pay attention to the placement of edges and how they align vertically and horizontally. Consider the angles of important shapes, such as triangles, within the composition.

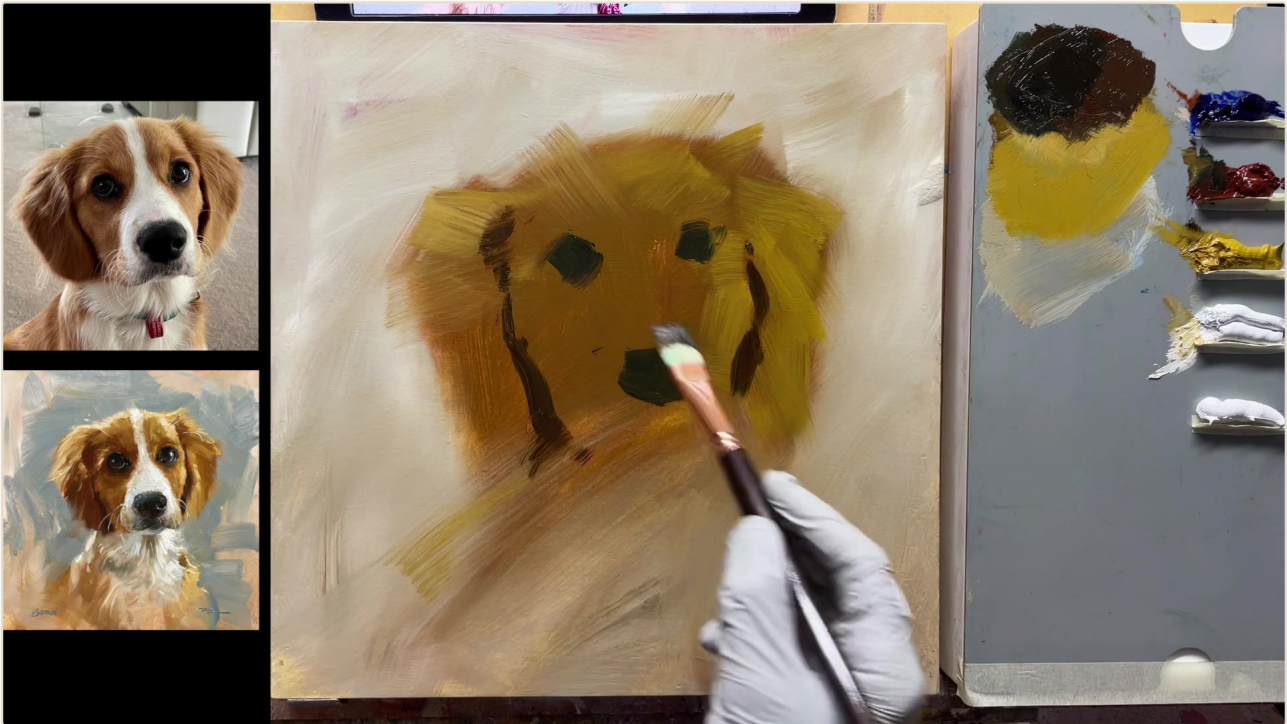
Explore Alternative Drawing Methods

Use a grid method by drawing a grid over your reference photo and canvas, then sketch each square. Alternatively, project the image onto the canvas and trace it. You can also transfer a printed image by rubbing charcoal on the back, placing it on the canvas, and tracing the contours.

PRO TIP

Use a projector to easily transfer your reference image onto the canvas by tracing the projected outlines.

6 Adjusting the Drawing



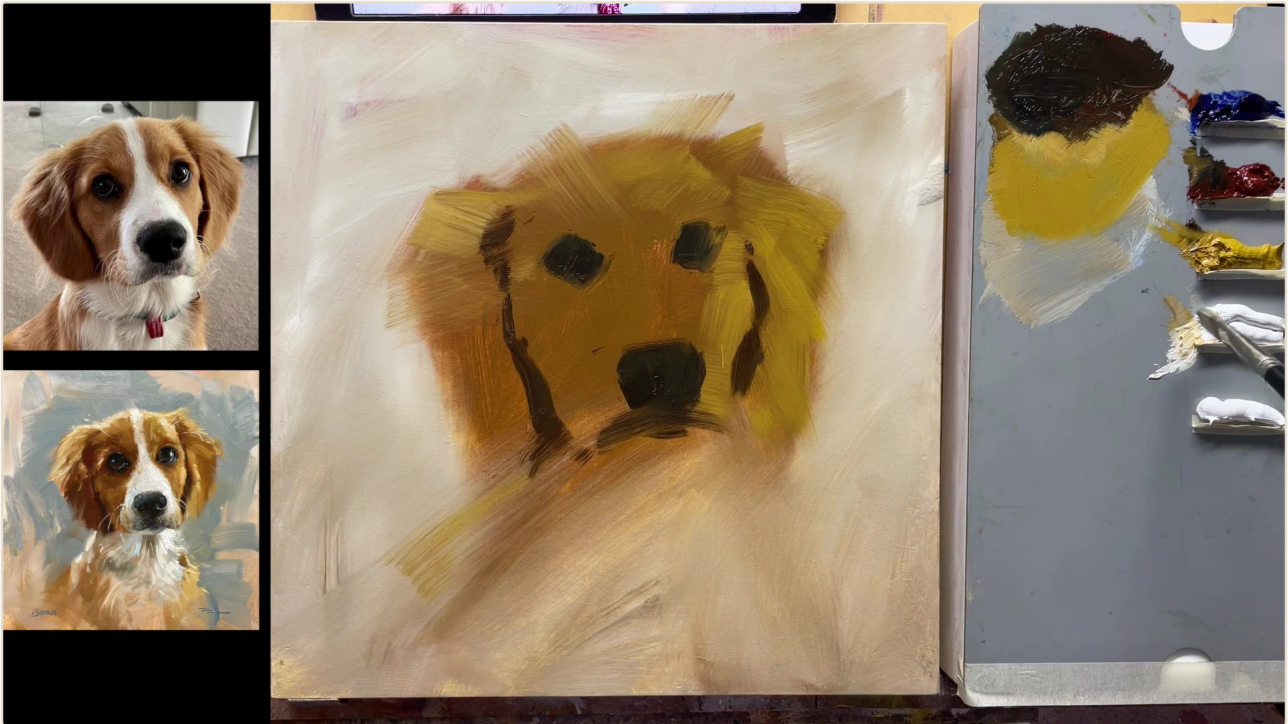
Adjust the Drawing

Focus on transferring dimensions and measurements to the canvas. Remember, with animals like dogs and cats, the drawing doesn't need to be as precise as with human portraits. Adjust the drawing as you go, using a pencil or the back of a brush to refine the placement.

PRO TIP

Use the back of a brush to scratch and adjust the drawing on the canvas.

7 Painting the Face Base Layer



Prepare the Face Base Layer

Switch to a different brush to start applying the base layer for the dog's face. Avoid using pure white; instead, mix blue and burnt sienna to create a cool grey. This mixture will blend slightly with the existing brown, creating a more natural look.

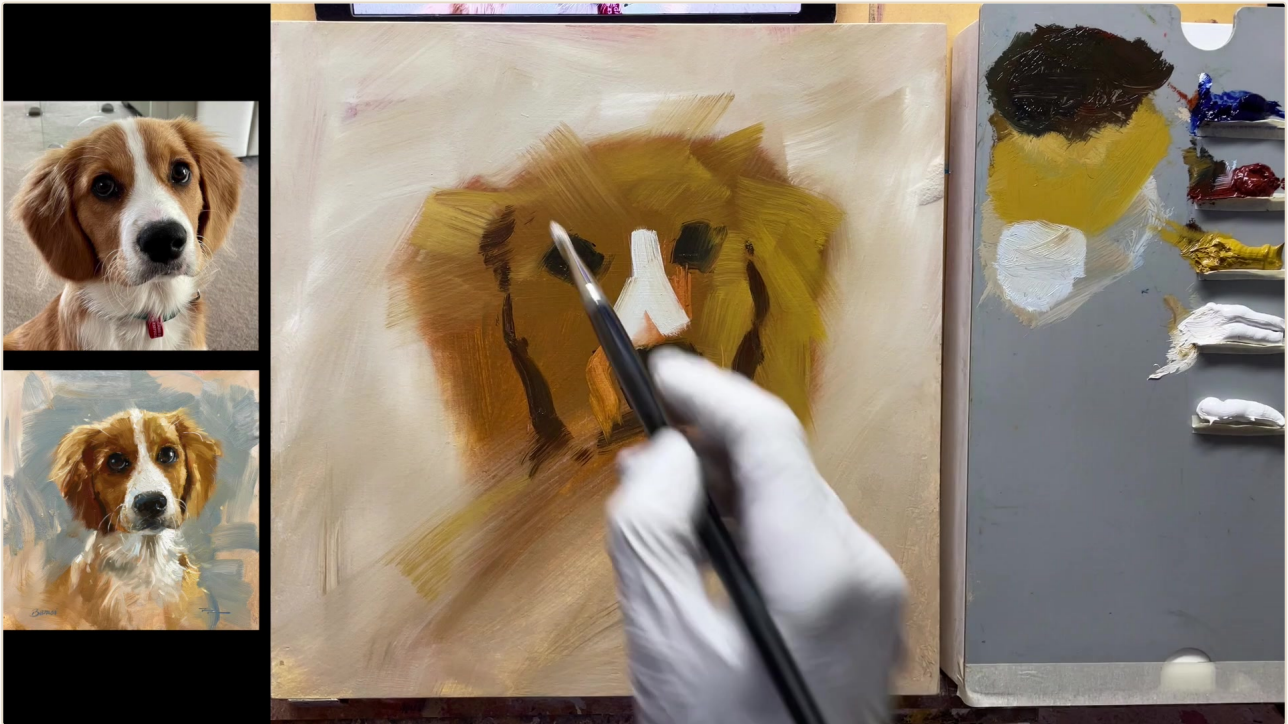
Manage Paint Thickness

If your paint is too thick, consider wiping away some of the existing layer before applying the new color. Keep the initial dark layers thin to allow for easier layering without excessive mixing.

PRO TIP

Mix blue and burnt sienna to create a cool grey for the face base layer instead of using pure white.

8 Focusing on Edges



Squint to See Big Shapes

Squint at your reference photo to focus on the big shapes rather than getting distracted by details. This helps in getting the drawing right by simplifying the complex forms into manageable sections.

Identify Hard and Soft Edges

Examine the painting for areas where hard and soft edges occur, such as where the nose meets the fur. Notice the contrast between these edges to enhance the realism of the portrait.

Exaggerate Edge Contrast

Deliberately exaggerate the contrast between hard and soft edges. Make sharp edges distinct where necessary, and soften edges where they naturally blend to avoid a cutout appearance.

PRO TIP

Pay close attention to edges and adjust their sharpness to enhance realism.

9 Building Up the Lights



Add Dark Tones

Add a little of the dark color to the base of the painting where it rolls away from the light. This will help create depth and shadow in the fur.

Brush in Fur Direction

Observe the direction of the fur and brush out in that direction. This helps to capture the natural flow and texture of the dog's coat.

Mix and Apply Lighter Tones

Mix some yellow ochre with thicker paint and a touch of white. Add a bit of the dark color to gray it down slightly, then apply it to the lighter areas of the fur.

Adjust Color Saturation

If the color appears too saturated, mix in a little blue to tone it down. This helps achieve a more natural look.

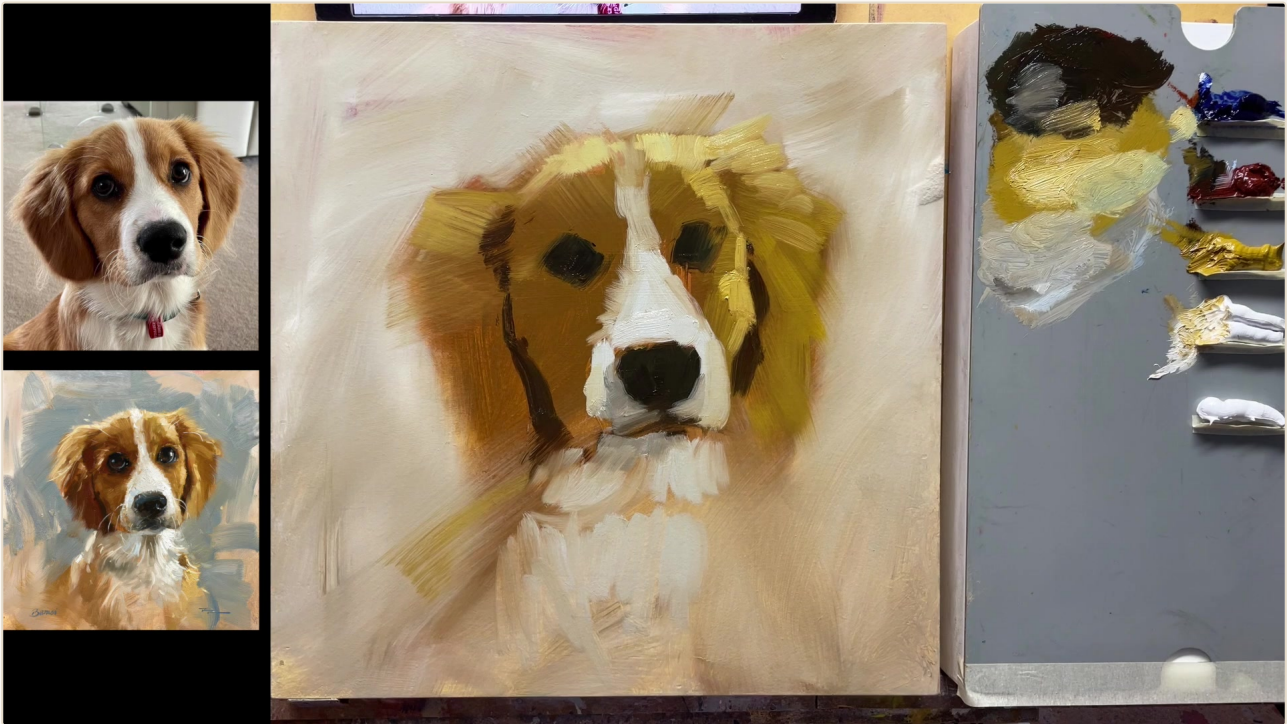
Correct Mistakes

If something doesn't look right, easily wipe it off. With oils, you can adjust as needed, unlike acrylics where you must wait for it to dry before painting over.

PRO TIP

Observe the fur's direction and brush accordingly to capture the natural flow.

10 Developing the Face Details



Block in Nose and Face Shapes

Add light to the nose by blocking in the big shapes you observe. Use a bluey gray to define these areas, focusing on capturing the overall structure.

Define Edge of the Face

Pay attention to the line at the edge of the face. Ensure the drawing is accurate here to maintain the correct proportions and structure.

Add Light to the Eyes

Introduce a little light into the eyes, but remember that the whites of the eyes should be much darker than pure white to avoid an unnatural look.

Mix Transition Colors

Create a warm dark transition color for the fur where it shifts from dark to light. This acts as a half tone, helping to blend the fur smoothly.

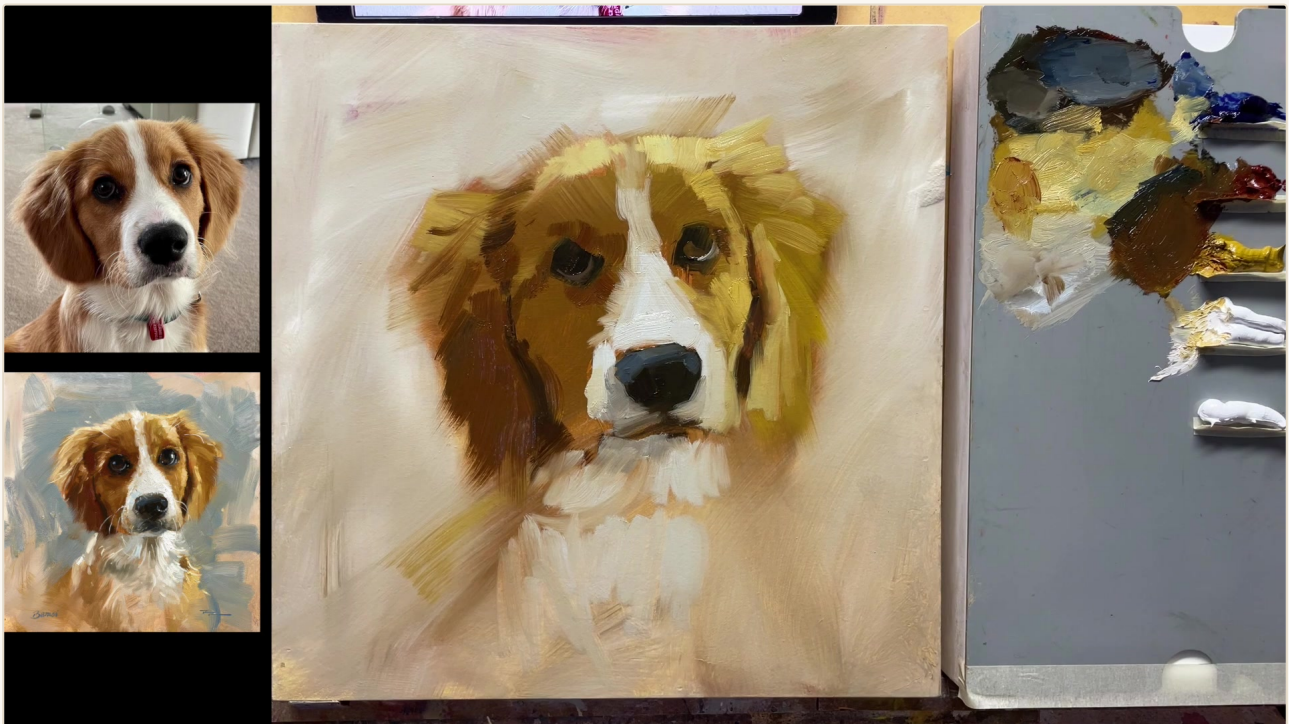
Deepen Shadows with Burnt Sienna

Use burnt sienna for the dark shadow side, especially where dark areas meet. Ensure the edges are soft to enhance the depth and realism.

PRO TIP

The whites of the eyes should be darker than you expect to maintain a natural appearance.

11 Painterly Technique Discussion



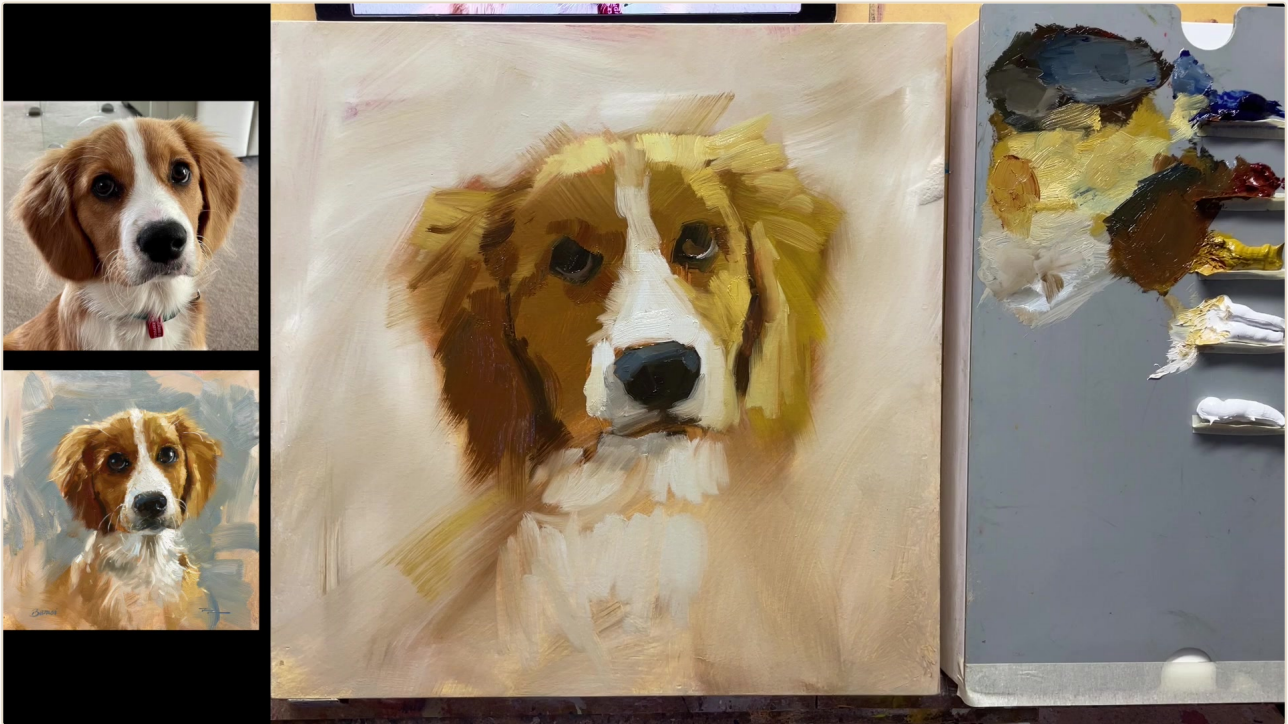
Embrace a Painterly Technique

Adopt a painterly and expressive approach to your painting. This technique allows the artwork to appear beautiful and dynamic at every stage. Unlike tight, controlled painting, this method offers a sense of freedom and enjoyment throughout the process.

PRO TIP

Feel free to stop at any point with a la prima painting, as it remains beautiful at every stage.

12 Enhancing Color and Shadows



Enhance Red Tones

Identify areas on the dog's face where the red tones are strong. Use pure burnt sienna to enhance these spots, adding vibrancy to the painting. Avoid making the entire face the same brown by strengthening colors in select areas.

Mix Dark Colors

Create a dark color by mixing pure blue and burnt sienna. Apply this mixture smoothly to keep the paint flat, preventing unwanted highlights from raised edges.

Transition to Warm Browns

When transitioning from dark to warm colors, add more burnt sienna to avoid creating a gray-brown. This will ensure a warmer feel, especially in shadowed areas.

Focus on the Eyes

Pay special attention to the eyes, as they draw the viewer's focus. Keep your brushstrokes gestural and painterly, avoiding overworking the area with too many strokes.

PRO TIP

Keep dark areas flat to prevent highlights from raised edges.

13 Refining Light and Shadow



Utilize Color Consistency

When using a color, look for other areas in the painting where you can apply the same color with slight variations. This approach speeds up the painting process and maintains harmony.

Create Smooth Transitions

Add more subtlety by transitioning between different values. Find a value halfway between two existing values and softly paint it in between to achieve a smooth transition.

Distinguish Light and Shadow

Squint or blur your eyes when examining the photo to identify the lightest and darkest parts of an area. Note the differences in color and value to accurately represent them in your painting.

Handle Dark Colors Carefully

Be cautious with dark colors on your brush to avoid creating mud. Wipe your brush carefully to maintain clean transitions and accurate values.

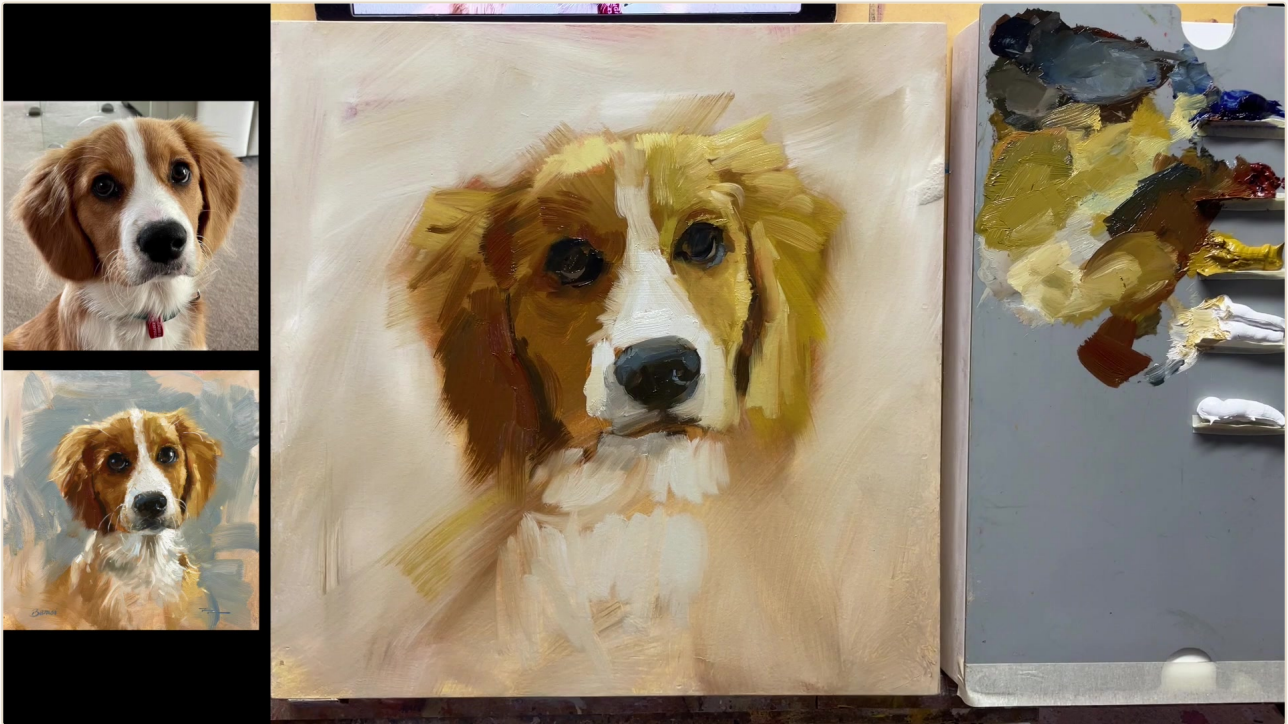
Assess Highlight Values

Compare highlights by asking if one is lighter than another. Making these subtle distinctions results in a more realistic painting.

PRO TIP

Squint to identify the lightest and darkest parts of an area for accurate representation.

14 Creating Soft Fur Transitions



Create Soft Fur Transitions

Focus on creating soft transitions between colors rather than painting each individual hair. This approach will give the fur a soft, natural look instead of a spiky appearance.

Extend the Head's Exterior

Paint the exterior of the head slightly further out than the desired final edge. This allows for adjustments when painting the background and ensures a smooth transition back into the fur.

PRO TIP

Avoid painting every individual hair to maintain a soft, natural look in the fur.

15 Adding Texture and Highlights



Add Texture to the Muzzle

Mix a very light neutral grey with a touch of blue. Apply it thicker on the white of the muzzle to create texture. Use the tip of a dagger brush to suggest individual hairs.

Highlight the Top

Mix more white with a bit of blue for the highlight at the top. Apply it generously, extending further than needed to allow for background adjustments later.

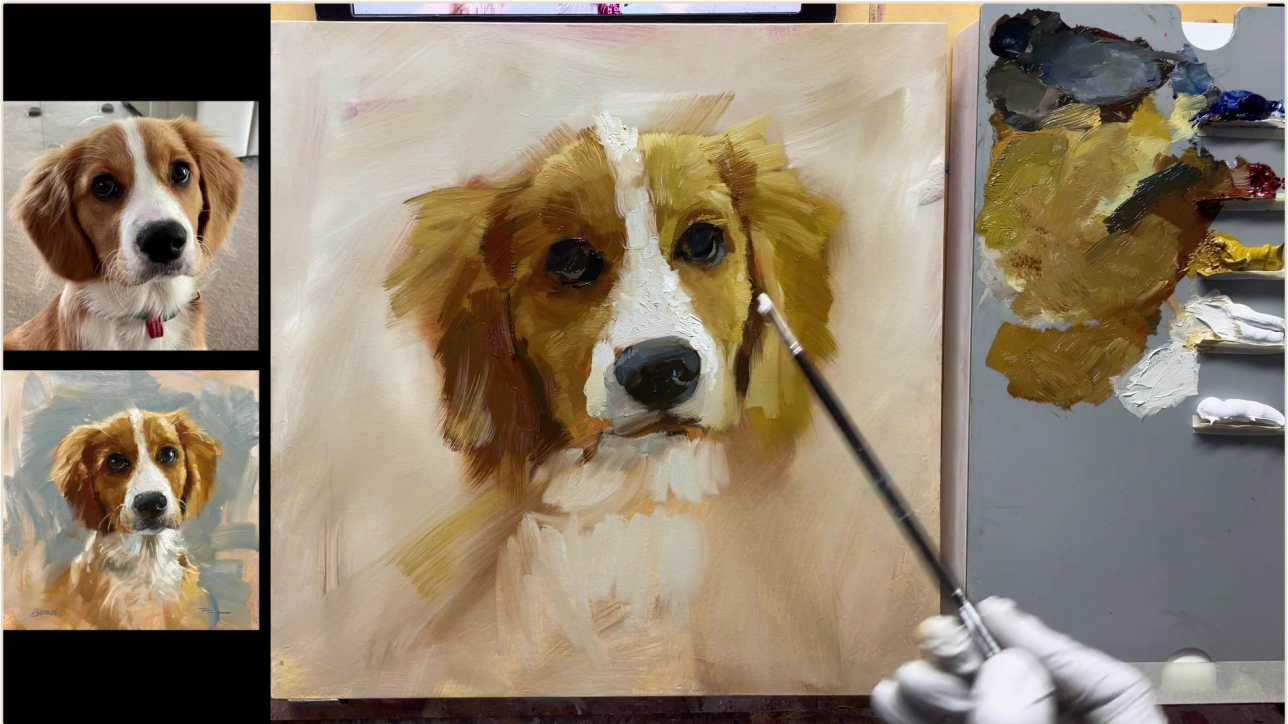
Enhance Texture on the Side

Use the same mixture of white, blue, and grey. Load the paint thickly on the side to enhance the texture on the painting's surface.

PRO TIP

Use the tip of a dagger brush to create the effect of individual hairs for added realism.

16 Softening Edges with a Fan Brush



Mix a Grey Tone

Prepare a grey mixture to use for the base of the mouth and lower jaw area. This will help define the cute little lower lip and create interesting shapes with sharp and soft edges.

Highlight the Face

Add a soft highlight to the face to push it out from the neck. This creates a nice counterpoint to other highlights and enhances the dimensionality of the portrait.

Soften Edges with a Fan Brush

Use a synthetic fan brush to gently soften some edges in the painting. Be cautious not to overdo it, as excessive softening can make the painting look overly airbrushed and lose the charm of your brushstrokes.

PRO TIP

Use a fan brush sparingly to soften edges without losing the texture of your brushstrokes.

17 Working on the Background



Darken the Top Background

Use a big brush to darken the top of the background. This will create contrast with the highlights around the top of the dog's head. Keep the bottom of the background lighter and slightly cooler.

Create a Furry Look

Lightly brush in the background to mimic a furry texture. Focus on maintaining the big shapes while adding this texture.

Add Variety with Brushwork

Use the brush in different ways to create a gestural background. Try using the side of the brush for some marks to add variety. Incorporate both sharp and soft edges for interest.

PRO TIP

Use different brush techniques to add variety and make the background more gestural.

18 Detailing the Eyes and Nose



Prepare Your Brush

Ensure your brush is clean and free of any white paint to achieve real darks. Use separate brushes for lights and darks to maintain color purity.

Paint the Darks

Apply the darks with a flat technique, avoiding any impasto texture. This will help keep the dark areas smooth and consistent.

Add Highlights

Use pure white for the highlight, applying it as a small, singular point. This can be simplified if needed.

Create a Wet Look

Mix white with a little blue for a highlight that catches light, giving the eye a wet appearance. Apply this with a slightly impasto technique for effect.

Subtle Highlights

Use a slightly darker gray for the less intense highlight. This should be subtle to avoid overpowering the surrounding dark areas.

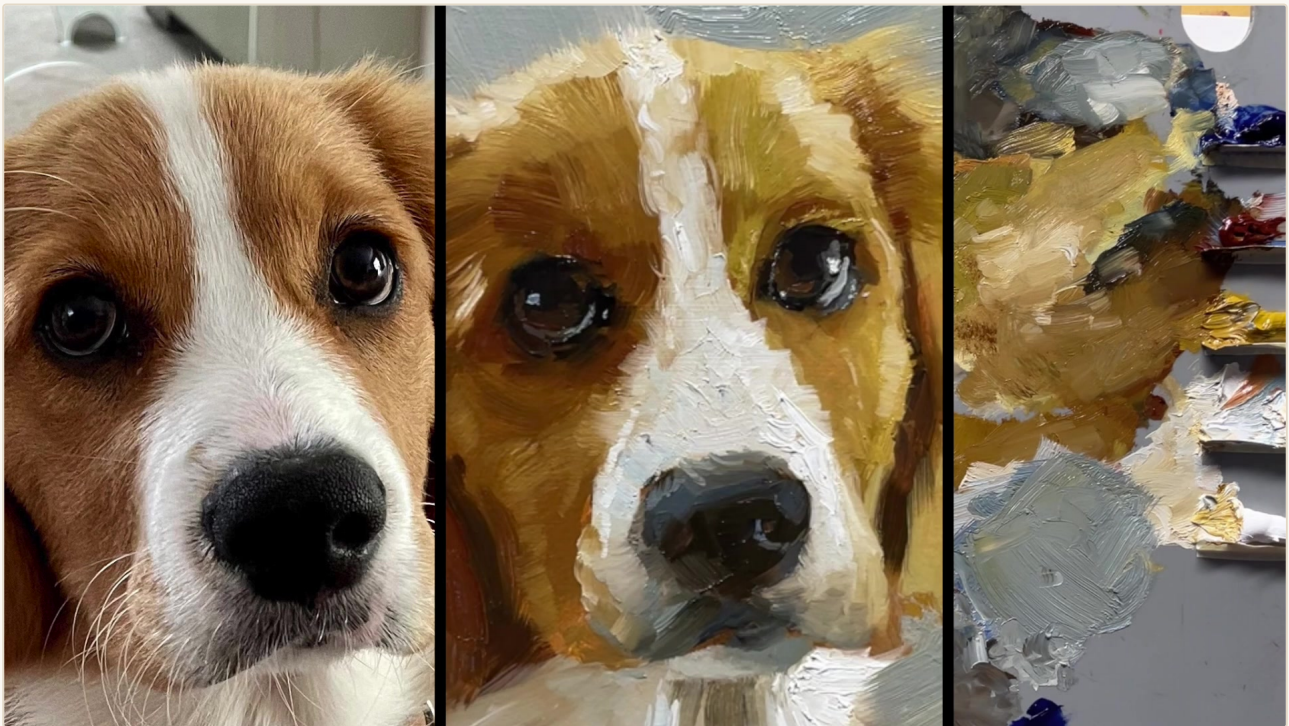
Final Touches

Add a tiny glint and a subtle strip of light to complete the shiny appearance of the puppy's eye.

PRO TIP

Use separate brushes for lights and darks to maintain clean, vibrant colors.

19 Final Touches and Signing



Restore Lost Darks

Use a rigger brush to carefully reapply any dark areas that may have been lost during the painting process. This will help restore depth and contrast to your portrait.

Add Subtle Details

Look for small subtleties in the painting that could use some fine-tuning. This stage is about enhancing the details to bring your portrait to life.

Highlight with Pure White

Use pure white to paint a few individual hairs that catch the light, especially across the snout. This will add a realistic touch to your painting.

Paint Individual Whiskers

Add a few individual whiskers with a fine brush. You don't need to paint all of them—just enough to suggest their presence.

Know When to Stop

Avoid overworking your painting. Recognize when it's time to stop, ideally before you make unnecessary changes.

Sign Your Painting

Once satisfied with your work, sign your painting to complete it. This marks your creation as finished.

PRO TIP

Use a rigger brush for precise lines when restoring dark areas or adding fine details.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your dog portrait painting journey by preparing your canvas with a smooth gesso surface and a warm wash to ease into the creative process. Set up your palette with essential colors and organize your tools to ensure a seamless workflow. Begin by laying in the background and blocking in the dog's shape, focusing on capturing the essence of the subject with broad, expressive strokes.

As you progress, refine your drawing techniques, adjusting as needed to capture the dog's likeness. Pay attention to the edges, using them to enhance realism by contrasting hard and soft transitions. Build up the lights and shadows, observing the natural flow of the fur and the play of light across the face. Embrace a painterly approach, allowing your brushstrokes to convey energy and life.

In the final stages, focus on the details, such as the eyes and nose, to bring the portrait to life. Use texture and highlights to add depth and dimension, and carefully soften edges to maintain the charm of your brushwork. Balance the background with gestural techniques to complement the subject, ensuring the entire composition is harmonious and dynamic.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Apply a colored wash to reduce the intimidation of a blank canvas.
- Keep two separate piles of titanium white to maintain clean highlights.
- Use large, gestural strokes for an abstract foundation.
- Pay close attention to edges and adjust their sharpness for realism.
- Observe the fur's direction and brush accordingly.
- The whites of the eyes should be darker than expected for a natural look.
- Avoid painting every individual hair to maintain a soft, natural look.
- Use a fan brush sparingly to soften edges without losing texture.



Bamsi 15x15" oil on board

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.

Puppy by Nancy Newton



Puppy by Nancy Newton

Great job Nancy, you've made Bamsi look even younger than the photo by lowering the eyes a little and making the nose smaller. Not intentional I guess but, hey, he looks as cute as a button. Really nice colouring and brushwork and some great soft edges there. If you glaze a little grey over the white on the left of his neck that'll help that area sit back in the shadow a bit and stop competing with the white of the muzzle. While you're at it, using that same grey glaze across the base of the muzzle and mouth can give that a better sense of roundness.

Bamsi by Lynne Walley



Bamsi by Lynne Walley

Gidday Lynne, thanks for your painting. I'm loving the energy of your brushstrokes and the contrast between that and the fine detailed work in the eyes and nose. Nicely done! You've made the eyes a little smaller which has aged Bamsi a few years, but basically it's still Bamsi. Great!

Puppy by Barbara Magor



Puppy by Barbara Magor

Good effort Barbara. I'm loving the bold brushwork. I'd like you to take another look at how the colour gets darker in the shadows of the muzzle and mouth, and also the chest beneath the chin. You need that to stop the face looking flat. Also, look at the light strips in the eyes, and note that the glints in the eyes should not be the same. Keep at it!

"Lady" by Fay Thomson



"Lady" by Fay Thomson

Beautiful done, Fay. I'd just suggest darkening the darks in the eyes a little more because they look a little glazed at the moment.