



Rocks

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/92-Rocks>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

During a recent trip to San Francisco, I had the surreal experience of painting the iconic Golden Gate Bridge. It's a sight many of us have seen countless times on TV, but standing there in person, brush in hand, was truly something special. While the bridge itself is a magnificent subject, I found myself captivated by a particular rock in the scene. Its subtle colors and intriguing shapes offer a wealth of lessons for us as painters. In this chapter, we'll focus on capturing the essence of that rock, allowing it to take center stage while the bridge plays a supporting role. You'll learn how to paint convincingly solid rocks by examining their form, color, and texture. We'll start by selecting a square canvas to complement the rock's shape and integrate the bridge effectively. Through sketching and value studies, you'll gain insights into composition and balance. Approach this as a study, embracing the freedom to experiment and express yourself without the pressure of perfection. Let's explore the beauty and timelessness of rocks together.



"Golden Gates" 12x16" Oil on Canvas by Richard Robinson



REFERENCE PHOTO 1

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 2

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 3

The scene as Richard found it.



REFERENCE PHOTO 4

The scene as Richard found it.

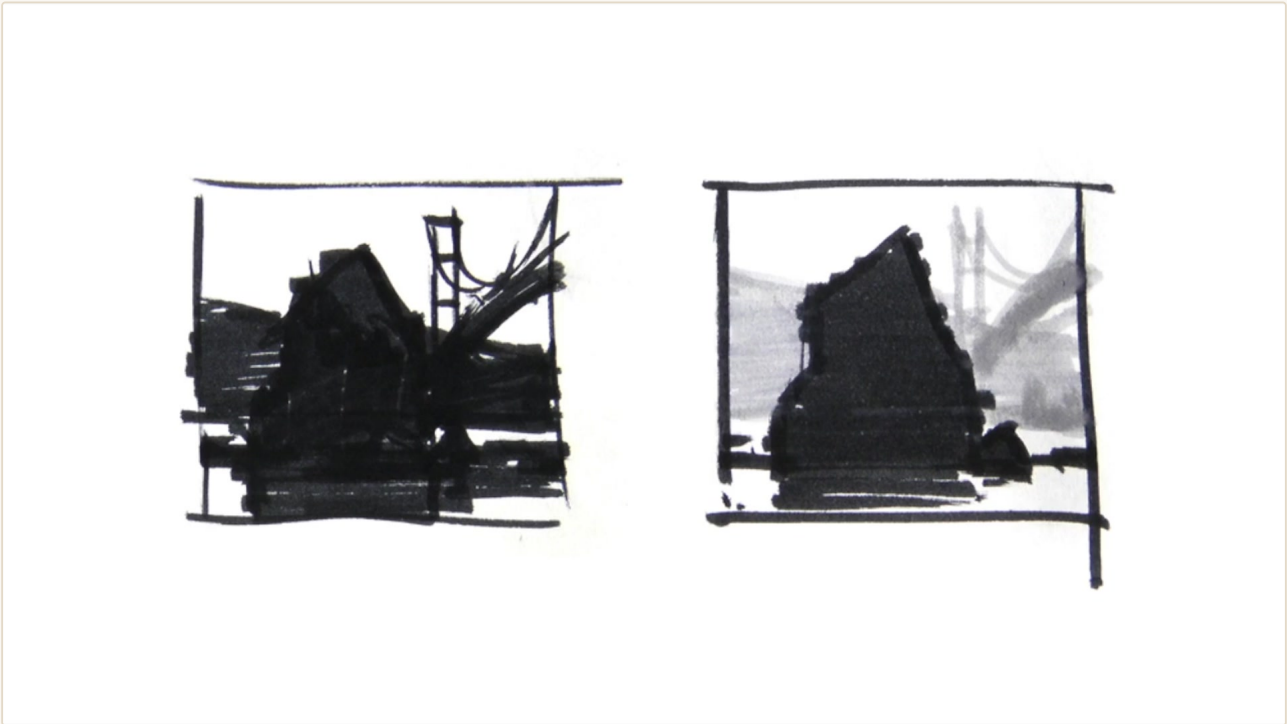
Materials

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

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- M. Graham & Co. Oil Paints
- Alizarine Crimson
- Phthalo Blue
- 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 Designing the composition



Choose a Square Format

Select a square format for your canvas. This shape complements the rock's form and helps integrate the bridge into the composition effectively.

Plan the Composition

Bring the bridge closer to the rock in your composition. This arrangement ensures both elements are prominently featured in the painting.

Create a Notan Design

Sketch a black and white notan design to establish the basic structure of your painting. This will help you visualize the balance of light and dark areas.

Develop a Thumbnail Sketch

Draw a small thumbnail sketch, breaking the scene into three values: foreground, mid-ground, and background. This simplifies the design and guides your value placement.

Embrace the Study Approach

Approach this painting as a study rather than a finished piece. This mindset allows you to experiment, be expressive, and take creative risks without worrying about perfection.

PRO TIP

Use a notan design to establish the balance of light and dark areas in your composition.

2 Painting the darkest darks



Mix the Darkest Dark

Combine ultramarine blue and cadmium red light to create a color as close to black as possible. Mix this with walnut oil to achieve a thin consistency. This will serve as the base for the darkest areas of your painting.

Apply the Dark Base

Brush the dark mixture broadly along the base of the rock. Extend a thin layer onto the left side of the rock to establish the foundational darkness. This will support the greys you will layer over it.

Layer with Warm Grays

Start adding slightly warm gray tones over the dark base. Ensure each gray is slightly lighter in value than the darkest dark. Use walnut oil to maintain a thin application, avoiding impasto in the dark areas.

PRO TIP

Keep the dark passages thin to prevent them from standing out too much.

3 Adding variation in shadow greys



Add Blue to Grey

Introduce a bit of blue into the grey on the front rock to create variation in hue. Keep the value consistent across all shadow greys to maintain uniform darkness.

Create Greener and Purplish Greys

Apply a slightly greener grey to the left-hand side of the rock. Add a purplish grey to the far left-hand edge to enhance the effect of light coming from the background.

Soften the Edges

Soften the edge between the darkest dark and the greys by using a grey with a value between them. This will create a smoother transition and prepare the area for the light side of the rock.

Infuse Light into Shadows

Add more blue and red to the edge of the shadow and lighten it slightly. This will create an infused light effect, simulating light pushing through from the background.

PRO TIP

Maintain consistent darkness in shadow greys while varying their hue for a dynamic effect.

4 Light reflection on the rock



Observe Light Reflection

Notice that the bottom of the dark side of the rock is slightly lighter. This occurs because light reflects off the water, brightening the lower part of the rock.

PRO TIP

Pay attention to subtle changes in value caused by light reflecting off surfaces like water.

5 Painting the light side of the rock



Mix Shadow Color for Foliage

Mix a grey with a slight green tint, keeping it fairly dark. This will serve as the shadow for the shrubs and growth on the light side of the rock. Focus on capturing the general flow and angle of the foliage shadows rather than exact details.

Apply Half Tone for Foliage

Use a slightly more vibrant green as the half tone for the foliage on the light side. Leave small spaces for rocks and merge into some of the shadow areas to create the impression of a shaded side.

Mix Shadow Color for Rocks

Prepare a slightly warmer grey, close in value to the green used for foliage. This will be the shadow color for the rocks on the light side.

Create Light on Rocks

Mix a slightly warmer and lighter grey by adding yellow ochre, red, and a touch of white to your existing grey. This will be the light color for the side of the rock, aiming for a crescendo of light at the top, which should be the warmest and lightest part.

Manage Edges

Pay attention to the edges on the light side. Use soft edges where light rolls over foliage and crisp edges where light transitions to dark on the rocks. Focus on creating interesting large shapes with smaller shapes within them.

PRO TIP

Leave small spaces for rocks when applying foliage colors to maintain a natural look.

6 Maintaining light pattern and highlights



Understand Light Patterns

Recognize the importance of maintaining a consistent light pattern across your painting. Avoid placing very light highlights on the rock, as this can disrupt the overall light pattern you want to achieve.

Exercise Restraint with Highlights

When highlighting a rock, resist the temptation to use bright, strong colors. Instead, keep the highlights fairly dark to preserve the believability of the light throughout the scene.

PRO TIP

Avoid overly bright highlights on rocks to maintain a believable light pattern in your painting.

7 Re-establishing dark accents



Use the Brush Edge for Fine Lines

Utilize the edge of your brush to create fine lines. This technique allows you to maintain precision without switching to a smaller brush.

Re-establish Dark Accents

Mix a slightly darker grey to reintroduce dark accents on the shadow sides of the foliage. Apply these accents sparingly to ensure the shadows are not lost amidst the lighter areas.

PRO TIP

Use the crisp edge of your brush to create fine lines without needing a smaller brush.

8 Painting the water



Mix the Dark Watercolor

Combine phthalo blue, ultramarine blue, yellow ochre, a touch of orange, and white to create the darkest watercolor. Apply this mix at the base in the shadow of the rock to enhance the scene with a tropical feel.

Adjust the Color Tone

If you prefer a grayer tone, add red and a little bit of white to the mix to neutralize the green. This will create a more subdued effect if desired.

Lighten and Blend the Water

Add a little more white and blue to the mix to paint the areas of water outside the dark reflection. Blend these lighter tones with the darker areas for a cohesive look.

Create Mid-Value Reflection

Mix a mid-value greeny-blue and work it down into the foreground to continue the dark reflection of the rock into the water.

PRO TIP

To gray down a green, add its complement, red, along with a touch of white.

9 Painting the bridge and background hills



Paint the Bridge

Mix a fairly neutral mid-value grey with a slight warmth, leaning towards red. This will suggest the local orangey-red color of the Golden Gate Bridge while allowing it to sit back into the atmosphere. Avoid using a bright orange to maintain subtlety.

Create Background Hills

Mix a cooler, slightly lighter grey for the background hills, as they are further away than the bridge. Add a touch of yellow ochre and a little bit of white to suggest light on the top of the hills.

Adjust Color for Depth

Lighten the blue-grey slightly on the side closer to the light source. Add a little magenta to the grey to counterpoint the greens in the foreground. Keep all values similar to merge the background into one mass, enhancing depth.

PRO TIP

Avoid bright highlights or strong darks in the background to maintain a sense of depth.

10 Mixing and painting the sky



Mix Turquoise

Use phthalo blue or phthalo green as a base. Add a lot of white and a tiny touch of bright yellow to achieve the desired turquoise hue.

Prepare the Sky Color

Mix yellow ochre with a lot of white and a tiny bit of purplish grey. This combination will create a soft, atmospheric sky color.

Paint the Sky

Apply the mixed sky color, starting from the top of the bridge. As you move towards the light source on the right, lighten and warm the color slightly with a tiny bit of bright yellow.

PRO TIP

Use phthalo blue or green with white and a touch of yellow to mix vibrant turquoise hues.

11 Refining textures and colors



Reflect Sky Colors in Water

Mix some of the water color with the sky color to create a harmonious reflection. This blend will ensure the warmth of the sky is mirrored in the water, creating a cohesive scene.

Add Texture with Palette Knife

Use a palette knife to add texture to the shadow side of the rocks. This technique creates a more organic texture that is difficult to achieve with a brush. Clean the palette knife between strokes to maintain pure color.

Adjust Dark Tones

Mix a dark gray-green to re-establish the darks in the shadow areas. This adjustment will help the dark tones harmonize better with the strong green of the water.

Enhance Shadow with Green

Add a slightly lighter, stronger green to the shadow side. This will reflect the water's color and add more interest and detail to the shadows.

PRO TIP

Clean the palette knife between strokes to keep the color pure.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by thoughtfully designing your composition. Choose a square format to harmonize the rock and bridge elements, and sketch a notan design to balance light and dark areas. Approach your painting as a study, allowing yourself the freedom to experiment and express creativity without the pressure of perfection.

Begin by establishing the darkest darks with a mix of ultramarine blue and cadmium red light, and layer warm grays over this base. Introduce variations in shadow grays by adjusting hues while maintaining consistent darkness. Pay attention to light reflections, especially those bouncing off surfaces like water, and gradually build up the light side with subtle transitions and vibrant greens.

As you refine your painting, maintain a consistent light pattern and avoid overly bright highlights to preserve the scene's believability. Use the edge of your brush for precise dark accents and blend colors harmoniously in the water and sky. Finally, employ a palette knife for organic textures, ensuring your colors remain pure and vibrant.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Use a notan design to establish the balance of light and dark areas.
- Keep the dark passages thin to prevent them from standing out too much.
- Maintain consistent darkness in shadow greys while varying their hue.
- Pay attention to subtle changes in value caused by light reflecting off surfaces like water.
- Leave small spaces for rocks when applying foliage colors to maintain a natural look.
- Avoid overly bright highlights on rocks to maintain a believable light pattern.
- Use the crisp edge of your brush to create fine lines without needing a smaller brush.
- Clean the palette knife between strokes to keep the color pure.



"Golden Gates" 12x16" 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.

"Golden Gate Bridge - San Francisco - California - USA" by George



"Golden Gate Bridge - San Francisco - California - USA" Oil on Canvas Paper by George

George this is a pretty striking painting, helped by a well balanced design with the foreground nicely leading us in and your zoomy clouds pushing our eyes back in from the top. Couple of things I'd like to see are the blue in the water grayed down a smidge because it hits my gaudy button, the horizon to not step down behind the rock, and for there to be some evidence of atmospheric recession in the bridge. At the moment the colour and value of the distant bridge is telling me it's been built on the back of the big rock but the good drawing of the bridge is saving it somewhat. You just need to grey and lighten the colour of the bridge as it recedes.

I like the interesting paintwork on the rocks which has a natural sort of randomness to it. Again there could be evidence of a reflection of the rock in the water which would add more interest and realism there. Good work George.

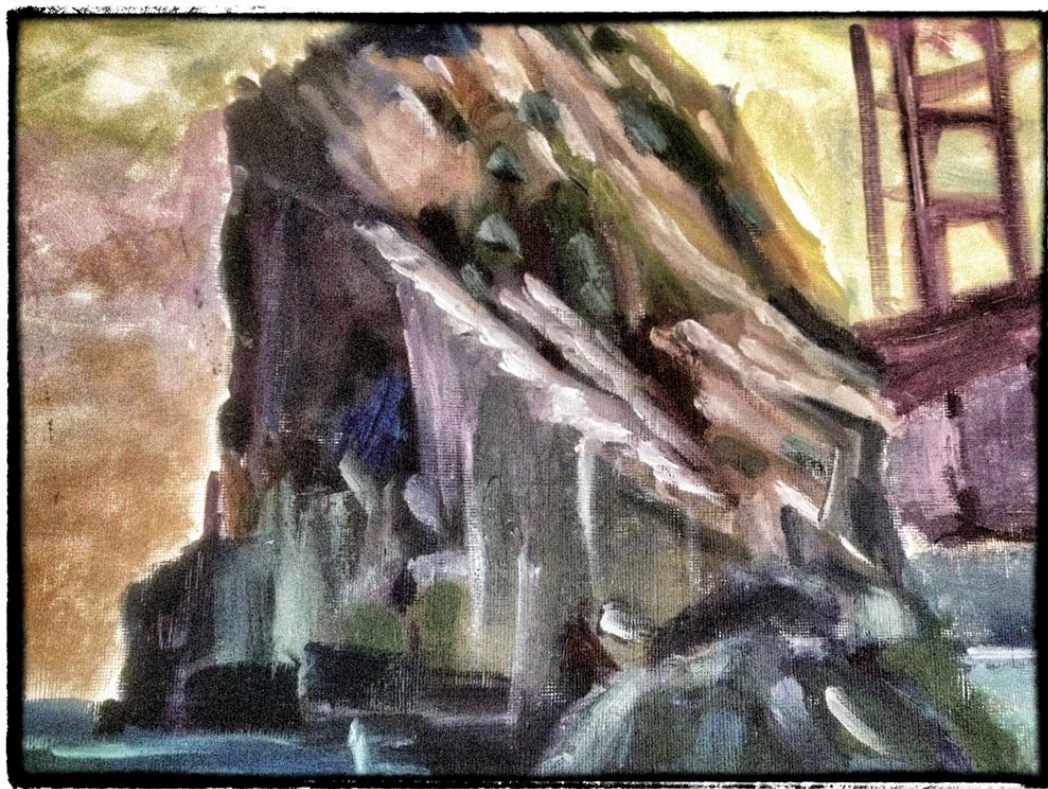
"A Rock" by Ningning Li



"A Rock" 30x30cm Oil on Canvas by Ningning Li

Great painting Li, love your bold colour and strong contrasts. I think enlarging the bridge slightly as you have done was a good idea in terms of balance but it does irk me a little that the top of the bridge finishes right at the top of the canvas. Also you could have given a little more information about how the bridge uprights connect to the land - looks a tad unfinished there to my eye. Minor things. Overall it's terrific and I love the solid brushwork. Good job!

"Rock Picture" by Diane Bialecki



"Rock Picture" Oil on Canvas by Diane Bialecki

A really bold design Diane and bold suits the subject so it works on two levels. You've broken the space into interesting shapes. The bottom right quarter seems a little lost in terms of structure though - perhaps a larger darker value shape would be good in there? I do like how you've cropped the top of the rock off as though it's too big to take in with one glance.

Strong colour usage - you've contrasted greys with small touches of more vibrant colour and you have plenty of variation within the greys to keep me interested. Although the background colour gradation up the left side of the canvas is interesting I can't help but feel it would have been even more interesting to just add a subtle hint of something else in the background like the distant shore or the bridge carrying on. Looking at the shadow side of the rock there it looks to me like a few of those lighter strokes could have been omitted or darkened to retain the simplicity and boldness of the large shadow shapes there. It's always tempting to over-lighten the reflected lights to add more oomph but there's a price to pay in the loss of realism, the weakening of form. Overall it's very powerful though and I'd like to see some more in this style.

"The Rock - Golden Gate Bridge" by Tammy Wolcott



"The Rock - Golden Gate Bridge" 11x11" Acrylic on Canvas Paper by Tammy Wolcott

Hi Tammy, not your best painting - but a tricky subject for sure, especially with acrylics because much of it is dealing with softer blends of colour. The brushwork in the sky is bold and interesting although it did get a little muddy around the bridge. Working back and forth with it tends to sort that out. ie. painting the sky then the bridge then the sky then the bridge. Similarly the water could do with some more work and some vertical strokes in there to give some evidence of the reflections on the rocks, which you've avoided. Those reflections help to anchor the rocks in the water - without them they float a bit.

You've kept your eye on the direction of the light which is good but your darks look a little too dark, giving the feeling of holes rather than shadowed areas. The horizon could be flatter too. One thing's for sure, not every painting is going to be a masterpiece, but every one is a stepping stone - that's what I keep telling myself anyway.