



Streets

A step-by-step painting guide by Richard Robinson

Watch the full lesson at <https://mypaintingclub.com/lessons/8-Streets>

MY PAINTING CLUB

Introduction

I never imagined I'd be drawn to painting a city street, but San Francisco has a way of changing perspectives. In this chapter, we'll dive into the captivating world of urban landscapes, focusing on the interplay of light and atmosphere that makes street scenes so enchanting. You'll learn how to capture the essence of a bustling street, emphasizing the intriguing shapes and vibrant energy that define it. One of the unique aspects of this lesson is the opportunity to liberate your color palette by starting with a black and white photograph. This approach allows you to focus on value and composition before introducing color, giving you greater creative freedom. We'll also explore how to effectively use online images as references, combining elements from various photos to craft a compelling and cohesive composition. By the end of this chapter, you'll have the skills to transform everyday street scenes into dynamic works of art, filled with light and life. Enjoy the journey of bringing a city street to life on your canvas.



"San Francisco" 14x14" 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 Photo Reference and Composition



Select Photo References

Choose photos that capture the essence of the scene you want to paint. If your own photos aren't ideal, consider searching online for additional references.

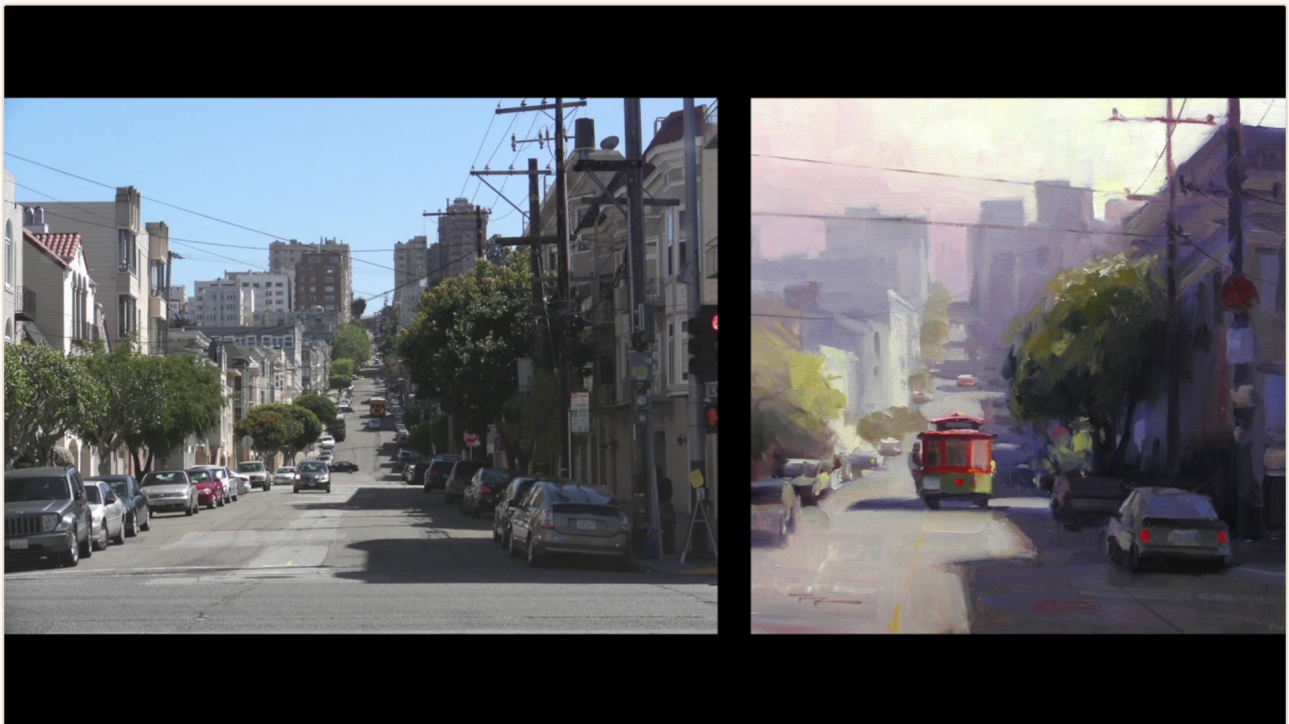
Combine References

Merge elements from different photos to create a cohesive composition. Use the best parts of each photo to enhance your painting's narrative.

PRO TIP

If your own photos don't capture what you need, supplement them with online images to complete your composition.

2 Photo Editing and Copyright



Understand Photo Editing

Recognize that your painting can differ significantly from the reference photo. This can be achieved by using a black and white version of the photograph and making creative adjustments such as cropping.

Consider Copyright Issues

Be aware that using photos from the web raises copyright concerns. Ensure you understand how to legally use these images for your painting.

PRO TIP

Always check the copyright status of reference photos before using them in your artwork.

3 Design and Composition



Prepare Your Reference Images

Use a black and white print of a photo for reference. Include a photo of a cable car from the web to help with the design of the back.

Set Up Your Canvas

Tape off a 14-inch square canvas. Crop your reference image to a square to match the canvas size.

Draw the Cable Car

Draw the cable car at the correct size on your canvas. Ensure it becomes the center of focus in your composition.

Analyze the Design

Notice the big dark area shape contrasted with the light area shape. Observe the strong verticals and horizontals, and the perspective lines leading to the cable car.

PRO TIP

Crop your reference image to match the size of your canvas for better composition alignment.

4 Encouragement for Personal Design



Challenge Yourself

Feel free to replicate the strokes exactly as shown, but take the opportunity to create your own unique design using the reference photos available on the resource page.

PRO TIP

Use the reference photos to inspire your own design, adding a personal touch to your painting.

5 Materials and Tools



Prepare Your Palette

Set up your palette with a range of colors suitable for your painting. Include a variety of hues to have flexibility in your work.

Use Walnut Oil

Use walnut oil as your painting medium. Keep a small dish of it nearby to dip into when you need to thin your paints, especially with darker colors.

Select Your Brushes

Choose from a variety of brushes, including bristles and synthetics. Have both filberts and flats in different sizes to accommodate various techniques and details.

PRO TIP

Keep a small dish of walnut oil handy to thin your paints as needed.

6 Canvas Preparation



Tone the Canvas

Apply a layer of acrylic pale beige to the canvas. This warm beige background helps counteract the tendency of water mixable oil paints to allow the canvas to show through brush strokes.

PRO TIP

Use a warm beige tone to prepare the canvas and reduce visibility of brush strokes with water mixable oils.

7 Sketching the Scene



Mix Your Sketching Color

Create a very thin mixture of ultramarine blue and red with walnut oil. This will be used for sketching the scene on your canvas.

Place the Center of Interest

Begin by sketching the cable car, which is the center of interest in your painting. Position it carefully to guide the viewer's eye.

Capture the Steep Angles

Notice the steepness of the angles, such as the tops of roofs and gutters. These angles are often steeper than expected, so emphasize them in your sketch.

Simplify Building Shapes

Sketch the buildings with general blocky shapes that suggest their form. They don't need to be exact copies, but should appear building-like.

Align Lines to the Horizon

Ensure that lines, such as those of the roofs and gutters, converge towards the horizon. This creates a sense of perspective and depth.

PRO TIP

Emphasize the steepness of angles in your sketch to capture the unique perspective of the scene.

8 Light and Shadow



Determine Light Source

Identify the light source coming from the upper right. Ensure the cable car is positioned in the light to create a realistic scene.

Cast Shadows

Paint the shadow of the cable car extending to the left on the road. Make sure the shadow aligns with the light source direction for accuracy.

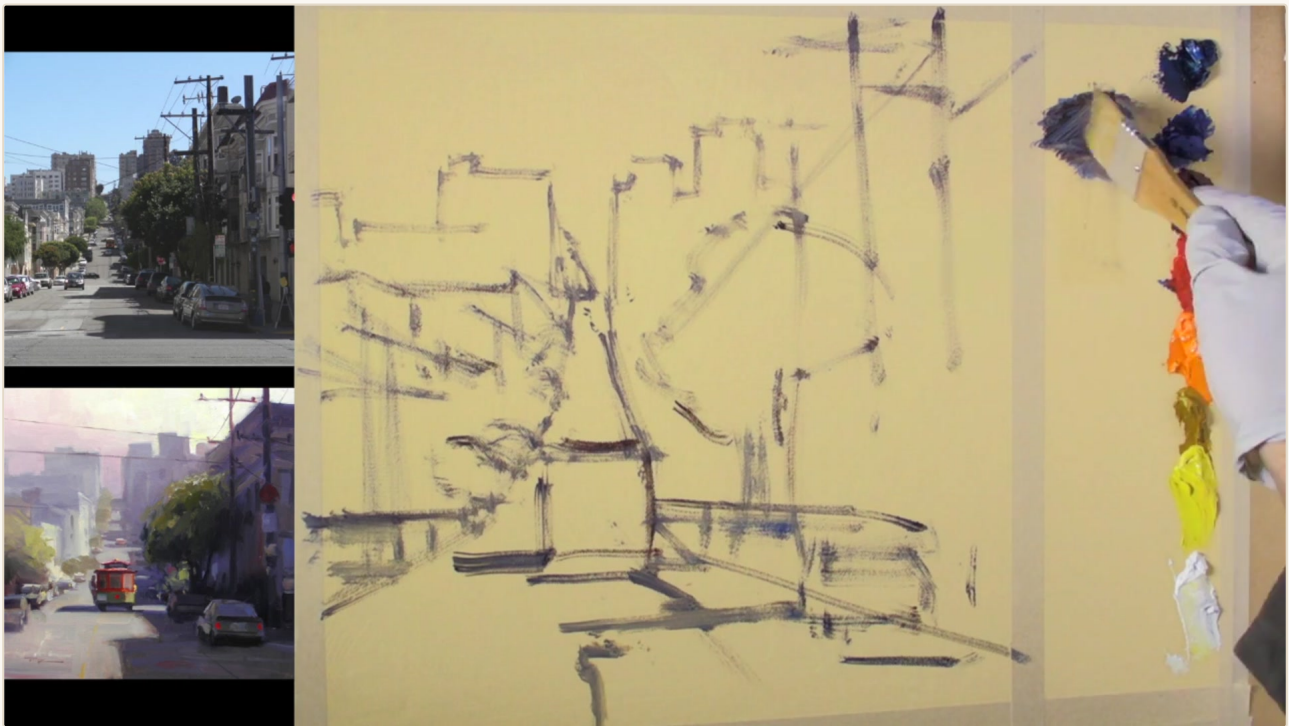
Apply Perspective to Shadows

Ensure that the shadows follow the same laws of perspective as the buildings and cars. Align every line in the painting to maintain a cohesive perspective.

PRO TIP

Align shadows with the perspective lines of the scene to maintain realism.

9 Mixing Dark Colors



Mix a Dark Base Color

Use a large brush to mix a very thin mixture of ultramarine blue, red, and a little bit of yellow with walnut oil. The yellow will help to grey down the purple created by the red and blue, achieving a balanced dark tone.

Apply the Dark Mixture

Apply the dark mixture broadly to the darkest areas of your painting. Focus on staying within the shadow areas to create strong contrast.

PRO TIP

Use yellow to grey down a purple mixture for a more balanced dark tone.

10 Color Variation in Shadows



Create a Cool Gray

Mix blue, red, and yellow to create a cool gray. Lighten this mixture slightly to make it just a bit lighter than the darkest shadow you've already painted. This will add depth to the shadow area without losing the overall darkness.

Add Warm Gray for Variation

Introduce some warmer gray tones into the shadow side of the building. This simulates light reflecting off the street and adds interest to the shadow, preventing it from looking flat and monotonous.

Maintain Value Consistency

Keep all values in the shadow area very similar. Focus on changing the hue slightly by modulating the color between warm and cool tones. This subtle variation enhances the painting's realism and visual appeal.

PRO TIP

Avoid painting the entire shadow in one color; introduce slight hue variations to keep it interesting.

11 Atmospheric Perspective



Enhance Atmospheric Perspective

Lighten the gray on one side of the street to create a scene that disappears into a light atmosphere. Repeat this on the other side to maintain consistency and emphasize the atmospheric perspective.

Modulate Colors

Add a slightly darker, warmer gray to modulate the colors and create depth. This helps in balancing the light and shadow values, keeping them close and similar.

Create a Glow Effect

Create a glow by allowing light to bounce off the buildings. Keep the values between lights and shadows even to achieve this effect.

Focus on Grayscale

Work from a black and white photograph to focus on grayscale. Aim to make the painting predominantly gray, allowing the cable car to stand out as a vibrant spot of color.

Adjust Road Color

Apply a light color for the road similar to the buildings in light. Later, adjust it to be slightly darker and cooler due to the road's angle to the sun and its local color.

PRO TIP

Keep the values between lights and shadows close to create a balanced glow effect.

12 Sky Colors



Create a Warm Sky Base

Use a warm color with some magenta to start the sky on the left. This will give a pinkish tone that sets the mood for the scene.

Transition to Lighter Tones

As you move to the right, lighten the color by adding more yellow and reducing the red. This creates a gradient effect, suggesting a light source from the right.

PRO TIP

Maintain similar warm tones in both the light and dark areas of the sky for harmony.

13 Cable Car Color



Adjust Cable Car Color

Mix a green with more yellow to reflect the golden light coming from the right. Ensure the green is lighter to capture the effect of the warm light. This adjustment will make the cable car appear more vibrant under the warm lighting conditions.

Modify Shadow Color

In the shadow stretching into the street, incorporate more of the sky color as it extends outward. Use a warm grey to match the warm lighting, making it slightly lighter. This will create a cooler appearance where it overlays the initial warm grey.

PRO TIP

Add more yellow to green when depicting objects under golden light to enhance vibrancy.

14 Tree Colors



Adjust Tree Colors

Make the colors on the left tree slightly warmer and lighter. For the right tree, use slightly darker and cooler colors. This contrast will enhance the light and shadow effect in your painting.

Create Warm Light Green

Mix a warm light green for the top of the big tree where the golden light hits. Add a touch of orange to the green to achieve this warm tone. This will reflect the warm light effect on the tree.

Thicken the Paint

As you lighten the paint, increase its thickness. This technique adds texture and depth to the lighter areas of your painting.

PRO TIP

Add a touch of orange to green to create a warm light green for areas hit by golden light.

15 Car and Window Colors



Thicken Light Paint

As you lighten the paint, avoid using any painting medium. This will help the paint to become thicker, enhancing the light areas effectively.

Blend Car Color

Mix the color of the street in shadow with a touch of yellow ochre. This will create a subtle difference that allows the car to blend with its surroundings while still standing out as a distinct object.

Reflect Windscreen Color

Use a warmer grey, slightly lighter, for the windscreen to reflect the color of the sky. This adds realism by capturing the sky's reflection.

Reflect Street Light on Car

On the left side of the car, apply colors reflecting the warm light from the street. This will enhance the car's integration into the scene.

Use Grey for Cable Car Windows

Apply the same grey used for the car's windscreen to the windows of the cable car. This consistency helps unify the elements in the painting.

PRO TIP

Mix street shadow color with yellow ochre to subtly differentiate objects while maintaining harmony.

16 Detail and Composition



Adjust Road Color

Make the road color slightly cooler and darker to create contrast with the surrounding elements. This adjustment helps in setting the mood and directing the viewer's attention.

Vary Shape Sizes and Spacing

Avoid repetition in shapes by varying their sizes and spacing. This variation adds interest and prevents the composition from becoming monotonous.

Add Light to Building Under Planes

Use a slightly lighter, warmer grey to represent the under planes of the buildings. These areas catch light bouncing up from the street, adding depth and realism.

Subdue Building Details

Minimize the detail in the buildings to keep the focus on the cable car and the contrasting colors. Suggest detail rather than painting every element, allowing the viewer's imagination to fill in the gaps.

PRO TIP

Focus on the main story of the scene by subduing unnecessary details and emphasizing key elements.

17 Final Adjustments



Evaluate the Scene

Step back and assess the entire painting. Ensure the scene is understandable and cohesive. Consider what the painting needs in terms of detail.

Adjust Details

Move around the painting, examining different areas. Add detail where necessary to enhance the scene. Remove detail where it detracts from the overall composition.

PRO TIP

Continuously assess how each area of the painting relates to the whole scene.

18 Shadow and Light Transition



Create Transition Zone

Use a slightly orangey grey to create the transition zone between the shadow and the light. Choose a value that is midway between the shadow and the light to smoothly blend these two areas. This will often have an orange or reddish tinge, adding warmth to the transition.

PRO TIP

Use a mid-value orangey grey to blend shadow and light areas smoothly.

19 Final Touches and Sky Details



Tone Down Bright Red

If a bright red area distracts from the main focus, tone it down slightly while keeping the red hue. This maintains the color without overwhelming other elements.

Add Sun Glow

Mix a warm rosy color and blend it into the area where you want a sun glow effect. This adds warmth and interest to an intense sky.

Tidy Roof Lines

Refine the roof lines to ensure they are clean and distinct. This helps in defining the structures against the sky.

Add Haze or Low Cloud

Introduce a bit of mauve into the lower portion of the sky to create a sense of haze or low cloud. This adds depth and variation to an otherwise uninteresting sky.

PRO TIP

Blend a warm rosy color to add a sun glow effect in an intense sky area.

20 Finishing Touches



Sign Your Painting

Add your signature to the painting to mark it as complete. This personal touch signifies the end of your creative process.

Spot and Fix Minor Issues

Carefully examine your painting for any small areas that need adjustment. Make necessary corrections to enhance the overall composition.

Use a Rigger Brush for Fine Lines

Employ a rigger brush to paint very fine lines, such as wires or other delicate details. This brush is designed for precision and will help you achieve clean, accurate lines.

PRO TIP

Use a rigger brush for fine details to avoid making a mess of delicate lines.

Summary & Key Takeaways

Embark on your painting journey by selecting and merging photo references that capture the essence of your desired scene. Use these references to create a cohesive composition that tells a compelling story. As you prepare your canvas, consider the design elements and ensure your focal point, like a cable car, is positioned to guide the viewer's eye.

With your materials ready, begin sketching the scene, emphasizing perspective and the interplay of light and shadow. Use a warm beige underpainting to help your colors stand out and maintain harmony in your palette. As you paint, focus on creating depth through atmospheric perspective and subtle color variations, particularly in shadowed areas.

As you add final details, refine your composition by balancing light and shadow, ensuring each element contributes to the overall narrative. Use fine brushes for delicate lines and make thoughtful adjustments to enhance the painting's cohesion. Finally, add your signature to mark the completion of your creative process.

LESSON POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Choose and merge photo references to create a cohesive composition.
- Check copyright status of reference photos before using them.
- Crop reference images to match your canvas size for better alignment.
- Emphasize steep angles in your sketch to capture unique perspectives.
- Align shadows with perspective lines for realism.
- Introduce hue variations in shadows to keep them interesting.
- Maintain similar warm tones in light and dark sky areas for harmony.
- Use a rigger brush for fine details to avoid making a mess of delicate lines.



"San Francisco" 14x14" 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.

"Streets of Italy" by Sandra Harris



"Streets of Italy" 16x20" Oil on Canvas by Sandra Harris

A beautifully coloured and structured scene Sandra! I'm glad someone painted this photo because it was my favorite one that was submitted. I've included the image here to compare it to your painting. First of all I think it was a great idea to bring the orange jacketed guy out of the shadows and into that key spot there, however, it would have worked out better if you'd painted him moving. Figures standing still in paintings (unless they're in a group conversing) always have the appearance of posing for a photo.

The only other thing I would have changed would be to darken the distant hills and sky as shown in the Photoshopped version in order to simplify the the background area which seems to be a bit of a jumble. What about putting some really thick impasto paint on the light areas in the foreground too add more textural interest and help with the recession? Could be good. Great job!

"S.F." by Mariangela Margoni



"S.F." 12x12" Oil on Canvas by Mariangela Margoni

Hey good colours Mariangela! I like the extra kick of warms you've injected into the sky especially. Your atmospheric perspective is working really well too as your building begin to merge in colour with the sky. The soft edges are really helping there too. I would just say that your shadowy blues going up the street and into the distant buildings are a little too light and that's creating some visual confusion there. You could either slightly darken those or slightly lighten the sky to sort that out. You could look closer at the drawing of some of the cars if you want to be picky but overall I think you've done a great job. Nice one!

"California street - San Francisco" by George



"California street - San Francisco" 28x38" Oil on Canvas Paper by George

A very striking image George and I think you're onto something here. I'm a sucker for a blue and orange complementary colour scheme. A picture speaks a thousand words so I did a little photoshopping of your image to show how I might change the lighting in it if you don't mind. Note the placement of the cable car too. Good on you for even attempting such a technical scene - it's not easy getting all those lines pointing in the right direction! If you want to keep those verticals straight it pays to use a ruler or a guide and keep using it throughout the painting to keep it all in check.

"One Sunny Day #2" by Jessica Futerman



"One Sunny Day #2" 12x12" Oil on Canvas by Jessica Futerman

Not too shabby Jessica, a nicely balanced composition and a good play of colour against grey. The drawing is my first concern here - all those straight lines are tricky with a wobbly paint brush right!? We seem to be having an earthquake in your painting as some of the buildings are swaying to and fro. I had the same trouble with my buildings. Using a ruler helps. Looks like you ran out of room for a sidewalk on the right too and so the tree on the right seems to be growing out of a crack - again just a drawing thing.

Looking at your colours you've done pretty well getting the buildings to recede in the distance but it could have been much more interesting overall if you'd put more oomph into your darks and mid values in the foreground, which is all I did with the Photoshopped version of your painting, as well as slightly lightening the lights. It creates a better sense of depth. I also changed the shadow of the cable car and the blue car. You're getting there.